



Surname Viet Given Name Nam
by Trinh T. Minh-ha

The Subaltern Body

A STUDY IN ETHICS, ALTERITY
AND SUBJECT CONSTRUCTION

by Helen Lee

It is the voice (with which we identify the "rights" of the person) which communicates (communicates what? our — necessarily beautiful — soul? our prestige?), but the whole body (eyes, smile, hair, gestures, clothing) which sustains with you a sort of babble... it is the other's entire body which has been known, savored, received, and which has displayed (to no real purpose) its own narrative, its own text.

Roland Barthes
Empire of Signs

If the undertaking of feminist cinema, like the work of anti-colonialism, is to be described as a project of oppositionality, the work of avant-garde and independent film and video can be regarded simply by its negative aesthetics. Arising from an analogous position in terms of the way she is defined in discourse, the figure of the subaltern woman and various configurations of the female body as the determining condition of her representability, visibility and identity, are the central concerns of this study. Understanding that identity is never pure but always relational and dependent on exterior, even prior relations, recent theoretical formulations in both materialist and psychoanalytic strains have been influential in breaking down the hitherto mutually exclusive terms of identity and difference — to the point of uncertainty, contingency



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If there exists a "discourse" which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers, an archive of structures, or the testimony of a withdrawn body, and is, instead, the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective and social relations in gestures of confrontation and reappropriation, destruction and construction — productive violence, in short — it is "literature," or more specifically, the text.

Julia Kristeva
Revolution in Poetic Language

Illuminated space is not the absolute interval. The connection between visual and touch, between representation and labor, remains essential... A meaningful world is a world in which there is the Other through whom the world of my enjoyment becomes a theme having a signification... The passage to the rational is not a dis-individualization precisely because it is a language, that is, a response to the being who in a face speaks to the subject and tolerates a response, that is, an ethical act.

Emmanuel Levinas
Totality and Infinity

and finally, unreadability. In response to this impasse of western consciousness and representation, contributions from feminist and postcolonial scholars and filmmakers have been most convincing. But the prohibitions of anti-positivist thought such as the negation of identity/self and the evacuation of political agency which have been useful in defining difference and oppression, also prove counter-productive to the aims of the work described here. The point is to find some commonality between these opposing views: one which proposes the impossibility of selfhood; and the other which insists on a definition of self and identity, not only as social construction but as political necessity.

Attributions of sexual and racial difference, so often ignored or overemphasized, are taken up in a variety of

"restagings" by four recent films. For a work such as *Adynata: Murder is Not a Story* (Leslie Thornton, 1983, USA) which emerges explicitly from the negative discourses of the avant-garde and anti-Orientalism, the negotiation of the self/other problematic engages a western version of subjectivity. Alternating from the purely imitative aspects of mimicry or verisimilitude, to Walter Benjamin's idea of "magical" mimesis, the film exposes the fragmentary nature of identity and identificatory processes, and the limits of a rational, liberal ideology and the "politically correct" representation. In *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1989, USA), the identity/difference problematic is put forward as a process. The compatibility of western feminism and national socialism within the framework of politically intentioned art

and aesthetic invention becomes a question; although it is not a question of priority — politics or art — but one of hybridity: the political dimensions of artistic practice and the artfulness of political discourse. Central to this process is the problem of translation. As observed by Alice Jardine, the irony of this deconstructive task is that the negative or supplement which comes to be named feminine is valorized in the work of deconstructivists such as Jacques Derrida. The subsequent desire for the maternal body (as a lost presence or structured absence) as theorized by Julia Kristeva, will be one route explored with regard to feminine melancholia and the scenarization of the colonized indigenous female body in *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (Tracey Moffat, 1990, Australia). Finally, in *Two Lies* (Pam Tom, 1990, USA), I hope to suggest alternative ways of approaching questions of racial, sexual and cultural difference, and dimensions of subaltern existence not as an exercise in marginality but as one account of subjectivity, presence and the glowing recognition of narrational possibilities.

WESTERN EYE/ORIENTAL MIND: ADYNATA

The constitution of an Orientalist mind is one of the main themes of *Adynata*. Caricaturing this attitude, the film offers a challenge to prescribed notions of alterity, femininity, "correct" representations and identification. Establishing the art historical/vanishing perspective position of the (western) camera eye, the film opens with a series of tableaux which define its visual structure. The camera framings are reverential, monumental and historically marked: a stone building of unmistakably imperialist design and proportions; the stiff portrait of a 19th century Chinese mandarin and his wife; an

Adynata by Leslie Thornton



omniscient but telescopic view of a planet. Successively, this stable and coherent view and position of mastery is affirmed, disrupted, above all rendered visible: the optical penetration of the Chinese couple through close-up and intermittent flash frames (literally exposing the editing process through the film stock's exposure to light); the movie camera is lifted unceremoniously from the tripod, whisking away with it the image of the impressive-looking building; the picture of the observed planet begins to swoon to and fro, subject to the scrutinizing, fickle lens of western science. Thus, truth becomes relational to knowledge of the object and the limitations inherent in each subject position and its necessary specificity. For the white women ornamented in Oriental gear (played by the filmmaker, Thornton), the discomfort of the mime is revealed by a quick cutaway to the same women, seated and repositioned in the frame, this time bare of make-up and jewellery. This gesture also acknowledges a western prerogative (or rather, compulsion) and its unmitigating desire for the other, resulting in a crass sort of mimicry, a misconceived mimesis.

Although the film is in some ways about the limits of representability, *Adynata* concerns itself with more than an act of writing "under erasure," more than a simple orchestration of Orientalist motifs and their overturning. Outside the domain of epistemological models that inevitably err against the body and into negativity, there resides nonsensuous knowledge. Taking up these powerful fictions, the film revels in false projections of the Japanese garden, bizarre Hindi ritual, the Chinese satin show. These different Asian terms collide as a constructed kind of babble within a western framework of colonialist nostalgia and phantasy, exemplifying what Allen Weiss has described as a clash of "different symbolic systems." Writings about the Euro-American contextualization of ritual sacred objects from the Third World as "art" in the Paris exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, he argues:

Our model of detached aesthetic contemplation belies the original complex situatedness of these foreign ritual objects whose efficacy did depend upon profound — and most often exclusionary — initiatory systems. We discover here precisely the theoretical point of articulation between not so much different "Worlds," but rather different symbolic systems. As postmodernist criticism insists, the critical point is the hinge between local and universal — or at least universalizing — systems. Already, the notions of "anti-aesthetic" or "anti-Oedipus" (radical, contestory, and destabilising as they may be) are but local systems of thought within our larger, but still local, system of ecumenical pretensions.(97)

Combining ethical principle with aesthetic regard, the point raises important issues for intercultural communication. In Gayatri Spivak's retheorization of the negative western

construction of Hindi communalism and the female subject in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she remarks on the British missionary attitude of "white men saving brown women from brown men." (121) In her study, the subaltern's intervention results in her demise: the young revolutionary woman commits suicide when she is menstruating so that the action cannot be read by her community as the compulsive act of a pregnant unmarried woman. Although the assertion of subaltern agency guarantees her destruction (with the double negative equalling a positive identity), the terms here are at least relocalized to the subaltern sphere. In *Adynata*, the recourse to a re-enchantment of Japanese gardens (the camera's blurred focus implying pre-historic vision and sensuous attachments) and our fantasies, is but one admission of the terms of western vision. Chinese footbinding, evoked through the skittish pantomime of a pair of women's hands and the frantic stitching of a shoe, is presented theatrically through the proscenium framing of the setpiece. Neither aestheticized nor reducible to an anti-aesthetic, the mime itself announces the alterity of silence and negativity. Though unverballed and without dialogue, this highly vocalized account exemplifies through disfigurement and an ethnically-inscribed wound the

affective power of the muffled, sentenced female body. Still, the "impossibility" implied by its Greek title, *Adynata*, is a measure of the mimetic/alteric relation that assumes a (com)passionate, not knowledgeable, regard for the other. But "like a flash," the moment of coherence between the subjected body and the spectator's own is but limited to flashes.

THE SUBJECT ON TRIAL:

SURNAME VIET GIVEN NAME NAM

Memory, it has been said, is the only kind of metaphysics possible for (post)modernity and the age of anti-positivism. It is also through memories that, according to Freud, the libido is cathected to the object. (216) Using as a starting point, Annette Michelson's analysis of the mourning of the leader in Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin*, and the "process of historicization which transforms document into monument," (38) I would like to examine the ways in which the state is similarly memorialized in *SVGNN*. Like the Soviet female mourners belonging to various ethnic groups portrayed in the Lenin film, Vietnamese American women carry this responsibility since, as Michelson clearly spells out, "the work of mourning is women's work." (33) Her argument focuses on

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modernist reinventions of cinematic optical effects such as slow and reverse motion, looping and especially the free-frame in providing the photograph-like "kinetic icon" of Lenin essential to the acknowledgement of object-loss, mourning and the installation of a substitute. While some of these effects are featured in Trinh's films, other strategies are used that are more indicative of a postmodernist disposition. Also, the critical progress which Michelson characterized in Vertov's work as a shift from the magical to the epistemological function is signalled by another shift which I shall speculatively call the ethical. Most of the film's strategies involve a critique of the epistemological obsession for the object and while frustrating the desire for knowledge, they promote the idea of aesthetic choice (not as a way of preserving the modernist in postmodernism but) as both authorial inscription and as a problematic of the objectivity of documentary and the subjectivity of the spectatorial situation.

Foremost in *SVGN* is its critique of Vietnamese socialism from a feminist perspective. The imputed failure of the integration of the female proletariat into state discourse hinges on the existing terms of her relation to national identity. Structurally, nothing has changed for the woman under socialism. Instead of being married into the patrilineal family in accordance with Confucian doctrine, she is instead wedded to the state (hence, the film's title, referring to the name of South Asian origin which was chosen by national separatists who, in the interim between French colonialism and the U.S. invasion, sought to sever its ties to China.) Internationally contested, an understanding of the national identity of Viet Nam is variously translated by several women throughout the film. This process is not immune to the transliterative slip-pages and adjustments that occur when many different subjects with their own particularized histories take part in such a reconstructive process. As Trinh puts it, "Translation, like identity, is a question of grafting several cultures onto a single body." (8 Mayne) The interviews were originally conducted in 1978 by Mai Thu Van who, as a second-generation exile, came from France to Viet Nam specifically for that purpose. Published in 1982 as *Vietnam: un peuple, des voix*, the book was discovered a few years later by Trinh, who translated portions which were re-enacted in 1987 with Vietnamese women living in northern California. The film itself was completed in 1989. In "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin writes that "no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original." (73 *Reflections*) Still, the test for the original (and the translated copy) is its translatability. (70) Challenging ideas of western leftism (especially anti-Vietnam war sentiments) about socialism and their presumed coincidence with the aims of feminism, the explicit demand for a reformulation of national identity with regard to gender formation seems to stretch the western idealist frame.

I wish to focus on the staged interviews in the first part of the film and, as guided by the film's structure, counterpose them with the "real" interviews of the latter part as a way of explicating this shift from epistemology to ethics. Demonstrating a postmodernist attitude toward the subject, the film's aesthetic strategies strive for neither a likeness to nor the essence of the original interviews. Drained of the emotional intent and spontaneity of a natural conversation (never

forgetting, Trinh reminds us, just how tactical speech really is), the talks take the form of a strangely impersonal personal testimony. Within the constraints of different cultural environments, however, each personal memory becomes acutely historical or particular to the conditions of both the event (the original event) and the memory (its reenactment). Marked by the duration of real time, the long takes plainly invoke the duress involved in both identity formation and the melancholic reminiscence of stately failure — the burden of women's work. The "obsessive rehearsal... repetition, deceleration, distension, arrest, release, and fixation" (38) described by Michelson which characterizes the work of mourning no longer represent, here, the textual effects of a modernist gesture. Rather, as symptoms, they constitute a variety of subject-effects and the interpellation of the subaltern position as a partial and fragmented process. The transcriptions of the interviews (monologues) as onscreen text, differing from the spoken version, emphasize the discrepancy between a readerly and writerly discourse, the difference between interpretation and experience. Unconventional framing choices and camera movements such as unmotivated close-ups, pans and dollies across the surface of their bodies question not so much their status as subjective personalities but their usually intended roles as objects of an objective discourse. Intervening sections of the film such as archival footage and photographs have certain areas of the frame masked so that, moments later, the initial framing choice is put into question, or in a relational position to the rest of the image. The evocation of *Kim Van Kieu* (*The Tale of Kieu*), a 19th century national epic poem, the interpretation of which changes through time and assaults the formation of national identity, underscores this relational understanding. As Marina Heung explains, "During the Vietnam war and its aftermath, her story was often read as epic allegory, so that she successively symbolized the denunciation of feudalism, the oppression under feudalism, resistance to American colonialism and, most recently, the exile of the Vietnamese from their homeland." (8) Also marking the cinematic process and the passage of historical time, Super-8 footage of women performing a Vietnamese folk dance is blown up to the 16mm gauge, with particles of dust on the image's surface remaining. The footage is optically printed in ways that accelerate, decelerate and freeze the action. Wearing full traditional dress and carrying the burden of tradition, the subaltern position is then reversed in the latter part of the film, where a contemporary image of the modern, that is (Vietnamese-)American woman emerges. However, the image is no longer naive, no longer invested in the same transparent truths of newsreels and the documentary. Questioning its relationship to the real, though still soliciting a spectator given over to absorption, these passages demand an involved critical viewing, but on ethical terms.

Based on difference, not identity, Trinh's conception of subaltern subjectivity is derived from both Buddhist philosophy and French poststructuralism. While she is one of her own best commentators, I wish to highlight that aspect shared by many theorists who advocate an inclusive practice, but one which still insists on the specificities of racial, cultural, sexual, class and gender difference and their particular points of emphasis at different times. "In the complex reality of post-



Night Cries by Tracey Moffatt

coloniality," Trinh writes, "it is therefore vital to assume one's radical "impurity" and to recognize the necessity of speaking from a hybrid place, hence of saying at least two, three things at a time." (7 Mayne) Extended to the politics and aesthetics of reading, note how texts will call upon difference as a way of negotiating a realizable subject position within discourse. Applied to the variously interpellated, translated subaltern body, the need for an attentive, ethically-informed spectatorial practice is that much more critical. In this sense, a consideration of the identity/difference problematic and its relation to spectatorial specificity and textual pleasure is just beginning.

THE MATERNAL BODY: NIGHT CRIES

In Derrida's critique of western metaphysics, tropes of the body play a crucial role in opening the text to a readerly response. Writing around the same period, Kristeva's notion of the semiotic chora as a capacity that exists before and alongside the functioning of symbolic language reinvigorates the concept of the subject. Since the latent semiotic material is physically manifested on the level of the body, the one link I would like to emphasize is this pervasive body, always feminine and hauntingly maternal. In *Night Cries*, the relations between the mother and daughter, the white body and the black body, are "scenarized" in various ways. A series of

frames illuminate the personal, cultural and performative dimensions of subaltern experience through the carefully wrought *mise-en-scene*, accentuated lighting and other visual codes. But these different textures come to assume a consistent, uniform tone, one characteristic of neurotic melancholia. Different from the mourning of the state's failure in *SVGN*, this melancholia is peculiar to the mother/daughter relation.

Like Kristeva's conception of the split subject (on trial, *en procès*), Derrida poses *difference* as a process, not a "truer" meaning. Offering terms such as the supplement, trace, blank, fold and the hymen as momentary, slippery interventions, his theory of dissemination rubs against the grain of solid, diligent hermeneutical understanding. A reinvention of Plato's original idea of mimesis as truth, such an account acknowledges the ways in which the space between time-honoured oppositions such as syntax and semantics and other dualisms begins to signify, by "marking the articulated opening of that opposition." (222) The trope of the hymen as that standing "between the inside and the outside of a woman," (213) between the womb and the world, reconfigures the force of the operation for Derrida. Caught between desire and pleasure (fulfillment), the perceptual play of the hymen frustrates oppositions by dislodging them from their privileged positions. Although positioned to preserve the distinction of the inside and outside, and to maintain that separation, the

hymen also allows passage and the commingling of fluids. As Mayne observes, "its very etymology denotes both union and separation." (45 *Keyhole*). Mayne notes the suppression of the homosexual/homotextual possibilities in the hymen's structure of a double play. This kind of elision which had characterized the theorization of masculine subjectivity and is maintained with Kristeva's thoughts on her own motherhood in "Sabat Mater," is reconfigured by the Irigarayan project of female hom(m)osexuality. Without recourse to transvestism (Mulvey) or masquerade (Mary Ann Doane), Irigaray draws on this primal connection between women, and specifically between daughter and mother. The female desire for the maternal body is complicated in *Night Cries* through the displacement of the biological black mother for the (infertile) white mother, and further elaborated through the complex of melancholia that suffuses the film's scenarization of loss and the imputed hysteria of the female subaltern.

The thematization of maternal separation and union in the film is one in which its deliberately artificial construction underscores the violence of that process. More than a (primal) scene, it is a (multiple) scenarization of disparate, conflictual, finally destructive elements. On an isolated Australian homestead, a middle-aged Aboriginal woman cares for her dying, adoptive white mother with barely contained rage. In the ironic reversal of the maternal (mother/infant) and paternal (white colonizer/Aborigine) functions, she feeds and cleans the old woman, washes her clothes, wheels her to the out-house and watches over her disturbed sleep. The film narrates this (s/m)othering process with great acuity, with the mother finally occupying the place of radical interior/exteriority.

Displayed as the monstrous offspring of colonialism and genocide, the white mother/black daughter coupling engendered by forced assimilation policies in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s typify a relationship of "cruelty and destruction" that is the endpoint of rational discourse. (233 Horkheimer/Adorno) Here, the maternal register is short-circuited in one operative sweep, suggesting the mother's ultimate infertility and the uncertainty of civilizing primitive nature (the taming of the wild night's cries). The artificially conceived and dis/inseminated project, like the copy without an original, is denied the sense of a procreative spirit or original inspiration, the nature of natural conception. The use of post-synchronous sound demonstrates the artifice involved in its reconstruction and the interruption necessary for political and aesthetic intervention and change. On the precipice of nature and civilization, the homestead setting supplies a myriad of sounds that connote the domestic (the creak of the porch door) and the wild (simultaneously jungle and desert). Gradually, drumming sounds and the call of the wild, alternately animal and human-sounding, come to overtake the soundtrack. By the film's climax, different visual and discursive levels including the childhood memory/re-enactment and the Aboriginal Christian singer's performance, come to be sutured into the main narrative frame. This process is then broken by the off-screen sound of a terrible thunderbolt. The sonoric qualities of the drums and cries evoke ceremony, ritual and death, not to mention the libidinal economy associated with narrational strategies, especially on the level of sound.

The drum is contrasted with the sterility of oxygen tubes, the putrid exhalation of old, white breath and the terror of a newborn's cry and its misconceived birth. With regard to spectatorship and narrational processes, the film's climax and denouement facilitate a kind of release and reconciliation for the viewer. The spellbinding suturing effect (which occurs on the level of sound and is characteristically broken by the thunderstorm), proves enabling to a subaltern consciousness in a process not unlike the constructed cause-and-effect scenario described by Spivak. The specifically textual effects of the film's visual and aural elements are encoded on the spectatorial body in ways that define the centrality and marginality of subaltern discourse, both its tragic and pleasurable elements.

Finally, the subaltern figure in *Night Cries* embodies a figure of loss, the melancholic body of the female indigene. The daughter's mourning of her mother's death, though associated with object-loss, is also culturally ascribed as the legacy of colonialism and the territorialization of the native body. With respect to Irigaray's rereading of Freud's male economy in his account in "Mourning and Melancholia" according to the woman-to-woman and specifically mother/daughter connection, the passivity and love/hate relation that characterized the melancholic little girl's relationship to her mother is also extendable to a racially subaltern position and the mindset of the colonized. Irigaray describes the loss this way:

[The] devaluation of the mother accompanies or follows on the devaluation of the little girl's own sex organ. Thus in her case the relationship to the (lost) object is not simple but complicated by conflict and ambivalence that remain unconscious...that no language, no system of representations will replace, or assist... Which may result in their being "remembered" in the form of "somatic affections that are characteristic of melancholia? And also, of course, of hysteria..." (68)

Quite literally, it is only during sleep, and death, that the narrative of the daughter in *Night Cries* is released to other discursive levels. Taking the form of phantasy and (rear screen) projection, the *mise-en-scene* of the film recalls or "remembers" both its historical antecedents and the cinematic ones. *Jedda*, the first colour film produced in Australia, is variously quoted and restaged in this reappropriation of the "tragic mulatto" scenario. The little Aboriginal girl, easily corruptible to native ways in explicitly sexual terms (the Aboriginal boys whom she plays with by the beach denoting this threat), becomes reattached to the white mother. Doing so displaces her ethnic Aboriginal origin and her developmental sexual identity onto the overburdened position of the mother. Only through the mother's death is it perceived that the daughter, now middle-aged (implying both fecundity and menopause), is able to function autonomously, extricated from daughterly obligation.

AN ETHICAL REGARD: TWO LIES

How would one begin to speak about ethics in our position as spectators of cinema? It would seem that in a modern concep-



Two Lies by Pam Tom

tion of the term, ethics would be opposed to epistemology and politics. In his recent talk, "Cultural Power and the Struggle for Hegemony" (October 1990), Stuart Hall spoke on behalf of ethics and the need for such a system of ideas. In this period where theories of cultural discourse seem morally evacuated, withered and lacking the instrumentality needed for political change, he argues for a reinvention of the subject based on an ethical system. Different from an oppositional practice which posits the hegemonic hold of the enemy as the precondition for intervention, ethics provides a different rationale for intervening — some solid ground. In Hall's version, an ethical system offers a double to epistemology, but is decidedly political in character and purpose. Still, the conception is lacking in definition (due in no small part to the fact that it is new and still in formulation). The clearest example he provides is the one of choice as an assertion of ethical belief. He asks, "What is the terrain on which I am trying to make a difference?". Hall puts the question to calcified leftist thought and the insistent us/them bifurcation, instead of the formulation of a strategic ethics of political practice. Again, the persistent binarism of social structures incapacitates the inferior relation of the subaltern as a potential agent of social discourse.

Given this urgent political need, Emmanuel Levinas is an enigmatic figure, whose theories of otherness seem to defy western metaphysics, phenomenology and anti-humanist discourse at each turn. In proposing an ethics of alterity, Levinas insists upon the renunciation of self as a precondition to subjectivity. Based on the utmost exteriority, excess, infinity and activity (meaning the subject's passivity) of the other, his the-

ory envisions a turn from logos to mythos, epistemology to ethics, the true to the good — or rather a reprioritizing of the terms. Affirming the limits of a modern *cogito*, one's obligation and responsibility to the other provides the basis for subjectivity, is indeed dependent upon it. The priority remains with the other. For Levinas, writes Elizabeth Grosz, "Alterity is always prior to identity and the binary divisions between subject and object." (37) Through shared themes of sacrifice, Levinas offers the figures of the hostage and the mother as those bearing the unconditional response and responsibility for the other.

Focusing on the idea of vision and visualization, I would like to frame my discussion of *Two Lies* around the redoubtable maternal figure, whose alteric relation to the daughter reinvigorates the subaltern body, gives it coporeal affect and weight, and affirms its irremediable otherness. By speaking its name, "two lies," the daughter, whose subjectivity is positioned as a possibility throughout the film, comes into identity through difference (set apart from her mother but also the same), and an ethical basis for understanding her subaltern position.

The body, the "unsignifiable" and repressed body, represents for many theorists the unsaid and unsayable. But I would like to argue that it is only through the female body and the body of the text that the repressed material is enunciated. Returning to Kristeva, recall that she privileges the poetic text and its departures from lexical rules and strictures as a measure of its revolutionary potential. These grammatical deviations and syntactical play depend upon the body. Semiotic processes are registered through elocution and its

attempts at articulation, so that no matter how muffled and partial, the meaning is quite clear. Posing a danger in exposing the insufficiency of symbolic language, the body appeals to mimetic, sensuous and semiotic processes that are excessive of symbolic order. In the most productive approach to the emergence of the body, we can say that the definition of language itself is expanded.

In *Two Lies*, the body both narrates the available positions (naive, knowing, fallen), and is itself narrated by a master narrative. Three characters in the film represent the possible positions of the innocent body (Esther, the youngest daughter), the knowledgeable body (Mei, the older daughter), and the corrupted body (Doris, the mother). The story of these three different bodies, modelled on the conflict structure of western narrative, may be viewed as the problem of grafting the narrational possibilities of separate entities onto the body of one filmic text. But one other subjective presence animates the film, that of the author and the politics of cultural identity. More than the other three films in which authorial intention is more ambiguously positioned with regard to subaltern subjectivity, identity is assumed, *a priori*. The mother, functioning negatively in this regard, represents the (non-)identity of the Asian American woman. On narrative terms, the eyelid operation the divorced mother undergoes to make herself more appealing to white men is perceived as a denial, the refusal of racial difference. But on an ethical level, her actions may be read as a kind of sacrifice.

In Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" the female protagonist takes her life under similar circumstances of an ethical choice. The mother's ethical decision in the film is to fulfill her gender role, not her maternal one. This ensures the daughter's renunciation of the mother, the daughter's arrival into subjecthood, and the final reconciliation. This change is presented in a process of visualisation in the film. Throughout, the mother is presented without sight, wearing bandages across her eyes. Still, the gauzed, partially obscured gaze when she greets her daughters and reveals the operation is from her point of view. The two girls stare into her eyes, which occupies the position of the camera. In this sense, the mother represents vision and non-vision. This critical look is returned by Mei after her mother reveals her wounded eyes. In the last shot of the film, Mei readjusts the rearview car mirror. Changing the focus from what was a view of her mother sleeping in the backseat to herself, now occupying the driver's seat and not coincidentally the position of the camera, Mei becomes the beholder of vision — but no less beholden to the mother. The final shot, extended in time by a freeze-frame, provides a look of unmistakable self-recognition, bittersweet in its knowledge of a realized and defined subjectivity, but also deferred to the other whose alterity is irrefutable.

For Levinas, one's proximity to the face of the other and its undeniable alterity is both humbling and enabling for self-hood. He writes, "We can speak of enjoyment or of sensation, in the domain of vision and audition, when one has seen or heard much, and the object revealed by the experiences is steeped in the enjoyment — or suffering — of pure sensation." (187) This process of subjectivity, its effacement and the effects of the text upon the body offers a compelling model for spectatorship, particularly with regard to the ever-fluctu-

ating subaltern position which is sometimes centrally placed, but more often not. It speaks to the pleasures, sometimes painful pleasures of watching cinema, and those fleeting moments of coherence.

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