Trinh Minh-ha’s attempt in *Shoot for the Contents* to induce a change of consciousness in her audience via experiments in filmic form does not meet with total success because she attends more to *how* something is said than to *what* is said. This emphasis culminates in the perpetuation, rather than the contestation, of contemporary Western conventional wisdom about China. It would be fallacious, however, to conclude that stability of meaning and the perpetuation of stereotypes are the sole products of *Shoot for the Contents*. This film is a dense and intricate work that demands active viewer participation in order to make sense of it. The film both assumes and purposively withholds information in order to deny the pleasures and complacency of cinematic suture. The viewer must consult alternative sources when seeking answers to questions and issues raised in the film. In doing so, ideally, the viewer will arrive at an understanding that is simultaneously more nuanced and self-conscious than that which would have resulted from a more self-contained film. In spite of *Shoot for the Contents* elitist propensities, this quality constitutes the primary strength of the film.

**NOTE**


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*A Space on the Side of the Road*

Kathleen Stewart
243 pages + xii. 36 photographs.

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The use of photographs within the bodies of textual ethnographies has a mixed history of failures, near-misses, and rare successes. Much depends on the balance between image and text, on the motivation for including photographs within the ethnographic text, and on the use of photography as an element of ethnographic practice. While Kathleen Stewart’s book *A Space on the Side of the Road* incorporates photographs in a deeply engaging manner, the work is in majority a textual ethnography. Before beginning a discussion of the images, it will be useful to sketch a discussion of the ethnographic text.

One major danger of ethnographic practice may be the attempt, both in the field and while writing-up, to fit one’s observations into a pre-figured ontology and epistemology; a way of ‘doing’ ethnography as its own fixed practice, a practice able to shift locales and objects while retaining a thrust both cohesive and ultimately static. Stewart appeals to a dramatic move away from this type of business as usual. Her book attempts a “new ethnography,” an ethnography that takes “a cue from the tactile, imaginary, nervous and contested modes of critique of the subjects we study not in order to decide what these interpretive modes ‘mean’ in the end but to begin to deploy them in a cultural politics.” This is a dangerous and shifting ground, a ground that depends on keeping the dynamic gap open between signs and what is read from signs. Invoking the space on the side of the road calls forward not simply a marginalized and resistant space, but also a deeply creative, productive, and unfixed one. It is a space with what Ross Chambers calls room to maneuver; a richly textured space of imagining that resists the traditional ethnographic effort of getting the “gist” of things.

It is difficult to begin a review of such a book. Integral to the book’s form is a resistance to such attempts at encapsulation. It begins as an ethnography of Appalachia. Soon, however, the book starts to weave back on itself, shifting both language and objects of analysis, from the beginning establishing a dialogue both with itself and with the reader. A lyrical evocation of speech, stories, memories and fragments, Stewart’s book is a richly-layered poetic exploration of Appalachia, of the role of talk in Appalachia, of ethnography, and of the ways in which we make sense of texts themselves.

There are a number of formal conceits that Stewart uses to keep the gap between signs and what is read from signs open and dynamic. The text slips between a language of analysis and the language of her informants, using speech patterns and cadences that cross over, repeated words with dropped ending ‘g’s, and the reappearance of such words dressed-down, outside of scare quotes, bold type, or italics, and re-introduced through the text as reasonable and logical ways of
speaking. Strategies like this serve to unsettle the distinction between analysis and quotation. Indeed, they serve to problematize the action of quotation itself, keeping the dynamic between oral speech and the mediation of both textual rendition and theoretical analysis open. Mediation, as a point of entry, is left as an unfixed quality, shifting, returning to itself to tell stories of its own travels. In this way, it serves to further illustrate how big meanings “culled out of the proliferation of stories, monuments, memories, and litanies come to be written through with the texture of words overheard and sights overseen and are in-filled with the density of rhythms, intonations, and partial, accidental associations.”

Stewart foregrounds this dynamic as part of her own process, locating not just herself in the landscape but also the implications of her practice among and amidst the practice of others, “not on the cleared ground of realist ethnographic description but in an intensely occupied and imagined space, fashioning an ‘object’ of analysis out of filled spaces with the power to deflect and transform desire, to dramatize and fabulate, to situate and surround.”

The ethnographer surrounded and in-filled; This is one source of leakage or transgression between the language of Stewart’s main characters or informants, and the voice of the ethnographer herself. It serves to point out the underlying tension between the action of participating and that of observation, the double bind of ethnographic experience. It is this double bind which is most important to Stewart’s book and work, a problematization of the arbitrariness of the split between the disembodied voice of a narrating ethnographer and the recorded and rendered voices of the narrated ethnographic subject(s).

Here, there must be a recognition of the self-aware and self-conscious moves of the author: the use of a transcription system and form that plays with the stereotypical sound of language, the problematics of transcription itself, and the mediation of writing. The use of transcription that breaks down and extends into the text, mixing and rubbing shoulders with ethnographic and theoretical analysis, folds over and underscores the question of difference. The action of making something out of talk itself creates “a fluid space of continuous engagement and encounter.”

A Space on the Side of the Road is a richly evocative book, in-filled with a mixture of poetic language and poetic theory that, through its self-aware construction, keeps the tension between acts of writing (ethnography) and the realms of experience and speech very much alive. The strategy of using different words and phrases originally located in quotations from the subjects of the book as part of its theoretical arguments serves to extend the tension between participant and observer, between transcription and translation. The use of photographs through the text introduces something similar. There is an unsettling that happens with the use of images in the text, a certain thwarted or ironicized expectation between representative photographs and their surrounding text.

An overwhelming majority of ethnographies use photographs mainly as supplementary illustrations. Captions extend this illustrative or referent connection, and photography becomes another tool in the ethnographic tool kit, a way of supporting the main argument that runs through the text. Rather than illustrative tools, the photography in Stewart’s book more resembles a collection of multiple possible entries, a way of unsettling expectations concerning photographs as simple or transparent referents. The photographs appear throughout the text, sometimes illustrating immediately-preceding text, as in the picture of “Eva Mae.” Sometimes the photographs provide a visual extension of an image raised in the text; a picture of coal trucks follows a discussion of the dangerousness of Appalachian back-country roads. We are left to imagine the situation in which such a truck might appear, careening into our own field of vision.

Another photograph follows a chapter discussing an auto accident in which a number of people were killed, including one Hollie Cox. In the text, Stewart discusses how the signs of the accident are narrativized, are enveloped within talk and story and transformed. Gary Lee, Hollie’s four-year-old nephew, has a waking vision in which he sees his uncle sitting in an overstuffed chair on the family porch. A photograph follows this. Gary Lee is leaning against the chair on the porch, eyes almost addressing the camera but sliding camera left. The chair, a broken lounger, is occupied by a large stuffed dog. The porch corner is supported by a stack of cinder blocks and stones. The photograph stands as a referent for Gary Lee. It indexes the chair, the porch. One is almost assimilated into the sense of “having been there” that photographs evoke. Then the reader/viewer steps back and remembers that the photograph is referring to a vision, and that the vision in turn refers to someone dead. That the story of the vision has been
spun in the gap between dreaming and waking, between the sign of the photograph and what it is meant to extend.

The photographs (by Em Herzstein, Harriette Hartigan, John Hartigan, as well as the author herself) provide points of departure and meditation. Reflection. Like Walter Benjamin's dialectical image, the photographs can be seen as ways of representing that push, not toward resolution, but toward a recognition of axes, of intersections between what things seem and what they could possibly mean. While Benjamin was interested in using such an intersection as a waking point for a particular kind of historical materialism, the photographs in Stewart's text attempt to keep open and contingent a contested and poetic space of making meaning.

The photographs, appreciated as icons or indexes "take on a power of their own as signs waiting to happen or vibrant half-associations waiting for completion." They become quotations—signs mixing a double-meaning of apprehension as both a way of grasping knowledge and a hesitation, a way of critically assessing the appearance of a re-contextualized referent. Quotation is not limited to textual representation but also includes photography: as a point of departure, as a point of contemplation, and as a point of entry within the density of the text itself. Photographs invoke an image that holds itself frozen and fleeting, momentarily caught in the motion of looking backward while indicating the present and the future—a point of departure and of ethnographic and historical attention. Like "assertive back talk," photographs can turn a "flat reading of signs into a performative space of claims and counter-claims, mutual misreadings, and momentary excesses that push things to the limit of the 'ordinary' and draw attention to a space of unseen forces."

The attempt to keep such a performative space open might be seen as problematic. These photographs could be seen as a collection inserted into gaps in the text, sealing over or cinching tight expected and discrete narratives. Photographs showing stereotypical poor Appalachians, mostly in casual and work clothes, sitting amidst broken things, or in paneled rooms with pictures of the Last Supper or Jesus on the wall. Photographs of broken-down trucks, or trucks so far past being broken-down that they settle into ruin, marking a passage or story from the past while providing a jumping-off place for confabulation in the present. Broken trucks, ramshackle houses, odd signs and buildings. These could be seen as more depictions of the stereotypical, of what is expected and, thus, what can be contained before it is even presented, slotting into the static place of a represented known.

But the photographs do something else. Like the rest of the form of the book, the photographs tease open a tension between the expected and the unknown, drawing the potential for a sharper realization and avenue of critical process by stressing the gap between the image itself and what is made of it, the gap between the photograph as a place of affirmation (of the text, of the stories, of the stereotype) and the image as a place of expansion, where meaning comes contingent, unfixed, and shifting.

The book ends in bits of letters, in phone calls, in interactions that remind the author of times or meetings back in Appalachia. One is left with the sense that the process of reading things out of things, of making meaning, is neverending. That the process begun with the book continues, doubling back, contingent, resurfacing. And that such a dynamic is the point of the text, the photographs, the bits of recorded and re-told stories, and the work of ethnography itself; to haunt and inhabit, to slip past attempts at containment and to keep alive culture's sense of what Michael Taussig calls its own fecund indeterminacy.

"There is no final textual solution, no way of resolving the dialogic of the interpreter/interpreted or subject/object through efforts to 'place' ourselves in the text, or to represent 'the fieldwork experience,' or to gather up the voices of the other as if they could speak for themselves." The placing of the ethnography within the poetics of story and "ways of talk" eludes the usual self-reflexive nod, where the inclusion of the "I" in the text is left to speak its own volumes. Here, the process of imagination, of recording, and of reflection are more integral to the processes of both the text and the theoretical workings that run through it. The "I," in this case, is contingent and unfixed, an "I" that gets layered within dense re-tellings and re-imaginings; evocative and teasing with its multiple uses of "imagine," "picture," and "we could say."

Within this understanding of the processes of the text, the photographs that run through it are integral. But photographs are troublesome things. As representative images, by nature they are broken free from their initial act of exposure, from that initial shift from
observing to mediated recording. Both gesturing toward their moment of conception as well as away from it, toward constructions of sense or meaning. As such, photographs leave open the problematic gap between seeing or perception and the “making sense” of things. Photographic images themselves both invite and resist interpretation. A Space on the Side of the Road speaks to this same gap, through an active tension between quotation and exegesis, between experience and mediated reportage. For this reason it is an important work, a book willing to keep alive the contingent practice(s) of culture and language and the ethnographic, photographic, and poetic practices of speaking through them.