

The Concurrency of Migration and Transculturalism in Moving Image

Jolie Zhilei Zhou

April 9, 2017

Globalization brings flexible mobility for some all over the world; at the same time, it also causes hosts populations' growing fear of the overflow of migrants. Responding to the coverage on mass media about migrants, such as depicting migrants as the sources of terrorists and crimes, artists take up their craft to defy mainstream stereotypes of migrants. Migrant images have become familiar in the field of contemporary art, especially in video installation. In an image-saturated environment, spectators are immersed in a culture of violence in which the normalization of violence renders spectators become relatively indifferent towards violent images they see. Therefore, the aestheticization strategy for migrant images, in turn, allows spectators to reflect on the darker themes. The paper will focus on the works by two video artists, Isaac Julien and Francis Alÿs, who primarily work with migration themes, yet have different politics of aesthetics. Specifically, the research paper will primarily focus on Isaac Julien's *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) and Francis Alÿs's *Don't Cross the Bridge before You Get to the River* (2008). Further, "migratory aesthetics," which is developed by Mieke Bal, asserts that there are four key characteristics to clarify how video and "migratory" can illuminate each other: movement, time or heterochrony, memory, and contact (150). While Isaac Julien investigates Morecambe Bay tragedy by construction and destruction of fictions, Francis Alÿs presents political tensions between Europe and Africa through a symbolic performance. Both of their works illuminate the characteristics of movement and contact, and their transculturality adds another level of movement to migratory aesthetics. Eventually, Julien's *Ten Thousand Waves* exemplifies multi-temporalities and destruction of fictions to challenge realism and Alÿs's work exemplifies acts of memory that doing something poetic can be political.

Migratory Aesthetics and Transculturalism

Migratory Aesthetics, a concept developed by Mieke Bal, is a crucial notion of migrant

images, which Jill Bennett later argues that it is a “relational aesthetics” more than a “thematic interlude” of migration (121). In other words, the aesthetic resonates works not through its content or form but through the way that “the political aesthetic as a method of inquiry” (121). Mieke Bal refers Theuw’s four key concepts from her videographic experiment to embody the concept of migratory aesthetics (151). Movement is the property of video as a medium and is also the basic of migratory culture (152). “Migratory” does not claim account for the actual experiences of migrants but refers to “the trace, equally sensorial, of the movements of migration that characterize contemporary culture” (152). Heterochrony is about the politics of time and is related to multi-temporality. Memory is not traumatic recall, but it points to the idea that people perform “acts of memory,” thus they do so in their present moment (Bal 157). In other words, memory forms people’s present behaviors and thoughts. Therefore, Bal states that “migratory experience exemplifies the present of the past within the present” (157). Contact means the installation space of video, which produces “a disenchanted intimacy that enables an ethical engagement with the migratory ‘otherness within’ contemporary culture” (Bal 158). While Mieke Bal uses these concepts to investigate the relation between video and “migratory,” Jill Bennett develops discussions about why migratory aesthetics is not synonymous with “art about migration,” or “art by migrants” (Bennett 120). She states that “the cumulative effect of the aesthetic engagement with migration is to engender a politics of contemporary culture as ‘migrant’” (120). In effect, both Bal and Bennett refuse to identify migratory art as a minority culture; rather it is a culture that is transformed by migration.

Movement, the broadest term among those four concepts of migratory aesthetics, implies the mobility of the video itself and the traces of the movement of people. Isaac Julien’s *Ten Thousand Waves* investigates the tragedy that at least 21 Chinese undocumented migrant cockle

pickers were drowned by an incoming tide in 2004. The installation reveals the economically driven displacements of the Chinese migrants and the mobility of the artist to trace back their route. Isaac Julien re-presents their route by intertwining archival radio recordings and found footages of the search in Morecambe Bay, calligraphy performance by a Chinese artist, reenactment of *The Goddess*, the myth of Mazu and Yishan Island, archival footage of cultural revolution and the 1930s Shanghai, and cityscape of Shanghai in *Ten Thousand Waves*.

Therefore, it is an installation that travels through time as well as space. The installation is not only aesthetically appealing but also challenges spectators' viewing habits of having one vantage point in cinema by the choreographic arrangement of nine screens. The body movements of spectators within the installation space is also another type of movement, which suggests the fact that their freedom of moving around the space is a "cruel choreography of power relations" in comparison with the forced migration on screen (Bal 153). Francis Alÿs's *Don't Cross the Bridge* (short for *Don't Cross the Bridge before You Get to the River*) documents Alÿs's concept of having two lines of children to form two separate lines from the narrowest strait between Spain and Morocco, which would ultimately form a symbolic bridge between Europe and Africa. Alÿs's politics of rehearsal is accomplished by this incomplete mission, which indicates its utopian dimension itself. The project can only be rehearsal; thus, it eventually manifests Realpolitik – the tension between these two continents revolving around illegal migration. Instead of presenting the migratory movement by realistic representations, Alÿs utilizes innocent children, who are recognized as apolitical figures, to denounce the unequal political relations between these two continents. Moreover, the video forms images that move, and that "move us emotionally" (Bal 153). Compared to the sadness that Julien's work generates, the emotion for Alÿs is more complicated. The video has joy and innocence on the surface, but it embeds grief

and sadness in depth.

Not only the migrants are on the move, but the artists are also on the move. Julien and Alÿs have a common point because of their *foreigner* positions to the events that they investigate. There is no doubt that art critics would be skeptical about Julien's position in making a project about Chinese culture, and Alÿs's position in making a project about contemporary history. Julien is a British whose parents migrated to Britain from St Lucia. Alÿs is a native of Belgium and lives in Mexico. Both of them make the installations that are less concerned with their identities. Nevertheless, it is essential to bring up the notion of "transculturalism" within the context of globalization to explicate the relationship between transculturalism and migratory aesthetics. This term is usually compared with multiculturalism which suggests the presence of many cultures in society, but they do not necessarily interact. Thus, Wolfgang Welsch advocates the term "transculturality" to convey "the complex interconnections that bind different cultures together today" (Ní Éigeartaigh 10). First, the themes of the installation are about migratory and transnational move, which has been explained above. Second, the collaboration team in each installation is transnational. In the research process of *Ten Thousand Waves*, Julien asked Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen, a Vietnamese-Canadian artist, to find a Chinese myth that would "allegorize" the Morecambe Bay tragedy, and eventually, Jacqueline found "The Tale of Yishan Island" (Julien et al. 194). To make a project about China, the comprehensive research and the help from transnational artists exclusively benefit from the result of globalization and digitization. In one of Julien's talks, he made a joke that he making *Ten Thousand Waves* is a black male making a work about Chinese culture (Julien, "Isaac Julien"). Nevertheless, the epoch of information explosion makes nobody have a stable identity. The transcultural environment breaks the "cultural and national values, and history one has inherited" in forming one's identity;

one's identity, then, is "the result of the different spaces through which one travels" (Ní Éigearthaigh 9). Julien notes that the attribution of his transnational team to "a modern international art world resembles the currents of globalization that displaced the cockle pickers from Fujian to northwest England" (Julien et al. 198). As Isaac Julien says in *Riot*, he was quite familiar with new wave of Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and mainland Chinese cinema (194). In effect, this fact implies the interconnection of different cultures that "nothing today is 'absolutely foreign' any longer" (Ní Éigearthaigh 10). In fact, Alÿs's *Don't Cross the Bridge* and *Bridge/Puente* inevitably need cooperation of people from two different nations, though these people do not necessarily meet.

Challenging Realism

Julien and Alÿs develop their politics of aesthetics and pursue "the epistemic possibilities of aesthetic perception to establish [a new] way of knowing" (Bennett 119). Art become political is not "simply by communicating a political message," but art makes spectators to investigate the politics of aesthetics (Demos 92). When talking about globalization, Demos develops the idea of "crisis globalization," which means "an era of growing inequality, increasing influx of migrants and refugees, widespread poverty and zone of conflict" (xiii). As a result, Papastergiadis argues that "fears are now most vivid in the way we describe mobility and belonging" (2). There is no doubt that art critics consistently bring up their distrust of the aestheticization approach to migrant images. A crucial quotation that Julien mentions in his talk at University of Toronto¹ must be brought up here:

Julien's work engages with the more lyrical artistic and cinematic tradition that has depicted tragedy and human suffering for centuries, but also speaks to a newer, media-saturated environment where all kinds of violence appear aestheticized and normalized.

It is precisely this normalization of violence in popular culture that may function to mask the real world violence of international politics. (González 127)

Documentarism is no longer crucial when artists want to investigate something that can only be imagined rather than being documented. Multi-temporality of *Ten Thousand Waves* is associated with the construction and destruction of myths; it is Julien's methodology to investigate the invisible concept "capital," which drives Chinese migrants to risk their lives to across continents. As Demos states that "political effectiveness may also never have been the goal of artists in the first place" (28), in *Ten Thousand Waves*, the interlacement of facts and fictions indeed visualizes the investigation of globalization's effects on individuals. Julien chose to reenact *The Goddess* (1934), a representative of Shanghai cinema in the 1930s. The story of *The Goddess* tells a story about a young and beautiful woman (played by Ruan Ling-yu) struggling for a better life to feed her only son and therefore works a street prostitute. *The Goddess* not only responds to Julien's question of historical motivation for people to take risks but also contributes to the idea of time travel. Julien establishes the myth of Mazu (played by Maggie Cheung) through most of the installation, but he also reveals the green screen and the double of Maggie Cheung to achieve the destruction of fictions. The myth is out of date and so needed to be destroyed, he claims (Julien, "Isaac Julien"). This behind-the-scene images also show Julien "problematizing his attempts to create a memory of Morecambe Bay" (Livesey 31).

Furthermore, Isaac Julien's installation does not come with subtitles, so the Chinese lines are incomprehensible for non-Chinese speakers. At the beginning of *Ten Thousand Waves*, Chinese calligraphy performance addresses the aesthetic aspect of waves, and its movement also echoes to the fearful nature of waves. Therefore, I would argue, the use of calligraphy performance underlines the uniqueness of Chinese calligraphy, which embeds the spirit of the

Chinese character “wave”(浪). Nevertheless, the inaccessibility of Chinese language to other language speakers may be a strategy that to resist the fact that English is the dominant language of contemporary art world. Near the end of the installation, the Chinese artists begin to wipe out the calligraphy writing “ten thousand waves” (萬重浪). Though spectators do not understand the characters, the gesture of wiping is powerful. Julien makes the calligraphy performance accessible by translating a culture through the gesture. As Isaac Julien reveals the making process of the installation, it invites spectators to think about his politics of aesthetics: construction and destruction of fictions. Accordingly, Laura Mulvey admires *Ten Thousand Waves*’ boldness and courage to reflect on politics today, because art should “engage with global phenomena without the traditional trepidation of ‘orientalism’” (Julien et al. 204). The use of digital technology enhances the construction of spectators’ emotion. According to Laura Mulvey, the CGI-enhanced ocean waves “evokes the fearful nature of the sea on an immediate level;” on another level, “it establishes visually the highly metaphoric significance of ‘waves’” (Julien et al. 204). The CGI effect is hardly observed by spectators; yet the images in Julien’s works tend to be metaphorical rather than indexical, in which the waves need to be CGI to create emotional and thematic connections with other screens’ images. Laura Mulvey suggests that the CGI waves signify the intertwined layers which lie at the heart of *Ten Thousand Waves*. They are “the migration of impoverished peoples under capitalism, and the circulation of capital itself, through manufacturing and finance, and particular, in this context, as it flows into the new China” (Julien et al. 204). The choices of reenactment and destruction of fictions, refusal to provide translation for the calligraphy, and the use of digital technology, are Julien’s methodology responding to the contemporary art world – to destruct the dominant discourse of realism and the dominant position of the West in the contemporary art world. Therefore, the multi-temporality also

includes the very moment of the exhibition, which immediately interacts with the images and interrogate the art institution that this installation situates.

Compared with Julien's careful and precise planning of his project, Alÿs asks "can an artistic intervention truly bring about an unforeseen way of thinking, or is it more a matter of creating a sensation of 'meaninglessness' that shows the absurdity of the situation" (Godfrey 265)? In other words, Alÿs's politics of rehearsal may demonstrate the absurdity of the contemporary politics. He then states that "for the moment, I am exploring the following axiom: Sometimes doing something poetic can be political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic" (Godfrey 265). For Alÿs's *Bridge/Puente* (2006), he embeds his political metaphor in seemingly naïve performance. Unlike Isaac Julien, who often works with both facts and fictions, Alÿs asks the local people to join his performative project and document the performance. Thus, the work immediately has its political message, which can be associated with the local context. Alÿs asked fishermen from Florida and Cuba to drive their boats to form a line departing from the opposite shores. Godfrey states that "the work dramatizes the impossibility of the dream it articulated through the incompleteness of the 'bridge,' through its own transience" (267). Further, with a more recent project, *Don't Cross the Bridge*, he has children to line up to form a "bridge" again. They speak to the contingency of Alÿs's politics of rehearsal. These two projects do not mean to have a real *bridge* to link each other; in fact, the symbolic weight of this project is much heavier than actually building a bridge. In spite of documentary style that is presented by the two-channel installation *Don't Cross the Bridge*, the installation is not a documentary at all. Though the time on these two screens claims to be "August 12, 2008," it could be a lie. Moreover, even the location may be faked too because the horizon line of the blue ocean can be hardly distinguished. Despite the fact that this speculation may be true, the memory

that this project bases on – the tension between Europe and Africa – is true. Therefore, it is fair to argue that documentarism is not longer important because the poetic performance acts out the political message. Therefore, the installation verifies that migratory aesthetics need not be realism because “the bare facts alone would easily bring up an unease related to voyeurism” (Bal 158). Last, but not least, the sense of temporality is rather weak in Alÿs; by which it means that the symbolic performance takes place at no time but in a utopia. Compared to Julien’s contemplation on Morecambe Bay tragedy, there is no specific event that Alÿs contemplates. Alÿs seems to reflect on the overall tension between two continents, that he reflects on his memory. Thus, when the idea of symbolic bridge move from Cuba and the United States to Africa and Europe, there is almost no difference between those performances by nature; the only difference is the context of the project. Hence, I would argue, it is the politics of Alÿs’s aesthetics that the poetic performance can become political depending on the context he chooses.

Multiscreen Experience as Reconstruction of Meaning

Art historian and critic David Joselit “raised the contradiction of discovering art that opposes consumerism in the site of the commercial art gallery” (Demos 90). On the other hand, video installation is a “contact zone,” a “social space where cultures meet, clash and negotiate” (Bal 158). The art gallery is not a “mere commercial enterprise” (Demos 93). In *Ten Thousand Waves*, spectators from different cultural backgrounds can meet Chinese history and its contemporary politics through the materiality of the projection on screen. Isaac Julien utilizes nine screens in *Ten Thousand Waves* partially results from his interest in the “sculptural possibilities” of moving images (Julien et al. 188). Though the images on nine screens are arranged as not being captured in one moment, “the economy of the fragment text” allows spectatorship moving from simple consumer to producer because spectators can make their own

understandings through the fragmentation of narrative (Livesey 30). The notion of “the traveling spectator” notes that spectators follow the characters’ journeys (Julien et al. 193). Julien states that “there should be some movement and instability in their own experience” (Julien et al. 193); by which it means that the experiential aspect of the installation is closely associated with the mobility of the migrants. The choreography of nine screens largely influences spectators’ perception of the installation. When *Ten Thousand Waves* was installed in MoMA (Museum of Modern Art), the United States, the huge screens were hung on the ceilings with various angles. This choreographic choice is not only the “expanded cinema” in a museum context but also a method to resist the didactic possibility of the exotic images (Julien et al. 193). By using “parallel montage,” the relations between the past and the present are simultaneously shown (Julien et al. 193). For instance, juxtaposing to the modern scenes of Shanghai, actress Zhao Tao dresses as the protagonist of *The Goddess* (1934) walking through the hallway of a museum; at the same time, the Chinese video artist Yang Fudong “acts as a john in the reenacted scenes of *The Goddess*” walking through the hallway alone as well (Livesey 29). They meet up at a room with oriental mural and sit opposite to each other; this space suggests the contemporary art scene. As the original actress of *The Goddess* Ruan Ling-yu died for the pressure of rumors, which foreshows the contemporary art scenes, the reenacted scenes in the museum are haunted. Only one screen shows Mazu flying through the hallway of the museum, so there is possibility that spectators can miss this shot because spectators have to turn their heads quickly. This (in)visibility of ghost benefits from the irregular choreographic multiscreen. The archival footage of Mao-era is juxtaposed with the museum scene and the reenactment scenes of *The Goddess*. The juxtaposition of these three different eras of China adds complex layers on the topic of economically driven displacement. It suggests people in the Republican era, socialist era and

neoliberalist era of China; it then is followed by the images of a man drifting in the water, accompanied by a poem suggesting the suffering of migration. The three periods eventually propose different ways that people pursue capital. This part can hardly be missed because it includes the repetitive use of one same image. The multi-temporalities within a space “contributes to the temporal texture of our cultural world and thus, our understanding and experiencing it is a political necessity” (Bal 156). Hence, the multiscreen experience enhances the heterochrony that the migratory aesthetics propose: “Time is not an objective phenomenon” (Bal 156).

A Story of Negotiation is Francis Alÿs’s recent exhibition in Art Gallery of Ontario. *Don’t Cross the Bridge*, a two-channel video installation, is installed face to face. The videos are projected on two huge walls, between which a bench is provided for spectators. In one of the video, a line of children holding small sailing boats that are made by colorful flip flops depart from the shore of Morocco; in the opposite video, another line of children holding those toy boats depart from the shore of Spain. The oppositional relation between these two videos essentially abstracts the idea of building a bridge, whereas it also hints at the impossibility of this project. Therefore, the sense of incompleteness is enhanced by the special arrangement. With intertitles that indicate these children’s location and briefly mentions Alÿs’s idea about this project, spectators can immediately imagine the political allegory of this project. This seemingly naïve project is never naïve; to symbolically link two continents is to express his wish to build an invisible bridge between two countries. Nonetheless, these two lines would never meet because of they can never get even, which Alÿs knows from the very beginning. Multiscreen video installation as a sculptural work can activate the relation between the migratory culture and artists’ politics of aesthetics.

Conclusion

In short, Isaac Julien challenges the notion of realism by making a video installation about Chinese cultures. At the same time, *Ten Thousand Waves* problematizes the identity politics and multiculturalism in contemporary art world because it is a work that never falls into any of these categories. Because of the identity of Julien, the work breaks the balance of the art world which tends to curate the even numbers of non-Western artists and Western artists in a show (these works mainly align with their identities) to make the show international. On the contrary, In Alÿs's *Don't Cross the Bridge before You Get to the River*, the identity of the artist is not important at all. This project is the poetics of contemplation on the contemporary history of migration between Africa and Europe. It is also a documentary-style narrative in which “the shoes become the vessels, and the children turn into mythical giants” (Alÿs). Thus, the complexity of their works characterizes the potential of new migratory aesthetics: transculturality, choreographic of multiscreen, and symbolic performance without time.

Notes

1. For the context of the quotation, see González 127.

Work Cited

- Alÿs, Francis. "Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River." *Francis Alÿs*, <http://francisalys.com/dont-cross-the-bridge-before-you-get-to-the-river/>. Accessed 5 Apr. 2017.
- Bal, Mieke. "Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement." *Exit*, No. 32, 2008: pp. 150-161. Web. 22 Mar. 2017.
- Barriendos Rodríguez, Joaquín. "Global Art and the Politics of Mobility: (Trans) Cultural Shifts in the International Contemporary Art-System." Translated by Anke van Wijck. *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: "Conflict, Resistance, and Agency."* Edited by Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro. The Netherlands: Brill, 2011, pp.313-334. Print.
- Bayraktar, Nilgün. *Mobility and Migration in Film and Moving-Image Art: Cinema Beyond Europe*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016. Print.
- Bennett, Jill. "Migratory Aesthetics: Art and Politics beyond Identity." *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: "Conflict, Resistance, and Agency."* Edited by Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro. The Netherlands: Brill, 2011, pp.109-126. Print.
- Ní Éigeartaigh, Aoileann, and Wolfgang Berg. "Editors' Introduction: Exploring Transculturalism." *Exploring Transculturalism: A Biographical Approach*. Edited by Wolfgang Berg, Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh. Wiesbaden: VS Research, 2010. Web. 1 Apr. 2017.
- Demos, T. J.. *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013. Print.
- Ferguson, Russell, and Francis Alÿs. *Francis Alÿs: Politics of Rehearsal*. Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2007. Print.
- Godfrey, Mark. "Walking the Line: The Art of Francis Alÿs." *Artforum*, XLIV (9), 2006, pp. 260-267. Web. 19 Mar. 2017.
- González, A. Jennifer. "Sea Dreams: Isaac Julien's *Western Union: Small Boats*." *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*. Edited by Saloni Mathur. Williamstown, Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2011. Print.
- Julien, Isaac. "Isaac Julien: Artist's Talk." Cinema Studies Institute, University of Toronto, 31 Mar. 2017, Innis Town Hall, Toronto. Speech.
- Julien, Isaac, Cynthia Rose, Paul Gilroy, Kobena Mercer, B R. Rich, bell hooks, Mark Nash, Giuliana Bruno, Christine Assche, Laura Mulvey, and Stuart Hall. *Isaac Julien: Riot*. Museum of Modern Art, 2013. Print.
- Livesey, Joseph. Wave after Wave after Wave: The Multi-Channel Immersion of Isaac Julien's Ten Thousand Waves. *Film Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 4, 2014, pp. 26-32. Web. 16 Mar. 2017.
- Papastergiadis, Nikos. "Art in The Age of Siege." *Glocal Time*, October 2005. Web. 19 Mar. 2017.

Installations

- Alÿs, Francis. *Don't Cross the Bridge before You Get to the River*. 2008.
- Alÿs, Francis. *Bridge/Puente*. 2006.
- Julien, Isaac. *Ten Thousand Waves*. 2010.