Art for Intellectuals – Isaac Julien's *Western Union: Small Boats*

Jolie Zhilei Zhou

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Isaac Julien's recent exhibition of at Royal Ontario Museum, *Other Destinies*, consists of two multiscreen moving -image installations, *True North* (2004) and *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007). These two installations present two stories that have different historical references conveyed through highly aesthetic and deeply political visual registers, which challenge conventional visual representations. *Western Union* (short for *Western Union: Small Boats*) depicts a contemporary image of North African immigrants, who risk their lives on their journeys across the Mediterranean Sea to find a better life. However, most spectators can access little information in *Western Union* because the reference associated with each visual representation requires relevant knowledge. On the other hand, some curators and scholars might be able to associate the symbol of small blue boats with the slave-ship in history (Chubb 36). Thus, the complex visual registers in this aesthetically appealing installation reveal a permanent display of power-knowledge relation within a museum space.

At first, viewers without any understanding of the context for the images they are seeing in the installation may be able to connect the relation between tragedy and African identity through sounds, the images of the clothes without owners, the black female figure, the drowning man, and *dead bodies*. However, they may easily get lost in the dancers' performance and the wandering black female character because the temporalities that are associated with them are ambiguous. The less viewers know, the less they can connote the images, and vice versa. As the didactic panel indicates, "this moving-image installation is a powerful reflection on the dangerous and often deadly migrations from Africa to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea;" thus, viewers can start to imagine the connection between the *immigrant identities* of the dancers and the sublime landscape. The concept of *Western Union* originates from the North African migration to Italy. The motivation for Isaac Julien to make *Western Union* was his regular visits

to the south coast of Italy with his mother, where he noticed an increasing number of African people (Julien et al. 173). While North African migrants try to cross the Mediterranean to get entry into "fortress Europe" without papers, the great loss of life on the journeys has become known as "the Sicilian Holocaust," by which is meant the number of deaths equals to the loss of life in a war (Julien et al. 174). Julien's aestheticization of the *ugly facts* delivers a serious message in museums, in which the sublime landscape and professional dancers hide the political references. In addition, no matter how beautiful the images are, the installation never makes the spectators feel pleased or joyful; rather it makes them feel doubt and uncertain. The installation then can be argued as a self-reflexive work.

The opening is set on the south coast of Italy where Julien had his first thought about this project. The landscape and the Palace not only serve to represent the beautiful and sublime, but they have significance for the history of both African migrants and Italy. The first sequence of the installation portrays a black female figure standing at the entrance of a tunnel with broken gates. The following sequence depicts several tourists on the coast and a black male figure on the shore. Accompanied by an African folk song, these two sequences indirectly point to the origin of the two black characters and their relation to the location. In the next few sequences, which take place in Lampedusa, which is "a hundred miles away from the North African coast" (Julien et al. 174), the central symbol of this project, the small blue boats, start to occasionally juxtapose with the images of black migrants. Small boats build up the relation between the entry point for illegal migration and the vacation paradise. Again, this symbol of the small boat requires relevant knowledge to connote it. The final sequence returns to Lampedusa again, and this time, the image shows vacationers enjoying vacations by the sea shore; meanwhile, this image contrasts with the black bodies that are covered with aluminum on the other side of beach not far away.

Julien states that "there, deaths at sea can occur any day; it's seen as almost ordinary when bodies turn up on the beach" (174). Julien turns this fact into very straightforward but less striking images. In this sequence, the people on vacation are placed in long shots; meanwhile, the dead bodies are primarily seen in close-up shots, so the viewers can only see parts of the bodies. Further, the whole installation is almost wordless. Visual representations without any linguistic message are incredibly powerful because viewers can connote anything depending on their knowledge. Spectators can easily glean that the last sequence on the beach presents a contrast between joyful bourgeois lives and the fearful fact of the *dead* migrants. The installation itself speaks for the migratory tragedy through the simultaneously innocent and fearful images.

On the one hand, the aestheticization requires historical and social knowledge about the visual representations of the installation in order to understand the association between them. Part of *Western Union* was shot at an ornate palace–The Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi in Italy– which was a key location for Luchino Visconti's film *The Leopard* (1963) (Julien et al. 174). *The Leopard* tells a story about the decline of the Sicilian nobility during the Risorgimento. In fact, Julien refers to the parallel between the history of Italian immigrants in America and the history of North African immigrants in Italy. As the installation is set in Italy, Julien wants to create a conversation between Sicilian histories and the immigrant reality (Julien et al. 174). The appearance of the leopard on the ceramic tile is not accidental but is a hint to the film reference as well as to Sicilian history. The leopard's gaze seems to witness the migrants' survival as well as the vicissitude of the Italian nobility. Nevertheless, the historical background of the location does not manifest itself; viewers have to build up their imagination with visual signs – the Baroque ceiling, a smiling female guide, and the luxurious furniture – which ultimately may hint at the heritage of colonialism. The coded messages of these signifiers have different levels. Once

spectators get to know the surface level of these coded messages, they can get the most common idea of the installation – the tough life of those who are in forced migration. The encrypted messages are for the intellectuals.

The choreography and performance of the *immigrants* on the Palazzo also illuminates the parallel between Italian history and the history of North African migrants. In the sequence on the Palazzo's staircase, one screen presents a group of dancers holding aloft a white female figure while they slowly climb the stairs; and another screen shows several dancers unconsciously sliding down the stairs one after another. These two scenes juxtapose with each other. Although the use of the white performer renders the visual representations of migrants unstable, it refers to two different types of migrants that Julien addresses. Therefore, Julien draws a parallel between two histories by carefully planning the meanings of different visual signs. The exhibition context provides a rationale for the video installation, which indicates the institution of exhibitions as "a context of the permanent display of power/knowledge" (Bennett 79). While the dancers apparently signify migrants, viewers hardly perceive the connection between the bodies and the Palazzo's staircase. As the exhibition context manifests its power of knowledge, spectators do not blame the obscurity of the work but rather their lack of knowledge. In other words, museum as a place that urges spectators to learn eventually prompts spectators to learn about the installation and its historical and cultural references.

On the other hand, Julien's visual strategy avoids the "representational violence" that employs a "bare, severe aesthetic" (Chubb 33). Julien's aestheticization includes the use of professional dancers, who replace conventional representations of migrants. In effect, this aestheticization encourages people not to consider "the fact of migration but the fictions that govern its representation" (Chubb 33). In *Western Union*, the dancers' choreography and

performance reimagine the situations of migrants. For example, one scene in the Palazzo is paired up with the squeaking sound of a boat, the sound of flowing water, and the choreography of the male dancer. The nondiegetic sounds suggest the situation of drowning migrants, which provides a new context for the images of the Palazzo. The professional dancer beautifully adopts the movement of drowning; he lies on his back, fluidly moving his limbs in motions, which suggests the images of the drowning man in the water. The juxtaposition of images of the dancer on the Palazzo and images of the dancer in water recurs on three screens, which suggests the relation between the unfortunate migrants and the survivors. Although the images are beautiful and contemplative, the spectators cannot help but question the representations under the pressure that is imposed by the "exhibitionary complex" (Bennett 71). In other words, the exhibition context seems to impose a power of knowledge on the viewers; and it implies that the exhibits in museums contain more meanings than they see on the surface.

Julien has been criticized for over-aestheticization by the use of professional dancers and sublime landscapes (Chubb 31). Emma Chubb argues that "the documentary approach to make clandestine emigration visible often neglects migrants' agency and individual experiences" (33). *Western Union* is indeed beautiful on the surface, but what it embeds in these beautiful images is the contradiction between the performance and the sublime landscape. The effect of engendering viewers to think is the self-reflexivity of the installation. Furthermore, the timeless character in *Western Union*, the wandering black female figure, is a witness to all events. Most of the time, her gaze leads spectators' gazes; she interweaves the fragmented visual elements together. Regarding formal strategies, Julien particularly situates her gaze on one of the screens, which creates an illusion that she has witnessed everything. Using multiple screens can modify the relationship between screens and thus meanings within each screen. The juxtaposition or

montage of three screens creates the visual experience that a single screen would not possess. Julien occasionally uses the triple-screen as a Cinerama to present an expanded landscape. However, the temporality of the events within the landscape occur are often distorted. For instance, when a ship crosses one of the side screens and disappears from that screen, it will not appear on the central screen in chronological order. This suggests that the event occurs on the central screen first, but the image on the central screen is shown later than that the image on the side screen. After several viewings, viewers may be able to notice that the temporalities of these images on different screens are sometimes anti-chronological and very ambiguous. Thus, the ambiguous temporality challenges the spectators' habit of watching films or videos in a passive way, and thus the installation encourages spectators to actively question the methodology of it.

The darkened room and the immersive big screens enclose the spectators within a space, which allows the installation to pour its knowledge into *empty bodies*. In a darkened room, viewers' social identities also vanish into the immersive images. Robert Smithson states that "the consuming darkness removes us from the world, suspending us in an alternative reality in which our bodies are subordinated to eyesight" (Bishop 94). A scene on the shore that occurs on the south coast of Italy juxtaposes with the scenes in the Palazzo. The middle screen shows a black performer carrying a *dead* white figure on his shoulder by the sea shore, and the two screens beside it show two oppositely tilting shots of the Palazzo's interior. As a result, the triple-screen creates a swinging visual effect that makes the spectators feel dizzy. This juxtaposition, paired with the squeaking sound of the deck, then mimics the uncomfortable physical experience of being on a boat. In effect, the spectators can connect their visual experience with the political context, which informs the migrants' experience. Last, but not least, the sound design plays a significant role in evoking the spectators' imagination about the tragedy and thus the connection

between it and the beautiful landscape, such as the radio noise, the sound of flowing water, the squeaking sound of the deck, the folk songs, and so on. In other words, the sound design functions to connect the beautiful images and the context of them. Not only the sounds from specific sources engender viewers generate imagination about tragedy, but also the soundtrack of the installation, which seems to be the mix of low-pitch bass and other music instruments, contributes to the construction of a heavy keynote.

In short, Isaac Julien's beautiful but obscure visual representations, which are mostly associated with indirect references, engender spectators' further exploration. Moreover, these representations are powerful statements against the clichéd representations of North African migrants. The aestheticization and sound design contribute to the creation of self-reflexivity in the installation. In an exhibition context, this installation indeed imposes the power of knowledge on spectators, wherein the spectators realize their lack of knowledge and are encouraged to seek knowledge about this installation. Therefore, the intricacy of visual representations in Isaac Julien's *Western Union* indeed reveals a display of power and knowledge in museums.

Work Cited

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