

# Electric Shadows (Dian Ying 電影)

Mark Nash

The ‘shifting perspective’ of Chinese painting ... invites us to explore nature, to wander through the mountains and valleys, discovering fresh beauty at every step. We cannot take in so great a panorama at a glance; indeed the artist intends that we should not. We would need perhaps days or weeks to walk the length of the stretch of countryside he presents in his scroll, but by revealing it to us little by little as we proceed, he combines the element of time with that of space, in a four-dimensional synthesis such as western art has not achieved until modern times.

Shen Kuo (10th century)<sup>1</sup> *Dream Pool Essays*

## POLYVISION

I have been privileged to see Isaac Julien’s *Ten Thousand Waves* installation in a number of different venues—at its premiere in the Sydney Biennial in May 2010, at the ShanghART H-Space in Shanghai a few weeks later, and most recently at the Kunsthalle in Helsinki. However, simply to say it is a nine-screen installation does not tell you very much about the ways in which his images work with space, time and sound.

Julien’s first foray into the installation form came with *Trussed* (1996), a black and white, silent two-screen installation, in which images of SM ritual bondage are duplicated and projected into the corner of a room. Julien has since worked with increasingly complex configurations of projection screens: two (*Trussed*, *Vagabondia* (2000)), three (*Long Road to Mazatlán* (1999), *True North* (2004) *Fantôme Afrique* (2005)), four (*Fantôme Créole* (2005)), five (*Western Union: Small Boats* (2007)) and presently nine<sup>2</sup> (*Ten Thousand Waves*). Sometimes the installation form mimics a cinematic presentation, as in the back-projected three screen *Paradise Omeros* (2002) at Documenta11, in which the screen, built out into a solid three-dimensional structure, faces a series of bleachers. In others, the solidity of the back projection screen remains, but the seats are removed, and the viewer can sit or stand in the space to view the work. In the essay that follows I explore some of the aesthetic issues Julien’s work provokes.

Starting with *Fantôme Créole*, Julien has explored the possibilities of a presentation that does not allow the viewer to see the whole work from any one vantage point. In *Fantôme Créole*,

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as installed in the Centre Georges Pompidou in 2005, seats were placed in the centre of the space, but the audience had to choose in which direction to look. In the Sydney Biennial, ShanghART and Hayward Gallery installations of *Ten Thousand Waves*, there was a circle<sup>3</sup> of seven screens with two in the centre, the latter obstructing our view of the whole space. Again one had to move around to see the ‘whole thing’ and there were always one or two screens that one was not able to see. The Helsinki presentation was in some ways the most ambitious, here the screens were distributed between three of the four connecting rooms that formed the first floor of this Kunsthalle exhibition space—the architecture making any overview impossible. The viewer moved from room to room, drawn by the half-glimpsed, half-heard movement of images and sounds emanating from the other rooms.

At the beginning of the last century some silent cinema directors, most notably Abel Gance, experimented with multiple screens (for example in *Napoleon* (1927)). Gance called his system Polyvision, an early precursor of the Cinerama format. Both involve the deployment of three synchronized 35mm cameras. In the 1960s, Hollywood experimented with split-screen formats as a means of developing narrative tension, by displaying threads simultaneously (for example John Boorman’s *Point Blank* (1967)). More recently IMAX cinema has pushed the boundaries of cinema screen formats so the screen aspect ratio approximates more accurately to that of human vision.

The triptych format that a body of Julien’s work is concerned with has an important ancestry in Christian art: three-part altarpieces (which in turn drew their model from the earlier three-part Roman writing tablet). The panels were hinged or detachable for ease of transport. In a similar fashion of course, the single-screen components of Julien’s installations are also portable. However there are aesthetic properties of the two and three screens that are also important: firstly, a simple mirroring with the two screens, and a more complex form of mirroring when the two side screens of a three-screen projection mirror each other adding weight to, or distracting attention from, the central screen. With four, five and then with nine screens much more complex poetic structures are possible as the images repeat and echo each other across the space of installation.

## AFTER BAZIN

In 1947, film critic and theorist André Bazin wrote an essay ‘The myth of total cinema’ in which he explored cinema’s fascination with reduplicating the real. He argued that the technical development of cinema was less the outcome of economic and historical forces than from the converging of various obsessions<sup>4</sup> with the ‘reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, colour and relief’.<sup>5</sup>

Twenty years later colleagues in *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Screen* were to revisit Bazin’s formulation in the light of (Althusserian) Marxism. While they agreed with Bazin that technical change is ideologically driven, they critiqued this notion of an in-built realist teleology. Bazin pointed to cinema’s fascination with reduplicating the real: the attempt to add sound and colour to the film experience as early as the first decade of cinema and the various attempts to immerse the viewer in the moving image referred to above. These were to be complimented later by the development of Dolby and other surround sound technologies. Julien’s recent work has involved 5:1 surround-sound technology, and in the case of *Ten Thousand Waves*, he uses the more recent (and immersive) 9:2 configuration. Today with the development of realistic digital effects (CGI) and the revival of 3D cinema we are again in the midst of a drive towards immersive technologies, as though the movie industry believes that it will be possible to reduplicate the experience of reality cinematically.

Bazin was also a proponent of the long take. He was hostile to montage cinema as it had been elaborated by Soviet filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein. Its concatenation of images, prevented the reduplication of reality, Bazin’s advocacy of realism also involved the repression of the tradition of avant-garde cinema that attempted to embrace the fragmentation of visual space being embraced by Cubism.<sup>6</sup> This in turn involved a privileging of narrative over image. In recent years the development of what has been called a ‘slow cinema’, constructed around the long take, has brought a renewed interest in Bazin’s ideas.

Although Isaac Julien’s earlier films, such as *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) and *Looking For Langston* (1989) embrace the vocabularies

of narrative and poetic documentary cinema respectively, his work is always informed by avant-garde approaches to montage. Indeed in *Ten Thousand Waves* we are forever having our attention drawn to some closer shot or some version of the shot-reverse-shot figuration characteristic of classic narrative film here drawn out syntagmatically in the multiple screen installation.<sup>7</sup> In addition to this, Julien’s work clearly forces a fragmentation of the field of vision, a project embraced by earlier experimental cinema (eg Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy’s 1924 *Ballet Mécanique*) but rejected by commercial, and to some extent art cinema, in preference for narrative realist forms. Whereas one might have expected moving image artists to reconnect to modernist aesthetics, instead they have, by and large, opted to embrace cinema’s ongoing dialogue with realism. Julien’s cinema does not embrace this ideology of realism. The viewer is always aware that the images are constructed for both critical engagement, and emotional pleasure. They create an excess, one might call it beauty, that always outstrips the narrative or conceptual function of image and sound.

## SCOPIC LANDSCAPES

Those sumptuous images of the goddess Mazu (played by Maggie Cheung) suspended over a river in Guangxi province, framed by vertiginous limestone peaks, makes one think for a moment that one might be participating in the Taoist aesthetic of say a fifth generation Chinese filmmaker, such as Zhang Yimou. However the evident CGI constructedness of the Mazu figure, and the zip pans through the bamboo forest with their homage to the prestidigitations of Hong Kong popular cinema and Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2000) point in a different direction. And in case there should there be any uncertainty in the viewer’s mind, a whole green screen section of *Ten Thousand Waves* is devoted to ‘laying bare this device’ (to adopt the phrase from Soviet literary critic Viktor Shklovskii) unpacking an element of Julien’s cinematic technique.

On the other hand, in the sense that the original vocation of 19th century realism, as developed by French novelists and painters, was to depict the reality of working class life,

the heart of Julien’s project is deeply realist, not necessarily at the level of form, but in its representation of conditions of life (and fantasies) of different classes of Chinese working people (cocklefishers, city workers, prostitutes and peasants,).

These scenes shot in southern China recall the painted scrolls familiar to devotees of Chinese landscape painting. Southern China contains some beautiful landscapes that have informed impressive work by artists such as Guo Xi (1020–1090). In Imperial China, as in the later Roman empire, dissident intellectuals were exiled far from the capital, and their work can have an undertow of nostalgia and regret. They were also far enough from the capital to be the subject of exotic speculation as well as connotations of displacement and exile. Indeed in Julien’s film we cut from these idealized images to the heady, and as Chris Connery so aptly puts it, the ‘scopic landscapes’ of Shanghai. The karst mountains with temples on their peaks are supplanted by the shimmering and complex outlines of the high-rise Pudong architecture.

Chinese landscape art took different forms, vertical hangings, horizontal scrolls, books, even fans. What interests me here are the scrolls. The scrolls though often exhibited as a long horizontal landscape, were in fact viewed in sections, from right to left, the eye traversing the landscape as the scroll was unrolled and rolled up in one single motion. Like triptychs, scrolls are portable, but this mode of viewing really works against any totalizing view. Of course if you look at the whole of a landscape, say by Guo Xi, you will see different kinds of levels of detail, as you would, in fact, in a Renaissance drawing, say by Leonardo da Vinci. The totality has to be imagined rather than demonstrated. This mode of viewing has a lot of similarities with the installation form as Julien develops it. There are narrative fragments—‘The Tale of Yishan Island’, scenes from *The Goddess* (1934), scenes of angelic visitation in the Pudong Park Hyatt. The installation form as it were unrolls these images for us. Of course film is a unidirectional medium and yet we are offered tantalizing repeats of sequences as though, in fact, we could re-view a scene we found particularly intriguing, before being redirected again to the end.

The multi-screen format is the core presentational mode of Julien’s installation work. However he also produces versions which echo the aesthetics of earlier works, for example, three

screen or single-screen. There is an economic logic at work here. The works are funded primarily by foundations and private collectors who can install the full multi-screen version in their galleries, homes or offices. There are also single-screen versions made for cinematic presentation for those who prefer a less complex version for display within their collection. The more elaborate works are collected and displayed in public museums—most recently *Western Union: Small Boats* in the Brandhorst Museum in Munich. As well as these different versions Julien also produces photographic series of still images associated with the works. These are often shot on the set of the production, indeed some feature the production apparatus eg *Baltimore* series (*Filmset/Still Life* (2003)). They are not, as some may think, film production stills, but professional large format photography. In the case of one series, commissioned by Two Rooms—an Auckland, New Zealand Gallery—the *True South* series (2009) there were only photographs produced, no film. I particularly like this series because of its play with expectation: there might indeed have been a film, but instead these images create their own film. In *Ten Thousand Waves* the still images literally provide souvenirs: memories of the installation. What is created in this method of working is a series of versions, versions which undercut somewhat the sense of there being an original or definitive version, but rather a series of copies (one dominant, others subordinate in most cases). In one particularly successful case in my view, two three-screen works—*Fantôme Afrique* and *True North*—were grafted together to form a new four-screen work *Fantôme Créole*. The images of cold (north) and hot (Africa) extended both works so that their projects became more conceptual: linking the north and the south, the pole and the equator, exploration colonialism and the struggle for independence.

## RE-LOCATIONS

Works are also defined by their context. Art history is so market-driven and object-focused that it pays little attention to the texture of exhibition and installation context and location. In the Sydney Biennial for example, *Ten Thousand Waves* was shown in the recently renovated two storey Mould Loft—Building 6, part of an elaborate ship building complex on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour which has become a key venue for the Biennial. The work’s location, on the ridge of the island, helped the piece stand apart from the often grungy connotations of many of the exhibition venues. It also worked well with an adjacent sculptural installation by Shen Shaomin, *Summit* (2010), presenting a series of wax figures of tyrannical world leaders. Up in the top floor of the shed one could see the images of Mao and Stalin held aloft in the archive footage of Julien’s film, below the sound of the marching feet echoed into Shaomin’s installation. These felicitous juxtapositions are one of the challenges, and when deftly executed as here, pleasures of biennial curating.

In Shanghai, ShanghART had expanded its exhibition space in the Moganshan Road district into an adjacent workshop, Building 8 especially renovated for the exhibition. The space was smaller than in Sydney, and more intimate. Being in China of course it gave the piece a very different resonance. *Ten Thousand Waves* became a metonym for China. It was in China but it referred to a series of different “Chinas”. It became naturalized and at the same time distanced. Workers who, under different circumstances, might have been forced to make the journey to Europe in search of a better life, lived and worked in an adjacent building. The rumoured and eventual arrival of Maggie Cheung, who plays the role of the goddess Mazu, for the opening prompted them to dress up for the occasion. One in which a Chinese screen icon watched herself playing the role of Mazu who might (or might not) have been able to save them in this other parallel universe but who represented so much of Chinese ambition to be like the west—in this case the dream factory of Hollywood and its star and celebrity culture—and at the same time be different from or indeed critique the west.

Finally in Helsinki, as I have mentioned, the work was architecturally reconfigured within the Kunsthalle, a recently renovated public exhibition space. Far from China the work of course fed into the west's fascination with China. There had been an exhibition of the landscape work of Guo Xi at the Kunsthalle in 1999. However Helsinki was also one of the first European cities to embrace Julien's work. He had been showing films in Helsinki since 1987 and Kiasma, the Contemporary Art Museum was one of the first public museums to collect his work (in 2001). The signifier "Julien" therefore played a much larger part in the works circulation of meaning than it did say in Shanghai. One might venture that Finland's experience of first Swedish and Russian/Soviet occupation and colonialism made those people more sensitive to the preoccupations of his work.

## SONIC SCAPES

A word about music, and sound. There is an elaborate sonic structure to Julien's work equally as complex as the visual. In *Ten Thousand Waves* we hear sound and music from Jah Wobble and the Chinese Dub orchestra. The music which sounds to a western viewer most Chinese is in fact this fusion of eastern and western forms. Equally, the more abstract atonal elements composed by Maria de Alvear are taken from *Equilibrio*, a score specifically composed to accompany a screening of an element of *Ten Thousand Waves: The Tale of Yishan Island* (and which recently premiered in the Reina Sofia in Madrid in June 2010). De Alvear was a former student of the celebrated Mauricio Kagel (best known to cinephiles for his score for *Un Chien Andalou* (1928)). Written for two pianos, flute, percussion and strings, with the pianos and string sections tuned a quarter tone apart, her score has a sound quality which references the Chinese pentatonic scale as well as contemporary atonal music. Sound artists Mukul Patel and ChoP (Zen Lu and Grzegorz Bojanek) also contributed more abstract elements of sound design. The soundtrack of the *Ten Thousand Waves* installation is both woven together from these different elements as well as sequenced together with, and in counterpoint to, the movement of the images. This gives the installation something of a symphonic structure—a series of movements of sound image and voice

(poems by Wang Ping)—in which shifts of musical theme and register, the editing of the sound track, move the piece along as much as the editing of the image track.

In the 1990s Isaac Julien and I worked together very productively on a film we researched and wrote together *Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Mask* (1995). That film was an experimental biopic of Frantz Fanon. I came to the project with my 1960s Fanon of *The Wretched of the Earth* and revolutionary politics. Julien, almost a generation younger, was more interested in the Fanon of *Black Skin White Masks*: the theorist of the psychic ambivalence of racism and the master slave dialectic. Our film explored both perspectives. Looking at it now I am struck by the way it anticipates Julien's later aesthetic development. In this film there is a complex interplay of still and moving images, the still images located diegetically as images within the frame (on the mantelpiece, in a frame on a piece of furniture) but also functioning as pivots enabling the film to segue out of a documentary interview into a more poetic sequence.

## SINO-AESTHETICS

Our relationship to China was similarly complementary. I first visited mainland China with Revolutionary Chinese aesthetics in mind: both the adaptation of Soviet Socialist Realism as well as the model operas and film promoted by Jiang Qing and *The Gang of Four* and Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan's twelve-part documentary series *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976). There are traces of that China still to be seen today, but it seemed to me that Julien visited with fewer preconceptions and as a result was able to penetrate far quicker into what one might call the Chinese aesthetic psyche, through a series of research visits. On one of those visits we were both guests of the Guangzhou Triennial, who were staging an event under the rubric "Farewell to Post-Colonialism". The echo with the Maoist "Down with Foreign Devils" only struck me much later. What was fascinating about this conference was the concern both to learn from the west—in this case the critical theory of post colonial emancipation—and at the same time to produce an internal Chinese theory which would free the participants from

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any dependence on western models. As I got to know a little more about the intellectual history of contemporary China it struck me that the biggest problem was the Cultural Revolution. This event had destroyed the China of the literati; and had attempted to restructure the character of family life, art, and culture. The excitement that younger Chinese felt in engaging with western critical theory came at the price of realizing there was an absence in their own intellectual framework which made them anxious, concerned and occasionally hostile to us post-colonial westerners who at times felt we were being confused with Bush's America or Blair's Britain. In any event it was a salutary experience to be presented with the relativisation of theoretical constructs.

*Ten Thousand Waves* was presented in Shanghai in May 2010 at the same time as the Shanghai Expo. The British Pavilion there, designed by Thomas Heatherwick, was as sensational as Julien's film. It also demonstrated an original approach to cultural and scientific translation between cultures: in the case of the pavilion a collaboration with the Kunming Institute of Botany integrating British urban design with a Chinese seed bank. Julien's film made a similar operation taking pre-constructed signifiers of Chinese life and culture and reconfiguring them within Julien's own installation aesthetic. This can only be a loose analogy since, as *Ten Thousand Waves* points out through his inclusion of video artist Yang Fudong as a performer, Chinese installation art is now equally complex as its western equivalent. Indeed one might venture that this installation form is a new and global art form that is not limited by nationality or location.

For the first few decades of the 20th century Chinese cinema developed with the aid of European production companies, based in the International Concession in Shanghai. A leftist cinema with an emphasis on the condition of Chinese workers (of which *The Goddess* is an important example) grew up in Shanghai. The privations of the Sino Japanese war found reflection in a sound cinema which equally drew inspiration from western sources (*Crows and Sparrows* (1949)) being contemporaneous in tone and aesthetic to Italian neo-realism. This is not the place for a history of Chinese cinema however condensed, but it is important to note the way Julien's *Ten*

*Thousand Waves* installation recapitulates the history of Chinese film and aesthetics: the literati tradition and the Mazu legend, which parallels the rediscovery of Chinese Landscape by fifth generation Chinese cinema; *The Goddess* and the Shanghai Film Studios (in which much of the installation is shot); the early Communist period (archive footage), and so on. In having Yang Fudong play a lover to the Zhao Tao character (played by Ruan Lingyu in the original), Julien is paying particular homage to Yang's eclectic literati cinema, which reprises pre-revolutionary cultural iconography, particularly that of the West Lake in Hangzhou which features in much traditional Chinese landscape painting. Julien's use of multiple screens predates Yang's. His single screen *An Estranged Paradise* (1997–2002) was one of the discoveries of Documenta 11, and his use of the multiple screen installation in his more recent work can be read as in part a dialogue with artists such as Julien about the future potential of the medium of electric shadows.

*Ten Thousand Waves* received its UK premiere in the Hayward Gallery exhibition *Move: Choreographing You* in October 2010. The exhibition explored different approaches to movement in contemporary art, performance and dance. *Ten Thousand Waves* engages with the theme of performance and movement in many different levels—the choreography of actors and performers within the installation, the choreography of the audience as they move around the viewing space, their emotional engagement (the way the experience 'moves' them), and of course the movement of generations of Chinese in search of a better life, one which Northern England sadly could not provide for the Fujianese cockle pickers who perished in Morecambe Bay in 2004.

- 1 Shen Kuo *Dream Pool Essays* (Meng Xi Bi Tan) quoted in Michael Sullivan *The Arts of China* London:Thames and Hudson 1973 p 137.
- 2 Even numbers of screens can be problematic in installations because of the symmetry they can set up. An uneven number, nine, creates the imbalance needed to keep the sequence going. Nine is also propitious, being one of the strong yang integers in traditional Chinese numerological cosmology. The installation of *Fantôme Créole* in The Pompidou Centre, Paris in 2005 by curator Christine VanAssche was deliberately asymmetrical, an anticipation of the installation strategies of Julien's later work.
- 3 In the Hayward Gallery installation, hung at irregular heights.
- 4 André Bazin 'The myth of total cinema' in *What is Cinema* (selected and edited by Hugh Gray) London; Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p 17: "Cinema is an idealistic phenomenon. The concept men had of it existed so to speak fully armed in their minds, as if in some platonic heaven, and what strikes us most of all is the obstinate resistance of matter to ideas rather than of any help offered by techniques to the imagination of the researchers".
- 5 Bazin op cit p 20.
- 6 A fragmentation arguably anticipated centuries before in Chinese landscape painting.
- 7 Some filmmakers who have moved into installation work, such as Chantal Ackermann, literally cut up the film into a series of passages which, presented on a series of monitors, can be experienced simultaneously, for example in her installation versions of *D'Est* (1993) or *De l'autre côté* (2002). This procedure—the choices the filmmaker makes between elements of a film language in constructing the filmic sentence—are deconstructed. The different choices (paradigms) are, as it were, laid out as a sequence (syntagm).

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