

PROOF

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Digital Aesthetics and Affective Politics: Isaac Julien's Audiovisual Installations

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Introduction

In the 1999 essay 'Postcolonial Media Theory' María Fernández stresses that there are some artists, such as Roshini Kempadoo and Keith Piper among others, who have raised postcolonial questions in the field of electronic media. However, since they work with digital photography and video, 'their work is under-represented in established electronic media contexts' (Fernández, 1999: 69). Most of the artworks created by them bring to the fore the issues of the construction of European master discourses, in relation to resistance, identity, representation, agency, memory, gender, and the legacy of colonialism in the form of migration. Stuart Hall, in his 1996 essay 'When Was the "Post-colonial?" Thinking at the Limit', highlights that the term 'post-colonial' re-elaborates colonization, defined as 'part of an essentially transnational and transcultural global process' (Hall, 1996: 247). If we mean the postcolonial not as a temporal succession, but rather as a political horizon that deconstructs Western hegemony and reveals the violence that is at its core, we realize that this task is far from over, as Achille Mbembe has recently claimed (2010).

Postcolonial studies, although claiming to displace Eurocentric theory and history, have been influenced by European theorists of poststructuralism and postmodernism. As Gen Doy highlights (2000), it may be tempting to refer to postcolonial thinkers when we approach works produced by black artists in the later twentieth century, who have decentred formalist modernism. These artists usually come from families whose countries of origin were colonized by Britain or other nations. Particularly, in exploring black British art, Kobena Mercer's writings (1994) have developed some concepts central to postcolonial theory,

1 in particular the questions of identity, 'race', the cultural politics of
 2 diaspora, black masculinity and the burden of representation. Works of
 3 art are not expositions of theories, however they can become theory.
 4 Black artists' creations 'are much better suited to represent the shifting
 5 concepts and fluid notions of the indeterminacy of postcolonial thought'
 6 (Doy, 2000: 214). Art suggests a compelling way to test and reconfigure
 7 theories: we can expect not only practical outcomes, but also 'enhanced
 8 perception, aesthetically satisfying experiences, and expanded and more
 9 critical thought' (ibid.). Probably, more than written texts, artistic works
 10 are able to achieve ambiguity, indeterminacy and disorientation.

11 This chapter elaborates a theory of postcolonial digital art and inves-
 12 tigates the potentials offered to traditional postcolonial issues by the
 13 impact of digital technology. The artwork analysed in particular is the
 14 short film study *Encore II (Radioactive)* made by the black British artist
 15 Isaac Julien in 2004.¹ Here, the material intensity of sound and the
 16 manipulated visual field change the traditional configuration of per-
 17 ception, the reception of the image, and the construction of memory.
 18 Beyond positions and counter-strategies, this analysis will lead to the
 19 conclusion that digital aesthetics aims at the affective perception of
 20 difference and contributes to the work on the cinematic paradigms of
 21 representation and spectatorship.

22 As for many other artists, the so-called digital revolution at the begin-
 23 ning of the 90s transformed the way Julien works with images. The last
 24 decade of the twentieth century witnessed a technological develop-
 25 ment of unprecedented speed in terms of hardware and software that
 26 was reflected by artists' experimentations. What is known as digital art
 27 was once referred to as 'computer art', then 'multimedia art', and now
 28 is under the umbrella term 'new media art', 'which at the end of the
 29 twentieth century was used mostly for film, and video, as well as sound
 30 art and other hybrid forms' (Paul, 2003: 7). Indeed, what is new is
 31 that digital technology offers new possibilities for the production and
 32 the experience of art. In an interview Julien emphasizes the issue of
 33 technology:

34
 35 The digital revolution at the beginning of the nineties transformed
 36 the way one works in cinema – there's improved editing on Avid sys-
 37 tems and huge advances in ways to manipulate images. When I film
 38 now, I can flip the image, stretch it, desaturise it, slow it down, have
 39 ten different cuts of a sequence in one day and perfect the image in
 40 a way that wasn't previously possible.

41 (Julien, 1999: 26)

1 The term 'digital art' refers to a broad range of artistic practices that it
 2 would be difficult to include in one specific and unified set of aesthetics.
 3 In the *The Digital Film Event* the Vietnamese writer and filmmaker Trinh
 4 T. Minh-ha – who works at the limits of documentary, fiction and experi-
 5 mental films – underlines that the digital format is not only more versatile
 6 and flexible than the analogue one, but it also allows for the crossing of
 7 borders between film and video, breaking the continuity of the narration.
 8 Like Julien's films and audiovisual installations, her films are 'boundary
 9 events' (Minh-ha, 2005), in other words, disturbing yet empowering prac-
 10 tices of difference, in a process whereby the self loses its fixed location.

11 12 **The affective perception of *Encore II (Radioactive)***

13
14 As an access point to other worlds, and a plurality of temporalities,
 15 *Encore II (Radioactive)* is a hybrid form between a short film and an audi-
 16 ovisual installation that produces affects – moments of intensity – and
 17 calls out to a state of warfare. In this three-minute long work the spec-
 18 tators are mostly struck by the ambiguous and fascinating figure of an
 19 afro-cyborg, whose presence is dominating the screen. At the beginning,
 20 in a manipulated Icelandic landscape the sound of the rolling waves is
 21 interrupted and dislocated by a sudden prolonged roaring sound. And
 22 we think: what's going on here? As Kodwo Eshun highlights in regard to
 23 music, the brain has an area called the thalamus, which is basically the
 24 fear sentinel, and that operates faster than the speed of thought:

25
26 [A]s soon as you hear a sound you can't identify, a sound that you
 27 can't locate, that you can't immediately attach back to a meaning,
 28 then fear-flight thresholds kick in and you start to panic.
 29 (Eshun, 2008)

30
31 As soon as a black woman walking along the beach appears, we feel that
 32 the sound of the ocean waves mixes with a harsh sound: manipulated
 33 voices from radars detect the presence and the distance of military
 34 planes, by sending out pulses of high-frequency electromagnetic waves
 35 that are probably reflected on the woman's skin. Is she really a woman
 36 or what? Her black skin is irradiated, illuminated as if by shining a light
 37 on it, maybe emitting electromagnetic radiations as well. As Eshun
 38 suggests, the skin is able to promote tactile hallucinations, hear things,
 39 transmitting and receiving sensation-concepts, affecting the physical
 40 interface of perception. The skin feels: feeling is the sensation of ampli-
 41 fication, where all the channels are open, the result of all the senses



Figure 14.1 Still from Isaac Julien's film, *Encore II (Radioactive)*, 2004

converging at once. In *Encore II (Radioactive)* the woman's skin is maybe hearing. When a force is almost tactile, hearing becomes physical, the sound travels to the skin – which starts to hear – and eyes start to feel.

[Y]our skin is starting to hear, your ears are starting to feel, your eyes are starting to hear, and your ears are starting to see, and it's almost like all the different senses, all the different sensory perceptions, are being shared around and being triggered simultaneously. And you suddenly start thinking.

(Eshun, 2008)

As soon as the sound of the bombings becomes more and more violent, we feel disoriented. Where are the planes? In this scary soundscape sound is detached from the sources, so effects arrive before objects. We hear all these effects without causes, and it's incredibly frightening. The audioscape becomes infernal:

[T]he reason is that as soon as you detach sounds from source you start to attribute invisible causes to those invisible sounds, you start

1 to attribute sounds not to effects and not to instruments but to invis-
 2 ible demons, to inanimate objects, to inanimate machines.
 3 (Eshun, 2008)
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5 Through the harsh sound of melting ice, the woman is transported to an
 6 irradiated apartment where she sits and listens to what is going on out-
 7 side: manipulated sounds of voices and radars in a modified Icelandic
 8 landscape. From a box-shaped device that receives television signals and
 9 reproduces them on a screen, the camera goes on framing the eye of
 10 the female afro-cyborg. Through her bionic eye the spectator hears the
 11 voices of the civilians attacked by bombs: people crying, loud screams
 12 of women escaping a condition of warfare. These sounds are perceived
 13 as 'internal sound' that corresponds to the physical and mental state
 14 of a character (Chion, 1994). Memories can also be internal sounds.
 15 Through the afro-cyborg's eyes we experience a world which seems to be
 16 falling apart and that is attacked by bombs with furious speed.

17 Behind the curtains of the apartment, from outside its space, we
 18 see flashes of light. The woman keeps on walking. Her steps become
 19 much more rhythmic. Here, rhythm is not really about notes or beats,
 20 it is about intensities, crossing thresholds across the body. The material
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41 *Figure 14.2* Still from Isaac Julien's film, *Encore II (Radioactive)*, 2004

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Figure 14.3 Still from Isaac Julien's film, *Encore II (Radioactive)*, 2004

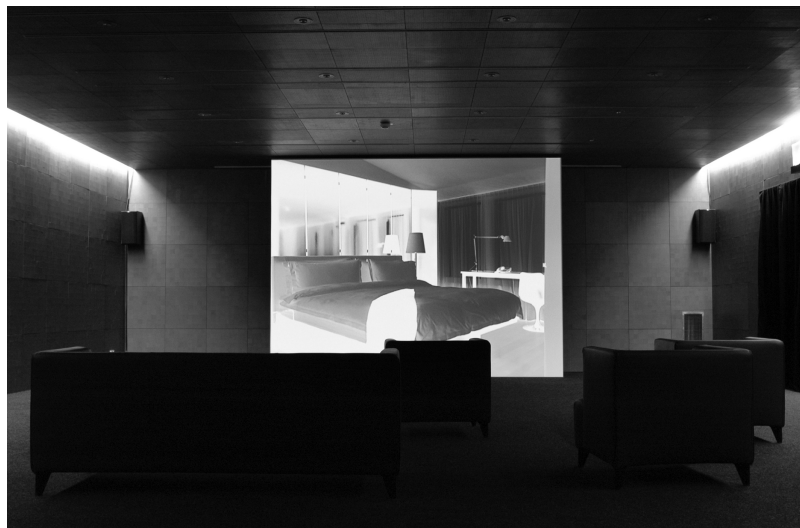


Figure 14.4 Still from Isaac Julien's film, *Encore II (Radioactive)*, 2004

intensity of the sound in *Encore II (Radioactive)* can grab the spectator. In this work Julien uses a sonic soundscape to enhance the electronic visual field. Indeed, the sequence of the afro-cyborg's movements seems to create a connection with the spectator's heartbeats in making him/her feel the pulsations that move faster than our thought. Suddenly, the woman moves backwards and continues her journey along the beach of a digitally manipulated landscape.

She walks away out of sight, interrupting the linearity of the narration through the dislocation of the power of sight, maybe towards or into a past, where the past is not simply a point somewhere behind on the line and the future is not just a point ahead:

The past and future resonate in the present. Together: as a dopplered will-have-been registering in the instant as a unity of movement.



Figure 14.5 Still from Isaac Julien's film, *Encore II (Radioactive)*, 2004

The past and future are in continuity with each other, in a moving-through-the-present: in transition. It is not the present that moves from the past to the future.

(Massumi, 2002: 200)

It is the afro-cyborg's memory of the future-past that continually moves through the present. Her memory does not coincide with the present. It coincides with its potential, the future-past. *Encore II (Radioactive)* manipulates the footage of the Icelandic landscape and its domestic architectural surroundings, 'imbuing them with an electronic aura'.² The things which the afro-cyborg's mindful body interacts with also change; as do both the apartment she is in and the ocean. In the end this surface matches with the sound of the rolling waves, but it becomes red. As red as the fire of the bombs and the blood of so many lives that are lost or potentially can be lost.

The affective fabric of memory

Referring to the aesthetic choices of intercultural cinema, which is often at the limits of sight, sound and representation, in *The Skin of the Film* Laura U. Marks (2000) re-elaborates new media works in relation to multiple senses and affect, developing the concept of 'haptic visuality'. As a way of seeing and knowing which involves multiple senses, haptic visuality offers a method of analysis which does not rely on the mere presence of senses. Haptic visuality is thus a way of seeing and knowing which more directly includes the viewer's body. The eyes function as organs of touch. According to Marks, while optical images portray the representational power of the image and figures for a viewer to identify with, haptic visuality allows the spectator to sense the surface of the image with his/her body. The material presence of the image is felt, before any logical comprehension. The haptic space of the audiovisual installation requires the viewer to work to constitute the image and to expand its meaning, because there is not a narration that has to be followed.

In *Encore II (Radioactive)* everything is potentially threatening. There is always something about sound that surprises us, because it is not localized in the same way as the image (Chion, 1994). Thus, sound interferes with our perception, affects it. For film, much more than the image, sound can become a means of affective manipulation; it works on us and has an influence on perception, because it can make us see in the image what we would not otherwise see, or would see in a different way.

Films and other audiovisual media do not just address the eye. They place their spectators – their ‘audio-spectators’ – in a specific perceptual mode of reception, which Chion calls audio-vision. He describes sounds one hears without seeing their originating cause as ‘acousmatic’, a word of Greek origin theorized by Pierre Schaeffer. The acousmatic sound maintains suspense, constituting a dramatic technique in itself:

A sound or voice that remains acousmatic creates a mystery of the nature of its source, its properties and its powers, given that causal listening cannot supply complete information about the sound’s nature and the events taking place.

(Chion, 1994: 72)

In *Encore II (Radioactive)* Julien seems to give us an encore, a repeated or additional performance, as called for by an audience or by an urgency of a future-past of warfare (Encore II/World War II?). The black woman walking along the beach is recasted in the apartment as an afro-cyborg, which is an intertextual reference to the same artist’s previous installation *Baltimore* (2003).³ Julien redigitizes out-takes from his three-screen installation *True North* (2004), weaving the threads of the afro-cyborg’s visions with the fragmented and forgotten memories about Matthew Henson, the African-American explorer who was one of the first people



Figure 14.6 Still from Isaac Julien’s installation, *Baltimore*, 2003

1 to reach the North Pole. Julien weaves and reweaves flows of light
2 and sound. As dynamic and vibrating fields, the images constitute a
3 non-linear narrative, the knots of an affective fabric:

4
5 Weaving as a method of non-linear montage is a narrative of the
6 process of memory. The framework of meaning is constantly newly
7 constructed. Every new element is integrated in the fabric like in a
8 network of relationships.

9 (Melitopoulos, 2003)

10 11 **Going back, going forwards**

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13 In Julien's practice, 'cinema can be a critical tool and can be used as an
14 effective means for recirculating memory' (Julien, 2003: 150). Memory
15 becomes a key site of aesthetic engagement. In order to dislocate the
16 linearity of the narration and the authorial voice, the formal construc-
17 tion of *Encore II (Radioactive)* shows the impossibility of presenting the
18 fullness of memory. The black skin and the bionic eye of the afro-cyborg
19 register frightening and fragmented memories of a future-past: floating
20 memories of diasporic and subaltern bodies that exceed the imperial-
21 istic act of framing the world according to a logic.⁴ The investment in
22 memory is connected with the reconfiguration of the archive, the work
23 on the image, the involvement of the audience, and the disruption of
24 a purely narrative reading of content.

25 Julien's idea of a meditation on history is a way of thinking about
26 the past, but also about the paradigms of cinema. *Encore II (Radioactive)*
27 develops, indeed, a continuity with his work made in the 80s in the
28 domain of image-making. Julien uses Super 8 footage shot in 1980
29 from his video experiments conducted when he was a student at Saint
30 Martins School of Art. As Mercer states, when a new generation of black
31 British artists, activists, image-makers and intellectuals – Sankofa, Black
32 Audio Film Collective – emerged in the UK in the 80s it caused a new
33 reflection on the changing meanings of race. In 1983 Julien co-founded
34 the Sankofa Film and Video Collective, providing a space for interven-
35 ing and thinking critically about the means of representation and the
36 images of race and difference.

37 The starting point for this kind of work is the importance of visuality
38 as a cultural practice. The field of the visual is seen as an interdiscipli-
39 nary and stimulating place of social interaction and definition in terms
40 of race, class, gender and sexuality. As Hall stresses in *Visual Culture:*
41 *The Reader* (1999), the question of how to imagine 'visual culture' is

concerned with the cultural practices of looking and seeing and the capacity of image to produce meaning. However, since these meanings cannot be completed within the text, their realization requires the subjective capacities of the viewer to make images signify. As Frantz Fanon highlights in *Black Skin White Masks*, the question of the gaze is crucial for the production of the postcolonial subject's identity. It is through the power of the gaze that Fanon understands himself as a black subaltern subject:

'Dirty nigger!' or simply 'Look! A Negro!'

I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects.

(Fanon, 1952: 89)

Julien's experimental approach in the 80s challenges the British race-relations documentary tradition and emphasizes the plural identity of black society. For example, *Territories*, directed by Julien in 1984, stresses the fragmentary state of the narration that places the spectator in a position of agency and depicts the intersections, the overlapping and the intermediary spaces between blackness and Englishness, Britishness and Caribbeanness, and among race, class and sexuality. The refrain is: 'the contradictory spaces which are the geographical expressions of a city: territories of race, labour, class and sexual relations'. In the film two voices state that they are struggling to tell a story, 'a herstory, a history, of cultural forms specific to black people'. *Territories* dislocates the symbolic system of the master narrative and interrupts the objective account of the reality, achieving a quality, as Mercer would put it, of 'critical reverie' (1994).

In the critique of realism and the refusal to fix meanings for passive consumption, *Territories* constructs memory and dispatches the viewer's expectations into a more active process. Through the fragmentary collage of archival material, original images and oneiric scenes, this film contests the regime of representation and liberates the expressive dimension of the image in its materiality. A narrative reading of the content is totally disrupted. This question is also acknowledged by Trinh T. Minh-ha. Her film *Reassemblage* (1982), for example, is constructed with fragmented compositions, unfinished pans, jump cuts and multiple framings, which prevent the viewers from appropriating the content of the images by their brevity and dispersion. Her films are 'boundary events' (Minh-ha, 2005) which – like Julien's audiovisual installations – reaffirm through digital

1 technology the work on the limits of representation and re-elaborate
2 the politics of black art, thinking otherwise the issues of memory and
3 invisibility. Moreover, Minh-ha proposes the 'inherent mutability' of the
4 digital image, in its constant movement of appearing and disappearing.
5 In films such as *The Fourth Dimension* and *Night Passage* – which mark for
6 her the shift to digital technology – the image is always uncompleted, in-
7 between presence and absence. The image is not rendered as story-image,
8 but as painting-image, an image that is de-formed and made unrecogniz-
9 able in its fluidity and openness.

10 We could highlight the image in its materiality, its availability to be
11 stretched, spread, modified on the screen, in a process that is similar to
12 painting. Lev Manovich (2001) suggests that digital cinema becomes a par-
13 ticular branch of painting, 'painting in time'. Seen in this context, according
14 to him, the construction of images in digital cinema represents a return to
15 nineteenth-century practices, when images were hand-painted and hand-
16 animated. The image can be touched, transformed, put in circulation, evok-
17 ing the work of a painter or a sculptor. In this regard, Maurizio Lazzarato
18 draws on Angela Melitopoulos' metaphor of weaving:

19
20 The electronic image is not an impression of light on a chemical
21 medium (the film), but an interweaving of the threads (flows of
22 light) which make up the universe. The images are the place where
23 the different threads (relations) entangle and mingle, where they
24 sketch out a refrain, curling in on themselves. They constitute the
25 knots of the fabric. The work of the video artist, like that of the
26 weaver, is to weave and reweave flows of light with a particular kind
27 of loom (a camera and an electronic editing table).

28 (Lazzarato, 2005)

29
30 According to Melitopoulos, video technology operates as time technol-
31 ogy. Referring to the work of Henri Bergson, memory is an accumula-
32 tion of time that introduces the possibility of an intentional selection
33 and brings the past into the present:

34
35 Video images have a pre-representative life: a molecular life of (tape)
36 speed, (light) intensities, (camera) movements, and (video) streams
37 of light, which are determined by the smallest forces of desire and
38 affects. Electronic images, sounds and their smallest pixels are under-
39 stood here as bodies, which affect other bodies, because every image
40 is a body and every body is an image.

41 (Melitopoulos, 2003)

The investigation of the potentials that are offered by the shift to the digital technology moves from the idea of resistance to that which considers change as related to visibility and perception. As Luciana Parisi would put it, digital aesthetics becomes a micropolitical tactic that changes the perceptive habits, rethinks the politics of blackness, and interrupts the power of the gaze in determining the position of the alterity. It would be misleading to think that digital liberates us from the ocular tradition; however, in the attempt to raise questions about methodologies, we could affirm that the digital amplifies the affective politics of the audiovisual production. From such art practices, therefore, we could learn new perspectives. On account of its processual qualities and openness, art is already memory and can become a new project of archive that through technology intensifies modes of perception.

Notes

1. Isaac Julien currently lives and works in London. He has been making films for almost 30 years, some experimental fiction films, some documentaries, and more recently very elaborate film and video installations built with multiple screens in galleries and museums. In 2001 he was nominated for the Turner Prize. Julien is represented worldwide, for example in the Tate Modern, Victoria Miro Gallery, Centre Pompidou, Metro Pictures, and Guggenheim Museums. Most recently, he has had a solo show at ShanghART in Shanghai, which is the gallery's first for a foreign artist.
2. See Julien's website and visual archive available at <www.isaacjulien.com/home> (Accessed 30 April 2011).
3. *Baltimore* is a multiple screen audiovisual installation that questions easy categorization and uses museums as key locations. Starring black actor and director Melvin Van Peebles, this work puts together at the same time three institutions in Baltimore – the Walters Art Museum, the Contemporary Museum and the Great Blacks in Wax Museum – with styles, gestures and symbols that belong to the genre of Blaxploitation movies. Julien's installations *Baltimore* (2003) and *True North* (2004) mark the shift to the digital image and to a technology that also allows him to work with the surround sound, where the question of the soundscape is as important as the image and intensifies the involvement of the spectator in the rhythm of the image.
4. Julien's audiovisual installation *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* (2007) represents the final work of a trilogy which also includes *True North* (2004) and *Fantôme Afrique* (2005). Through the journeys of the so-called clandestines made across the Mediterranean Sea, in the gallery space the audience becomes part of the event. The fragments of the immigrants' memories – contorted black bodies gasping in the foam or abandoned on the shores of the Italian island of Lampedusa – seem to traverse and involve the spectators.

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7 **Filmography**

- 8 *Territories*. 1984. Directed by Isaac Julien.
- 9 *Baltimore*. 2003. Directed by Isaac Julien.
- 10 *Encore II (Radioactive)*. 2004. Directed by Isaac Julien.
- 11 *True North*. 2004. Directed by Isaac Julien.
- 12 *Reassemblage*. 1982. Directed by Trinh T. Minh-ha.
- 13 *The Fourth Dimension*. 2001. Directed by Trinh T. Minh-ha.
- 14 *Night Passage*. 2004. Directed by Trinh T. Minh-ha.