

Michaela Quadraro

'Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories' in Postcolonial Art

Abstract I: This paper is inspired by the complicated cartographies and the unstable maps of the contemporary world. Following Edward Said's concern for the 'geographical inquiry' that also involves ideas and images, this essay reflects firstly on the critical value of visuality as a space where meanings are created and contested, and then plunges into a more specific exploration of the territories of art. In particular, emerging from a postcolonial horizon of migration and hybridity, the artworks that will fuel the investigation propose a map of multiple crossings and contribute to the imagination of alternative archives.

Abstract II: Questo saggio si ispira alle cartografie complicate e alle mappe instabili del mondo contemporaneo; sulla scia della connotazione geografica della ricerca di Edward Said, l'articolo intende riflettere in primo luogo sul valore critico della visualità in quanto spazio in cui i significati sono prodotti e contestati, e poi offrire un'esplorazione più ravvicinata dei territori dell'arte. In particolare, emergendo da un orizzonte postcoloniale di migrazione e ibridità, i lavori artistici che danno corpo all'analisi propongono una mappa di attraversamenti multipli e contribuiscono all'immaginazione di archivi alternativi.

Postcolonial Horizons and Visual Culture

Art is the opening up of the universe to becoming – other.

(Grosz 2008: 23)

This paper engages with the complexity of the contemporary world and explores the critical tensions that emerge from questions of space and spatiality. These issues are inextricably related to the cartographies of power that constantly produce social inequalities, racial differences and blocks of stereotypes on a global scale. With this concern in mind, it is quite clear that imperial and neocolonial strategies are far from over: these questions are of the greatest importance when we try to deconstruct the violence that is at the core of Western hegemony. As Achille Mbembe has recently argued, the focus is not on the critique of the West *per se*, but of the consequences produced by 'colonial' conceptions of reason and humanism (2008). In this way, colonisation is not considered as a closed and immutable chapter of history, but as a trans-national and trans-cultural global process that produces passages, interstices and in-between spaces that shape the world we live in.

The dynamic interdependence between the past and the present, between colonisers and colonised, has been largely developed by Edward Said's work. In this regard, his commitment for the complex connection between imperialism and knowledge represents an important resource for the study of the contemporary historical and cultural processes (1994). He takes into account the profound cultural dimensions of the imperial strategies and develops the well-known idea of 'overlapping territories, intertwined histories' that belong simultaneously to distinct contexts and interconnected subjectivities. The traces of the historical legacy of colonialism become the basis for a theoretical and pragmatic work in the present moment.

Indeed, if we observe European nations through a postcolonial lens, it becomes clear that decolonised peoples who have made their home in Europe

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act as a perpetual reminder of the ways in which the once metropolitan and imperial centres have been forged by the narrations of their global peripheries. Migratory movements of bodies and imaginaries have thus contributed to the constitution of a trans-national and diasporic world, and to the displacement of cultural identities. In this way, the postcolonial horizon critically interrupts the historiographical chronicle transmitted within univocal and unchangeable parameters. Moreover, the theoretical value of the term 'postcolonial' does not merely describe a particular society or a particular epoch. Rather, it takes into account diasporic rewritings and creative re-elaborations of grand narratives.

These encounters render the traditional and inherited categories of nation and identity very problematic. As Iain Chambers has argued, this is to call into question the linearity of progress, to decelerate its anxiety, and to insist on a multiple modernity folded into other times and spaces (2008). Moreover, from the perspective of Occidental humanism the centrality of visibility represents the hegemonic modality of knowledge. This is not to refuse the plane of the visual, but to think about the importance that maps, writings and visual representations have had historically to confirm the humanistic projects supported by institutions and experts (scholars, teachers and missionaries). In this regard, Said believes that the isolation of the aesthetic realm has been essential in the West since the eighteenth century to reinforce hegemony and to acquire distant territories. All cultural forms are therefore hybrid: they must be inscribed in the global processes.

Such work is also concerned with analysing the forms of resistance to hegemony, defined by Antonio Gramsci – and then expanded by Said – as the intellectual and moral leadership that contributes to maintain the dominant order. Since the 1970s and 1980s, during the conservative regimes of Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States, the exploration of counter-hegemonic practices and ideas has been crucial for Anglophone critical thought. In particular, the University of Birmingham Centre

for Contemporary Cultural Studies, founded in 1964, concentrated on representations of class, race, gender and class in order to study the effects that media had on audiences. From the very beginning this approach came to focus on the strategies of resistance and contestation that subvert dominant regimes of representation, defined by Stuart Hall as the production of meaning through language. The image can function as a sign or text that transmits meanings that, nonetheless, require the subjective capacities of the viewer to make images signify.

Within this theoretical and practical context, visibility – as a cultural practice – refers to the registers in which both the image and its visual meanings operate. An essential inspiration for these intuitions is represented by Frantz Fanon, whose work activates psychoanalysis in the investigation of colonialism and the visual construction of racism; in particular, Fanon examines the power of the gaze and its capacity to establish the racial identities through social and psychic processes. In *Black Skin. White Masks* this dynamics becomes very clear:

'Dirty nigger!' Or simply, 'Look, a Negro!'

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. [...]

But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye (Fanon 1986: 109).

It is through the Other's gaze that Fanon unveils 'the fact of blackness'. He discovers himself as a black subaltern subject once he comes to the metropolitan centres of the colonial empires. The realm of visibility becomes an interdisciplinary and fluid interpretative frame, in which social interactions of racialized identities, gender and class are debated and contested. At the end

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of the Nineties, then, 'visual culture' comes to be defined as a transversal field of inquiry that crosses art, cinema and media studies. The interactions between the viewer subject and the viewed object become, in Nicholas Mirzoeff's intuitions, the visual 'events' that provoke the creation and the circulation of images (1999). Visuality is thus developed as a problematic place, where it is possible to re-think the consolidation of power as a visualised model on a global scale and the place of visual subjects within that system, in other words people defined as the agents of sight and as the objects of particular discourses of visibility. Through ambivalences and interstices the issue of power in the field of visual culture concerns the question of representation. In particular, this interconnection leads to the very specificity of the images that confront the new and emerging conditions of contemporary society.

Geographical Inquiry and Art Spaces

The past decades have witnessed an increased interest of critical theory for the significance of spatiality, in particular for the heterogeneous formation of space that confuses rigorous strategies of mapping and locating. As Irit Rogoff suggests, the critical dimension of spatiality insists on the condition of multiple belonging and is in contrast with nation states, which insist on a singular inhabitation under one dominant rule (2000). Therefore, space is unavoidably characterised by boundary lines, social relations and psychic forces that constantly produce strategies of inclusion and exclusion.

Said is not necessarily associated with this emergent field of inquiry, however he represents an important precursor and resource. His deep interest in spatiality allows him to construct an imaginative geography of identities and a map of the changing constellations of power and knowledge. In particular, in *Culture and Imperialism* he tries to do what he calls "a kind of geographical inquiry into historical experience", and engages in the so-called "struggle over geography" (Said 1994: 6). In having the topographies of the major

metropolitan cultures in mind, Said outlines their 'structures of attitude and reference' that clearly resonate with Williams's seminal work on the 'structures of feeling'. Specifically, Said refers to the ways in which these structures appear, sometimes allusively, in the languages of individual works of literature, history and ethnography. The dissemination of geographical references has the power to create and recognise territories and unveils a constancy of concern that arises, not from a pre-determined plan, rather from the development of national cultural identity. Indeed, the construction of identity is bound up with the imagination of geographically conceived locations and desirable but subordinate peripheral worlds.

Narrative is the contested 'territory' that Said explores: how issues of imperialism and colonialism are reflected, decided, and even debated in narrative. However, his concern brings the question of visibility to the fore: the struggle over geography "is also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" (Said 1994: 6). In this way, visibility is always rooted in the earth, that is to say in the material context where meanings are constructed and called into question. Because of this, Said's work proposes to reinterpret the Western cultural archive and to register its geographical fragmentation. As in Western classical music, where polyphony results from the different themes and not from an abstract unity, the rereading of the archive has to be 'contrapuntal'. This means to insist on the simultaneous registration both of the grand narratives and those other histories that are left out. At this point alternative memories emerge and express strategies of resistance. Said's geographical inquiry allows to reflect on a visual approach, in order to investigate the tensions between vision and power.

To some extent the project of visual culture has been to repopulate space with all the unknown images removed by the illusion of transparency. Visual arts are able to register the indeterminacy of space, open to a multitude of traces and to a more complicated history. Here, the theoretical writings of Stuart Hall,

Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak are particularly powerful when we approach works produced by artists who come from – or are connected to – previously colonised countries. However, as Gen Doy suggests, there cannot be any straightforward identification between artworks and criticism (Doy 2000). Despite the fact that there are convergences and issues in common, art has the power to test and reconfigure theories. From it we can expect not only practical outcomes, but also enhanced and further critical thought.

This leads to the idea that art leaves the shores of representation to propose an ethical event. Elizabeth Grosz defines art as experimentation with reality and the material forces of the world, rather than a mere representation of the real (Kontturi & Tiainen 2007). Artistic practices are the sites of imagination and possess the potential to change the world. They can be explored in a more compelling way if one thinks not in terms of representation, but in terms of force and intensity. This is also the intensity of thought because “thinking gives us joy, perceiving gives us joy” (Kontturi & Tiainen 2007: 225). For the theorist we need to affirm the joyousness of art and the pleasure of critical thought. These can be forms of self-understanding and ways to resist the oppression that comes from everywhere as Grosz points out:

I mean the point is the way in which the new world is produced is precisely through revelling in the affirmation of the strengths that art gives us. The only way we can make a new world is by having a new horizon. And this is something that art can give us: a new world, a new body, a people to come (Kontturi & Tiainen 2007: 256).

Following Gilles Deleuze, Grosz states that art expresses the invisible and unheard reality of things. It addresses problems and provokes, not so much the elaboration of images in which the subject might recognise itself, but real changes and reciprocal exchanges of elements. It is for this reason that art cannot be a frivolous ornamentation: it is a vital form of impact that does not

merely concentrate on the observation of an object or the development of a plot, but on the resonances, the transitions and the silences. Therefore, art cannot be considered as a window on other worlds, but as the place where experimentations are brought into being. In this sense, “art is intensely political”: it elaborates alternative possibilities and provokes a perceptual anticipation of the future (Grosz 2008: 79).

Artistic production is therefore not so much to be read and interpreted. It cannot be the object of a political and social analysis, but the site where previous statements are questioned. For Thelma Golden, director and chief curator at The Studio Museum in Harlem, art can change the way we think about culture and ourselves. Her overall project is about artists such as, for instance, Glenn Ligon and Kara Walker who reflect on American historiography through the lens of a black history, in which Harlem was a city with a large black presence. The artists Golden is interested in really concretise the essential questions she wants to bring to the fore as a curator:

I was interested in the idea of why and how I could create a new story, a new narrative in art history and a new narrative in the world. And to do this, I knew that I had to see the way in which artists work, understand the artist's studio as a laboratory, imagine, then, reinventing the museum as a think tank and looking at the exhibition as the ultimate white paper – asking questions, providing the space to look and to think about answers (Golden 2009).

The point Golden raises is extremely important: artists can provide a space where to work and to think through art. For example, contemporary artists such as Isaac Julien and Zineb Sedira (Anglo–Caribbean the former, French–Algerian the latter) intervene in the aesthetic strategies in order to propose alternative configurations of space. In their recent work, mainly audio–visual installations elaborated on multiple screens in museums and galleries, Julien and Sedira do

not intend to transmit a linear narrative reading of the content. Indeed, the term 'installation' is linked to concepts such as interaction, project and event. Some of its main features include: the immersive aspect that challenges the traditional perceptive habits of the audience through images and sounds that go beyond the physical limits of space; the tendency towards a negotiated collaboration between artists and curators, in order to build a critical platform of discussion and transform the museum institution into a cultural laboratory; the centrality of themes such as 'temporality' and 'memory' that question official narratives and historiographies; and the movement of the spectators that displaces the traditional division between the viewing subject and the viewed object. In this way, digital technologies intensify experimentations and contribute to the questioning of traditional considerations. In an installation the artwork, indeed, is transformed into an open structure that engages the viewer in the same way a performance would.

The Migratory Aesthetics of Postcolonial Art

Within the complex cartography of global modernity, the encounter with art proposes a critical reflection on the intertwining cultural, geographical, historical and economical contexts of the contemporary world. Thinking with postcolonial art does not mean to propose a classifying phrase or taxonomy. Rather, emerging from experiences of hybridity and migration, art elaborates an ethical-aesthetical cut or interruption "across and within an inherited Occidental art discourse that leads simultaneously to recovery and renewal" (Chambers 2012: 22). Expressing the interweaving of memories, this art questions forms, canons and genres, and explores the relation between identity and difference, geographic locations and dislocations.

The impossibility of representing the wholeness of memory is reflected in the cuts, in the emphasis on traces, intervals and fragments. Postcolonial poetics proposes a politics that interrupts modernity to elaborate an alternative visual

space. Here, the focus is on the question of migration and its relation to cinematic and artistic productions, where hybridity becomes integral to cultural productions. For example, the aforementioned artist Sedira concretises on a formal level the condition of living in the interstices. Working with film and still images she has developed a language in the last ten years that connects issue of migration, mobility and displacement. For example, her piece *Floating Coffins* (2009) is a constellation of fragmented moving images and sounds about the harbour city of Nouadhibou, on the coast of Mauritania. Facing the Atlantic Coast this town is today one of the main points of departure for those who leave in search of better lives. Across fourteen screens and ten round speakers the installation proposes a displacing flux of sounds and images that evoke the desperate clandestine migrations: migrating birds, desert lands, old boats abandoned in the water as coffins.

Postcolonial art appears in the simultaneously political, historical, and theoretical conjuncture of the diasporic experience. Diaspora, as a specific framework of transformations and dislocations, gains a historical specificity in the moment of post-war global migrations (Hall 2012). However, diaspora defines also an emergent field of inquiry and an important interpretive frame for exploring the political, economical and cultural ramifications of the conditions of migrancy. Always in formation, this is the context where the politics of gender, class, and race form together a new, powerful and unstable articulation that does not provide easy answers, but raises “new questions, which proliferate across older frames of thought, social engagement and political activity” (Hall 2012: 30). Therefore, the contemporary idea of diaspora is rooted not only in earlier imperial settlements and older structures of power, but also in the experience of the vulnerable minorities and the conditions of the refugee camps, the detention centres, and the invisible economies of the advanced world.

The notions of a cultural authenticity and a stable national identity are

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thus called into question by postcolonial art. For example, in Julien's multi-screen work *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* (2007), the materiality of the images emerges through the bodies of the immigrants who cross the Mediterranean: bodies that traverse the fluid space of the sea in search of a better life. This is a postcolonial cartography that rethinks cultural places such as the Mediterranean and takes a heterogeneous modernity into account. *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* proposes, indeed, a disturbing geography of the intermediary space of the Mediterranean, crossed by the fluxes of human beings. The *mare nostrum* comes to be a burial site that resonates with the Atlantic middle passage: traumatic memories common to men and women, and traces of the daily experiences of migrants disorient the spectators' expectations. Furthermore, in the five screens that build Julien's installation, the sea is not only a surface that permits movement and migration, but becomes a sea of memories that recalls the 'intertwined histories and overlapping territories' proposed by Said.

The disturbing geography expressed by Julien's installation is a meditation on migration and, what is more, provokes the "migration", or the transit and the transformation, of previous statements in the context of the museum and the curatorial practices. *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* is the final work of a trilogy that also includes the audiovisual installations *True North* (2004) and *Fantôme Afrique* (2005), conceived by Julien as a trilogy of journeys and dislocations across different continents and cultures. In particular, *True North* is a cinematic rewriting of the North Pole exploration narratives of the twentieth century. The title is a pun on the idea of true north and magnetic north, and refers to the relation between the site of North Pole and the compass. Julien questions the objectivity of science, and the fact the North Pole is perceivable only through scientific instruments. He also challenges the mythical aspect of the true north, in other words the northern American sense of a true north as a nationalistic, mythological and nation-building narration. *True North* tells a narrative of

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discovery excluded by official historiography, namely the story of Matthew Henson, the African–American man who went with Robert Peary and some Inuit to the North Pole in 1909. His black presence in the white landscape disrupts the white supremacy and the normative male subject. What strikes is that Henson is interpreted by the black British actress Vanessa Myrie who wanders – as a nomad, an explorer and also a witness – through this glacial landscape and displaces its whiteness.

For Françoise Vergès the landscape in Julien's artwork is sublime because it evokes a new exploration of space, through the narration of Henson's voyage (2005). As a map of displacements in time and space, this poetic and creolised scape becomes an affective reality of narrations. Julien is certainly inspired by Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), in particular by the notion of 'translocation', in other words the idea of continuous movements that contaminate each other. Julien, the son of Caribbean immigrants in London, demonstrates this chain of transits in his work and insists on a hybrid articulation between heterogeneous spaces. Finally, True North is definitely a question around geo–politics, because it shows a concern for the past but also for the environment: Henson footsteps cross spaces, as the ice glaciers, that are melting and disappearing.

The disturbing geography of the contemporary world is also central to Julien's piece *Fantôme Afrique*, the second installation of the trilogy, where references to the urban space of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso – that since 1969 has hosted FESPACO, the major panafrican film festival – are woven together with the ruins of modernity. Archival images of the colonial missions in Africa and the struggles for independence are registered by two unsettling characters, a man and a woman, who witness history's wreckage in the present. In *Fantôme Afrique*, the ghosts – or we could say the 'angels' to recall Walter Benjamin's theses on history – witness the ruins of the past and simultaneously are driven helplessly into the future. The different trajectories of the two

characters often overlap: as Vergès reminds us, the postcolonial world experiences new cartographies of intertextuality that emerge as spaces of conflicts and relations, exchanges and encounters (2005).

The trans-local artworks realised by Julien or Sedira provoke a different configuration of modernity, a liquid one, based on the centrality of transits, trans-cultural movements, and the trauma of migration. Liquid modernity, the present condition of the world, involves both the unmaking of Europe as a space of exemplarity, exception and privilege and the remaking of Europe as a space of trans-cultural ferment, movements and transits. The innovative languages of the visual arts become instruments of knowledge and change; specifically, cinema, enhanced by digital technologies, creates an interesting expressive space for the postcolonial perspective. For instance, the digital images created by Trinh T. Minh-hà represent another important example of heterogeneous spatiality. In particular, the digital images in her film *Night Passage* (2004) work on the intervals and the encounters between the scenes. Offering a dislocation that cuts across cinema, painting and theatre, *Night Passage* is a visual poem set on a night train that evolves around the journey of a young woman, her best friend and a little boy. At each stop of the train, the passengers' histories come from darkness and open to a trans-cultural condition.

Since the film highlights the transition from one state to another, the focus is on passages, where 'the gap becomes the bridge'. Images, like the passengers of the night train, appear, disappear and re-appear with no apparent continuity, except for the continuity of the movement of the images themselves. As Trinh Minh-hà points out, the digital video image is an image constantly in formation, that gives great attention to the time of the between and the crossroads, to transformation and transition as time-spaces (Trinh 2005). Here, the prefix 'trans' does not indicate a transit between rigid boundaries or a reduction of differences, but an interdependence between things that stresses the very condition of living in interstitial spaces.

Like the above-cited artworks by Sedira and Julien, Trinh Minh-ha's *Night Passage* resonates materially with the "overlapping territories, intertwined histories common to men and women, whites and non-whites" suggested by Said (Said 1994: 72). As he remarks, looking back at the archive means reading it contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the dominant history and of those other histories against which the dominating discourse operates. Visual arts can be considered theoretical and material tools that challenge the humanist perspective, according to which the archive is a social and neutral tool that secures the most significant parts of the past. As Arjun Appadurai has proposed, the archive should be regarded as "a search for the memories that count and not a home for memories with a pre-ordained significance" (Appadurai 2003: 23). This is to insist on the archive as a work of imagination and aspiration that brings out what is neglected and repressed. For migrants, in particular, the idea of a living archive becomes extremely important, from the most intimate one to the most electronic and public one. Through their experiences, we can see how archives register spaces of debate and desire. In this sense, postcolonial art, emerging from diasporic and liminal spaces, elaborates the strategies of archiving as forms of intervention. Beyond the languages of trauma and loss, its contribution evokes sites of re-creation; beyond the rhetoric of geography, it invokes heterotopic spaces that proliferate through multiple and coexisting realities.

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Michaela Quadraro holds a PhD in Cultural and Postcolonial Studies of the Anglophone World from the University of Naples “L'Orientale”, where she works as Appointed Researcher and member of the Centre for Postcolonial Studies. Her research interests focus on contemporary art and cinema, through the critical approach of cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and visual culture. She is a member of the research project *MeLa* European Museums in an age of migrations*.

michaelaquadraro@libero.it