HEINZ PETER SCHWERFEL

AFTER CINEMA

STORYTELLING IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ART

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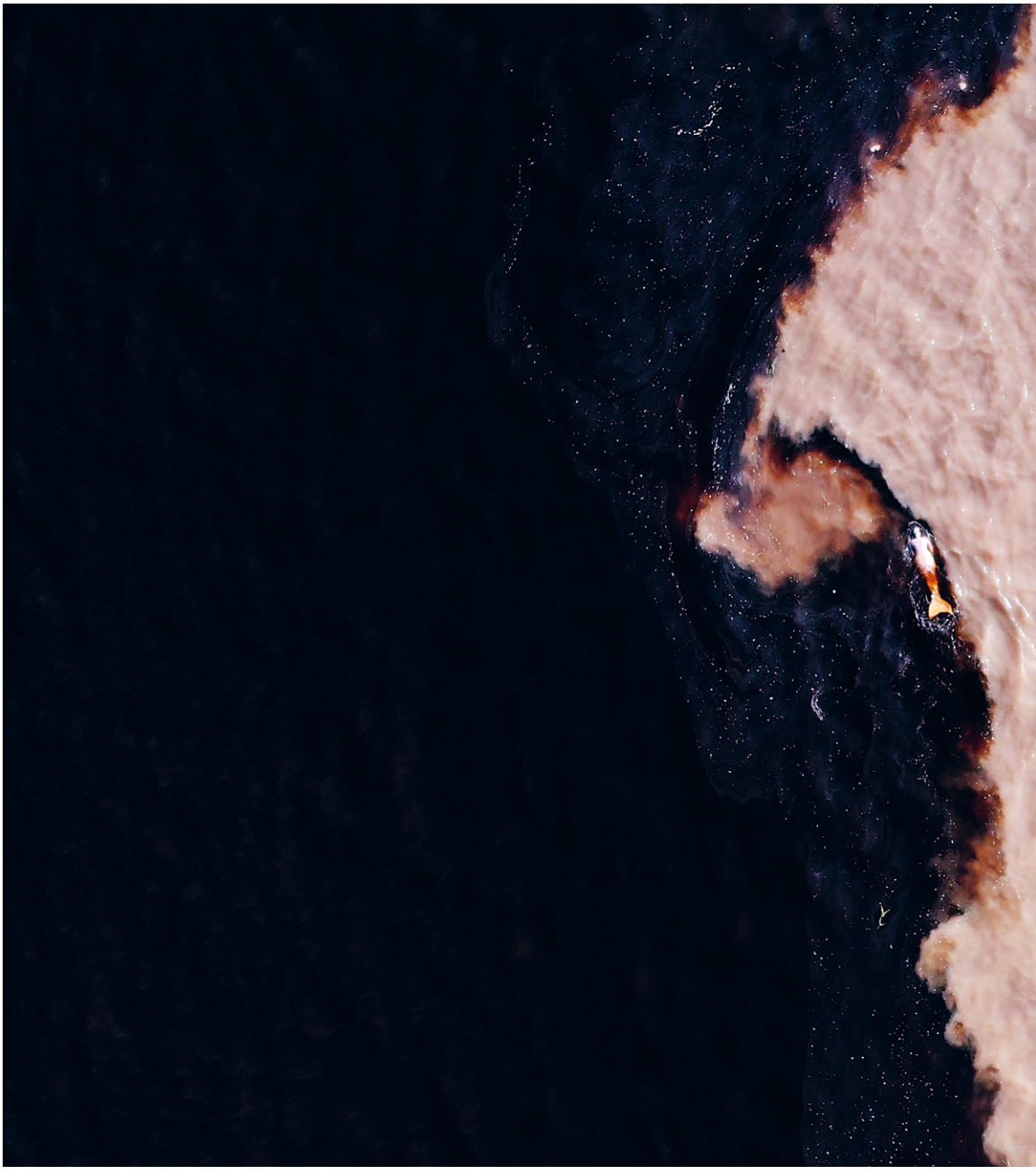


Emilija Škarnulytė, *Æqualia*, 2023

INTRODUCTION

Art can be cinema. In his work *Baltimore* (2003), Isaac Julien has a female Black Terminator spring up many meters onto the domed ceiling of a museum, only to land perfectly on her feet, gun ready to fire. In Hans Op de Beeck's *Sea of Tranquility* (2010), the real-life captain of a cruise ship, which exists only inside a computer, traverses a digital ocean. In *Ni le ciel et la terre* (2015), Clément Cogitore transports his audience to the Taliban in the Afghan mountains, and in Cheng Ran's *In Course of the Miraculous* (2015), the Himalayan legend George Mallory, who is still missing today, rises from the dead.

Art can be cinema, but cinema is no longer art. Jean-Luc Godard is gone. Béla Tarr has voluntarily retired. And many others have had their funding cut because their work is not suitable enough for the masses. As a result, cinema, which is known in France as *le septième art*, the seventh art, has become a museum piece, the rich cultural heritage of a bygone era. The creative present, however, lacks courage, visibility, and the audience's interest. Since the pandemic, even the most recalcitrant film critics have begun to welcome American blockbusters supposedly capable of saving the cinema single-handedly. And Hollywood continues to expend itself on sequels, while original major film productions are rare. Meanwhile, streaming platforms are vying for subscriptions as they reduce their once lavish production budgets. Only South Korea and Japan seem to be responsible for innovative social criticism. European *auteur* films have looked like television for years (and German television like bad *auteur* films). Disney rules the world.

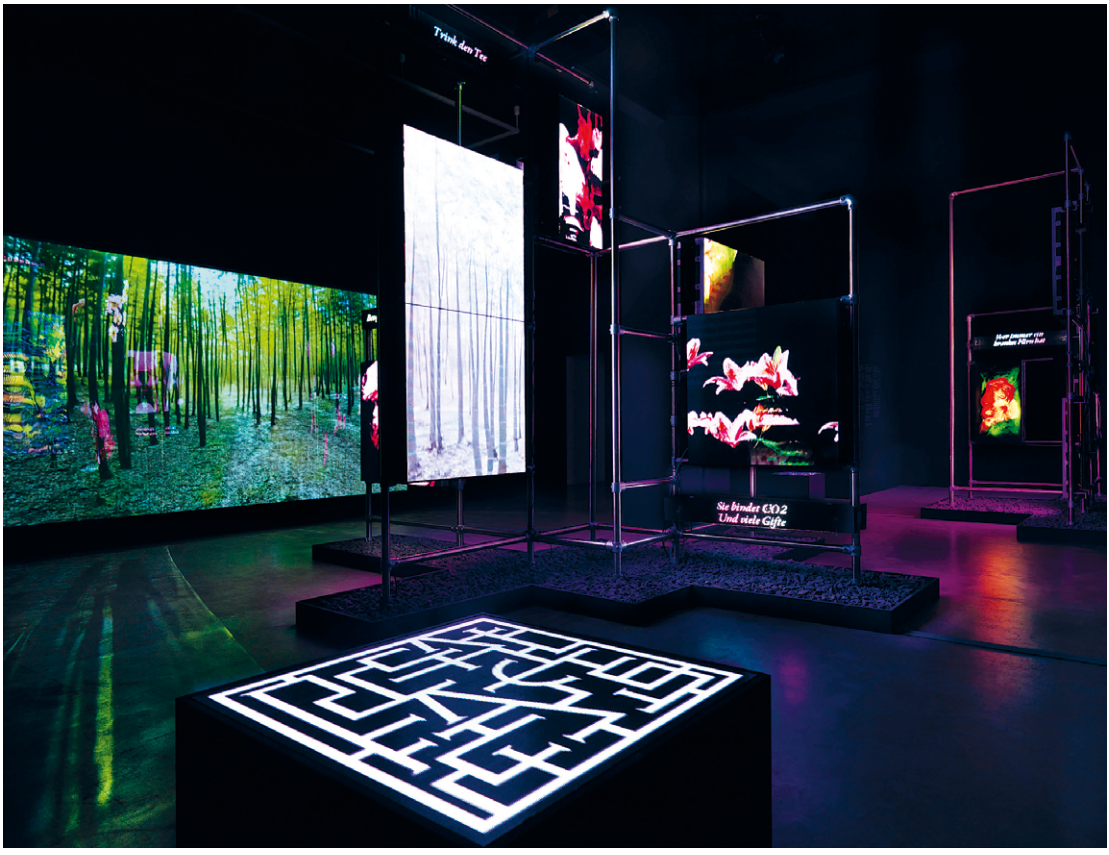
Cut. In New York harbor a few homeless people are debating capitalism. A bottle circles around a warming fire; things get heated. This good-humored dispute in Julian Rosefeldt's *Euphoria* (2022) is centered on the topics of property, greed, and the impossibility of sharing wealth. The audience is surrounded by life-sized projections of 140 young singers from the Brooklyn Youth Chorus as well as prominent jazz drummers on five additional screens. They are all waiting for their cue, which comes as the debate ends and the drone flight of the camera hovers over the night harbor, a ship graveyard, and decommissioned battle tanks in the limbo of human existence.

Today, art can and must be capable of more than just moviemaking. That is why it deserves serious attention, and not just because of

fashionable buzzwords such as “immersion,” “virtual reality,” or “artificial intelligence.” In terms of form, content, and technology, the art of the moving image is per definition in perpetual forward motion. Images have long since learned to move, and artists today tell their stories with special effects that offer audiences spatial and, above all, mental immersion. Media art can be equated with progress because it aims for the future not the zeitgeist. That is why this book is about works of art, not technological buzzwords. It is about contentious, innovative poetry, not purely militant or documentary works, interactive experiments, or nostalgic gymnastics with 35-millimeter reels.

Instead, a thesis: in media art, narratives are more effective than a pointed finger. They break down the collective catastrophes of our time into individual fates, which is how they encourage empathy and identification without abusing either in a pandering way. Above all, they strike the right note in our chaotic era. Narrative media art may have learned a lot from avant-garde cinema, but it does not produce the “second world” feared by philosopher Paul Virilio. Rather, it recounts the first world, that is, our reality—even when it utilizes artificial intelligence and gently seduces its techno-skeptical museum audience to wear virtual reality headsets.

Film seeks its salvation in the shelter of the cinematheque and the film museum. The art of the moving picture, however, is experimenting with new forms in the museum. Whether single or multi-channel, projected, installed, or created with immersive technology—the future of cinema resides in the art museum. Not because the museum preserves the old, but because it enables the new while simultaneously promoting a form of contemporary art that is not threatened by the secondary market and speculative collectors. Even narrative media art needs an art market to exist, but it occupies a niche occupied by a small number of serious collectors. In the past, anything difficult might have been called elitist, but today long lines of young people in front of galleries and museums prove that this is not the case. Increasingly, it is collaborations with museums and other cultural institutions such as theaters, music festivals, and opera houses that provide the laboratories for narrative experiments. Here, new narrative forms are put to the test, new techniques are introduced, and social trends such as decolonization or the struggle against racism and homophobia are not only incorporated but anticipated. Examples of all these new trends are presented in this book. Above all, they are narrated.



Hito Steyerl, *This is the Future*, 2019

CHAPTER 1
A NEW DREAM FACTORY

How does one renew cinematic techniques without destroying the narrative? How does one replace the linear narrative inherited from nineteenth-century literature without falling back into flashback clichés? And who redeems the viewer from their previously passive role without turning him or her into a coauthor?

British filmmaker Isaac Julien's major retrospective in 2023, entitled *What Freedom Is to Me*, covered forty years of his search for new artistic paths—away from political militancy with its accusatory pointed finger, away from the cinematic mechanisms of conventional narration and naturalistic acting. Less psychology, but instead more shots, characters, subplots, cuts. A plurality of screens, known as "multichannel," provide Julien with the desired expansion of spatial and temporal possibilities that enable him to tell stories in his own way. Cinema of the 1950s dreamed of "expanded cinema." Today, it is everyday practice in the museum.

Yet, Julien, long controversially received because of his highly aesthetic style, goes even further: he multiplies the camera's perspectives on one and the same storyline, completes the action through empty spaces in the form of abstract, colored surfaces, repeats an action in reversed images, and switches between sound channels distributed throughout the room. Sometimes, he simply leaves one or more screens blank or hides parts of the plot from the audience. His media art is always transparent in its staging and requires both mental and physical movement on the part of the audience.

Julien's films are seductively beautiful, even when intercuts (to camera and director) are used as distancing effects to cancel out illusion and identification. The film within a film is important to him. Only when the mechanics remain visible can the viewer understand that even beauty must be staged. And that it has abysses: behind every carefully constructed tableau is the eye of the artist, behind every cut is an intention, behind every image is a researched reality.

Isaac Julien, *Mazu, Silence (Ten Thousand Waves)*, 2010

Born in London in 1960, Julien was one of the first to combine art, film, and political engagement in the early 1980s while he studied painting and media. After his first militant short film, *Who Killed Colin Roach?* (1983), about a Black victim of white police violence, and his short film *Territories*, about London's Caribbean community, he made *Looking for Langston* (1989), an elegant pictorial broadsheet depicting the grand Harlem of the 1920s during the so-called Harlem Renaissance. The title refers to one of the most important protagonists of this era, the homosexual African American poet Langston Hughes—although he only appears in archival footage in the film, the rest consists of mostly staged scenes. As Julien's first feature film, it was a completely new mixture of cultivated dandyism, beautiful people, homoerotic sex, historical stock footage of 1920s Harlem, contemporary tidbits, and potshots at today's politics and racism. It won an award in a parallel competition at the Berlinale and was followed in 1991 by the more realistically told *Young Soul Rebels*, about the lives of Black youths in

London's musical underground, which was awarded the Caméra d'Or at the Cannes International Film Festival.

Disillusioned by the lack of commercial success for his films made for the cinema, Julien discovered his niche in the visual arts. With the docudrama *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* (1995) about Frantz Fanon, the Martinique-born psychiatrist, revolutionary, and pioneer of decolonization, he proposed a cinematic hybrid, in the same way that Creole language and culture are hybrids. This is how he discovered the leitmotif that has accompanied his work for over forty years: the dislocation of people with migrant backgrounds, their longing for their original cultures, and the friction of their cultures with new social environments.

From 1999 onward, the narrative possibilities of multichannel projection gave Julien a creative burst thanks to a blend of fiction, poetry, photography, music, choreography, and performance. And politics. Because Julien always deals with social issues such as racism, homophobia, exploitation, and migration. He became internationally known in 2002, when he exhibited his three-channel *Paradise Omeros* at documenta11. Set on the Caribbean Island of St. Lucia, the home of his parents, and in a dreary London during the 1960s, it is a tale of economically induced emigration turned parable. Additionally influenced by Homer's Greek classic and its adaptation by the Caribbean Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott, it was staged by Julien with great effort and oriented to the clichés found on tourist postcards and in mass-media travel reports from the Caribbean paradise.

The film was soon followed by one of his most important works to date, *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007), which intermingles the tragedy of African boat people and Sicily as a Mediterranean melting pot with film history and contemporary choreography. Shot without any dialogue, the drama builds through contrasts between a picturesque coastal landscape—the historical location of Visconti's epic film *Il gattopardo*—and stranded fishing boats that look like nutshells in the moody Mediterranean. On ten screens, the bodies of dancers tumble through the stairwells of magnificent palaces as the corpses of African migrants pile up under blankets on the shore.

In *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), Julien went a step further with his radical seductive aesthetics by linking a fifteenth-century Chinese legend of the gods with contemporary social wrongdoings, whether

the ruthless flooding of entire Chinese mountain villages for energy-generating reservoirs or the tragic drowning of twenty-three illegal Chinese migrant workers in northwest England. Acted by well-known film stars and with a guest appearance by fellow artist Yang Fudong, the film jumps between yesterday and today, legend and reality, politics and poetry. In between, there are repeated cuts to a green animation studio where assistants and puppeteers are guiding the goddess Mazu, alias Maggie Cheung, through the air on a rope.

Ten Thousand Waves was followed by *Playtime* in 2014, a work about the migration of capital rather than people. Filmed in Reykjavík, where the great financial crisis of 2008 began, it opens within the ruins of a newly built home where an artist is recounting the loss of his entire fortune due to bad bank loans. Then, it cuts to London as the symbolic site of surplus capital that flows into art. Here, an unoccupied, newly constructed building serves as the setting for a cynical monologue by a real estate agent, played by James Franco, who believes he has found the ideal property to house the collection of an art-loving hedge fund investor. Finally, after a chapter on the importance of auctions, there is Dubai, an oasis for parked capital in the Middle East, as seen through the eyes of a modern-day slave: a Filipino domestic worker.

Isaac Julien composes images whose perfection and beauty are simultaneously seductive and confusing. He tells fictional stories that are based upon years of research and uses dramaturgical tricks to repeatedly undermine any possible viewer identification. In more recent multichannel works such as *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)* (2020), about the friendship between the famous American collector Albert E. Barnes and the Black philosopher Alain Locke, he harkens back to an important social moment that only in retrospect was recognized as a decisive new beginning in the history of art reception.

In *Lessons of the Hour* (2019), he reconstructs the life story of former slave Frederick Douglass, who became the voice of African Americans in bourgeois nineteenth-century New York. In both works, Julien revisits his leitmotif, the search for Black identity, long before Black Lives Matter. Born into slavery, Douglass was a respected writer and fierce anti-slavery activist in the northern United States of the nineteenth century. Viewers must wander between the work's ten screens and follow Julien's choreography to piece together the images like a puzzle and understand the film in its entirety.