

Eastern Cultural Heritage, Digital Remediation and Global Perspectives

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Abstract

The paper describes findings from a practice-based research project exploring cross-cultural influences between the West and the East by recreating the concept of Shan-Shui-Hua – the traditional Eastern landscape painting within the new genre of “Video-Painting” as wall-mounted flat screen video installation. It uses concepts of Art Appropriation, Remediation and Remix to re-investigate relationships of man and nature in Eastern traditional landscape art and philosophy and transposes the content to con-temporary global environmental issues and digital visualization technology. Using the “other” or the “unfamiliar” allows a fresh access and new interpretation of well-known territory. As such cultural heritage is seen as an opportunity to explore new artistic boundaries and styles of representation within set commodities of contemporary (digital) image creation. Translating and adapting subtle aesthetics, rich metaphor and philosophy of Eastern traditions creates a powerful, subversive tool to address pressing ecological issues differently and allows alternative ways of seeing and thinking thereby detecting Western preoccupations.

Keywords

Eastern Cultural Heritage, Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting, Video Painting, Digital Visualization Practice, Eastern Philosophy, Remediation, Remix, Cross-cultural Art.

Introduction

The paper is a critical reflection on the general use of our current digital visualization practice. It highlights how its technical, aesthetic and expressive conditions are the result of a long continuous cultural, technological and intellectual development within the Western civilization which allows certain ways of visual expression but also puts restraints on others. It investigates Eastern cultural heritage and art traditions as an opportunity to create a different approach to reflect on some parameters of contemporary (visual / digital) culture.

The paper does not suggest alternative modes as a new paradigm, it just invites to engage in alternative, competing and / or opposing cultural perspectives in

the light of a multi -cultural globalized world where the understanding of other (visual) cultures and heritage becomes increasingly important and opens ways for new approaches in the future.

The practice presented in this paper consists of three video paintings that rework each certain aspects and contents of Eastern visual culture and philosophy. The artworks transform the original messages embedded in the source material as well as the source material itself:

1) The video painting *Shan-Shua-Hua* or *mountain-water-painting* adapts visual principles and contents of Chinese Landscape art and the ancient hand and hanging scroll.

2) The video painting *Shizen?natural* adapts the concept and content of the Japanese *Makimono*.

3) The video painting *We myself I and Them* reworks an ancient hand scroll of a cityscape and poses questions about citizenship and the relationship between individual and society.

All three video paintings recontextualize aspects of Eastern art tradition in the following areas:

- The use of time and temporality
- The use of space and perspective: linear perspective versus the Eastern concept of shifting perspective and multiple vanishing points
- Eastern philosophy: Relationship between man and nature, individual and society



Figure 1. *Mountain-water-painting*, digital video painting, 2009, 6,12min. ©Christin Bolewski

Remediation, Remix and other Theories

In the pivotal book *Remediation - Understanding New Media* published in 2000 the newmedia specialists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin coined the word “Remediation” to refer to the ways in which any new medium is always both a refashioning of an earlier medium and a novelty understood through previous media. They note that earlier media have also refashioned one another: ‘photography remediated painting, film remediated stage production and photography, and television remediated film, vaudeville, and radio.’ They come to the conclusion that ‘for our culture, mediation without remediation seems to be impossible’. (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) Any new medium develops hereby step by step from the emergence of a novel technology and through the articulation of a specific media language and semiotic system by reworking, remodeling and sampling various elements of differing other media into newly converged forms to successfully establish its own aesthetic vocabulary.

Irvine notes in *Remix and the Dialogic Engine of Culture* that ‘today we inhabit a *semiosphere* formed by a hybrid system of old and new media with built-in combinatorial processes for new meanings and media hybridization and that the ongoing, recombinatorial principles of culture have often been noted in general ways, and emphasized by many recent scholars.’ (Irvine, 2016) Recent theories, for example, in *Remix culture* define remix as a general method of (cultural critique) using quotation, citation and commentary. Originally made popular in music culture during the late 1970s remix theory today encompasses a large variety of forms in music, film, poetry and the visual arts with *remix video* relating to earlier concepts of *found footage* in *video art* based on reediting mainly television, movies and news media content for critical and political purposes. As both *found footage* video art and *remix video* are mainly linked with appropriating and critically commenting on popular media culture and symbols and to transform them through juxtapositions, repetition and often rhythm the ‘older’ concept of *art appropriation* seems to be more suitable to describe the approach to reworking concepts and contents of Eastern landscape painting tradition into contemporary moving image practice - mixed with some reflections on recent theories of global and cross-cultural art practice or alternative modernities.

Today there are global themes and global codes of image making which are shared by all of us and certainly are being pushed via digital media technology.

Contemporary art practice is now global and artist from all cultures contribute today in developing it forward. Cross-cultural practice is very common, hence heritage from different cultural settings can act as instigators for new development. Also concepts of *remediation* and *remix* stemming from within Western art theory could now be revisited and extended by including traditions and media from other cultural backgrounds that are being *remediated* or *remixed* into a global culture.

Time and Temporality: Western Film Tradition, Eastern Visual Art and Contemporary Video Painting

An early example of referencing aspects of Eastern culture in relation to film practice is the Russian avant-garde filmmaker Sergej Eisenstein. Beginning of the 20th century he was inspired by the commonality between the medium film and the Eastern art tradition in the development of his theory of film montage. (Eisenstein Leda, 1996) He studied Japanese language and art and concluded that all the various branches of Japanese art were permeated by the same cinematic element, so that it was appropriate that the cinema should learn from other forms of Japanese artistic practice. Besides extracting techniques from Chinese characters and the Kabuki theatre, Eisenstein had also drawn on traditional scroll paintings that fused in his mind a combined image of close-ups and composition in depth.

The link between film and Eastern art has not been very prominent for a long time, so that it is quite challenging - from the perspective of a contemporary digital media artist and film maker - to look closer to this relation and to consider the early observations of Eisenstein specifically in an approach to digital film and visualization practice, nearly 100 years later.

The video painting *Shan-Shui-Hua* (translated from Chinese language into *mountain-water-painting*) that was developed first in this practice based research project follows the idea of Eisenstein and introduces the genre of the *video painting* as a suitable form for development. The video painting is a quite new artefact in contemporary moving image practice. It is a hybrid concept (or *remediation*) between still and moving image using traditional pattern of film and painting practice. It emerges as a supremely pictorial form and due to its ambient and meditative character video painting seems to be privileged to represent the conceptual and philosophical ideas of the traditional *Shan-Shui -Hua*.

‘It creates a visual aesthetic, which relies on high visual impact, the subtle manipulation of image, multiple layers, and the play of gradual, complex transitions. It is a smooth temporal flow, always changing, but never too quickly. The piece is an exploration of concepts of ambience, time, and the liminality of image and of narrative. (Bizzocchi, 2005).

Cross-cultural Art Practice

During the practical process it became obvious that it is impossible to create such a body of work without encountering difficulties of translation between Eastern and Western art tradition and without engaging in a debate on crosscultural art or post-colonial issues. In the past ten to twenty years it has become quite common for Eastern contemporary artists to incorporate aspects of Western art into their practice, and there is evidence of its worldwide success in various exhibitions in major museums and galleries. In the short time contemporary Eastern art has had to establish itself - sometimes accused by Western and Eastern critics of continuing to mimic Western art historical movements.

Meanwhile a more complex relationship of influences has developed and Eastern artists are reworking their traditional concepts combined with Western ideas in a more independent way, which the Chinese art critic and curator Fei Dawei describes as ‘gradually placing issues brought from Chinese context into the larger cultural background of the world, in a lively and creative way, so that it can set in motion a process of becoming “common” and “extensive”.’ (Dawei in Lu, 2009)

The quite new technical genre of the high-resolution flat screen display wall-mounted as video painting inspires also a number of Eastern artist to set their traditions into motion. The Korean artist Lee Lee Nam is internationally very successful and transcends traditional Eastern forms into digital sculptures and video paintings. A very prominent example was presented at the Opening Ceremony of Beijing 2008 Olympics. Here a mega scroll was displayed and set in motion on probably one of the world’s biggest LED screen: 22 meters wide and 147 meters long. As usual, the painting was a still image. It was not temporal art, but the scroll’s dynamic display set the painting in motion and was able to show both the still image and dynamic one.

The adventure of mixing aspects of both cultures is rarely been undertaken in the other direction from the West to the East. Although the incorporation of Eastern

aesthetics into Western art has long precedent in modern art, it is today sometimes still regarded as “esoteric” or can be criticized as a “post-colonial attitude”. So there is a crucial question: Is it possible today in the age of globalization to create new modes of cross -cultural art based on a comprehensive understanding of the other culture and without being accused of mimicking or exploiting the other?

There are many different (and often contradictive) conceptual frameworks available to answer such a question. Elkins concludes in *Is Art History Global?* that ‘it can be argued that there is no non-Western tradition of art history, if by that is meant a tradition with its own interpretive strategies and forms of argument.’ He finally comes to the conclusion that ‘globalism means the use of Western forms, ideas, and institutions.’ (Elkins, 2007) More positive approaches such as theories of *Alternative Modernities* or *Altermodernity* coined by French art critic Nicolas Baurriand conclude that (*altermodern*) culture is based on increased communication, travel and migration. Multiculturalism and identity is being overtaken by creolisation and artists are now starting from a globalized state of culture. This new universalism is based on translations, subtitling and generalized dubbing. ‘*Altermodern* art is thus read as a hypertext; artists translate and transpose information from one format to another, and wander in geography as well as in history.’ (Baurriand, 2009)

Detour via China – A Philosophical Approach

East Asian aesthetic and philosophy is difficult to understand for the Western mind with its emphasis on openness and suggestiveness. There is a difficulty involved in bridging the gaps of understanding when viewing Eastern art. The reception of the art is passed through filters of language and culture and we in the West often realize that we cannot always grasp the full meaning. In her essay *Another kind of global thinking* published in *Is art history global?*

Barbara Maria Stafford points out that translation and interpretation always involve transformation. ‘The pristine distinctiveness of other cultures cannot be maintained through the process of interpretation. It involves assimilation to the conceptual vocabulary and values of the other culture and does not overcome the basic fact that they are still being removed from the specific cultural context to which they belong, translated into an alien context and idiom - Anglo-American

art history - and set into a net-work of concepts and comparisons which transform their significance.’ (Stafford, 2007)

There are some contemporary writers such as the French philosopher and sinologist Francois Jullien, South Korean cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han or the Chinese French writer Francois Cheng who translate Eastern culture and aesthetics for Western understanding offering some insights and interesting alternatives to compare and rethink Western traditions. In his book *The Detour via China* (free translation of the German title *Umweg ueber China*) Francois Jullien attempts to create a new approach to Western culture: A “local change of thinking”, a process of distancing from Western thinking as an effective strategy where Eastern philosophy functions as an “outside” from which to see more clearly the values and preoccupation of Western culture. His detours about China always emanate from European philosophy with its Greek origins and lead back there to reveal the contingencies of their principles and conditions. Jullien talks about the impossibility to compare the two separate cultures. Eastern and Western ideas are often not in opposition; instead they are based on different categories and different pattern of thought, which makes a direct comparison impossible, and he suggests distancing and reflecting each others preoccupations.

Detour via China Applied to Practice

The three video paintings confronted with this problem of understanding and translating contents of a foreign culture apply this philosophical concept as a methodology for art making: In the sense of Francois Jullien the art work is a *detour via China*: Emphasizing to some extent philosophical as well as pictorial concepts and practical aspects of the Chinese painting process enables to distance and to take a fresh approach to Western thinking, film and digital visualization practice, but at the same time using software tools that generally have been devised to create 2D and 3D artefacts from a Western cultural perspective avoids the pitfalls of echoing and imitating Chinese landscape painting too closely.

Space and Perspective

Erwin Panofsky argues in *Perspective as Symbolic Form* that the perceptual schema of each historical culture or epoch is different, and each gives rise to a different but equally full vision of the world. Panofsky articulates

these different spatial systems, demonstrating their particular coherence and compatibility with the modes of knowledge, belief, and exchange that characterized the cultures in which they arose. For the Western vision of the world he identifies linear perspective as the dominant perceptual schema: the disregard of the blurred human vision in favor of the precise concept of a finite mathematical spatial system where every point is defined. Not only through the use in Western painting, but also through the existence of that system in every image that is taken from our reality through photography or film the “geometrical sharp vision” has influenced our perception of the world, so that the understanding of our reality is illustrated and equated with a precise defined sharp form of visualization (Panofsky, 1991).

Western Principles: Linear Perspective and Transparent Immediacy

In *Remediation - Understanding New Media* Bolter and Grusin define *Transparent Immediacy* as one of the most important aspect of the Western visual culture. It is a concept, which is based on geometrical perspective and in accordance with the thoughts of Panofsky. *Transparent immediacy* longs for a medium whose purpose is to disappear, a visual experience without mediation. ‘Virtual reality, three-dimensional graphics and graphical interface design are all seeking to make digital technology “transparent”. The user moves through the space interacting with the objects “naturally” as (s)he does in the physical world. In this sense, a transparent interface would be one that erases itself, so that the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in an immediate relationship to the contents of that medium. The desire for immediacy itself has a history that is not easily overcome.’ (Bolter and Grusin, 2000)

Bolter and Grusin also note that at least since the Renaissance it has been a defining feature of Western visual representation. ‘To understand immediacy in computer graphics, it is important to keep in mind the ways in which painting, photography, film, and television have sought to satisfy this same desire. These earlier media sought immediacy through the interplay of the aesthetic value of transparency with techniques of linear perspective, erasure, and automaticity, all of which are strategies also at work in digital technology.’ (Bolter and Grusin, 2000)

Eastern Principles: Multiple and Shifting Perspective

In Chinese culture the (landscape) painting is not a representational image of reality, a specific place or landscape. It is called *Shan-Shui-Hua*; the three characters standing for respectively mountain, water and painting and is a metaphorical or “spiritual” vision attached to a landscape - free of that “sharp precise vision” mentioned by Panofsky. Chinese art is based on philosophical and spiritual ideas and the depiction and creation of realistic space is not one of its aims. So unlike the Western painting tradition, which under the strong influence of science emphasized proportion, perspective and realistic depiction of form, the Chinese artists never felt compelled to restrict themselves to this limited view. Eastern art has a concept of using no or multiple vanishing points called *San-e-ho*. Because a painting is not a window, there is no need to imitate the mechanics of vision and view a scene from only one spot. Instead, they developed a more abstract and free spirited attitude towards art. ‘The Chinese artist inspects the world from unrestricted, shifting points of view, this is also known as the “shifting perspective” method *San Dian Tou Shi* and is essentially different from the strict and realistic western “single perspective”. This unique feature enabled Chinese painters to free themselves from the limitations of human vision and permitted more freedom to improvise using ones imagination.’ (Art Realisation TM, 2005)



Figure 2. *Shizen?natural*, digital video painting, 2013, 7:15min. ©Christin Bolewski.

Shan-Shui-Hua Reinterpreted: The digital Video Scroll

The three video paintings explore the Eastern concept of shifting and multi-perspective and the endless scroll through digital filmmaking, video compositing and virtual camera, depths and particle systems. They are a

combination of a traditional Eastern hanging and hand scroll. The vertical hanging scroll is given through the format of a vertical mounted flat screen and gives space to apply the concept of *San-e-ho* (multi-perspective) combining different perspectives within one image. The horizontal scroll of the video unrolls in time and space, but only in the moment of projection and is composed and animated from right to left in analogy to the East Asian principle. The video presents a permanent virtual camera movement gliding through an indefinite landscape. This imitates the conception of spatial representation of an original hand scroll where multiple points of view are spread horizontally, parallel to the scene; or to say within the concept of Chinese axonometry: it has no clear vanishing point.

The landscape of the video scrolls contains original 2D video recordings as well as 2D / 3D computer generated images and animations of landscapes. Whereas in the original paintings the journey within the third dimension of space is simulated through a careful arrangement of *San-e-ho* and the repeated appearance of the figure of a solitary traveler (for the viewer to identify with being on a journey) the video scroll additionally uses virtual camera movements along the z-axis as an extra layer to push and question the perspective composition of the traditional Chinese painting.

The video scroll uses templates of mountain models, especially wire frame models and particle systems for snow, mist and clouds. As the Chinese landscape traditionally does not represent a single landscape rather than an ideal and symbolic form of it, the different elements become a set of “metaphorical templates” similar as the templates in 3D construction.

Man and Nature in Chinese Art and Philosophy

The theme of the “journey” is an enduring theme in Chinese landscape paintings. This means yearning for the spiritual, the remote, or the unattainable. The artist frequently portrays himself as a lone figure, a romantic fugitive, wandering into the uninhabited parts of nature where he can linger forever. Chinese landscapes usually include small human figures that blend harmoniously into the vast world around them. Man and nature interact and complement each other to reach a state of balance and harmony. The animated video scrolls reframe the original narrative and transpose this traditional relation into a different, more contemporary Western manner reflecting current environmental issues:



Figure 3. Mountain-water-painting, digital video painting, 2009, 6,12min. ©Christin Bolewski

1) Mountain-water-painting

In *mountain-water-painting* the ancient pilgrim is replaced by the figure of the Western mountaineer equipped with special tools and protective clothing to vanquish the highest peaks in order to conquer nature, thus counterpointing Eastern and Western ideals. The ambient video scroll presents a poem of the famous Chinese poet Han Shan. He was a hermit and poet of the T'ang Dynasty and most of his poems were written when he lived alone in caves and primitive shelters in the far Eastern mountains of China.

Chinese is a symbol language, ambiguous and open for multiple interpretations. Therefore, also the poetry is open to varying interpretations and within the video scroll it is presented as a reflection on the Western mountaineers fight against nature ascending and descending the highest peaks counterpointing the Chinese attempt of spiritual harmony.

In the Chinese landscape as well as in the video scroll different parts of the image sit separately designed within a large empty space. Water, mist, or clouds divide the scene naturally through the interplay of mass and void. Mass and void is an important principle of composition. 'The mist is also empty space, and empty space contains the possibility for transformation. Transformation is central to Taoist thought. It is like being in meditation, when the entire cosmos looks like a white mist, and one finds oneself in a world of white light. Here, time and space seem to be annihilated.' (Wong, 1991)

The video paintings play with absence and presence, totality and emptiness, materiality and transcendence. 3D computer generated forms and wire frame grids of mountain models mix with 2D video recordings; illusionism meets reality. The principle of transformation

so central to Taoist thought becomes the transformation of an imaginary digital landscape.

2) Shizen?natural

Shizen is the Japanese word for nature and the second video scroll reflects our relationship to nature by citing and transposing form and content of the *Makimono* - a traditional Japanese horizontal scroll painting- into a contemporary manner: Throughout the year seasonal motifs are changed - accordingly spring, summer, autumn and winter progress as well as the destruction of our environment. The work is a comment about the huge contrast between ancient traditional Japanese culture and the modern extremely technology based and artificial life which exists there today. It shows traditional temples and gardens now filled up with modern tourists and overcrowded street scenes in Tokyo as the modern replace for the ancient pilgrim. It refers to the nuclear meltdown after the Earthquake and Tsunami in Japan in 2011 and a global question and challenge arise for mankind: to coexist in harmony or to control, master and exploit nature? This ambient video scroll presents a poem of the famous Japanese poet Yamabe no Akahito celebrating iconic Mount Fuji as a reflection on the conflicting relationship struggling between tradition and technological and cultural progress.

Challenging the Western preoccupation with narrative and distinct meaning the ambient video scrolls contain no complex narration and attempt to be meditative open artwork combining and contrasting Western and Eastern culture by reflecting our current disturbed relationship to nature in contrast to original Eastern poetry which celebrates harmonious existence.



Figure 4. *Shizen?natural*, digital video painting, 2013, 7,15min. ©Christin Bolewski.

3) We Myself I and Them

The third video painting is an investigation of the city-scape. It makes references to an old Chinese hand scroll titled *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* by the Song dynasty artist Zhang Zeduan. It captures the daily life of people and the landscape of an old Chinese capital. The painting is considered to be one of the most renowned works among all Chinese paintings and has been reinterpreted by a number of court artists of subsequent dynasties each following the overall composition and the theme of the original but differing in details and technique. Citing and reworking of art tradition seems to be therefore also a well-established concept of Eastern and not only Western art tradition and for the World Expo 2010 presented at the China Pavilion the original painting was again remade into a 3D animated digital painting titled *River of Wisdom*.

We myself I and Them adopts this old master piece again into a contemporary manner by using contemporary and historical video footage recorded at *Tianamen Square* in Beijing. The work particularly makes reference to tourists who are today mostly populating the square and to military parades and the *Tianamen Square* protests in 1989. So the work investigates public space and provides some comments about citizenship and the relationship between individual and society in the traditional Eastern society now affected by Western and global influences.

Conclusions

The digital artwork presented in this paper can act as an example and point of controversial discussion as to how cultural heritage from a foreign culture can act as an unfamiliar access to own (Western) culture and digital visual practice. The “other”, the unfamiliar acts as a fresh input or way of seeing things. Reframing of the original narrative produces a fresh perspective on both the source material and the context in which it first existed and in which it exists now - in the Eastern, Western or globalized world.



Figure 5. *We myself I and Them*, digital video painting, 2017, 7,15 min.
©Christin Bolewski

Eastern aesthetics seem to be particularly suited to create subtle and poetic approaches – rich in metaphor – providing a meditative (and subversive) contemplative situation that puts the audience into a state of flow, to calm down and take time to reflect on those conflicting issues that the artwork presents: There is destruction of nature presented as poetic beauty. Working with those contrasting effects can create very powerful experiences for the viewer and invites engaging in alternative, competing and opposing cultural perspectives in the light of a multi-cultural globalized world where the understanding of other (visual) cultures becomes increasingly important or as Irvine concludes in his essay in *Remix and the Dialogic Engine of Culture* ‘any work produced and received in a culture is, necessarily, a materialized symbolic structure encoding an interpretive dialogic pattern of combinatorial units, meanings, values, and ideas that came from somewhere and are on their way to somewhere else.’ (Irvine, 2016)

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