Ana Cristina MARIAN

Bill Viola – An Approach to the Idea of Passage

Abstract*:*

This article analyzes how the multimedia installations and videos of American artist Bill Viola, one of the most out-standing names in video art, develop the idea of passage (from the mundane to the spiritual), materialized as a form of communication through the digital image. Focusing on examples from Viola's work, the article argues that Viola uses the contre-jour technique to highlight the presence of the camflouged sacred. In the context of recent theories about the "return of beauty" (Mitchell 2005) in the work of multimedia artists like Mona Hatoum (*Impenetrable*, 2010) and Klaus Obermeier (*Apparition*), Viola tests the limits of technology and seeks to transfigure the common place and turn it, through art, into the sacred. Many of his videos start from an everyday occurrence and end up raising existential questions. I argue that in this way Viola's work reflects Mircea Eliade's idea that the sacred and the mundane coexist (Eliade 2005, 32-33). His videos speak about a reflection on life where narrative and symbol combine in a holistic vision (Martin 2006, 92). Focusing on the recontextualization of the idea of passage, a recurring theme in the videos *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-1979), *The Veiling* (1995), *Fire Woman* (2005), and *An Ocean Without a Shore* (2007), the article analyzes the explorations of the boundary between two worlds in Viola's videos. The timeless atmosphere, conveyed through techniques that break the image ryhthm through slow-motion or contre-jour filming, accompany the artist's mise-en-scene, which addresses universal themes, such as birth, death, life, love, in a contemporary way.

Keywords: video, visual perception, light, contre-jour, passage.

More than fifty years after the birth of video art, there is nothing unusual about watching the moving image, accompanied by sound, of a video. First used by artists as a protest against commercial television, video art as an expressive environment has established its own place among the other visual arts. On the one hand, according to Raymound Bellour, video spreads in space like a picture; on the other, it plunges into time, like a story which is serialisation into units... (Bellour 2015). Contemporary art has developed alongside the proliferation of media technologies. Yves Michaud, influen-

ced by Adorno's teories, suggests that art has been sublimated into aesthetic experiences as a result of the spread of these technologies, and consequently the work of art is seen as a product of the society of spectacle, which increasingly includes new media. McLuhan shows how media technologies have an important role in human consciousness transformation and also in social changes (McLuhan).

This article analyzes how the multimedia installations and videos of American artist Bill Viola, one of the most outstanding names in video art, develop the idea of passage (from the mundane to the spiritual), materialized as a form of communication through the digital image. The article argues that Viola uses the contre-jour technique to highlight the presence of the camflouged sacred, focusing on examples from Viola's work consulted in the exceptional and comprehensive 2014 *Bill Viola* exhibition in Paris.

In the context of recent theories about the "return of beauty" (Mitchell 2005) in the work of multimedia artists like Mona Hatoum (*Impenetrable*, 2010) and Klaus Obermeier (*Apparition*), Bill Viola tests the limits of technology and seeks to transfigure the common place and turn it, through art, into the sacred. Many of his videos start from an everyday occurrence and end up raising existential questions. I argue that in this way Viola's work reflects Mircea Eliade's idea that the sacred and the mundane coexist (Eliade 2005, 32-33).

Viola's videos speak about a reflection on life where narrative and symbol combine in a holistic vision (Martin 2006, 92). The relevance of the themes that explore the limits of the human body (*Nine Attempts to Achieve Immortality*, 1996) and the spiritual as its extension (*Tristan's Ascension*, 2005, or *The Voyage,* 2002) comes from the unique way in which universal human experiences, such as birth, death, love, are revealed under the camera light.

From the beginning of his career, Bill Viola has not hesitated to ingeniously combine techniques such as signal distortion in order to creatively involve the human senses, which receive a different perception rhythm, and transform with each image sequence. Through this technical game he actually interrupts the linearity of perception and suggests new ways of interpreting the images for the viewer. Having studied information technology, electronic music and Eastern religions, Bill Viola is interested in perception, in the relativity of seeing through the camera "lens", which, as he states, offers the possibility of a "new understanding of sight" (1978) (Neutres 2014, 17). His videos speak of the act of discovery, of intuition, memory, immortality and the struggle to escape an overwhelming mundane, as gnoseological experiences. Doubled by the intention to transcend space and time through art, his videos become, through a metaphysical approach, a way of understanding life and the expression of its meaning. "Intuition is the fundamental, decisive element" (Neutres 2014, 30) as the artist declared in an interview with Jerome Neutres – the excess of reflection and thought interferes with the wholeness of the sense of intuition (Neutres 2014, 30), an idea inspired from principles retrieved from Buddhist philosophy, and which Viola tries to reflect in his work.

By using slow-motion techniques in the video *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-1979), Viola creates a metaphor of resurrection. A character at the edge of a pool situated in the middle of a forest prepares to jump into the water. The body's movement in the air is frozen in a static sequence, as if the video had stopped. In fact, the video continues, the body's shadow appearing in succession both in the water and on the side of the pool, disappearing at the end in the background. I argue that Viola plays a resurrection game here, questioning the possibility of the existence of another world, very close to us. The ease with which the character disappears and reappears in distinct places shows, I suggest, that there are crossings, passages towards something else, as if there were penetrable screens around us. Even though video art was initially a protest against television, here it is used as a means of communicating a mystically experienced truth. Viola has been accused by some critics of overusing technological effects and resorting to clichés: "there is water, there is fire, there are the usual tears and slow-mo special effects. Life is a cycle, and death is not the end… it is a catalogue of clichés" (Searle 2006).

The novelty that this video brings consists in the way the work reflects the idea of the screen which separates one world from another. The passing no longer requires a space to be passed through, an explicitly marked passage that is separated through distance, as it is now compressed to fit the dimension of the screen, with the appearing and disappearing actions happening simultaneously, in an instant. The artist's play with light and darkness, the light-dark contrast, along with the slow motion recording technique can also be found in other works, among which *The Quintet Series, The Passing*, and *Observance*.

The ubiquity of the state of waiting, present in *Reflecting Pool*, the delayed launching of plot resolution and the lyricism of a surreal atmosphere are characteristic features in his other works, such as *Walking on the Edge* (2012), *The Deluge* (2002), *The Encounter* (2012). The use of slow-motion facilitates the profound perception of the visual event, emphasizing the momentary, the instantaneous. The continuous present of the camera slow-motion builds a reality in which the viewer can be timelessly transposed, charmed by the occurrence of a new "happening". The spatiotemporal extraction used by Viola puts the spectator in the position of exiting his or her usual rhythm; time has a different measure, space is compressed or expanded. In this sense, in his videos, human intuition and reason are conjugated in terms of the relativity of perception. The bright contour crops the character, in contre-jour, who is intentionally projected on a neutral background. The facial features become unimportant thanks to the positioning of the light in semi-obscurity, while water becomes the surprising element through its translucidity. Therefore, water takes the dynamic role of materialising the idea of passing from one world to another.

The fact that the video allows "live" broadcasting turns the viewer into a participant, who is however unable to intervene. In *The Encounter* (2012) Viola presents an encounter between two women, in the desert. Because of the desert steam, the image becomes distorted, and the viewer is unable to tell if the women are imaginary, such

as a "mirage", or real. Only after they meet and continue their separate journeys, just like two electrons which unrelentingly resume their trajectory after colliding, can the viewer be certain that the event was real.

The installation *The Veiling* (1995) also focuses on explorations and encounters. The projection, which is performed from two opposite sides, offers the viewer two different sequences, which meet through overlapping images, due to the very fine, semi-transparent veils, located at the same distance from one another and divides the space in equidistant screens. The images are always accompanied by sounds or music that emotionally fulfill the sensory effect.

Bill Viola's option of using the contre-jour technique is, I believe, explained through the fact that it allows both the existence of images with an impact, almost bi-dimensional ones, such as *Fire Woman*, as well as a certain degree of ambiguity – *The Veiling* – which attracts the spectator, keeping him or her in suspense, creating that tension that is so necessary in making a movie seem interesting and attractive.

The surreal atmosphere, the steam, the cloud, and the ambiguity are the result of a certain type of dialogue between light and shadow. The contre-jour technique used here hides, but also reveals a certain momentary limit of the human figures which, through appearance/disappearance, contributes to the chimerical atmosphere.

Although the brain signals the existence of an object only in the presence of light, the shadow, as a component of the contre-jour technique, partially hides, while leaving room for exploration and discovery, through the uncertainty it generates. In *The Veiling* Bill Viola plays with the ephemeral, offering an impressive display of self-searching, as Marcheschi argues, a kind of meditation training, pushed to research something that was both mental and physical; a hidden place inside themselves, to embrace a holy sense of the infinite (Marcheschi 2014).

Similar to a dream, the projection provides a subtle play with light and shadow, in which the protagonists, a woman and a man, have the opportunity to meet through the multiplication of the projections and their criss-crossing on the parallel and equidistant screens described above. The searches of the "camera eye" rhythmically exploit, through the idea of mutual encounter, the communication niches, the possible "crossings" towards each other. Shadows and body parts recorded in partial shadow suggest the idea of communication as a fragile, evanescent space and the fact that everything is continuously transforming, as time passes. "We are all moving images" (Bill Viola) is, according to the author of the installation, a statement that reiterates the idea of passage which is no longer an actual space to cross, but multiplied, diffuse, moving images, which, through their play, reveal the surprise of meaning.

Bill Viola's videos propose a world of simultaneous transparency and mystery, where the elements specific to the diaphanous, such as air, water, fire, and glass – seen as a reflection of water, a mirror image – create a world outside time. This "outside" is suggested both visually and aurally, with sound playing an important role in the works of the artist who sees himself as a "sculptor of time".

The author, clearly preoccupied by the idea of passing, of a passage between two worlds and the way in which it happens, introduces the viewer to a space where the laws of physics seem to work differently. In the video *Fire Woman* (2005) the outline of a woman is filmed in contre-jour, profiled on a fire wall that disappears in its own reflection, a chimerical image of a person at the border of life and death. The same theme of passing into another world can be found in the video *Tristan's Ascension* (2005), which shows the inert body of a man lying down, from which water drops flow upwards. These drops multiply, finally materializing into a waterfall around the body, lifting it towards the upper side of the image where, in the end, the body disappears into the light of the surrounding water. Marcheschi notes that the mythical and mystical apparitions of the final part of the exhibition which was dedicated to those works connected to the ideas of rebirth and transcendence. Besides the previously mentioned *Ascension* and *The Dreamers*, the two works opening this section were the haunting and immersive installations extracted from Viola's creation for Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Peter Sellars: *Tristan's Ascension* (*The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall*) (2005) and *Fire Woman* (2005) (Marcheschi 2014).

The idea of backlit characters coming from semi-obscurity and moving towards the light, flooded by water, has already been used in the video *An Ocean without a Shore*. Here, from the hands and shoulders of the characters, small waterfalls seem to burst out, gradually slowing down their flow, while the character is outlined through light, as if he were crossing from one environment to another through a bright aquatic curtain. The sacred becomes perceptible, intuitive, and the artist brings it closer to the viewer through the universal themes addressed and the way in which technology is used to express ideas. As Maria Rosa Sossai writes, the presence of water is an acknowledgment of the crucial role this element plays in the iconography of the great masters of painting and of its value as a dynamic natural force… water may be seen as celebration of the ritual of purification through which ordinary gestures turn into something unprecedented (Sossai 2012, 25).

Nothing is random Viola's work, the choice of themes which he develops, their profoundness, the ability and perfection in using the camera, the techniques which are specific to video, all of these subscribe to the tenacious wish of the author to share some of life's mystery, to share personal experiences which become universal experiences through the language of art. Doubled by the intention to transcend space and time through art, his videos become, through a metaphysical approach, a way of understanding life, the expression of its meaning.

We find here the transposition through image of the idea of transcending reality, of surpassing the limit of experiential knowledge, expressed by means which are offered by contemporary art. The video as a means of expressing oneself has become one of the favorite ways of communication employed by the young generation, its popularity being explained by the impact it has in the context and environment of the Internet and of communication networks. Considering this aspect, the role of video has re-con-

textualised itself, and Bill Viola's videos are valuable not only from an aesthetic point of view, but also because they become attitude generators.

The video art image becomes the vehicle of the artist's thoughts and transfigures reality into a dynamic field of interactions where Bill Viola uses new media technology to involve people conceptually and emotionally. The freedom of expression and creativity in his works offer us new aesthetic criteria, developing new possibilities for contemporary art.

The perception, intuition, the instant nature of the snapshot, as well as the present are all part of Bill Viola's visual language. His image does not show, does not explain things in detail, it has the force to send us towards what surrounds us, towards fragments of reality that we all know, towards the memory of the things that guide us on a relentless search for truth.

The inner eye opens through the camera eye, and Bill Viola's art turns into a spiritual exercise, through which objects are dematerialized and become transient, illusive, in an intuitive and mysterious world.

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