

Bill Viola, an Installation Artist Full of Spirituality

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Abstract:

Bill Viola is a pioneer in the use of dynamic images. He is good at using the images and audio captured by the video to express the rich human emotions of life, death, personality, society, and thinking about life. Originating from the influence of childhood drowning, he often uses water elements to create art and express his thinking about life. At the same time, the Viola family are all Christians, and reflections on religious culture can also be seen in his works. This kind of artistic creation that integrates one's own experience and social environment runs through Bill Viola's work. "Nantes Triptych" is Viola's portrayal of his own life imitating the medieval altar decoration triptych. You can also see his exploration of life, death, senses, subconsciousness and other emotions based on real life in his works. "Going Forth By Day" transforms and circulates from the visual dynamics to the time perspective, revealing the invisible things like thinking, and transforming between dual latitudes, exploring the complexity of human existence. In the way of presentation, Viola uses advanced high-definition video technology to close the audience in influence and sound, break the distance between traditional art and the audience, and align the audience's spiritual world with the work. This perception of "here and now" arouses the emotional resonance of the audience, allows the audience to perceive the meaning of life in the works, and injects spiritual power and charm into Bill Viola's works.

Keywords:

Dynamic Images, Emotion, Life, Spirituality, Mysterious, Time, Water, Death

1. Introduction

Bill Viola is a pioneer in the use of dynamic images. Because he was born in the same era as video technology and is deeply influenced by photography technology, Viola has been using video for artistic creation since the 1970s. He likes to use the images and audio captured by the video to explore the relationship between life, death, time, etc., as well as the expression of rich human emotions and life. Viola's work has added a new thing like video while maintaining the classical aesthetics. It is not limited to the form, and integrates diversified disciplines and cultures to present the relationship between modern art and emotion. Not resisting the "new" nor forgetting

the “old” is a characteristic of his works. Viola believes that “thoughts are functions of time, not discrete objects” (Bill Viola, 1995), so he uses technology to display human thoughts and emotions through the opposition and circulation of time and space. Therefore, his installation art has primitive wildness and mysterious spirituality, and constantly arouses the resonance of people’s hearts.

2. The Influence of Religion and Experience

Bill Viola was born in New York and grew up during World War II and the Cold War. His parents were both faithful Christians. Because of the influence of his growth environment, he became interested in European classical culture and religion. He often spends a lot of time in the Renaissance church research, which is why his works often have classical artistic and cultural colors. After Viola married his wife, he lived in Japan for a year and a half, where he learned the culture of Buddhism from Zen master Daiyuan Tanaka. This collision between different religions and cultures aroused his keen interest and planted the seeds for him to learn Oriental Zen and art culture in the future. Therefore, in Bill Viola’s works, we can see the manifestation of multiple cultural forms, as well as his reflection on religion and philosophy.

If we say that religious culture and other artistic elements are embodied in Viola’s works in a metaphorical and deeper way, then Viola’s current living environment and experience are the direct manifestations of his works of art. Viola had a drowning experience in his childhood. This experience was directly referred to by him as “...the most beautiful world I have ever seen in my life”. It is hard to imagine how Viola felt when he was closest to death, but Viola seemed to feel the mystery of life in this experience. In his subsequent works, he was very good at using slow motions of actors struggling, swimming, and shouting in the water to convey the rich content he wanted to express. “Water” has also become the most common creative element in his works. In addition, in 1991, Viola's mother died and his son was born in the same year. This extreme pain and happiness made Viola feel the meaning of life again. This extreme collision between life and death, pain and happiness caused him to think more, and thus created the famous “Nantes Triptych”. At the same time, his rich experience also injects more soul into his works. In his youth, Viola studied with composer David Tudor for a period of time and established a pioneering visual studio. In addition, he has also recorded and created traditional art in Solomon Island, Indonesia and other regions, and held art exhibitions in Melbourne, London, Somalia, France and other countries and regions. The broad vision brought by Bill Viola’s travels also brought spiritual power and strong vitality to his works.

3. Nantes Triptych

Nantes Triptych is a work created by Bill Viola in 1992 and one of his masterpieces. The whole work is composed of three color video image projections. This is Viola’s work imitating the representation of the Renaissance triptych. The panel is directly projected on a dark and spacious wall, just like the Italian Renaissance fresco, directly in contact with the mottled wall. Accompanying these three scenes is a 30-minute soundtrack composed of running water, crying and breathing. Viola uses the form of triptych to show the discussion and struggle of life, death, and life.

When the audience entered the exhibition hall, three contrasting and impactful images were presented before their eyes. The video on the far left shows the birth of life. At the beginning of the video is the process of a woman giving birth. The whole

process is full of screams, pain and breathing. In the end, the baby's face gradually enlarges in the mother's arms, and finally freezes in the whole picture. middle. The picture on the far right is the opposite. It shows the end of life. There is no climax in the whole video. Only an old woman is lying on the hospital bed dying with her mouth open. The audience can hear her faint breathing and see her half-opened eyes. Finally, the old woman's breathing stopped, and the whole picture was gradually covered by black. In the largest screen in the middle, five drowning stories are played continuously. The difference between this video and the other two is that it is not a real event, but was filmed by actors. All stories start with the actors jumping into the water, but they present five states of giving up struggling, trying to get out of the water, rising to the right or upward, and spiraling.



Figure 1. *Nantes Triptych 1992.*

Source: https://www.google.com.hk/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.tate.org.uk%2Fart%2Fartworks%2Fviola-nantes-triptych-t06854&psig=AOvVaw0zxbzcjqbbPSvD6v8N2zrx&ust=1640850359277000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CagQjRxqFwoTCOC_1YnCiPUCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAS

The inspiration for these three videos was created by Viola based on his son's birth, mother's death and childhood drowning experience. A newborn baby is contrasted with an old man about to die, forming a contrast between life and death, as well as an emotional connection in the cycle of life and death. This extreme sense of contrast and unity caused the audience's emotional ups and downs, but life and death is a life that everyone has to experience. This inevitability resonates with the audience's soul and makes the visitors think about the beginning and end of the journey of life. In addition, the central panel shows the state of the person when they are drowning, and is linked to the pictures on the left and right sides, showing the meaning of life and death in an instant. At the same time, the picture in the middle video shows a black background and blue constantly surging bubbles, as well as the struggling process of a person when drowning, and then merges with the dull sound of water, bringing the audience's emotions into it. At the same time, Viola gives the audience a vehicle for thinking, but does not limit their thinking. The audience can freely shuttle between the three videos. This is also the attraction of his work. Everyone can find resonance and their own understanding in the work, this is also the spirituality of this work.

4. Going Forth By Day

Going Forth By Day is a work exhibited by Bill Viola at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2002. The name of the work comes from the title of "Egyptian Book of the Dead", which means: "The soul is freed from the body, and finally travels on the dawn". In this work, Viola created a projection device composed of five-part panels and sound. The image can be directly projected onto the wall without any screen or frame support.

The first drawing board of Going Forth By Day named "The Birth of Fire" was placed on the wall at the entrance of the gallery, showing the continuous

transformation of the human body in the fire. This seems to show the birth of a person, and it is a metaphor for the beginning of life. The second picture “Path”, a picture of many people with luggage walking forward in a forest. People’s life travels with time and cannot look back, but everyone walks on a different path, which implies that each person’s different personalities lead them to choose a different path. This picture is projected on the side wall and is the longest of all the drawing boards. The third picture “Flood” corresponds to the position of “Birth of Fire”. Perhaps because of Viola’s childhood drowning experience, water and fire have become the most common elements in his works. Neatly dressed people walk around in front of a white house, and the next second flood rushes out of the house.



Figure 2. *Going Forth By Day 2002.*

Source: <https://images.weserv.nl/?url=https://www.guggenheim.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/12/installation-deutsche-berlin-viola-e1459886158189.jpg&w=1170>

The first three pictures still belong to the category of reality. The audience has rational and logical thinking. However, this picture has reached the realm of surrealism, which can evoke the collision of irrational thinking and soul in the audience’s subconscious. The flood in the “Bible” only temporarily alleviated the disaster, and in Viola’s work, along with the cycle of pictures, the disaster also came again. On the fourth drawing board, many people are carrying luggage on the dock, but the old man in the house is lying on the bed dying. The contrast between movement and silence seems to be a metaphor for the end of life and the arrival of death. In the last painting, “First Light”, rescuers are working in the desert after the flood. A mother is waiting anxiously. They look tired and seem to have fallen asleep. However, in the next second someone gradually rose from the water and disappeared into the picture. This picture is reminiscent of the scene of Jesus ascending to heaven wearing white clothes. At the same time, the flood in the desert represents both hope and disaster. Combining the prayers of the mother and the ascension of the son, the whole picture is full of religious atmosphere.

From the first picture “birth”, the road in the forest, the flood, the separation of family members from life and death to the final redemption and rebirth, these separate stories are connected and can become a larger narrative cycle. The sound of each panel is played independently, but merged in the air, creating an independent and overall atmosphere. The whole work uses linear projection to explore the themes of life: birth, personality, society, death and rebirth. This kind of religious work is inherently mysterious and can give the audience more psychological hints and resonate with them. In addition, Viola uses film to present visual images, not just static oil paintings. This visual effect, coupled with the internal reflections on the exploration of life, is also the spiritual part of the work. In addition, visitors must step into the light of the image if they want to see the entire work. When they enter, they will find themselves surrounded by all the projected images on the wall, as if standing in the center of an image world. At the same time, there is no fixed sequence for the

five projections. The audience may have different opinions according to the order of viewing, and may want to explore the connection between other pictures, and constantly generate new logical thinking. However, because all the pictures and sounds are carried out at the same time, the audience can only perceive the work piecemeal in a short period of time. It is inevitable to miss the climax of other pictures, and regrets are always the norm in life. However, after they leave, they may recall some fragments that were considered unimportant at the time. This process can also be said to be the process of the birth, personality, death, and rebirth of the mind. This process of resonating with the human soul is also the spirituality and charm of Viola's works.

5. Features of the Bill' works

"Humans are the product of time, and video art is the best way to record this continuous life." (1995) Bill Viola is good at using images captured by video media to express rich human emotions and thinking about life. This use of video, projection, and audio to form a complete and independent space is the external feature of Bill Viola's work. In terms of content, the themes of Viola's works mainly revolve around humanistic themes such as birth, death, emotion, and life, accompanied by religious colors such as Christianity, Zen Buddhism, and the style of Renaissance wall paintings. For example, Viola's "Nantes Triptych" created by imitating the triptych of the medieval altar decoration is a typical Renaissance style work. This is a portrayal of Viola's own life, based on his real life, his exploration of life, death, senses, subconscious and other emotions.

The third scene "Flood" and the fifth scene "First Light" in "Going Forth By Day" are Viola's re-creation of the "Great Flood" disaster and the "Ascension of Jesus" scene described in the Bible. At the same time, the use of advanced high-definition video technology to seal the audience in the influence and sound, which makes many people think that what they see is a real record. This perception allows the audience to perceive the meaning of life and death and life in the works, inject spiritual power and charm into the video, and then bring resonance to their hearts.

6. Dualism

If the use of video, audio and space is the external cause that resonates in the audience, then dualism is the internal cause of Bill Viola's resonance and the spirituality of the work. "Nantes Triptych" is a new paradigm bred from European Christian culture. It contrasts and connects old women and babies, life and death, and reflects the "universe" and the "concepts of the socialized world." This visual display that spans time and latitude from life to death makes the projected works more artistic and spiritual. In "Going Forth By Day", from the visual dynamics to the time perspective, the five projections all reflect different spaces and times. In a complete sequence, a connection is established between material objects such as people, houses, clothing, and luggage, and transcendent realities such as fire, flood, and rising. In this way, Viola reveals the invisible things like thinking, and transforms between dual latitudes, exploring the complexity of human existence and the cycle between birth and death.

7. Conclusions

Viola uses the pictures captured by the video and the space for display to form the external frame of the work, and then uses the dualistic approach to integrate classical art and religious culture into the work through opposing latitudes and spaces. And put the spiritual core in the exploration of human thinking such as life, death, thinking, emotion, and emotion. The expression of this kind of emotion through projection establishes a connection with the audience, breaks the sense of distance between traditional art and the audience, matches the audience's spiritual world with the work, and arouses deep emotional resonance. This is also the reason why people can feel spirituality and resonance in Viola's works.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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