

Multi-channel Video as Polyphonic Narrative: Time Fragments and Spatial Paths in Contemporary Moving Image

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Abstract: This study focuses on Multi-channel Video within contemporary moving image practice, understanding the multi-channel format not as a mere multi-screen display but as a structural system defined by multi-track images that generate differential rhythms and a polyphonic relationship along the temporal axis. Employing a structural analysis that integrates narratology, spatial image studies, and memory studies, the paper examines three representative works—Wu Junyong’s Qian Yue, Li Ming’s Straight Line, Landscape, and Tong Yixin’s Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo—and categorises them into three distinct multi-channel paradigms: the Lyrical, the Itinerant, and the Mnemonic, which respectively correspond to emotional rhythm, path-based time (or movement time), and multiple historical temporalities. The research further demonstrates that these structural models not only establish distinct modes of viewing—such as fluid drifting, path reconstruction, and multi-vocal decoding—but also reveal three corresponding artistic subjectivities: the Poet, the Traveller (or Peripatetic), and the Historiographer (or Chronicler). Ultimately, the study posits that “Multi-channel” should be understood as a crucial critical concept in contemporary moving image studies for reshaping temporal perception and narrative mechanisms.

Keywords: Multi-channel Video; Polyphonic Narrative; Temporal Structure; Spatial Image Studies.

1. Introduction

Multi-channel video has become a central form in contemporary moving-image art, distinguished by its reconstruction of time, space, and viewing experience through multiple asynchronous tracks. Unlike single-screen cinema based on continuous montage, multi-channel structures highlight gaps, ruptures, and the tension between simultaneous yet heterogeneous images. Meaning emerges not from unified events but from the interplay of parallel temporalities and semantically drifting fragments.

While existing studies—including installation art, expanded cinema, and media archaeology—address screen multiplicity and spatial display, the narrative potential of multi-channel temporal structure remains insufficiently theorised. This paper focuses on three questions: (1) How does multi-channel structure produce non-linear, fragmentary, or poetic narrative rhythms? (2) How do spatial and geographic dimensions transform frequency into a representational logic for action and embodiment? (3) How does polyphonic organisation enable multi-vocal narration when the image hosts local history or memory?

To address these questions, three representative works are examined. Wu Junyong’s Qian Yue constructs emotional fragments through nine asynchronous screens; Li Ming’s Straight Line, Landscape uses geographic alignment and bodily action to generate visualised path structures; and Tong Yixin’s Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo deploys ten channels to weave oral history, ruins, and local narratives into a polyphonic memory field.

Three conceptual clarifications are needed. “Multi-channel video” in this paper refers specifically to temporal structures formed by multiple desynchronised tracks rather than physical multi-screen installations. “Multi-screen installation”

emphasises spatial arrangement but may not constitute a temporal system. “Polyphony” describes the coexistence of multiple image-voices that do not converge into a single centre, generating meaning through parallel rhythms and reciprocal resonance. [1]

2. Methodology and Literature Review

The study categorises the three works into Lyrical, Itinerant, and Mnemonic multi-channel video, based on how meaning is generated through temporal and structural organisation. Methodologically, multi-channel video is analysed as a “structural text,” where rhythm, frequency, synchronicity, and spatial layout are treated as narrative units [2]. Visual analysis is supplemented with artist interviews, field context, and production processes to align each structural model with the artist’s conceptual orientation. [3]

Existing scholarship provides relevant yet dispersed resources. Krauss (1996), Friedberg (2006), and Spielmann (2007) analyse the spatial logics of screen-based art; Manovich (2001) and Youngblood (1970) conceptualise non-linear, database-like cinematic forms [4-5]. However, few studies examine how differences in rhythm and frequency form networks of meaning within multi-channel systems. Domestic research often discusses multi-screen display at the level of visual culture, with limited attention to temporal narrative, path-based structure, or memory formation.

Against this backdrop, this paper integrates narratology, spatial geography, and memory studies to fill a conceptual gap. The three works demonstrate three generative mechanisms: emotional (lyrical fragments), spatial-path (geographic action), and memory (polyphonic historical layering). This framework enables comparative analysis across temporal structure, spatial organisation, and narrative subjectivity.

3. Case Studies

3.1. The Constitution of Poetic Fragments: Wu Junyong's Qian Yue Image Structure and Creative Logic

3.1.1. Work Characteristics and Overall Assessment



Fig 1. Qian Yue, Wu Junyong, 2012

Wu Junyong's *Qian Yue* (2012), inspired by the poetic image of "one thousand rivers holding one thousand moons," uses a nine-channel arrangement to construct a floating, introspective emotional field. Each screen functions like an isolated page, forming a constellation of fragmentary images rather than a narrative sequence. The work is intentionally "light," emphasising suggestion, ambiguity, and rhythmic drift.

3.1.2. Creative Method: Poetic Writing with Images as "Linguistic Units"

In *Qian Yue*, Wu Junyong deliberately bypasses the plot logic or the conventional shot progression standards of traditional video creation, instead treating the images as "linguistic units" akin to text. Building on the classical poetic imagery of "One thousand rivers hold one thousand moons," he dismantles it into nine independent yet mutually echoing units. Each screen resembles a short chapter or an unfinished verse, carrying vague, subtle emotion without an explicit narrative. The artist tends to use imagery rather than events as the starting point for his conception; thus, every video segment possesses a "beginning-like" structure: it starts in a particular space, a specific action, or a particular light, but never develops into a plot-driven resolution. The shooting and editing of the video thus become a form of "writing," an accumulation word by word, allowing the nine fragments to be formally independent yet collectively to constitute a prose-poem-like image collection in terms of emotion and tone. This method of image writing makes *Qian Yue* closer to micro-texts in literature than to traditional video works dependent on linear narrative. The images are intentionally "lightened" by the artist, stripped of event information, so that the viewer does not follow a plot but instead experiences the fluctuation of emotions, the drifting of light and colour, and the slow passage of time across multiple screens. Wu Junyong uses this technique to construct a "thin-volume viewing experience," in which the nine-channel video acts like a collection of essays, disassembled and suspended in space, forming the work's unique creative language.

3.1.3. Implicit Design Logic of Multi-channel Video

Although the fragmented structure is the most prominent feature of *Qian Yue*, the nine images are not simply juxtaposed; they possess a subtle yet stable aesthetic internal

coherence. The work's multi-channel structure is designed not for each image to be an independent window, but for them to collectively form a multiple reflection relationship akin to "phases of the moon." The artist constructs subtle echoes between the images through factors such as light density, motion speed, and rhythmic pace: specific frames present highlights resembling moonlight across water, while others constitute another refraction of emotion through extremely slow movements or slight tremors. The contrast in brightness, the cyclic rhythm, and the texture of the frames across different screens create a perceptible internal rhythm, forming a holistic emotional field in space. There is no explicit causality between them, yet each points in a different way to the same "moon-shadow imagery system." The asynchronous looping of the nine images compels the viewer to constantly establish transient, accidental, yet organic connections between different screens, much like reading nine unfinished verses. The viewer's gaze traverses the space, forming a "spatial reading" that transcends single-screen narrative. This associative mode creates a structure that is simultaneously loose and cohesive: the gap between images is not an absence, but the site where the work's meaning is generated. It is precisely within this seemingly random yet meticulously controlled asynchronous arrangement that *Qian Yue*'s overall aesthetic structure is established.

3.2. The Visualization of Geographic Paths: Li Ming's Straight Line, Landscape Spatial Structure and Itinerant Logic

3.2.1. Work Characteristics and Overall Assessment



Fig 2. Straight Line, Landscape, Li Ming, 2014–2016

Straight Line, Landscape (2014–2016) transforms a conceptual geographic line—from Hangzhou to Taiwan—into a multi-channel system. Twenty-five shooting points were selected along this imagined straight line, each located at the highest mountain within every 50 km segment. Each video is an extreme zoom aimed toward Taiwan, generating a tension of distant longing.

3.2.2. Creative Method: Image Composition Framed by the "Path"

The creation method of *Straight Line, Landscape* differs from general video documentation, as it does not prioritise landscape or events as the subject of filming, but takes the "path itself" as the logical starting point for the image. The artist treats the straight line on the map as a structural framework, locating each shooting point at 50-kilometre intervals and then establishing the image coordinates by finding the highest peak within each straight-line segment (Fig. 3). This approach means the images are no longer

experientially selected scenery but "path nodes" generated through a strict spatial algorithm. Each image is a variant representation of the geographic path—a mandatory selection of mountain, direction, and focal length based on rational rules—giving the work a unique quality that sits between performance art and geographic surveying. In terms of image content, the selection of 25 extreme zoom-in shots generates a tension suggestive of "straining to look afar." The focal length is pushed to the limit, resulting in a blurred, shaky, highly compressed landscape. The second part of the work emphasises the fatigue, pauses, time expansion, and emotional sedimentation brought by walking, extending this "straight line" from a geographic logic to an emotional one through music and bodily experience, giving the work both structural and sensory layers.



Fig 3. Video still from Straight Line, Landscape

3.2.3. Implicit Design Logic of Multi-channel Video

Although the work is presented as 25 juxtaposed screens, its internal structure is highly rigorous. Firstly, the 25 screens do not represent only 25 geographic locations; they also manifest as 25 instances of the "pointing action" within the image, as every single shot is aimed at the same destination: Taiwan. This sustained act of pointing generates an intense unidirectional tension across the multiple screens, structuring the entire work like a "force under stretch." Secondly, the repetition of the 25 zoom-in shots creates a rhythmic consistency between the images, where the subtle tremor of the focus, the flicker of light, and the blurring of the distant view become a visual breath with a continuous pulsating quality during simultaneous viewing. This repetition is neither monotonous nor mechanical but constitutes the visual rhythm fundamental to the work's perception. The asynchronous playback across different screens further renders the work a "fragmented linearity" structure: the long straight line in space projected by each screen is received by the audience simultaneously. Linearity is broken down into parallelism, and the viewer must constantly reassemble the sense of direction of the walk across different screens. This

reassembly no longer depends on temporal sequence but on path logic, structuring the entire work as a "reading in space." In this sense, Straight Line, Landscape is a spatialized rewriting of linear narrative.

3.3. The Polyphonic Presentation of Local Memory: Tong Yixin's Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo Narrative Structure and Logic of Oral History

3.3.1. Work Characteristics and Overall Assessment

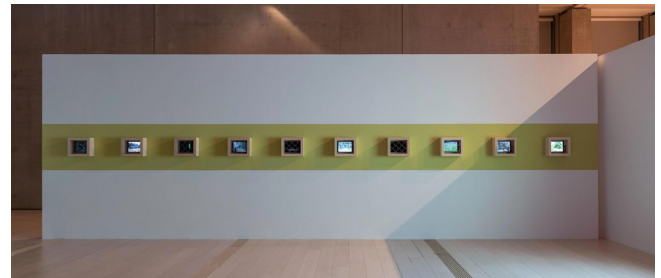


Fig 4. Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo, Tong Yixin, 2015-2020

Tong Yixin's Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo (2015–2020) is a polyphonic narrative work composed of ten-channel video, centring on an abandoned zoo on Mount Lu. Over five years of continuous filming, interviews, and the organisation of local oral histories, it integrates personal memory, local narration, and architectural ruins into the image system. The work does not focus on the zoo as a single subject, nor does it merely present the ruins as a spectacle, but uses the ten image tracks to constitute a multi-vocal narrative field, allowing stories, memories, rumours, work experiences, news events, and personal observations about the zoo to unfold simultaneously. The aesthetic significance of the work is that it ceases to narrate the rise and fall of the zoo, instead making the "mode of narration about the zoo" the actual subject, granting the work a complexity akin to a musical polyphonic structure.

3.3.2. Creative Method: Narrative Organization Based on Oral History and Observation



Fig 5. Video still from Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo

Unlike the previous works, the creation method of Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo is closer to long-term field investigation. Tong Yixin returned to the abandoned zoo annually, starting in 2015, to film and conduct interviews with local veterinarians, architects, staff, and residents. The voice

recordings in the video feature both Mandarin and local dialects, derived from authentic oral histories, news reports, personal narratives, and even past zoo work records. This creative approach gives the work a distinct documentary quality, though it is not presented as straightforward documentary footage. The artist edits, narrates, and reorganises the vast materials, transforming them into rhythmic poetic text tracks that, along with the image tracks, constitute the work's multi-channel system. Simultaneously, she conducts long-term observation of the spatial structure of the zoo ruins, documenting how the architecture is overgrown, modified, and forgotten. This rhythm of "observation—revisit—re-observation" infuses the images with a sense of temporal weight, which, when layered with the ten-channel structure, forms a more complex multi-tense narrative. The curved exhibition wall in the work extends the zoo space, expanding the video beyond the screen to the architectural form, presenting the work as a dual act of visual and spatial writing. [6]

3.3.3. Implicit Design Logic of Multi-channel Video

The ten internal videos of *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* are composed of three categories of material: images of ruins, oral texts, and fragments of local historical events. The ten channels are not independent chapters but collectively constitute a polyphonic relationship of "mutual responsiveness between voices. [7]" The ruin images provide the visual scene, the oral texts provide the narrative subjects, and the news and historical fragments provide the temporal coordinates. The three types of material constantly intersect across the ten tracks, creating a work that presents "simultaneous multiple temporalities" in the viewer's experience. The different tracks are neither repetitive nor directly corresponding in their narration, yet they form a holistic relationship akin to a breathing rhythm. The logic between these ten screens is not linear but a "logic of simultaneous stacking": the viewer constantly moves between screens, forming a reading experience that is not limited to a single perspective. The differences between the screens constitute the work's semantic boundaries, while their echoes define its overall narrative mode. The audience cannot obtain the complete story from any single screen but must construct the chain of meaning within the multi-channel structure—this is a crucial part of the work's design: the zoo's history belongs to no single person. However, it is collectively constituted by numerous scattered stories, fragments, and voices.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Across the three selected works, multi-channel video emerges not simply as a display technique but as a structural principle that reorganizes temporal perception, spatial cognition, and narrative subjectivity [8]. While each artwork adopts the basic logic of parallel image tracks, their differences reveal three distinct paradigms—Lyrical, Itinerant, and Mnemonic—each grounded in a different logic of meaning generation.

At the temporal level, the works demonstrate how multi-channel structures fundamentally reshape the viewer's experience of time. In *Qian Yue*, time is decomposed into emotional pulses and atmospheres; the nine asynchronous loops create a delicate temporal field where meaning occurs in the interval rather than in events. The temporal experience resembles reading lyric poetry, in which semantic resonance emerges from gaps, repetitions, and subtle shifts. Li Ming's

Straight Line, Landscape restructures time as a function of geographic traversal. Time is no longer sequential but "path-oriented," determined by the spatial logic of nodes and directional tension. Each screen represents a temporal cross-section of the same action—looking—thus creating a fractured yet directional temporality. In Tong Yixin's *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo*, time becomes multi-layered and historiographic. The ten channels unfold different temporal strata—memories, ruins, oral accounts, and historical documents—coexisting simultaneously. The work thus generates a "thick time" where multiple pasts coexist and contradict each other, revealing memory as an ongoing process rather than a fixed record.

From the perspective of viewing mechanism, multi-channel video redefines spectatorship as an active, reconstructive act. The drifting attention in *Qian Yue* encourages viewers to navigate between independent visual fragments, forming temporary constellations of meaning. This dispersed perception aligns with aesthetic models of contemplative viewing, where interpretation is associative rather than linear.

By contrast, *Straight Line, Landscape* demands that viewers constantly piece together spatial directionality from its 25 screens. The act of viewing becomes a spatial practice: the reconstruction of a straight line across discontinuous, desynchronised vantage points. This spatialised viewing echoes cartographic thinking, suggesting that spectatorship itself can function as a form of geographic cognition. In *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo*, spectatorship becomes polyphonic decoding. Because no single channel holds the "full story," viewers must weave meaning across conflicting voices, dialects, and temporalities. The work positions the viewer not as a passive observer but as a co-author who reconstructs the memory ecology of a place.

These structural differences point to three modes of artistic subjectivity embodied within the works. Wu Junyong's "Poet" subjectivity is rooted in implicitness, metaphor, and emotional density. His multi-channel system becomes a spatial poem in which the viewer encounters the residues of feelings rather than narrative causality. Li Ming's "Traveller" subjectivity emphasises bodily action, endurance, and conceptual measurement. The artwork visualises the duality of physical experience and abstract mapping, suggesting that artistic creation can be a form of geographic thinking. Tong Yixin's "Historiographer" subjectivity foregrounds documentation, testimony, and the ethics of representing local memory. Her polyphonic structure mirrors the multiplicity of communal histories and resists any singular authoritative narrative.

From a methodological standpoint, this study shows that multi-channel video must be analysed at the level of its temporal and structural logic rather than solely its spatial installation. The category of "multi-channel" thus deserves theoretical attention as an aesthetic apparatus that transforms frequency, rhythm, and parallelism into conceptual tools for representing affect, path, and memory. The three paradigms proposed—Lyrical, Itinerant, Mnemonic—offer an analytical framework for understanding how multi-channel practices reorganise narrative and perception in contemporary moving-image art.

While the current research focuses on three representative works, future studies may examine multi-channel practices informed by real-time data, artificial intelligence, networked media, or generative visual systems. Such practices may

further challenge the boundaries of polyphonic narrative, expanding the role of computation, automation, and non-human agents in the construction of multi-temporal moving-image environments.

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