The Visual Turn 2.0
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The Visual Turn 2.0

Tong Lam¹

In the past few decades, the human sciences have gone through what some scholars have come to call the visual turn. Specifically, researchers are increasingly trying to incorporate the visual realm into their scholarly inquiries. Such development includes, but is not limited to, the study of visual languages, visual experience, as well as visual media and technologies. Most recently, historians, too, have started to use visual evidence such as photographs, films, and other visual elements in their analyses.

My own experiment with the visual turn, meanwhile, has involved more than just the analysis of images and visual practices. In the past few years, I have also used my own artistic interventions to create visual material in order to engage students and the general public. In other words, rather than just drawing insights from visual studies in my research and teaching, I try to bring art into scholarship and vice versa. Oftentimes, this means that I need to work with filmmakers, curators, music composers, and digital specialists to deliver a new visual and audio experience for students and the general public in galleries, museums, and lecture halls both

An outdoor film screening in a small village in China’s Sichuan Province. (2014)

¹ Tong Lam was born and raised in Macao, formerly a Portuguese enclave near Hong Kong on the south China coast until it was returned to China in 1999. Being at the margins of several worlds, he has always been interested in issues of cultural representation, nationalism, colonialism, and globalization. His dissertation, completed in 2003 at the University of Chicago, is an examination of the significance of the rise of social survey research in the construction of the Chinese nation-state in the early twentieth-century. At present, his research and teaching interests include modern China, East Asia, empire and nation, the history of social sciences, globalization, cultural studies, war and memory, and historiography. He has written articles on nationalism and the emerging neoliberal social order in post-socialist China.
inside and outside the university.

For instance, during the past four years, I have been collaborating with two fellow historians in an ongoing SSHRC-funded project called *Screen China*, which is an investigation into the historical and contemporary practices of outdoor film screening in rural and urban China. Although our project is a study of the history of film, media technology, and their relationships to politics, the end products of our multimedia collaboration include a documentary film, photographs, visual essays, as well as research articles.

Meanwhile, in another research-driven art project called *Precarious Living*, I used projectors to project images of the everyday life in a Chinese city onto an urban slum at night and then photographed these night scenes. The images produced in this process are often surreal and not immediately understandable, and therefore require the viewer’s critical contemplation on their meanings. In this case, the images do not just highlight the tensions between China’s high-speed economic growth and the grim reality facing the residents who are being left behind. More importantly, I also try to show that in societies where commercial and state-sanctioned images are mere spectacles, fictional images may come closer to tell the truth after all. In short, these images are designed to destabilize the viewers, encouraging them to think about the relationship between documentary and constructed images.
In all these projects, I see art as a form of intellectual provocation. And my hope is to help students and educated audience in general to cultivate their visual sensibility and critical thinking. In doing so, I also suggest that digital humanities should go beyond the realm of data mining and analysis.