Steve McQueen’s seven-minute, ironically titled *Static* (2009) is the first of fourteen works I encounter in his exhibition at the Tate Modern. On the screen hovering before me, in the Museum’s unlit gallery, I observe shaky close-ups of a certain world-renowned copper statue. I often see this statue framed within postcard-like images on Facebook, or counterposed to a moody sunset in the entry credits of a sexy sitcom; or set as the unbelievable object of destruction in a Marvel Universe storyline. This statue, the Statue of Liberty, signifies in excess of its mere physical form as an ideological expression of 19th-century modernity—a mish-mash of scientific rationalism and classical liberalism mixed in with a heavy dose of industrial capitalism. Lady Liberty, in all her oxidized splendor, is disturbed from assuming her still, graceful comportment, as she continuously shifts about in the frame, thanks to the camera’s quivering movement. It’s clear we’re circling around the statue, and from an elevated height: the sound of the helicopter blades, which fades in and out, produce felt vibrations, dizzily moving about the device that, in turn, makes images move. Beyond the immediate object of attention is a horizon, filled with other objects that symbolize Man’s conquest over nature—skyscrapers, cranes, shipping docks—piercing into a violet-hued sky.

*Static* sets the stage for the other works that lie ahead, all typified by an emotion-packed, filmic language that blends cinematic formalism with a sensitivity toward the social and the historical. McQueen’s moving image works do not allow for neutral, detached viewing. They have a curious way of involving the viewer physically and psychically within the sensorial fields they construct. I always felt *something* after experiencing each work—something that was consistently large in affective magnitude but that varied in quality, moving between the harrowing and the endearing. I was always *touched* by McQueen’s moving images, and I mean that both literally and figuratively. The exhibition, McQueen’s first major institutional survey, is organized non-chronologically and is, by and large, experienced in the dark—a curatorial move that stresses the artist’s consistent deployment of darkness in his work.
Akin to Walter Benjamin’s flaneur, who prows the modern city absorbed by the arresting glow of neon-enhanced advertisements, I was similarly guided through the Tate’s darkened galleries with the aid of off-cast lighting produced by McQueen’s projections. I felt as though my eyes were not supposed to focus on anything else besides the exhibited works, allowing for an experience that was immersive tout court. This sensation of technologically aided sensory absorption formed an embodied thematic connection to Illuminer (2001) in which McQueen films himself lying on a bed in a dark hotel room, his partially nude body faintly illuminated by the glare of an off-screen television. Illuminer, like several other works in McQueen’s practice, places the Black figure (often, the artist’s) front and center, rendering its appearance in a fleshy, palpable manner — sweaty, sticky, present — all the while abstracting it through the mediation of gritty filmstock and compromised lighting.

In one gallery, Cold Breath (1999) and Charlotte (2004) were displayed across from each other. The pairing made sense. Both works are 16mm film projections, forming close-ups of body parts that extend the film medium into the sensory arena of touch. In the former work, black flesh consumes the entire frame. The artist’s nipple appears and then is vigorously rubbed, twisted, and pulled by his fingers. In the latter work, tinted with a bloody red filter, McQueen’s finger makes another appearance as it slowly pokes a human eye and its white epidermal environs, belonging to British actor Charlotte Rampling. Focusing intently on the image projections — watching black skin like mine being touched or doing the touching — I was pulled into the film’s sensorial field through my haptic sense. Indeed, I was touched by these films, and it also felt as if I was the one doing the erotic nipple stroking and the invasive eye prodding. There was no longer a distinction between the touching/touched subjects over there, in the frame, and myself over here, standing across from them.

Such an experience directly echoes Vivian Sobchack’s writing on the “cinesthetic subject” whereby the body becomes fully engaged in the cinematic experience, itself producing a kind of irreducible sensorial knowledge (its own form of meaning-making), thereby bypassing, and even enhancing, the privileged interpretative focus placed on cognitive reflection and textual analysis. This concept may sound bizarre to some, but it happens all the time. Recall the oft-experienced sensation of recoiling in your seat whenever a filmic character undergoes intense pain, like when his fingers get chopped off (à la The Grand Budapest Hotel, 2014) or when a character ingests something vile, like a cockroach (à la The Burial of Koja, 2018). As Sobchack points out, these haptic sensations aren’t merely metaphorical; they are very much real phenomena, neither reducible to the prior sensation of vision nor commensurable with the direct, physical sensation of touch.
While some works were displayed openly in the main gallery spaces, many were shown in isolation within sound-panelled rooms. Queues formed outside these rooms, where works weren’t playing on a continuous loop — a set-up that made me feel like I was in some highbrow amusement park. Staring at the countdown timer by the entrance of *Western Deep* (2002), I waited patiently to experience what would be, for me, the most outstanding work in the exhibition. After being let into the viewing room, a seemingly perennial interval of suspense ensued, which was relieved, but abruptly so, by a loud, shuddering bang. The sound shocked my ears and vibrated my body— moved me—again, interpolating me into the film’s sensorial field. Machine-like sounds filled the room as I waited for an image to appear on the screen.

When an image finally did ‘appear,’ it was barely decipherable. It soon became clear, thanks to the sporadic flashes of light from plastic helmets, that this prolonged immersion in darkness was itself a filmic documentation of McQueen’s long descent into the TauTaona mine in South Africa, the world’s deepest gold mine.

For most of the film, the cinematic relationship between image and sound is defamiliarized and rendered contingent. Akin to that of *Static*, the sound score fluctuates between intense drilling noises and utter silence. The mine, similarly, remains on the verge of visibility, occasionally lit by the miners’ dusty helmets — an eerie visuality that is further entrenched by the blurry aesthetic of a Super 8mm camera. What is so striking about *Western Deep* is what McQueen does not show or explain: there are no voice-overs, no interviews, no captions, no clear resolutions. Rather, what McQueen produces is an affective choreography of image and sound that, through its immediate sensory reception, incites a profound sense of horror in the viewer. However, this feeling of dread is not at all stultifying but instead breeds a cogitative state. The film led me to reflect on the mine’s location in a wounded postcolonial region that has for decades alienated indigenous African peoples from their land and from the products of their labor.

In a grim scene toward the film’s end, the miners, shirtless and tightly arranged in long rows facing each other, are seen continuously stepping off and on a step in coordination with a loud, repetitious, militaristic buzz. (My guess is that such bio-disciplinary practices allow the workers to stretch and keep fit in order to maintain maximum physical productivity.) The scene at once recalls the claustrophobic, architectural arrangement of black people in the Middle Passage and alludes to the deadening forms of time discipline inflicted by capitalism’s insistence on ‘efficiency.’ McQueen speeds up the workers’ dull physical motions, which, when combined with the grain of Super 8mm film, create a strange aesthetic effect whereby they blend into a singular tissue-like phantasm, evoking Hortense Spiller’s idea of the “flesh.”

Their invisible labor — the condition of possibility for the circulation of this fetishized global commodity — is reflected in the abysmal depth of the gold mine, its darkness imprinted by the film stock’s liquid emulsions which, again, draw the viewer to the moving image’s textured surface — its ‘skin,’ or what Laura Marks terms “haptic visuality.” *Western Deep* not only lays bare capitalism’s vampiric dependency on racialized labor (McQueen remarks that 5,000 workers are required in the mine at any given time) but also articulates its ruthless extraction of Earth’s resources. Race and capital, image and texture, sound and touch, past and present are thus fused into indistinct, cross-modal categories in McQueen’s brilliant, hauntological meditation on labor.

McQueen’s *End Credits* (2012–ongoing) brings blackness’s imbrication of sonic aesthetics and radical politics into focus through its lengthy archival interrogation of Paul Robeson, the famous African American singer, actor, and activist. On the screen, a slow vertical roll of documents detailing Robeson’s surveillance by the FBI is scored by voices that are reading out the documents but out-of-sync with their imagistic appearance. Again, McQueen disjoints image and sound, producing a deconstructive, self-reflexive critique of the film medium’s coherence. The film’s extreme length (the document roll lasts five hours and thirty-eight minutes while the audio transcription lasts a whopping forty-two hours and six minutes) both hints at the endless instances of black surveillance in the modern world and satirizes the durational terms of engagement demanded by the film medium.
McQueen often incorporates events and subjects from his personal life into his work, and though, in general, I find that autobiographical works have the tendency to approach the self-indulgent, McQueen navigates this terrain delicately. For example, in *Ashes* (2002–15), McQueen uses a two-sided screen to reflect on the duality of life and death, but in specific reference to a young man he met while filming *Carib’s Leap* (2002)—another work exploring the specters of colonialist, capitalist violence. On one side of the screen, this young man, Ashes, balances on his bright orange surfboard in crystal-clear azure waters. His glistening brown skin and gorgeous facial profile burst with youthful energy, immersed in the tropical breeze that brushes past his orange-dyed dreadlocks. In marked opposition, on the other side of the screen, two gravediggers prepare Ashes’ tomb while an artisan etches his memorial plaque. Via a testimonial text made available to viewers and a fragmented audio transcription by two Grenadians, we learn that Ashes died in relation to drug violence. *Ashes* bears a universal existential significance, as death is something that all human beings must eventually confront. However, it strikes a resonant chord for black men in particular, whose futures are more often than not predisposed to systemic interruption, either by death or incarceration.

Related themes surface in *7th Nov* (2001), in which McQueen’s cousin, Marcus, narrates the traumatic, accidental shooting of his brother. While the stirring twenty-three-minute narrative unfolded, I could turn my visual attention only to the accompanying projected still image. The photograph, now ingrained in my memory, shows Marcus lying down on his back, with the top of his scarred head dominating the frame (the work never explains how Marcus got this scar). Both *Ashes* and *7th Nov* visualize and auralize the stark, intimate relation of Black diasporic life to physical and social death—life that is informed, but not ultimately defined, by death (and in fact transgresses it).

For a practice that at many turns deals rather explicitly with contemporary and historical violence suffered by the Black Diaspora, McQueen never actually shows the spectacularized scene of violence. Rather, it’s always alluded to— in deep shadows, in disembodied voices, in haunted sites. This is very different from the severity of his feature-length films, such as *12 Years A Slave* (2012) and *Hunger* (2008), which both deal, albeit rather differently, with instances of state-administered violence. In the works that comprise McQueen’s timely survey, violence and its resultant trauma(s) are instead grounded in an affective, ineffable grammar, one that is extra-linguistic and expressed by taking apart and putting back together the structural elements of cinema: image, sound, composition, the frame. Furthermore, the body, and the flesh, are of central concern to McQueen’s oeuvre, not only because he continually makes reference to bodies falling, laboring, speaking, touching, looking, or singing, but also because of the way his works wholly engage the viewer’s entire physical being, their sensorium. At the Tate Modern, McQueen’s textured images and soundscapes (and what bodies do therein) form a chiasmatic relation to the haptic dimension, offering us a phenomenological entry point into a complex, rhizomatic history of the African diaspora that is too often discussed and too little felt or touched.
I am speaking, for example, of my contradictory affective attachment to the vibrating statue-image in Static (2009), which excludes me on both nationalistic and racial grounds: first, I am not an American, so am not included in its monumental celebration of US citizenship; and, second, what that statue represents, in its valorization of Man’s liberty, is its equal and opposite dehumanization of the Other, those non-white subjects forced out from the exclusive, Eurocentric category of ‘Man.’


Ibid.


A term coined by Jacques Derrida in Spectres of Marx to refer to the persistence of past events in the present. For an in-depth study on how hauntology informs the field of postcolonial aesthetics, see TJ Demos’s Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).

The term “social death”, coined by Orland Patterson in Slavery & Social Death, broadly refers to the ontological negation of African-descended people in the Americas, perpetuated by a set of social, historical, political and economic processes. While the term is useful here, I employ it with caution, given my scepticism of much recent Afropessimist discourse.