

Neither Here Nor Elsewhere: The Aesthetics of Erasure in Ranbir Kaleka's *Not from Here*

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Abstract

This paper explores the "Aesthetics of Erasure" within the contemporary video painting *Not from Here* by Indian artist Ranbir Kaleka. Centered on the socio-political context of India's internal migration crisis—affecting an estimated 100 million workers—the study investigates how Kaleka's unique hybrid medium of projected light on painted canvas functions as a formal metaphor for human invisibility. Drawing on the art theories of Ranjit Hoskote and Geeta Kapur, alongside Marc Augé's anthropological framework of "non-places," the research deconstructs the migrant body's ontological status as a "translucent citizen."

The analysis reveals that through the use of digital loops, shimmering luminosity, and the iconographic weighting of burdens over the human subjects, Kaleka simulates the precariousness and "stagnant temporality" of the subaltern experience. The study concludes that *Not from Here* serves as a critical moral witness, capturing the "neither here nor elsewhere" reality of displacement. By rendering the laborer as a spectral presence that flickers between the tactile and the ephemeral, Kaleka highlights the systemic erasure of the very workforce that constructs the modern Indian cityscape.

Keywords: Ranbir Kaleka, Video Painting, Migrant Labor, Aesthetics of Erasure, Indian Contemporary Art, Liminality, Non-places

1. Introduction

The contemporary Indian cityscape is defined by a paradox of hyper-visibility and profound erasure. While the steel and glass of urban development stand as monuments to national progress, they are built and maintained by a "ghost" population—an estimated 100 million migrant workers who traverse the subcontinent in a state of permanent transience [1]. These laborers function as the essential lifeblood of the city's economy, yet they occupy its social and legal margins, existing without a permanent record of presence or a recognized claim to the soil they inhabit. It is this haunting, liminal existence that Ranbir Kaleka captures with surgical precision in his seminal video painting, *Not from Here* [2] [3].

Kaleka's work does not merely "depict" the migrant; it simulates their precariousness through a unique hybrid medium. By projecting a moving cinematic loop onto a meticulously textured canvas, Kaleka collapses the boundaries between the tactile and the ephemeral. As **Hoskote (2007)** [4] observes, this technique creates a "meticulously calibrated adjacency," where the figures appear as translucent specters wandering through a landscape that feels both familiar and alien. They are caught in a restless loop of movement, burdened by the weight of their belongings but seemingly devoid of a final destination.

This paper argues that the formal qualities of *Not from Here* constitute an "aesthetics of erasure." Through the interplay of light and pigment, Kaleka moves beyond traditional social realism to provide an ontological critique of displacement. The title of the work serves as a double-edged sword: it identifies the laborer's origin as "other" while simultaneously suggesting that, within the urban fabric, they belong "nowhere." By analyzing the work's temporal structure and its manipulation of shadow, this study seeks to demonstrate how Kaleka renders the invisible laborer visible precisely by highlighting the tragedy of their disappearance. In the space between the painted background and the projected light, the migrant worker is revealed to be in a state of perpetual "in-betweenness"—living a life that is, fundamentally, neither here nor elsewhere (Figure 1) [5].

**Figure 1 : Video-Painting *Not from Here*
(Source: Saffronart.com)**



2. Review of Literature

The scholarly reception of Ranbir Kaleka's work frequently centers on his pioneering role in "video painting," a medium that critics argue transcends the traditional boundaries of both cinema and fine art. **Hoskote (2007)** [4] identifies this technique as a "meticulously calibrated adjacency of media," where the static authority of painting is challenged by the fluid instability of digital light. He further argues that Kaleka's images are "asynchronous," creating a spectral shimmer where the projected light and the painted pigment "snag at one another" [6]. This literature suggests that Kaleka's work functions as a "psychological event" that exists outside the physical confines of the frame—a concept vital to understanding the "neither here nor elsewhere" status of the migrant figures in *Not from Here*.

Critical depth is further provided by **Kapur (2000)** [7], who has extensively analyzed the "phenomenology of object-presence" in contemporary Indian art. Kapur argues that the Indian avant-garde often grapples with the "subaltern" figure by fluctuating between visibility and disappearance. In her analysis of Kaleka's later installations, she notes a sense of "mystical retraction," where the human subject seems to dissolve into the medium itself [8]. This observation aligns with the core of this paper's argument: that the migrant's visibility is always secondary to their eventual erasure within the urban landscape. By rendering the worker as a "luminous shadow," Kaleka reflects what Kapur describes as the "precarious sovereignty" of the working class in a neoliberal economy.

In the specific context of *Not from Here*, existing gallery texts and exhibition reviews highlight the work's thematic preoccupation with India's internal migration crisis. **Srivastava and Sasikumar (2003)** [1] provide the necessary sociological grounding, noting that migrant labor in India is characterized by a "lack of social security and political voice," rendering the worker a non-citizen in their own country. Critics have noted the deliberate visual contrast Kaleka employs to represent this: while the laborers' bodies are rendered as faint silhouettes, their luggage and meager possessions are depicted in sharp,

hyper-realistic detail. This "material presence versus human absence" has been identified as a critique of a system where the commodity—the labor or the baggage—outlives and out-values the laborer [9].

3. Methodology

This paper employs an **interdisciplinary qualitative methodology**, synthesizing **formalist visual analysis** with **sociological contextualization**. Given the hybrid nature of Ranbir Kaleka's "video painting," a singular approach is insufficient. Therefore, the research is structured around three primary analytical pillars designed to bridge the gap between aesthetic theory and the socio-political reality of India's migrant workforce.

3.1. Formalist and Iconographic Deconstruction

The core of the study involves a "close reading" of the artwork's physical and digital components. Following the framework of **Hoskote (2010)** [6] regarding the "adjacency of media," this research analyzes the interplay between the static oil-on-canvas and the projected digital light. This includes an investigation into:

- **Luminosity and Opacity:** How the "shimmering" quality of the projection serves as a formal metaphor for the precarious legal and social status of the migrant.
- **Iconography of the Burden:** An analysis of the physical objects within the frame—sacks, bundles, and tools—treating them as signifiers of a life reduced to "bare life" or pure utility [8].

3.2. Spatiotemporal Analysis

Unlike traditional static painting, video painting involves the dimension of time. This methodology treats the "**looping duration**" as a vital data point. Drawing on **Bhaumik's (2014)** [10] theories on "stagnant temporality," the research analyzes how the repetitive cycle of the video serves as a structural metaphor for the lack of upward mobility. The methodology treats the loop not merely as a technical necessity, but as a "temporal trap" that reflects the seasonal, circular migration patterns identified by **Srivastava and Sasikumar (2003)** [1].

3.3. Theoretical Mapping of "Non-Places"

To connect Kaleka's high-art aesthetics to the plight of 100 million workers, the research adopts a **spatial framework** based on **Augé's (1995)** [11] concept of "non-places." The methodology maps the visual "voids" and ambiguous backgrounds in *Not from Here* against the actual physical spaces inhabited by India's internal migrants—construction sites, highway underpasses, and railway platforms (Figure 2 & 3). This allows for a critical examination of how "erasure" is a spatial as well as a social phenomenon.

Figure 2 : Migrant Workers with Luggage
(Source : rkaleka.com [3])



Figure 3 : Only Luggage
(Source : rkaleka.com [3])



By synthesizing these approaches, the paper moves beyond a descriptive summary. It provides a systematic deconstruction of how Kaleka's technical choices—specifically the blurring of the boundary between the tactile (the painted) and the ephemeral (the projected)—function as a deliberate political statement on the invisibility of the subaltern.

4. The Medium of Metaphor

The profound resonance of *Not from Here* lies in its refusal to inhabit a single category of art; it exists in a state of hybridity that is neither pure painting nor pure cinema. This technical choice is not merely an aesthetic experiment but a profound formal metaphor for the "in-between" lives of India's migrant workers. To understand the erasure of the laborer, one must first deconstruct the collision of the tactile and the ephemeral within Kaleka's frame.

The Physics of Translucency

In traditional social realist painting, a figure is rendered in solid pigment, granting the subject a sense of permanent "weight" and a fixed "belonging" to the canvas. In Kaleka's video painting, however, the laborer is composed primarily of **projected light**. When this digital light strikes the physical, textured surface of the painted canvas, the figure acquires a shimmering, semi-transparent quality. As **Hoskote (2010)** [6] suggests, this creates an "asynchronous" relationship between the body and its environment. This translucency serves as a visual manifestation of the migrant's social status: they are physically present in the urban machinery, yet they possess a "ghostly" presence in the eyes of the state. Like the projection itself, the migrant is a figure that can be "switched off" or displaced without leaving a permanent mark on the landscape. The aesthetic effect is one of "mystical retraction" [8], where the viewer can literally see the background shining through the worker's torso, suggesting a body that is in the process of being overwritten by its surroundings.

The Canvas as Territory, The Light as Transit

The painted background in *Not from Here* represents the "territory"—the solid, immovable reality of land, property, and the established city. By contrast, the video elements represent "transit." By overlaying the moving laborer onto the static background, Kaleka highlights a fundamental friction: the laborer moves across the land but is denied ownership or rootedness within it.

The "erasure" occurs in the friction between these two layers. Because the projection is light-based, it lacks the material "permanence" of the oil paint beneath it. This reinforces the socio-economic reality identified by **Srivastava and Sasikumar (2003)** [1]: the infrastructure (the "paint") is permanent, while the hands that built it (the "light") are temporary and disposable. The medium itself thus becomes a political critique, asserting that the environment is rendered more "real" and more "durable" than the human beings who navigate it.

The Fragility of the Image

There is an inherent fragility in Kaleka's medium that mirrors the precariousness of the subaltern. If a viewer or an object passes between the projector and the canvas, the figure of the laborer vanishes instantly, replaced by a void or a shadow. This vulnerability reflects the lack of social safety nets for the 100 million workers who exist outside the formal record. Their existence in the urban fabric is as flickering and unstable as the digital signal. By choosing this medium, Kaleka asserts that the migrant is not a solid citizen, but a "luminous shadow" whose presence is conditional and constantly threatened by systemic neglect.

5. The Migrant Body in "Not from Here"

If the medium of *Not from Here* establishes the migrant's invisibility, the depiction of the body within that medium explores the physical toll of their displacement. In this work, Kaleka moves away from the heroic or monumental labor typical of early socialist realism; instead, he presents a figure defined by **burden and transit**. The body is not a site of power, but a site of passage.

The Iconography of the Bundle

A recurring motif in the work is the laborer carrying heavy sacks or bundles. In Kaleka's visual language, these objects often possess a higher degree of "optical density" than the humans carrying them. While the laborer's limbs may flicker or fade into the background, the luggage remains a solid, recognizable weight. This creates what **Kapur (2000)** [7] might describe as a "subject-object inversion." The migrant is defined not by their individual identity, but by their utility and their baggage.

The bundle becomes a symbol of "bare life"—a portable "home" that signifies the loss of a permanent one. By rendering the baggage more "real" than the person, Kaleka critiques a neoliberal gaze that sees the *load* but ignores the *carrier*. In this "aesthetics of erasure," the person becomes a mere shadow-support for the commodity, mirroring the sociological reality where the migrant's labor is extracted while their humanity is discarded [1].

The Gait of Perpetual Transit

The movement of the figures in *Not from Here* is neither a departure nor an arrival; it is a "wandering gait," a rhythmic walking that seems to lead nowhere. As **Hoskote (2010)** [6] observes, Kaleka's figures often seem to be "walking through themselves." This reflects the reality of **circular migration** in India, where workers are caught in an unending loop between the rural and the urban.

In Kaleka's video painting, these figures often walk across the frame only to reappear again, trapped by the digital loop. This movement suggests a state of **permanent transience**. The laborer is "from here" in the sense that they are currently occupying the physical space, yet "not from here" because they are never permitted to take root. This creates a visual manifestation of **Turner's (1969)** [5] "liminality"—a state of being "betwixt and between" social categories, where the migrant is neither a villager nor a citizen of the city.

The Face of Anonymity

Kaleka often obscures the faces of his subjects or renders them in a way that resists easy identification. By denying the viewer a clear, stable portrait, he highlights the **anonymic erasure** of the workforce. As **Bhaumik (2014)** [10] notes, the "slow" nature of Kaleka's video allows the viewer to gaze at the subject, yet the shimmering quality of the light prevents any true intimacy or "recognition" in the legal sense.

These are not specific individuals with "records of existence"; they are types, shadows, and statistics. Their minimal presence in the work mimics their minimal presence in the city's social registry. As they wander through the frame, they leave no footprints on the painted canvas, reinforcing the idea that the migrant's contribution to the city's construction is massive, but their personal "residue" or legacy is systematically wiped clean.

6. Spatiotemporal Displacement

The title *Not from Here* suggests a geographic dislocation, but the visual experience of the work suggests something more profound: a displacement from time and space itself. In this section, we examine how Kaleka's work constructs a "purgatorial" environment that mirrors the sociological concept of the "non-place," effectively trapping the migrant in a state of perpetual "elsewhere."

The "Non-Place" of the Urban Margin

Anthropologist **Marc Augé (1995)** [11] defines "non-places" as spaces of transience—such as motorways, construction sites, and transit hubs—where individuals remain anonymous and do not hold enough history or relational depth to feel a sense of "belonging." Kaleka's backgrounds are intentionally ambiguous; they are not recognizable landmarks of a specific metropolis, but generalized zones of dust, shadow, and architectural skeleton.

By stripping the city of its specificity, Kaleka places the migrant in a **spatial void**. As **Kapur (2007)** [8] notes, the background often feels like an "unclaimed territory," echoing the reality of the 100 million workers who occupy the cracks of the map. The laborer is "neither here" (in a home that welcomes them) "nor elsewhere" (in a village that can no longer sustain them). They exist in the thoroughfares of progress, fulfilling the criteria of **Augé's (1995)** [11] anonymity: they are seen only as "users" of the space, never as inhabitants.

Temporal Stagnation: The Loop as a Trap

While the figures in the video painting are in constant motion, they never actually progress toward a resolution. This is the paradox of the **digital loop**. In *Not from Here*, the repetition of the laborer's stride creates what **Bhaumik (2014)** [10] terms a "stagnant temporality." For the migrant workforce in India, movement does not always equate to social mobility. Instead, it often represents a "treadmill existence" of seasonal labor—moving to the city to build high-rises, only to return to the rural hinterland when the contract ends, and then back again [1].

Kaleka's use of time is therefore a critique of the "linear progress" promised by globalization. By trapping the figure in a perpetual cycle of walking without arriving, the artwork suggests that for the migrant, time has been frozen. As **Rajadhyaksha (2009)** [12] argues regarding the "politics of duration," the length of the gaze in Kaleka's work forces the viewer to confront this lack of progress. The laborer is denied a "future" in the urban narrative, relegated instead to a haunting, repetitive "present" where their existence is a series of restarts.

The Dissolution of Boundaries

Ultimately, the displacement in Kaleka's work is achieved through the **blurring of boundaries**. The edge where the projected light meets the painted shadow is never sharp; it is a site of constant visual "bleed." This formal "fuzziness" represents the blurring of the migrant's identity. They are half-rural, half-urban; essential yet disposable. By existing in this blurred state, the migrant becomes a "translucent citizen"—someone who can be seen through, but never fully looked at. This fulfills **Turner's (1969)** [5] definition of liminality: they are "falling through the cracks" of the social structure, existing in a space that is neither here nor elsewhere.

7. Conclusion

Ranbir Kaleka's *Not from Here* serves as a profound meditation on the mechanics of disappearance. Throughout this paper, it has been argued that the work's unique hybridity—the "video painting"—functions as an **aesthetics of erasure**, providing a formal language for a demographic that statistics often fail to humanize. By rendering the migrant laborer as a translucent entity, neither fully embedded in the tactile painted canvas nor entirely liberated by the ephemeral projected light, Kaleka captures the exact ontological "shimmer" of a life lived in permanent transience.

The significance of *Not from Here* lies in its ability to transform the viewer from a passive observer into a witness. In the urban rush, the 100 million migrant workers of India are often looked *through* rather

than looked *at*. Kaleka's art halts this habitual neglect. By trapping the laborer in a luminous, repetitive loop, he forces the audience to confront the "stagnant temporality." The laborer's baggage, rendered with more material density than the person carrying it, stands as a haunting indictment of a neoliberal system that values the movement of goods over the dignity of the mover.

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