

THE REAL AND THE IMAGINARY: REWORKING THE BOUNDARIES IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT CHINESE-LANGUAGE CINEMA

Yun-hua Chen
Clemens von Haselberg (University of Cologne, Germany)

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the inception of cinema and other mechanized visual images, but given renewed sharpness since the advent of the digital image, the question of representation with regard to the photographic image and subsequent developments is a highly disputed one. The conventionalized boundaries between the Real and the Imaginary, in the fields of film production, reception and filmic text, be it fiction or non-fiction, is innately blurred and contested. In this paper we intend to explore the possibilities of bringing ideas and conceptualizations deriving from Buddhism, Daoism, and Chinese literary and aesthetic traditions into the discussion about Chinese-language films in order to initiate a dialogue between epistemologies, ontologies and philosophies from different sides of the world. While extensive scholarship has been conducted on the questions of the Real and realism, it seems to be skewed towards a Eurocentric perspective in terms of theorization. We are therefore interested in exploring this area from a non-Western perspective, drawing on film theories from cultures outside of Europe and North America to inform us of alternative ways to define films and digital images, especially when such – predominantly Western – dichotomies as actuality and virtuality, or reality and imagination, seem to be naturally blurred and nuanced in Daoism-Buddhism.¹ There is a level of conversation as well as echoes between these systems of thought and specific Western philosophies that may prove fruitful for further investigations. For example, the resonances between the philosophy of Deleuze and Buddhist concepts have been documented by Tony See and Jay Garfield in terms of immanence, impermanence and the *Lotus Sutra*,² as well as in terms of reincarnation and Deleuze and Spinoza.³ Thus, without claiming a one-to-one connection between Deleuze and Buddhism, or similar dialogues between schools of thoughts with diverse historical and cultural backgrounds, we aim for a productive conversation that will expand into film theory in general and the theory of realism in particular. Through reflections and mirroring, we attempt to gain insights into the relationship between

the Real and the Imaginary on screen, their relation to each other and mutual permeation, without intending to forcefully fuse different schools of thoughts together in ignorance of their incompatibilities.

We will first discuss different Western film theories and Chinese literary, visual and philosophical ideas on the Real. In the ‘West’, the concept of ‘the Real’ is deeply grounded in discussions around ‘realism’, and in the field of audio-visual media, it stems from the theories of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, which have been challenged and revived in the past century. The Imaginary is often referred to as the opposite of the Real under multiple variations.⁴ On the other hand, traditional Chinese literary, visual and philosophical investigations, and Daoist and Buddhist philosophies, offer a more fluid way of looking at this conceptual pair, and they can be understood in parallel to the Western philosophies of thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze, for example. Subsequently, we will zoom in for a close-up of the specific interplays between the Real and the Imaginary in contemporary Chinese-language and related cinema using two examples: *Crosscurrent* (*Changjiang tu* 长江图, Yang Chao, 2016), with its echoes of poetic and visual traditions and its world in which senses are multiplied, which we analyze through a dialogue between the philosophical text *Zhuangzi* 庄子 and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body; and *Kaili Blues* (*Lubian yecan* 路边野餐, Bi Gan, 2016) with its not necessarily true pasts and impossible presents, informed by the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari and the Buddhist concept of impermanence.

1. THE ‘REAL’ IN WESTERN THEORIES, DAOISM-BUDDHISM AND THE AESTHETICS OF CHINESE PAINTING⁵

The aesthetic program of realism is firmly grounded in a European tradition that includes the arts but has its roots in ontology and epistemology. The development of film as a mimetic art is hard to conceive outside of this tradition and its paradigmatic expressions, from the Cartesian body-mind split to Newton’s mechanic worldview to the ocularcentrism of renaissance art. When it comes to cinema and film theory, the advent of realism proper is usually associated with André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. Bazin revived the question of realism by defining photography as an art form that directly imprints the photographed onto the film emulsion without human mediation, as a “mechanical reproduction”;⁶ this attribute has been discussed by Peter Wollen as “indexical character of the photographic image”,⁷ a term that is controversially debated in the contemporary crisis of the image, a crisis that has been initiated

by the digital image's perceived lack of it. Kracauer, on the other hand, theorized realism as the cinema's ability to "promote the redemption of physical reality" and "assist us in discovering the material world with its psychophysical correspondences", as, in his words, "[w]e literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence, by endeavoring to experience it through the camera".⁸ This position has been developed prominently into film phenomenology by Vivian Sobchak and other scholars, linking this strain of film theory to realism, in spite of the fact that it does not explicitly address it.

However, after a period of proliferation, realism came under severe attack with the rise of structuralism and Marxism in film scholarship. In the French film magazine *Cahier du Cinéma* and the British film studies journal *Screen*, realism was discredited as being representative of bourgeois ideology disguising contextual discourses and thus naturalizing the bourgeois order. Yet, at the same time, several innovative waves in the history of cinema emerged as new ways of tackling realism in cinema: new realisms in England and Italy, the French Nouvelle Vague, New German Cinema, Brazilian Cinema Novo, Third Cinemas, and New Hollywood among others. Therefore, the question of mimesis, representation, and, ultimately, realism has remained highly relevant to Western film theory. Recent decades have indeed seen a rediscovery and revisitation of early realist theorists, particularly André Bazin. Significantly, arguments have been made that the aforementioned theorists were misunderstood (in parts, perhaps, purposefully) as adhering to a naive belief in the camera as a direct window onto reality while being oblivious to the fundamentally ideological nature of this reality and the corresponding aesthetics of realism. Thomas Elsaesser argued that the refutation of Bazin's realism distorts Bazin's premises and neglects its intricacies,⁹ while in Tiago De Luca's analysis, Kracauer's and Bazin's photographic realism "enabled a sensuous and experiential rapport with the physical world, which facilitates the focus on cinematic modes of production and address".¹⁰ George Kouvaros claimed that "The common strand of this tradition is not a naive belief in the impartiality of cinematic representation, but rather a concern with cinema's ability to reveal underlying aspects, things hidden from view or unavailable otherwise".¹¹

Generally speaking, film theory related to realism has seen a proliferation and pluralization over the last couple of decades. Searle's 'representational' realism or representationalism posits a 'pure' mental representation as a conscious and perceived experience coded by the brain, whereas 'phenomenal' realism emphasizes the way that representation is shaped by the material reality that is being represented.¹² Hermann Kappelhoff uses the term "cinematic realism" to refer to the dynamism between poetics and politics in cinema.¹³ Noël Burch distinguishes between 'representational' cinema that attempts to reproduce impressions of reality and 'presentational' cinema that foregrounds its own artifice.¹⁴

In light of these strains of discussion, one could pointedly argue that realism remains the point of reference for both its defenders and its detractors. This shows in the fact that realism has terminologically remained anchored while that which it is opposed to has taken on various shapes including formalism, constructivism, modernism, structuralism, or psychoanalysis. The Imaginary – or the dream, the virtual and so on – takes in a secondary position in relation to the primacy of the Real. Consequently, theories opposing, or deconstructing realism cannot help but refer back to realism, thus testifying to its centrality in the discourse. This, in turn, is intrinsically related to the fundamental assumption of the mimetic and indexical nature of the photographic image. While the redemption realism has experienced over the last few decades certainly adds to our understanding of aesthetic and narrative strategies, it also binds us to the very binary view of realism and its other that has accompanied it since its inception, a binary that seems to be thrown off balance once the idea of indexicality started being challenged by the digital image.

With the emergence of digital technology transforming cinema's relationship with the Real by disentangling 'indexicality', this dominant mode of understanding reality has been challenged and threatened. For example, since the early 1990s, film studies have attempted to overcome the Cartesian division of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, subject and object, through theories including Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, Steven Shaviro's critique of psychoanalytic film theory,¹⁵ Laura U. Marks' 'haptic visuality',¹⁶ and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome.¹⁷ Notwithstanding the emergence of new voices and new perspectives, film theory has been surprisingly slow in opening itself up to voices outside the predominant Eurocentric tradition. While Western theories have been widely used in discussions about films produced outside of these theories' geopolitical territories, the reverse is virtually non-existent. This is all the more perplexing when one considers some existent affinities between contemporary Western and traditional Chinese literary, visual and philosophical investigations into the nature of reality. The lack of reception for non-Western thinking in the scholarship of film theory can arguably be attributed in part to the lack of translations as well as the difficulties surrounding their reception. There is indeed sufficient material on traditional Chinese aesthetics, but this academic field is largely disregarded by Western scholars outside of Chinese studies. The dual challenge of engaging traditions of thought unfamiliar to European and North American scholarship and of adapting them to a media environment and technology that they were not written for poses a serious problem fraught with pitfalls such as essentialism or dehistoricization (in the same way that Western theories inform non-Western works). These gaps in geopolitical power, technological advancement and sociocultural environments can sometimes be difficult to negotiate and bridge. Consequently, translations of and engagements with, for example, studies in Chinese on audio-visual media that analyze through the lens of

Daoism-Buddhism are very limited, and it is not yet clear how our understanding of cinema could profit from scholarly works not published in or translated into English or other European languages.

However, changes could be observed in recent years which suggest that engaging with premodern Chinese aesthetics in the context of film can inform, enrich, challenge, and open up a new discussion on, or enter a debate with, the aesthetic, epistemological and ontological preconceptions that have dominated the field of film scholarship in the first decades of cinema. Victor Fan's work is particularly illuminating in this respect. Fan bridges Western film theories and Buddhist thinking by revisiting cinematic identification in the framework of Buddhism, which has informed Chinese film theories since the late nineteenth century.¹⁸ *bizhen* 逼真, translated by Fan as "approaching reality," which is concerned with how the spectator perceives film as real or in relation to the real. Referencing art historian Wen C. Fong, Fan points to the difference between *bizhen* and the European idea of mimesis, an ontological concept of vital importance to the film medium, a difference which implies the specific contribution that *bizhen* may offer to our understanding of film's relationship with reality: "*bizhen* does not necessarily imply a proximity between the appearance of the painted image and the reality it represents; rather, it refers to an affective state that the painting is capable of producing in the sensorium of the beholders, one that either recalls their affective state when they apprehended the image-consciousness in their lived reality before, or insert such affective state into them as though they had been there."²⁰ *bizhen* itself. However, *bizhen* is not a general philosophical term, but a concept directly related to the reception of art. As Fan shows, Gu Kenfu 顾肯夫, a filmmaker and critic active in the 1920s, conceptualizes *bizhen* as a human tendency for the gradual improvement of the feeling of 'real-ness' in the development of (theatrical) art forms, defined as the spectator's affective identification with the performance.²¹ *bizhen* – is utilized to explain the new cinematic medium with respect to the Real. In this process, however, the concept itself mutates as it is integrated into a narrative of teleological evolution characteristic of modernity. Consequently, a culturally specific approach emerges, and at the same time, the concept of *bizhen* is appropriated to a new media context and transformed by a different worldview.

These observations demonstrate what is to be gained for contemporary film theory from the engagement of non-European and premodern conceptions: to perhaps arrive at a different understanding of reality itself that engulfs or engages the Imaginary rather than stands in opposition to it. *Bizhen* is also frequently engaged in Chinese mountain-water painting,²² which gradually superseded figure painting as the most highly regarded painting subject around the 10th century C.E. This genre of painting developed into a distinctly non-realist form once outer appearance was sufficiently mastered.²³ From the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279)

onwards, painting natural scenery became a way of expressing the inner life of the painter, and so landscape became a medium for sentimental expression. At the same time, the painting of landscapes never completely departed from referencing an outward appearance. Since no clear distinction between subject and object, between inner and outer nature, or between mind and matter, had been postulated in Chinese philosophical thought, Chinese painting neither developed complete realism nor complete abstraction.²⁴ Instead, it provided a vivid imaginative space in which painter, painting, subject and viewer were united. In this context, the concept of *yijing* 意境, often translated as mindscape, might provide interesting points of convergence with film theory. *Yijing* was first mentioned in the literary criticism of Wang Changling 王昌龄, a poet of the Tang dynasty (618-907). *Jing* 境 is a Buddhist term denoting an inner world or state of consciousness, and *yi* 意 can be rendered as idea, or intent of the mind.²⁵ However, as a compositum, the two-character word *yijing* only gained wider use in modernity, in the writings of Wang Guowei 王国维, a poet and historian who lived during the end of the last dynasty, Qing (1644-1911), and the Republican period (1911-1949).²⁶ Since then, it has been developed and theorized by other intellectuals, most notably Deng Yizhe 邓以蛰, Zong Baihua 宗白华, one of the founders of modern Chinese aesthetics, and Li Zehou 李泽厚, one of the most influential philosophers and aestheticians of the post-Mao period. In contrast to most other traditional categories of artistic evaluation, or categories building on traditional aesthetics for that matter, *yijing* has enjoyed continuous popularity among Chinese academics and has been defined and transformed into many different shapes, not least in engaging imported ideas such as the aesthetics of German idealism, and often with the aim of proposing a universal nature of *yijing*.²⁷ It has migrated into cinema, where Zhang Yimou has cited it as a major inspiration for his film *Hero* (*Yingxiong* 英雄, Zhang Yimou, 2002).²⁸ Despite its modern genesis, *yijing* remains notoriously hard to define and thus somewhat resistant to academic engagement. For the argument of this paper, we might use Peng Feng's characterization that "*yijing* can be translated as 'world,' but not every world is *yijing*. Only a world that has something 'beyond' or 'otherworldly' can be translated as *yijing*. Therefore, *yijing* is not a world limited by this world, but a world beyond or open to other worlds".²⁹ While *yijing* is explicitly referring only to the paintings and poems that interfuse the lyrical with the imagistic and not the narrative or historical ones, the way it bridges the Real and the Virtual may nonetheless provide new perspectives on the study of film.

Other famous examples from Chinese philosophical and aesthetic traditions addressing the porous borders between the Real and the Imaginary include the butterfly dream narrated in the

philosophical book *Zhuangzi* and the Qing dynasty novel *Honglouloumeng* 红楼梦 (*Dream of Red Chambers*). In the *Qiwulun* 齐物论 (*On the Equality of Things*) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the eponymous philosopher dreams of being a butterfly, but when he wakes, he muses whether he can be sure that it was not the butterfly dreaming about being *Zhuangzi*.³⁰ While on the surface this story appears to express a naive juxtaposition of dream and reality, in the context of the book, and this chapter in particular, it is only one of the more accessible of a great number of allegorical stories that all deal with reality's dependency on perspective and the unreliability of a perceptual understanding of reality. In a similar vein, a couplet from chapter 5 of *Honglouloumeng* reads, "Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true; Real becomes not-real where the unreal's real".³¹ 'Truth' and 'fiction', the 'real' and the 'not-real' enter a relationship reminiscent of the primal forces, *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳: each is ingrained into the other and thus they can merge into each other in myriad ways. Instead of being synthesized in a dialectical fashion, the two forces rather remain in a constant interchange and mutual transformation.

2. AN INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE REAL AND THE IMAGINARY

Having laid the background to contextualize our argument in the theoretical framework and culture-specific context related to Chinese-speaking regions, we now zoom in to examine different manifestations of the interplay between the Real and the Imaginary, and culturally diverse ways of looking at them, in two case studies. The interplay between the Real, ingrained in Western theories as foregrounded above, and the Imaginary, or all the world beyond the Real, that can be observed in Chinese-language films and films otherwise related with Chinese-speaking areas is multifaceted and nuanced, with porous differentiation.

Sometimes the interplay between the Real and the Imaginary can be traced back to literary and fine arts traditions in China. The magical-realist *Crosscurrent*, for example, heavily and consistently uses the aesthetics of mountain-water paintings and Chinese literary tropes to create a world of multiplication, reincarnation, and parallel and not necessarily true realities. The core of it is *yijing*, the world that has something beyond, something magical and imagistic in addition to the socio-realist level. The film is a boat trip down the Yangtze River, an area embedded with Chinese cultural heritage since the Spring and Autumn period in ancient China (770 – 476 BC) which has been submerged since the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. With its 35-mm film stock quality under the camera of Ping Bin Lee, who has made his name since the New Taiwan Cinema (also a new way of tackling realism in cinema), *Crosscurrent* portrays the Yangtze like a Chinese mountain-water painting; as discussed above, the inner

nature is reflected through the outer world, and the appearances are the embodiment of the mind. Downstream on misty days and from a farther perspective, the mountains are dark silhouettes against expansive whiteness, approximating *xieyi* 写意 (same ‘yi’ as in ‘*yijing*’), the style of painting spontaneously and intuitively capturing a certain mood. When the camera takes the perspective of the cargo captain Gao Chun (Qin Hao) in the boat upstream characterized by towering cliffs, mountains seen from gorges are colossal and the details of trees and rocks registered on film stock are reminiscent of the *gongbi* 工笔 style often opposed to *xieyi*, with meticulous brush strokes that strive for the Real.

Crosscurrent’s understanding of bodies and characters embodies both the visible and the invisible of Merleau-Ponty, and the form (*xingtǐ* 形体) and energy (*qì* 气) of Zhuangzi. The captain’s different lovers at each port are in fact the multiplication of one woman and one body; the bodies, the form, and the externally visible are discardable and surpassed. The “four limbs and a body”, in Zhuangzi’s words, are not forgotten by the character herself, but rather by the narrative device. While Gao Chun sleeps with a different woman at every port, all the women are played by the same actress (Xin Zhilei) and share the same name, An Lu; the ‘flesh’ and ‘body’ of the multiplication of the same woman in *Crosscurrent*, who is both real as in real flesh and blood and imaginary like a ghostly figure, is in line with Zhuangzi’s concept of *zuowang* 坐忘, literally ‘sitting and forgetting’, a fluid understanding of body as “await[ing] things emptily”³² and the state of “forget[ing] that [one has] four limbs and a body”.³³ The *Da zongshi* 大宗师 (*The Great Ancestral Teacher*) chapter of the *Zhuangzi* emphasizes that nature and human, matter and spirit, body and mind can be one. Confined by limbs and body parts, bodies are limitations that can be surpassed. Chan Wing-cheuk 陈荣灼, building on the observations of Chiang Nian-feng 蒋年丰, researches on the parallelism between Daoist and later Merleau-Ponty’s views on the flesh and furthers the dialogue between “Eastern and Western phenomenology”³⁴ in terms of the philosophy of the body. As Merleau-Ponty wrote in *The Visible and The Invisible*, “prior to and independently of other people, the thing achieves that miracle of expression: an inner reality which reveals itself externally, a significance which descends into the world and begins its existence there, and which can be fully understood only when the eyes seek it in its own location”.³⁵ Bodies for Merleau-Ponty are the combination of the visible and the invisible, which are *xingtǐ* and *qì* in the *Zhuangzi*, and for Merleau-Ponty, “[the body] is neither tangible nor visible in so far as it is that which sees and touches. The body therefore is not one more among external objects, with the peculiarity of always being there”.³⁶

In the case of *Crosscurrent*, the encounter between Gao Chun, who sails upstream from Shanghai to Tibet where the Yangtze River originates, and An Lu, whose timeline goes in reverse and who grows younger as the film progresses, is the cinematic journey of *zuowang*,

almost like a temporalization of space. It is through Gao Chun's stopover in different cities along the river that the life of An Lu is externalized, and it is through the carnal relationship with An Lu that the mind of Gao Chun is awakened. A lot of imageries in the film illustrate the merging of the visible and the invisible as in Merleau-Ponty and *xingti* and *qi* as in *Zhuangzi*. When Gao Chun looks for An Lu in a Buddhist tower in Dicheng, An Lu's voice echoes from the top of the tower whereas a Buddhist debate between An Lu and a monk takes place in a room on the ground floor; the disembodied voice and body of An Lu are actually one. When we finally see the hand-drawn map of the Yangtze River in full, an appendix to the poetry book hidden under the boat's engine, it looks like the silhouette of a female body; the main poster visual of the film when it was released in China was a blurred ink painting of a rather abstract female body, the spine of which is a white stripe on which a boat sails upstream. Like what An Lu says in fury when Gao Chun sails through without boarding: "This is my Yangtze River," one can also understand An Lu as the embodiment of the Yangtze, with her life journey as the opposite poles of past and future of the river.

The Yangtze, the most important character in the film, is also the combination of *qi* and all the different outer forms, at times flooded because of the Three Gorges Dam, at times misty, and at times cruel. In one of the most striking moments in the entire film, Gao Chun's boat is transported one level at a time in a ship lift. When it reaches the Three Gorges Dam, we look at the lift's metal gates in low angle shots, foregrounded like a gigantic cyborg. The dam's lighting above has a green hue that makes the walls of two sides enshrouded in dark green, like a space of imprisonment. The existence of the dam marks the abrupt transformation of the Yangtze River because of the need to produce electricity in the rapidly developing country, as well as Gao Chun's awakening from the entangled causes and consequences in his relationship with An Lu. In Chan's analysis, the "decrease" in Laozi's saying, "The pursuit of Dao is to decrease day after day (*weidao risun* 为道日损)" implies the "letting-be" and the rapprochement to nature, whereas Heidegger's "non-essence" is intrinsic to Being: "the non-essence remains always in its own way essential to the essence and never becomes inessential in the sense of irrelevant."³⁷ From the moment that the gigantic mechanical gate swallows Gao Chun's rusty boat, he enters the state of decrease, *ziran* 自然 (traditionally translated as "nature" and "it is so by virtue of its own")³⁸, and non-essence, a kind of self-concealing understood as a moment of the Truth of Being by Chan,³⁹ that leads to his shredding of the poetry book and putting an end to An Lu's endless cycle of trajectory, not dissimilar to how the dam puts an end to the Yangtze's flow.

Appearing at different ages and stages of life, An Lu's multiple bodies and forms and her *qi* are one. As in the concept of *zuowang*, cinematic bodies here are fluid and all-encompassing, which in turn enable the fluidity of the film. That is how An Lu, despite her different forms,

has an externalized tangible presence; as a wife who has an extramarital affair, a person who devoutly pursues spirituality, a Good Samaritan prostitute, and a student. In a way reminiscent of Elsaesser's analysis of *Bin-jip* (2004), the pure *durée* takes over in *Crosscurrent* although “suspended in the dead-ends of someone else’s absence, and thus it is a neo-realism ‘virtualized’”.⁴⁰ Whereas Elsaesser thinks that in *Bin-jip*, “Space is the medium of the real only in the sense that it can trap and thus index time, when the camera (or the body) no longer indexes space”⁴¹, in *Crosscurrent* it works in the opposite direction; the camera indexes space and no longer indexes time, and the real is the space while the apparition of An Lu punctuates spatial markers along the river like stanzas.

At other times, the interplay between the Real and the Imaginary can be embedded in a non-linear time framework reminiscent of both Buddhist philosophy and Deleuzian time-images. Bi Gan’s 毕赣 *Kaili Blues* lends itself particularly well as an example: As the main character Chen Sheng, a small-town doctor in Kaili in China’s Guizhou Province, embarks upon a road trip to locate his nephew who has been abandoned by his brother, the film meanders through subtropical and foggy mountain areas while Chen encounters a mix of people; some seem to be people from his past but in the setting of the present time. While the half-crumbling family house next to a waterfall, the zigzagging mountain roads, and the non-professional actors who play the roles of billiard players and motorcyclists are authentic and real, the narrative forks into different versions of itself and non-linear timelines, and the characters are not necessarily who they seem to be. With the film credits appearing as the credits of a film-within-a-film broadcast on TV towards the beginning of the film, the diegesis forms a *mise-en-abyme* where the Real is not necessarily true and is ingrained in the Imaginary while the Imaginary insinuates the Real.

These images are Gilles Deleuze’s time-images, working both as the crystal of a present that is not necessarily true and a past that keeps being recalled: “This is Borges’ reply to Leibniz: the straight line as force of time, as labyrinth of time, is also the line which forks and keeps on forking, passing through impossible presents, returning to not-necessarily true pasts”.⁴² As we see in Deleuze’s citation of Federico Fellini’s Bergsonian sentence, “We are constructed in memory. We are simultaneously childhood, adolescence, old age, and maturity.”⁴³ We do not know if Bi Gan is familiar with Deleuze, but from his own cultural background, Buddhism is an important source of reference, and he makes it clear at the beginning of the film. Before the film credits appear, Bi Gan quotes the *Diamond Sutra* (*Jingang jing* 金刚经): “As the Buddha says, the living beings in all these world systems have many different minds which are all known to the Tathagata. Why? Because the minds the Tathagata speaks of are not minds, but are (expediently) called minds. And why? Because,

Subhuti, neither the past, the present nor the future mind can be found.”⁴⁴ *Diamond Sutra* was also the title of a short film directed by Bi Gan in 2012. Although the *Diamond Sutra* and Deleuze have different focuses, they both free the concept of time from linearity and causality to embrace its fluidity, allowing mutual infusion and overlaps.

When we talk about Buddhist philosophy, we usually have a generalized picture of ‘a Buddhist view.’ Within the scope of such a ‘generalized view,’ basic tenets such as “all phenomena are impermanent (anitya), interdependent (partitya-samutpada) and have no intrinsic nature (sunya)”⁴⁵ were discussed, with respective variations in each Buddhist school. Impermanence is one of the key concepts that are shared by all Buddhist philosophy: all phenomena are impermanent, and all things are transitory and changing over time.⁴⁶ As Garfield says, “because of these kinds of change, all identity over time, from a Buddhist point of view, is a fiction, albeit often a very useful fiction.”⁴⁷ This Buddhist concept is shared by Deleuzians; the concept of transcendence and transcendent truth are refused. Both posit the self-generating capacity of a universe without cause. “Univocity” in *Difference and Repetition*, and “univocality” in *A Thousand Plateaus* can be understood in the framework of *The Heart Sutra*; our feelings, perceptions and concepts are “all manifestations of an ever-self-differentiating totality” which are not coming from the perspective as ‘I’.⁴⁸ In terms of interdependence, all events in time “occur in dependence on prior causes and conditions, and all states of affairs cease when the causes and conditions that are necessary for their occurrence cease.”⁴⁹

The Buddhist idea of time expressed in the *Diamond Sutra* was elaborated on by Buddhist thinkers from diverse historical and cultural backgrounds. Buddhist time can thus be negatively deconstructed by showing how past, present, and future are mutually dependent and therefore devoid of substance as in the writings of the Indian Nāgārjuna (ca. 150-ca. 250),⁵⁰ or it can be positively deconstructed by emphasizing the absolute relationality between the three as in the work of Fazang 法藏 (643-712), the third patriarch of the Chinese Huayan 华严 school,⁵¹ to name just two prominent examples. From such an understanding of time and temporality, the world according to Buddhist philosophy can be understood as a “rhizome” that extends and multiplies, as in Deleuze’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, without fixed causal relationships; causes and conditions are not this or that, but rather this *and* that; and *Kaili Blues* is a film of “univocity” and “univocality”. Prior causes determine subsequent events in a logic of their own, and the consequences also seem to be the causes of what is happening. On the surface, the film seems to be narrated from the perspective of Chen Sheng, but this ‘I’ is constructed in such a way that it is unreliable and yet consistent in its own way. Chen Sheng promises to bring a shirt and a tape to the ex-boyfriend of the elderly doctor in whose clinic he works but ends up wearing the shirt himself and giving the tape to a woman who looks exactly like his deceased wife. The

young motorcyclist, bullied by his peers, who takes Chen Sheng to Dangmai in order to catch a train to search for his nephew, is also Chen Sheng's nephew in the future; meanwhile, Bi Gan is the nephew of the amateur actor who plays the role of Chen Sheng. In the much-acclaimed long take of more than 40 minutes in Dangmai, the camera does not follow the main protagonist Chen Sheng, who stays at a noodle stand to eat, but rather wanders off freely when it passes by the window of Yang Yang, a girl whom the motorcyclist admires. It drifts to the other side of the river by boat with Yang Yang and walks across the bridge to complete the full circle; the camera joins Chen Sheng again in the hairdresser's. Chen Sheng's road trip is a time travel journey of circularity along the threads of memory and time, where events are inter-dependent and where all happenings are impermanent; the camera moves with its self-generating capacity without cause and effect, and the moments captured are transitory and fluid, whereas the present of Chen Sheng is not necessarily true and his past is constantly evoked or interwoven with the present. The question of time finds a quintessential image in a series of clocks painted on the wall of a train tunnel: when Chen Sheng looks out of the window of the moving train, the hands of the clock seem to be turning backwards. This seems to echo Victor Fan's suggestion with respect to the changing perspectives instigated by the digital that "if the photographic image was once considered able to mummify time, we may consider it now as *time undead*."⁵² The terms that Fan uses to describe this understanding of time – "transposition, transference, reflection, inflection, inversion, reversion, shuffling, recombination, counterpoint, and resequencing"⁵³ – could be used equally well to describe *Kaili Blues*' treatment of time, inspired by Buddhism. Fan, in turn, has moved on to reinterpret film theory through the eyes of Buddhism.⁵⁴

3. CONCLUSION

In a globalizing world transformed by technological change as well as political, economic, and cultural entanglements and interdependencies, the dominant Eurocentric conception of reality has been justifiably questioned. The examples above show a renewed and sharpened reshuffling of the conventionalized boundaries of the Real and the Imaginary in the areas of the filmic text, its production as well as its reception. While the cinema as an institution may be on the decline, the importance of moving images in shaping our conception of the Real is still growing. The advent of the digital image has called into question the ontological status of the photographic image and has rendered the border between the Real and the Imaginary porous. Film theory and philosophy in the West have long recognized and elaborated on this problem, but so far without a broader engagement with non-Western philosophies and aesthetics, in spite of the

fact that these philosophies and aesthetics have a lot to say about the inextricable entanglement of the Real and the Imaginary. With examples ranging from Daoist-Buddhist philosophies to aesthetic concepts deriving from literature and the visual arts, we have given a preliminary overview of possible ways to engage with such non-European worldviews and of what is to be gained from such a dialogue. The criss-crossing between ‘Eastern’ philosophy, such as Daoism and Buddhism, and ‘Western’ philosophy, such as Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, and between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ aesthetics, still largely under-researched, has the potential of shedding more light on how we see the Real and the Imaginary in Chinese audio-visual media. A concept like *yijing* can open up new directions in the phenomenological exploration of art and the spectator; a film like *Kaili Blues*, with its incorporation of Buddhist concepts and shifting notions of time, strikes a fresh chord, updating the more consciously artificial aesthetic strategies of films like *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), *Nostalghia* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1983), *Stalker* (*Смалкер*, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979), or *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997) as explorations of time and reality by expressing their theme in an aesthetic that subtly alters and enhances realist conventions. A further engagement with these and other concepts, schools of thought, films, and also contexts of production and reception promises a deeper and more balanced understanding of the Real, the Imaginary, and the complicated relationship between them.

¹ While Daoism and Buddhism are conventionally treated as two separate philosophies, religions, and traditions, it is commonly accepted that Buddhism was ‘sinicized’ through translation into Daoist terminology. Therefore, there is significant overlap between the two. For the sake of the arguments pursued here and to avoid both the indiscriminate use of ‘Chinese’ or ‘Eastern’ and the unnecessary burdening of this article with terminological differentiations not directly relevant to film studies, we have decided for this hyphenated combination where general remarks are made.

² Tony See, “Deleuze and the Lotus Sūtra: Toward an Ethics of Immanence,” in *Deleuze and Buddhism*, ed. Tony See, Joff Bradley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 11–32; Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 40–48.

³ Simon Duffy, “Deleuze, Spinoza and the Question of Reincarnation in the Mahāyāna Tradition,” in *Deleuze and Buddhism*, ed. Tony See, Joff Bradley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 33–50.

⁴ To avoid confusion, it is important to note that our use of the Real and the Imaginary are oriented towards their conventional usage, not understood in Lacanian terms.

⁵ Similar summaries of Realist theories have been put forth in the introductions to Cecilia Mello and Lúcia Nagib, ed., *Realism and the Audiovisual Medium* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and Lúcia Nagib, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (New York: Continuum 2011).

⁶ André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 14.

⁷ Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2013), 116.

⁸ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 300.

⁹ Thomas Elsaesser, “A Bazinian Half-Century,” in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife*, ed. Dudley Andrew with Herve Joubert-Laurencin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.

¹⁰ Tiago De Luca, *Realism of the Senses in World Cinema: The Experience of Physical Reality* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 8.

¹¹ George Kouvaros, “‘We Do Not Die Twice’: Realism and Cinema,” in *Handbook of Film Studies*, ed. James Donald, Michael Renov (London: Sage Publications, 2008), 377.

¹² Ian Aitken, *Cinematic Realism: Lukács, Kracauer and Theories of the Filmic Real* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 2–3.

¹³ Hermann Kappelhoff, *The Politics and Poetics of Cinematic Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 59.

¹⁴ Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, trans. and ed. Ben Brewster (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 241; Lúcia Nagib, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism*, 4.

- ¹⁵ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 13.
- ¹⁶ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and The Senses* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2000), xii.
- ¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London, New York: Continuum 2004), 11—12.
- ¹⁸ Victor Fan, "Cinema Illuminating Reality: Cinematic Identification Revisited in the Eyes of Buddhist Philosophies," in *The Structures of the Film Experience by Jean-Pierre Meunier: Historical Assessments and Phenomenological Expansions*, ed. Julian Hanich, Daniel Fairfax (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 245.
- ¹⁹ Victor Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- ²⁰ Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality*, 49—50.
- ²¹ Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality*, 47—49.
- ²² While *shanhui hua* 山水画 has often been translated as landscape painting for the sake of convenience, this term suggests a misleading similarity with landscape painting in the European tradition. The two elements *shan*, mountain, and *shui*, water, in fact have far-reaching cosmological, metaphysical and psychological implications that are not reflected in the term landscape. Therefore, we stick to a direct translation of the Chinese term.
- ²³ Cf. Michael Sullivan, *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), ch. III.
- ²⁴ Wang Caiyong 王才勇, *Shijue xiandaixing daoyin* 视觉现代性导引 (An Introduction to Visual Modernity) (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2018), 134.
- ²⁵ Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China: Von der Tradition bis zur Moderne* (München: K.G. Saur, 2007), 165—166.
- ²⁶ Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China*, 166.
- ²⁷ Peng Feng, "Defining Mindscape (意境): Extension, Intension, and Beyond," in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*, ed. Marcello Ghilardi, Hans-Georg Moeller (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 106.
- ²⁸ Gary G. Xu, *Sinascapes: Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 36—37, 40—42.
- ²⁹ Peng, "Defining Mindscape," 112.
- ³⁰ Zhuangzi 庄子, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*, trans., introd. and comment. Victor H. Mair (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), 24.
- ³¹ Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *The Story of the Stone: Volume 1*, trans. David Hawkes (London: Penguin, 1973), 130. The couplet's famous blurring of the boundaries between the Real and the Imaginary has also been featured in Cecília Mello's presentation "Phantasmagorical Realism in Bi Gan's Long Day's Journey into Night", available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YxteIOC954>> (last accessed 12/28/2022).
- ³² Zhuangzi, *Wandering on the Way*, 32. The expression in the original is *qi ye zhe, xu er dai wu zhe ye* 气也者，虚而待物者也。In this and the following quote, Mair's translation are altered; Mair uses an 'I' as the subject of the phrase as it is part of a dialogue in the original text. However, since there is no such pronoun in the Chinese, so taken away it makes sense to omit it in the context of its citation here.
- ³³ Zhuangzi, *Wandering on the Way*, 183; Chan Wing-cheuk 陈荣灼, "Daojia yu wanqi Meilu Pangdi shenti xianxiangxue zhi huitong 道家與晚期梅露·龐蒂身體現象學之匯通" (On Daoist and Later Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Body), *Ehu xuezhi 鵝湖學志* 66 (2021): 40—41. The expression in the original is *zheran wang wu you sizhi xingti ye* 輒然忘吳有四肢形体也。See note 32 for additional information on the citation.
- ³⁴ Chan, *Daojia yu wanqi Meilu Pangdi shenti xianxiangxue zhi huitong*, 36.
- ³⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 373.
- ³⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 105.
- ³⁷ Chan Wing-Cheuk, "On Heidegger's Interpretation of Aristotle: A Chinese Perspective," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 32, no. 4 (December 2005): 548.
- ³⁸ Chan, "On Heidegger's Interpretation of Aristotle," 542.
- ³⁹ Chan, "On Heidegger's Interpretation of Aristotle," 553.
- ⁴⁰ Thomas Elsaesser, "World Cinema: Realism, Evidence, Presence," in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, ed. Lúcia Nagib, Cecília Mello (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 16.
- ⁴¹ Elsaesser, "World Cinema," 16.
- ⁴² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 1989), 98.
- ⁴³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 96.
- ⁴⁴ The original text reads: *Fo gao Xuputi / er suo guotu zhong / suoyou zhong sheng / ruo gan zhong xin / Rulai xi zhi / he ye ji / Rulai shuo / zhu xin jie wei fei xin / shi ming wei xin / suoyi zhe he / Xuputi / guoqu xin bu ke de / xianzai xin bu ke de / weilai xin bu ke de* 佛告須菩提 / 尔所国土中 / 所有众生 / 若干种心 / 如来悉知 / 何以故 / 如来说 / 诸心皆为非心 / 是名为心 / 所以者何 / 须菩提 / 过去心不可得 / 现在心不可得 / 未来心不可得
- ⁴⁵ Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 2.
- ⁴⁶ Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 40.
- ⁴⁷ Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 41.
- ⁴⁸ Ian Cook, "On Not Mistaking Deleuze (With the Help of Some Buddhists)," in *Deleuze and Buddhism*, ed. Tony See, Joff Bradley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 103.
- ⁴⁹ Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 26—27.

⁵⁰ Rolf Elberfeld, *Phänomenologie der Zeit im Buddhismus: Methoden interkulturellen Philosophierens* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 2004), 178.

⁵¹ Elberfeld, *Phänomenologie der Zeit im Buddhismus*, 212.

⁵² Fan, *Approaching Reality*, 42.

⁵³ Fan, *Approaching Reality*, 42.

⁵⁴ Victor Fan, *Cinema Illuminating Reality: Media Philosophy through Buddhism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

