

**LIVING TIME:
RE-EVALUATING CINEMATIC EMPATHY THROUGH LI ZEHOU**

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is said that empathy requires understanding.ⁱ But if we pause to consider the two key words of such a requirement—understanding and empathy—a question arises. What is it to understand at the level of empathy? And if one has indeed “understood,” have we not slipped away from the Greek *em-patheia* or “in-feeling” relation and entered instead into something more akin to sympathy—a “with-feeling”? In the latter case, *I am with you and through that I realize your situation; I feel for what you are going through because I have attained some understanding of it*. This does not describe an empathetic relation. In empathy, the tether is not *known* but comes through being *in* the feeling. It is born of an experience, of having sensed and felt, of having *been affected* as the other. It has no reason. It lies outside of what we name as morality or ethics. Its relation has no prior law, code, or base of information. Empathy is the abandonment of understanding. More accurate is the common saying that empathy is being in a feeling *as* another or *as* a situation, a feeling not born of the language of knowing but a gathering of another kind. It is not only what we feel, but something we ourselves create from what is underway.

What does this mean for the possibilities of conceiving a “cinematic empathy”? Affect theory suggests that the cite of discourse is the body. Post-semiotic and post-psychoanalytic film theory call for re-corporalizing the body, bringing the eye back from its detachment to rejoin the body.ⁱⁱ But what is to be said of this body? Elsaesser and Hagener argue that psychoanalytic and psycho-semiotic theories of cinema were faulted for placing all their emphasis on the sensing eye, ignoring that it is the body that not only sees but hears and feels.ⁱⁱⁱ While a valid claim, this props up a merely receptive, immobile body. It presumes another kind of detached subject formation, this one set off *against* the “scape” of the film’s “land”—constructing, as the meaning of the word “landscape” suggests, a position from which to watch?^{iv}

A sensory empathy must be conceived as something else, one of integration rather than the separation brought about by the distance of a gaze. This of course threatens the crux of Enlightenment and Modern thought, which proposes a free subject capable of transcending the demands of external reality and its objects and dogmas. But it also suggests another kind of ethics.

The ethics proposed here depends not on the body, but on a consciousness that *creates* cinema. In cinema we do not entirely lose the body, but willfully abandon it by choice, enough to enter into a deep state of reverie. In the conjoining of the *recollective* and the *imaginative*, one's fixed positioning renders a fluid consciousness. We do not feel a film because our body sits and receives it; we feel it because it allows us to move thought and create time from within the relational experience that cinema evokes. The aim of this essay is to work through such cinematic relations to propose an empathy aligned with listening and the movement of time. Rather than a cinema of divisions, we find an empathetic interplay that is sensory, imaginative, expressive and experiential, one which evokes a harmonious relation of feeling what resides within the reality of the film's fiction.

Specifically, we look to the aesthetics philosophy of Chinese scholar Li Zehou. His work brings Western philosophy, particularly Kant and Marx, in partnership and in comparison with the historical traditions of ancient Chinese aesthetics. Through his work, the writings of others sympathetic to these themes, and films and filmmakers who express such empathy, we are able to draw out a different psychology of cinema and a different set of questions as to what it is doing.

2. EXPERIENTIAL CINEMA: OVERCOMING DISTANCES

Experience places the emphasis on immanence. This runs counter to "seeing" cinema as *transcendent to*, or in its reverse, as *projected to*, a viewer and a body: In both of the latter, the audience is separated from events that are watched. Empathy comes to the fore when such *frontality* is overcome, both conceptually and experientially. A sensory empathy pulls away from classic Greek epistemological necessities of distance, and later Renaissance concepts of perspective, which situate a knowing subject. It instead impels us to emphasize time over space. Emphasizing the former, Li draws us closer to a more Asian gathering of *living time*. He differentiates Confucian and Kantian time as a "difference between time as an inner human sense and the idea of a general, objective, and spatialized time. Time becomes deeply entangled in the sensuous emotions of nostalgia, yearning for life, and attachment to existence."^v Li highlights the concept of "*qing jing jiao rong*," or "the fusion of feeling and scene."^{vi} This concept has a deep tradition in ancient Chinese poetry. The *fusion* aspect becomes established by scholars in the late 13th Century, but as an artistic expression, it reached its peak in the Tang era of poetry.^{vii}

Li asserts that the fusion of feeling-and-scene is what the West names "empathy."^{viii} Taking note that there are many definitions of aesthetic empathy, he offers the following:

"In general, empathy can be said to consist of the melding of the appreciating (or creating) self with the appreciated (or created) object. The appearance or action of the object calls forth my mental and emotional activity,

which is subsequently dissolved in the full concentration of my faculties in the process of appreciation or creation, so that it is eventually replaced by the features and actions of the object, resulting in the unity of my own subjective emotions with the objective form. This is the fusion of feeling and scene, the unity of self and object, which is so sought after in Chinese art and literature.”^{xix}

Li, through his translator, offers the elements “self” and “object” here. It’s important to parse through all the key terms at play. Cecile Chu-chin Sun’s book *Pearl from the Dragon’s Mouth* works through the historical developments of *feeling-and-scene* and offers the following pre-Tang era terms:^x

1. Feeling (*ch’ing* or *ching*): inner world: thoughts/feelings.
2. Object (*wu*): physical world: external reality. There is also *hsiang* which is used for “outward phenomenon.”

“Object” (*wu*) is the focus in this early period; “scene” has yet to arrive. Instead of “scene” or “scenery,” *ching* is something like “light” or “the shadow cast by light.” In the Tang era, Li and Sun both mention how Daoism and Buddhism affected poetry. Here, “scene” emerges as an element “that surrounds the experience.”^{xxi} “Object” is de-emphasized as “the physical world itself comes alive through its association with emotion.” With the influence of Zhuangzi, the concept of “realm” (*ching*) comes to indicate a state of being. Through Buddhism it becomes a “*suprasensory* realm that represents the ultimate, purely spiritual goal of Buddhism” and “the *sense* realm in which man operates.”^{xxii} Herein lies the fusion—a “mutually enriching interchange,” in which “the two otherwise unrelated worlds become fused into one.”^{xxiii} *Realm* is the “fusion of the poet’s perception and the object of contemplation.”^{xxiv} This helps to understand how the Chinese emphasis on “landscape” and “language” become a poetic site of mutual interchange and how the environment is relationally bound with spirit and the mind.

Crucial to Tang-era poetry and painting, the work of art reaches out beyond the poet and the painter in a fusion that includes the reader and viewer. Critic Yin Fan (8th Century) writes of the de-emphasis on form or substance in Tang poetry. It develops instead the capacity to ““evoke phenomena”” through the writing and in doing so to affect the *reader*.^{xv} *Realm* is the aspect of poetry that cannot be comprehended literally—we might add in a cinematic sense *cannot be seen or read*—it “can only be sensed by the reader.”^{xvi} Li writes that music, poetry and painting are not so separated from each other; all express a musical “flow of emotion-filled time,” a relationship of inside and outside.^{xvii} Chinese landscape painting carries the notion that one is not looking at something but is invited to live inside the realm depicted. Through the influence of Buddhism, landscape painting is “always in intimate communication and relationship with human life and emotion.”^{xviii}

With realm as the focus, we approach a feeling-and-scene that Li describes as empathy. Li writes that with empathy as the emphasis, “there is no need whatsoever for conceptual signs or

symbols, nor for the mediation of any kind of ideology. ... Instead, all that the ear hears, and the eye sees is available to become the emotional form of the imagination's free play."^{xxix} Through such an artistic aim, "reason dissolves completely into the emotions and imagination, and loses its independent character to become a sort of unconscious or nonconscious player."^{xxx}

Such an open, involving, and imaginative empathy presumes no distance, nor does it depend on the more European understandings born of images, language, symbols, references or textuality. Through its necessary division, the framework of psychoanalysis requires the mediation of *listening as reading*, which itself involves the material existence—even if only as analogical—of a text or *statement*. A sensory empathy instead loosens the polarity that separates, or the dialectics of mediation, through a de-emphasis of gaze, text and analysis. Consider again the aesthetics of Tang-era landscape painting. Frances Wood describes the common theme of a natural setting with a towering mountain and a small, lone figure at the very bottom. She mentions how the poetry of the time through Li Bai and Du Fu was the "sound equivalent of a painting."^{xxxi} Poetry and painting are harmonious expressions of the processes and sounds of nature. She argues as well that the poetry expressed is untranslatable to English and that it retains its rhythm and sound only in Chinese. Cinema needs no translation, which allows it to express itself differently and without language. This is true both in the literal sense of there needing to be no words, but also in that there is no need to translate to a European syntagmatic form. Such distances are overcome in Asian cinema, which expresses a different sensory awareness and a different sense of empathy.

Further, there is no need to assume representational or ontological identity. We, the audience, never become a character, but never live outside of character either. As engaged experiencers of the film, we do not exist within any structure or film language; rather, we find ourselves as empathetic beings who fall into a duration that unfolds. The engaged participant is one who carries lived experience into alignment with the conditions, environments and situations presented in the story. We cannot cry out to them or warn them or advise them, but we do sense and feel *as* them, becoming the one who senses and feels. This is because sensation and time are the only channels of cinema that are necessary. Indeed, sensation-in-time is the only aspect of cinema that is shared. Although the circuit is unidirectional, we stretch ourselves along this thread through an act of opening up *their* world and enfolding it into our own time. We anticipate what is to come and, in a sense, *live* the time of what is at stake.

This connection is even stronger in the audible sense than the visible. The audible is more than simply listening *to* the voice, as psychoanalysis emphasizes. We instead hear within, as we engage in another gathering. We feel the scene, to use Li's term, in listening to their world for them as us. "We are not in the world, we become with the world; we become by contemplating it."^{xxxii} We are pulled along this thread through the film's development. But as empathetic, we begin to pull *ourselves* along with it. We become the film through its becoming.

3. EMPATHY AND PSYCHE IN LI ZEHOU

Writing about Li's concept of empathy, Marthe Chandler writes that it arises out of the ancient "shamanistic dances in the collective psychological formations created by primitive sedimentation."^{xxiii} This concept of "sedimentation" (*jidian* 积淀) is key to Li's philosophy, not only in aesthetics but in cultural/historical formations of the psyche. Roger T. Ames and Jinhua Jia describe it as "the form of the human cultural psychology (*wenhua xinli jiegou* 文化心理結構)—that is synchronic, diachronic, and evolutionary."^{xxiv} One might compare it to Freud's concept of the super ego or Jung's collective unconscious;^{xxv} but the concept is more dynamic, while also grounded in a psychological binding of cultural practices with nature. It is not "biologically 'inherited,'" as Téa Sernelj describes, rather "a dynamic, ever-changing process of psychocultural development."^{xxvi}

Li has three levels of sedimentation:^{xxvii} 1) primitive (emotio-rational) sedimentation grants subjectivity, a sense of order and rhythm, and the use of body and vocal language in the emergence of reason and beauty; 2) cultural-psychological sedimentation, including differences in human relations, values, patterns, emotional expressions, etc. which produce distinct cultural psychologies; 3) individuality arising out of the previous two, offering the potential for personal creativity and a change in the overall sediment.

The connection of sedimentation to empathy comes in how the former emerges through cultural practices and artistic works. Consider the early Chinese rites and rituals, shamanistic music and dance practices, through which a cultural-psychological empathy forms. This led to the development of works of expressive art that reflect such practices. Li describes how music and dance enabled the cohesion of people into early civilized societies. This is what he means by the shaping of "a 'cultural-psychological formation'" through ancient rites of musical expression.^{xxviii} Such ancient ritual and symbolic cultural activities are acted out through music and song, words, and rhythms. They are, as Li describes, playful, practical, and conceptual, producing products of the imagination. Biological communities became civilized societies that transcended biology. Community came through hearing, listening, music, dance, and ritual. At heart is an "instinct for play" that becomes a "sociocultural consciousness."^{xxix}

When we turn to cinema, we find a similar kind of connection through a time-based expressive art that encourages a sense of empathy. Cinema is an *involvement* that envelops an audience into the imaginative ritual being performed in the cinema of the mind. In particular kinds of expressive cinema, we do not so much "watch" a film or listen to its dialogue; we experience the ritual enveloping us. We can think of this as a form of aesthetic becoming—a folding and

unfolding relationship. Rather than a gaze/gazed-upon relation of eye to bodies through a medium of the screen, we can consider instead an *expressive resonance* that encompasses self and world, or to again adopt Li's term, feeling-and-scene.

Here we can turn to Gilles Deleuze and his concept of upper and lower floors of a Baroque structure in his writings on Leibniz. He describes the relation between as a "resonating as if it were a musical salon translating the visible movements below into sound above."^{xxx} The aim is not to produce a dualism—a visible world of things below and a sonic world above—nor to suggest that the upper level of soul marks a transcendent division. Rather, the whole architectural structure *folds* what is both independent *and* inseparable. The soul resonates what the eyes accept, together composing a process of inclusion. It is interesting that Deleuze uses a musical metaphor since in cinema, the audible is the more permeable and resonant membrane. It is thus more prone to empathetic connectivity. Yuhui Jiang draws Deleuze's concept of "the Fold" into Daoist philosophy to describe a sonic-audible experience that is "always *in-between*."^{xxxi} Here the audible produces a void that allows one to leave the determination of place in favor of a relation more aligned with the rhythms of breathing and pulsation that are so vital in Daoist thinking.

Cinema has the ability to compose such folding relations, which function through fleeting and fragmented durations of experience. Time unfolds as a multiplicity, moving through fluid states that are both simultaneous and coexisting, channeled from character to audience. In *multiplicity* we traverse an infinite array possible times and places, present, imagined or recalled. In *simultaneity*, we find multiple expressions within a *single* shared time. In *coexistence*, by contrast, we feel the sharing of *multiple* times, in which a sonic event is freed from visual verisimilitude. This pushes a listener to attend to differences in time—that is, a hearing of the past in an imagining of the future.^{xxxii} Such weavings are the expressive essence from which we feel what is underway. In a film lies an experiential unfolding that is capable of an ineffable empathetic bond. Life expresses its essence through its movement. Such expression is the "about" that precedes concept and discourse through the act of living. This is how a particular kind of cinema produces an empathetic relation as a life that is lived in its unfolding. This is emphasized highly in Daoism and in earlier and later movements in Chinese aesthetics.

4. LI ZEHOU: THE AESTHETICS OF EXPRESSION AND TIME

Li's aesthetics emerges through his writings beginning in the 1980s, which Tsuyoshi Ishii describes as a "New Enlightenment movement" in Mainland China.^{xxxiii} Scholars were fusing a Kantian-informed "Hong Kong-Taiwanese New Confucianism on the one hand, and Mainland Chinese Marxism and historical materialism on the other." Li's book *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition (Huaxia meixue)* was first published in 1988. In it, he moves through periods of, in

historical order, ancient rites and music, Confucianism, Daoism, and Chan Buddhism. Through his process, he integrates Kantian and Marxist philosophy to build original concepts of sedimentation, empathy, and expression.

One area to draw out in Li's comparative philosophy is his contention that while Western aesthetics is grounded on *mimesis* (representation, imitation), the Chinese tradition emphasizes expression. While we may think of the former as an outer relation and the latter an inner one, Li writes that this does not mean Chinese aesthetics is about inner feelings. Rather, Chinese Art—Li focuses on the influence of music here—is about a harmony of universal, natural laws in accordance with drawing out emotions. “The goal of music was an ordered universe and harmony in the human world, while at the same time it provided form, order, and logic to human emotions.”^{xxxiv} Chinese art is also representational, but not in the showing of things, events and phenomena or individual emotions; rather it is ““expressive.”” What it aims to express are “universalized emotions that must be able to objectively ‘harmonize with heaven and earth’.”^{xxxv} The mimesis/expression divide is less important for Li; more important is his observation that the goal of ancient Chinese art, literature and aesthetics was “the molding of the emotions as its goal, having its origins in the ancient tradition founded on the standard that ‘music entails harmony’.”^{xxxvi}

In describing a universal molding of the emotions, Li is writing of the pre-Confucian rites period of Chinese aesthetic sedimentation. As the arts develop over history, empathy, the fusion of feeling-and-scene, becomes more prominent. By the Tang era, emotions are liberated but they retain the element of “scene” to the expression. This era of poetry exhibits “the poet's ability to capture human emotion in all its concrete vividness through both the apparent genuineness of the emotion and the convincing ‘*scene*’ that surrounds the experience” (96-97, emphasis added).

By both Li's and Sun's account, Confucianism is embedded throughout what followed in Chinese aesthetics history. Rather than the oppositions and counter-moves of European philosophy, Confucianism remains the constant thread in the rise of Daoism and Chan Buddhism. Through every shift, expression and emotion remain at the core. Zhuangzi and Laozi for example “emphasized the expression of human imagination, emotions, and intuition in perceiving the world.”^{xxxvii} Venerable “Warring States” poet Qu Yuan rejected Confucian obedience and moderation but “he integrated Daoist concepts of the free expression of individual feelings and imagination.”^{xxxviii} Through Chan aesthetics comes “the expression of the conscious inner life and the introspection of the subject.”^{xxxix} In all, we find expression, feeling and imagination at the core. As Sun writes, the line of Confucianism that runs through Daoism and Buddhism brought an engagement of a “mutually reflecting interaction with the viewer of the scene” (p. 98). The poet sensitive to its reader in this period produced “an unprecedented emphasis on using the mind to intuit this aesthetic dimension of poetry” (108). Through this relationship, the mind *understands* the boundlessness of spirit.

Li situates the Western dependence on transcendence and immortality against a Chinese “sensuous human world” that is immanent and undivided.^{x1} We find a *Western sedimentation* at work in film theory’s dualism, a tendency to regard a divided world of film and spectator and of gaze and analysis. Li points to Kant’s *epistemological* subject compared with a Confucian *aesthetic* subject. Again, concepts of time play a critical role. Through Kant, we have an inner consciousness trying to come to terms with finitude and infinity. The Confucian consciousness is also an inner process, but Li argues that a subjective sense of time is a historical accumulation of emotion and experience. “Emotionalized time is a fundamental characteristic of Chinese art and Confucian aesthetics. It constitutes the highest level of internalization of the world.”^{xli}

This element of emotionalized time as the coursing of history is key to an empathetic cinema. It is less about the images and more the movement that comes about through sound and hearing as the passing of a time that incorporates all that has been into any moment that we call cinematic. Through time, a *listening to the movement of images and sounds*, empathy forms. In Li’s description of Zhuangzi’s Daoism, the aesthetic experience of beauty is a cognitive act, but one that actively aims to move outside of language. As Iishi describes Li’s reading of Zhuangzi, aesthetic experience is grounded on “concrete existence” rather than “linguistic categories.”^{xlii} His Daoism is social practice through a cognition that “pierces through the language stratum to the very reality” of existence.

This piercing of the veil of language also works to describe our relation to a screen and speakers in our empathetic engagement of cinema. As experiencers of cinema, we *understand* the separation of self-to-screen/speakers in the same way that we can fragment our consciousness. Sitting in a restaurant, with the sounds and images of the present environment, my consciousness is also remembering yesterday’s hike up a mountain. Yet with cinema, the emphasis is reversed: A film endures as a *dwelling reverie* of movement and action while the inert body sitting in the theater fades from conscious attention. In reverie, as Gaston Bachelard reminds us, time relaxes without the necessity to produce linkages or associations. It is a different kind of consciousness. Such “poetic reveries” become “hypothetical lives which enlarge our lives by letting us in on the secrets of the universe. A world takes form in our reverie and this world is ours.”^{xliii}

5. EMPATHY IN FILM: REVERIE, MEMORY, AND LISTENING

There are many filmmakers who invite empathy through such reverie. We can think of luminaries such as Tarkovsky, Kubrick and Bergman on up to more recent “slow cinema” or “transcendental cinema” directors like Chantal Akerman, Tsai Ming-liang, and Claire Denis. But slow cinema and empathy are not the same. Indeed, despite the moniker, slow cinema is often regarded on visible and spatial terms that de-emphasize the element of time and the listening it brings.

“Observation is key,” as Nadin Mai writes about the movement’s common characterization.^{xliv} It is more accurate to say that slowness opens to the *possibility* of empathy by offering of the *time of empathy*, not in its formal construction of time but as a means of gathering time. For there to be empathy, time must not only be given, as in its slowing pace or a lingering shot; there must be a felt sharing of duration in an accumulation of thought and feeling. Borrowing from Li, empathy is also defined by expressing a harmony of consciousness, sensation, and memory as a relationship with nature in its temporal unfolding. At issue is not form but the expression of such a relationship. Even fragmentary and rapidly cutting montage can produce such a connection. Here we find a style underway, but one that empathetically evokes a temporal multiplicity folding and unfolding—a coexistence of durations.

We can turn to a film like *El Dorado XXI* by Salomé Lamas (2017) to illustrate the distinction. The film opens with a couple of long still shots before giving way to a nearly hour-long fixed shot of a literally endless stream of miners ascending and descending a mine. One could argue a sense of empathy is exhibited here in holding a fixed viewpoint to express the endless repetition that we cohabitate as viewers. This would be empathy as a means of being present to events, but we are strangers and observers to a state of otherness that is inescapable. This is because it is entirely visual. Lamas overlaps a layer of sonic elements, but it is of an entirely other location and reality. The sonic element works to replace—that is *re-place*—what is underway visually. This heightens the sense that the space of struggle is merely gazed upon—a site (and sight) of fascination rather than feeling. While the fragmentation of sound and image time can evoke an empathetic bond, here it does not because it lacks a *hearer*. It is rather a sonic and visual construction, an overlap of phenomena rather than a fusion of feeling-and-scene.

Terrence Malick’s films work differently with the juxtaposition of image and sound by instead producing hearing, presence, and memory. His films express a coexistence of living in present time while producing the occasional durations of reverie that fragment time. But it is done so inwardly rather than simply through appearances. Here empathy comes in a gathering—an experiential and expressive actuality of time that emerges *as* images through reverie. The body-relation in affect theory, which splits the anchored spectator into a duality,^{xlv} is reversed in an empathetic cinema as described here. An empathetic relation eliminates the need to render the spectator anywhere. An active film-body spectator relation is a distraction, a logical and rational interruption, of that which is empathetic. An empathetic participant instead feels the pull of the actuality of *experience*.

Whereas the body awareness of affectivity breaks empathy in the position of receptivity, *formal* constructions break empathy through reflexive methods. Reflexivity produces a visual statement, a demand to be understood at the level of style and form. Empathy is the opposite of this. All cinema is fragmentary through montage, but empathy comes when the film expresses fragmentation within *itself* in a way that encourages harmony with the fragmentation of the time

that exists in every filmgoer. Walter Murch wrote that film cuts work because we blink in our field of view.^{xlvi} An empathetic cinema takes this idea to the whole of consciousness in a relationship with time, memory, and our engagements with the sensory environment.

Over the course of his artistic development, Malick's films increasingly fragment that which we ourselves experience in cinema. *The Thin Red Line* (1998) is a film of presence that becomes occasionally broken by reverie. Given more attention, this reverie might overtake the presence of war. But the demands of war require a true being-within. Malick's pioneering stylistic element is how he increasingly fragmented his films into multiple durations, times, and locations that defy the concept of flashback.^{xlvii} This was accomplished through a fragmentation of the expectations of sound in relation to the progression of images, as *hearing* overtakes what we think of as sound design. With each film, reverie increasingly becomes the prevailing expression underway, and this is its empathetic bond. By *Knight of Cups* (2016), experience has reversed: reverie is the dominant stream, occasionally fragmented by the distractions of presence. While the war of *The Thin Red Line* required present attention, *Knight of Cups* finds a consciousness adrift in repetitions of aesthetic fragmentation. Christian Bale's Rick is Kierkegaard's aesthete struggling to attain some Zen-like presence, or a sense of faith in the infinite-within-finitude.^{xlviii} As a result, we feel lost with him, *as* him. They are different manifestations of empathy because they are different mindsets, different experiences of lived time. In both are manifestation of feeling-and-scene, but the unity sought after in Confucianism has become adrift in the later film.

Chloé Zhao is sometimes compared with Malick in her cinematographic style and natural staging. Films like *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015) and *Nomadland* (2020) feature characters in open, natural, "golden hour" locations. This element is stylistically comparable to Malick's pre-*Thin Red Line* era films such as *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*. Zhao's films compose total presence and a devotion to realism. This devotion compromises empathy with an adherence to the actual space of events. Her mix of skilled and unskilled actors in actual settings, depicted dramatically, produces a mimetic-ethnographic/docudrama hybridization. The problem with this approach is that the commitment to realism—employing actual people for whom this dramatic situation is real as characters—simulates an actual situation while breaking the empathetic bond that drama evokes.

We find this as well in the film *The Dead and the Others* by João Salaviza and Renée Nader Messori (2018), which is a more faithful ethnographic docudrama. The filmmakers offer a sense of empathy through a close relationship of camera to character and character to nature. (The camera is extremely tight on bodies moving through nature.) However, as with Zhao's films, being authentic to real life sacrifices the drama, becoming inauthentic *drama*. Untrained actors give flat performances that expose the cinematic artifice and continually threaten to undercut empathy and expression in service to the factual real. While this film is evocative in other ways and "true" ethnographically, it becomes "false" as dramatic fiction. Deleuze writes in *Cinema 2*

that a character becomes real by making fiction, which is different from a fiction made from reality. As Claire Colebrook describes Deleuze's concept: The "power of fiction" is "not making a claim about what the world is, but about the imagination of a possible world."^{xlix} Deleuze's fiction expresses "not so much the cognitive and the intellectual as affective (to do with feeling and sensible experience)."

The empathy of feeling-and-scene in Li and others complementary to this concept is one in which the impact upon the psyche comes in the means of expression. Li does not detail the significance of hearing and listening as a binding force, but in an expressive, experiential cinema, it is the primary empathetic channel. The audible binds us to what is otherwise a succession of images and sounds. Consider again the still image with overlapping sounds as in *El Dorado XXI*, which gazes and associates and presents a stream of sound that reflexively divides us from what we see. An audible coexistence of durations and reveries by contrast evokes the empathy of feeling-and-scene.

We can turn to other filmmakers to help define cinematic empathy as proposed here. Abbas Kiarostami works in a linear fashion of purely present visual activity. As with Zhao, his films aim for realism. It often seems that his camera has stumbled upon a real-life situation already underway. In a film such as *A Taste of Cherry* (1997), it feels as if all of Tehran is his *mise-en-scène* and all of its inhabitants are players in his drama. It pushes a viewer to wonder if his actors are improvising around the actual chaos of the environment or if he has meticulously orchestrated dramatic "accidents." Further, Kiarostami frames his actions in medium shots, MCUs, and POV shots that establish characters in full view. We are always looking tightly at a dominant person in a tracking shot or through a car window as the world becomes a secondary aspect that passes by. His linear approach is further exhibited in landscapes shot through long lenses, showing paths and roads flattened out upon hillsides like lines drawn upon nature. While remaining real to the setting, empathy is lost as we find ourselves gazing at or through a substantial character conducting routine, often absurd repetitions, as in a film such as *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999).

By contrast, Apichatpong Weerasethakul evokes a sensory empathy closer to Li's aesthetics of a temporal and harmonious feeling-and-scene. Rather than producing a linear progression of individuals against nature (Kiarostami) or submitting to ethnographic realism (Zhao), Weerasethakul works in emergences of memory and temporal multiplicities in a manner completely different from Malick. Both filmmakers reveal a dedication to the sensuous and experiential realities of nature and time-consciousness through a dramatic, fictional unfolding that creates a real empathetic bond. They are different in their spirituality, evocative of the different "sediment" of their learning, to again borrow Li's concept. Malick offers the immanence of nature with the "perhaps" of a divine transcendence through fragmentations of recollection, repetition, reverie and forgetting. Weerasethakul's films evoke a purely immanent coexistence of nature, spirit and imagination in a gathering of what time has forgotten—a transcendence of another kind.

One comes from an aesthetic sediment of Christianity, the other of Buddhism. “Transcendence and immortality are not achieved in heaven or in a future life, nor are they to be found in an infinite substance that has shed sensuousness. Rather, they are achieved within this sensuous human world.”¹

In his *Cemetery of Splendor* (2015), Laotian goddesses emerge and share fruit with protagonist Jenjira. The three speak in a casual, natural manner about what is happening at the clinic where people have inexplicably fallen into a deep sleep. Evoking Buddhist and Zhuangzi poetics of dreams and memory, Weerasethakul’s films blur the lines between dream and reality, the present and the past, through his characters who *move through* the multiplicities of spaces and times. In an extraordinary scene in the aforementioned film, two characters move through ruins overgrown with leaves and roots as Keng channels a spirit of the past through Itt’s sleeping consciousness, speaking to Jenjira. Keng-Itt moves through the opulence of a palace that once resided on the land. There are two bodies, Jenjira and Keng walking through the crunch of dried leaves; but there are at least five “spirits” moving through spaces felt rather than known.

Weerasethakul’s more recent *Memoria* (2021) continues these themes. Here, empathy is introduced through a single sound. We hear it as Tilda Swinton’s Jessica does. To her and to us it is a disturbing mystery coming in sudden shocks of violence to the senses. A simple restaurant conversation scene is punctuated with an unknown and unseen violence that we and Jessica feel in the same moment. It is not until she meets a fish scaler named Hernán in the Columbian countryside that she is able to tease out the meaning of what haunts her. He falls into a deep sleep-trance, and we are with both of them, hearing nature, as he dreams for her. Later in his house, the two share audible memories in an extraordinary long take in which they sit at a table without speaking a word. All of us together hear the hearings of other places and times as they unfold.

The empathetic bond composed through such experiential filmmaking constructs the continuance of presence, memory, trauma, and reverie. In Weerasethakul, as with many contemporary Thai filmmakers,¹¹ we find fragmentations of collective memory that are expressed in distinctly Asian and Buddhist ways. Rather than simply personal moments, these films become allegories for political violence or the struggles of migrant workers. In films that express audible experience over images, we live the imprecision of such durations. We move through what has been and imagine what is to come within this moment of finite time. There is, for us, no audience, sound design, image capture, profilmic construction, text, or *mise-en-scène*. There is memory, reverie and imagination, an experience we feel because we ourselves live the time of recollecting and imagining. This does not produce a special transcendent (divided) status of the viewer brought about by the apparatus of cinema. First, because an empathetic cinema is not constructed on the distance of viewership; second, because the audioviewer *as empathetic* gains no privileged transcendent position.

The ritual of cinema does not have to take place in the space of the theater to be communal. We again may think not of place but of consciousness that is by its nature multiple. We unconsciously integrate the idea that none of this is limited to a personal experience, but that others are engaging with this film and with cinema as a whole. We are together in the ritual of imagination that allows us to have an experience that is real. As a relationship with the film in its unfolding, we both pull back and go within at the same time. One is aware that the screen and speakers are given. But empathy comes from knowing and discarding that the body element has found its place in the seat in which one sits. The *audible* mind in particular becomes free to move within the depths of what unfolds. We lose “audience” and become the consciousness that moves and dwells in a continuing state of unfolding. One finds empathy by moving *through* a cinematic memory-imagining that is not altogether one’s own. Recollection and imagination are not passive reveries. I choose to live the life that unfolds.

6. CONCLUSION: AN ETHICS OF EMPATHY

Empathy in cinema, as proposed here, is not exclusive to Li or to Chinese aesthetics. Rather, Li and the tradition of Chinese aesthetics offer a conceptual means of thinking a particular kind of cinematic empathy that emphasizes audibility, imagination, coexistence, and expression as a sensory relationship with nature and time. Such cinema can be thought through two complementary concepts: Heraclitus’ *logos* and Zhuangzi’s *dao*. In its pre-religious meaning, *logos* describes a gathering and an account *in listening*; in Zhuangzi, the *dao* is unspeakable and unspoken but rendered in attunement. Both constitute a willing release of oneself into the reality of the cosmos undergoing its process of life. Each film produces its particular expression of *logos* or its particular expression of the *dao* through an empathetic and mobile process of becoming. Neither points to reasoning or an *a priori* truth of categories or forms, rather an opening to possibilities of understanding only as an *outcome*.

A final, concluding question brings us back to the possibility of an ethics derived from such a concept of empathy. Is there a danger here in becoming *impressed* by the ideologies and biases of the filmmaker? This is surely the case. Film is dangerous because its experience borders the religious. But this is where the guided aspect of the director as sage becomes important, as in the Chinese tradition Li chronicles. We may also think of a team of filmmakers as a collective tribe, building an aesthetic experience of virtue. An ethics or morality is not a set of standards or codes preceding the film; the film makes its ethics. This is the responsibility of its creators. *The film* is prior to any analysis of it. It is a time of learning and experience, a process akin to that of ancient times, both in the East and the West. It should come as no surprise that in both the Greek and the Chinese traditions, ancient storytelling used melody and “the chorus” as the music of civil

harmony. Learning came not only in a story but was given in a melody that is communally heard, evoking such harmony. There is plenty of time later for talk.

Empathetic cinema is cinema as the ancient myths would have it. Old dogmas are necessarily being challenged in today's hypermediated reckoning of all images and statements through facts and information; at the same time, we cannot forget the importance of myth and imagination. Aesthetic courage is the courage to be affected. For Li this is expressed most predominantly in history through ancient rites of music and dance that become culture and civilization through their affective power. Oral cultures conjured stories that were told to be *imagined* through the creative act. Through the aesthetics of expression and empathy, they become remembered in a way that allows them to be retold. Poetry, *poiesis*, the making of time, the making of experience, the making of memory—all gather into what we name as a *story* in the production of culture. It is the old, long forgotten mind, producing a *logos* that one carries, a *dao* that is attended. The creative ethics comes in its production as a reinvention of the oral *ethos*—the making of time as an expression of shared experience.

ⁱ An example of this is found in Julien Baggini, “Serious Men: The Films of the Coen Brothers as Ethics,” in *New Takes in Film Philosophy*, ed. Havi Carel and Greg Tuck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). We find “empathy” mentioned in film theory but too often bound to a concept of “sympathy.” It perhaps does not help that Deleuze calls empathy a “subjective sympathy” in Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, tr. Hugh Tomlinson & Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota 1989), 6.

ⁱⁱ See Elsaesser and Hagener, whose critique here is addressed further ahead in this essay, in Thomas Elsaesser and Malta Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (2nd ed., New York: Routledge, 2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} For more on this concept of landscape, see Francois Jullien, *From Being to Living: A Euro-Chinese Lexicon of Thought*, tr. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (Los Angeles: Sage, 2020).

^v Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, tr. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 55.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 152.

^{vii} Cecile Chu-chin Sun, *Pearl From the Dragon's Mouth* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). The Tang or T'ang era is commonly identified as the dynastic period from 618-907.

^{viii} Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, tr. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 152.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 152-153.

^x Cecile Chu-chin Sun, *Pearl From the Dragon's Mouth* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 64-65.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 97.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 112.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 97.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 113.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, 109-110.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 118.

^{xvii} Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, tr. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 57.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 97.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, 153.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, 153.

- ^{xxi} Frances Wood, June 9, 2022. In Our Time. Podcast audio. Tang Era Poetry. Simon Tillotson. WAV. June 10, 2022. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/in-our-time/id73330895?i=1000565758213>.
- ^{xxii} Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, tr. Hugh Tomlinson & Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University, 1991), 169.
- ^{xxiii} 2018, p. 295.
- ^{xxiv} Roger T. Ames and Jinhua Jia, "Introduction," In *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018) 8.
- ^{xxv} See Téa Sernelj, "Modern Chinese Aesthetics and Its Traditional Backgrounds: A Critical Comparison of Li Zehou's Sedimentation and Jung's Archetypes," in *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018) regarding the connections of Li's sedimentation and Jung's archetypes.
- ^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, p. 350.
- ^{xxvii} Li, Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*.
- ^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ^{xxix} *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ^{xxx} Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, tr. Sean Hand (London: Athlone, 1993), 4.
- ^{xxxi} Yuhui Jiang, "Sacred Listening in a Folding Space: *Le Pli* and Ancient Chinese Philosophy of Listening," in *Deleuze and Asia*, eds. Roland Bogue, Hanping Chiu and Yu-lin Lee (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 73-98, 86.
- ^{xxxii} James Batcho, "Simultaneity and Coexistence: Audible Overlaps in Cinematic Time," in *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, 15:1, 2021.
- ^{xxxiii} Tsuyoshi Ishii, "Li Zehou's Aesthetics and the Confucian 'Body' of Chinese Cultural Sedimentation: An Inquiry into Alternative Interpretations of Confucianism," in *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 316-317.
- ^{xxxiv} Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, tr. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 28.
- ^{xxxv} *Ibid.*, 28.
- ^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, 29.
- ^{xxxvii} Téa Sernelj, "Modern Chinese Aesthetics and Its Traditional Backgrounds: A Critical Comparison of Li Zehou's Sedimentation and Jung's Archetypes," 341.
- ^{xxxviii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxxix} *Ibid.*
- ^{xl} Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 55.
- ^{xli} *Ibid.*
- ^{xlii} Tsuyoshi Ishii "Li Zehou's Aesthetics and the Confucian 'Body' of Chinese Cultural Sedimentation: An Inquiry into Alternative Interpretations of Confucianism," 363.
- ^{xliii} Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*, tr. D. Russell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 8.
- ^{xliv} Nadin Mai, "Third (Slow) Cinema," in *The Arts of Slow Cinema*, 2013. Accessed June 20, 2020. <https://theartsofslowcinema.com/2013/10/27/third-slow-cinema/>.
- ^{xlv} Elsaesser and Hagener write that "sound" is especially useful for this, in *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*.
- ^{xlvi} Walter Murch, *In The Blink of an Eye* (2nd Edition), 2001. Los Angeles: Silman-James Press.
- ^{xlvii} James Batcho, *Terrence Malick's Unseeing Cinema*, 2018. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- ^{xlviii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xlix} Colebrook, Claire. *Gilles Deleuze*. (London: Routledge, 2002), 12.
- ^l Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 55.
- ^{li} This is evident as well in his Thai contemporaries such as Phutti Phong Aroonpheng (*Manta Ray*, 2018) and Jakrawal Nilthamrong (*Anatomy of the Past*, 2022) who deal with similar narrative themes and empathetic approaches to cinema. These two filmmakers also collaborate on each other's works. The latter was a producer for the former's *Manta Ray* and *Ferris Wheel* (2015). Aroonpheng in turn was cinematographer for Nilthamrong's *Anatomy of the Past* (2022).