Illuminating Reality: Cinematic Identification Revisited in the Eyes of Buddhist Philosophies

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Abstract

According to Jean-Pierre Meunier, identification is an intersubjective process. Yet, when it comes to theorizing the attitudes by which we identify, he seems to suggest that a permanent and individuated subject has been in operation all along. This aporia has been examined in the debate between Mādhyamaka (middle way) school (theory of the emptiness) and the Yogācāra school (theory of existence) of Buddhism, a discourse borrowed by Chinese film theorists since the late nineteenth century to scrutinize cinematic identification. This chapter argues that this aporia underlines not only how identification operates and why it must operate, but also how we inevitably return to it in our theorization.

Keywords: Buddhism and film theory; Chinese film theory and criticism; Mādhyamaka Buddhism; Yogācāra Buddhism; cinema ontology and identification; Jean-Pierre Meunier

Introduction

In the beginning of The Structures of the Film Experience, Jean-Pierre Meunier, based on the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Angelo Hesnard, argues that cinematic identification is best understood not as a relationship between two individuated subjects. Rather, it is an inter-psychic connection that takes place on a level prior to individuation and subjectivization. In this sense, identification is not a process in which a pre-constituted subject becomes one with a pre-constituted object. Rather, it is a process of individuation, in which the divides between the self and the other, the subject and the object, and the
spectator’s body in here and the image out there, are initiated. Then, towards the end of his book, drawing on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Meunier reminds us that, what we sense and perceive as individuals in the image is the presence of the absence of an individual whose image was captivated by the camera in the past. Identification therefore requires the spectator to: (1) ‘presentify’ in a home movie, i.e. to make present the absence of someone we have known all along; (2) ‘personalize’ in a documentary, i.e. to give personality to an individual who has been reduced by the documentary to a representation of a larger social group, and (3) ‘affectivize’ in a fiction film, i.e. to establish affective connections with an imagined character who has no existential value in our lived reality.

Between these two registers of understanding, there is an aporia. The understanding of identification according to Merleau-Ponty and Hesnard presumes an interdependent relationship between the spectator and the image. The individuation of these two parties renews itself at each moment of identification and each temporal point-instant of sense-perception. In this light, each party does not exist in its own right. The understanding of identification according to Sartre, however, presupposes the temporal permanence of a sentient body, which enables each sensory-perceptual point-instant to take place. It is this sensory-perceptual process that makes present the absence of the image, thus allowing the spectator to presentify, personalize, and affectivize the image as a subject.

Meunier’s shift from the first register to the second is symptomatic of a philosophical struggle outlined in the beginning of Henri Bergson’s Matter and Memory (Matière et mémoire, 1896). We cannot say that there is a permanent world out there that constitutes the mind in here (materialism), or that there is a permanent mind that projects a world out there (idealism). It is because our ability to sense and perceive and what we sense and perceive are interdependently related, that is, they arise and are extinguished in relation to each other. Nevertheless, despite our knowledge of this, it is extremely hard to theorize identification without imagining a je ne sais quoi from which a temporally and existentially permanent self is constituted. Yet, if understood this way, identification is ultimately not an intersubjective process, but an idealistic one, that is, the image is a milieu initiated from this je ne sais quoi that underlines the process of sense-perception.

This question was first raised by Chinese intellectuals between the 1870s and the 1890s, who attempted to establish a comparative space between modern European philosophy and classical Chinese learnings – especially Buddhism – in order to foster an alternative mode of modernity. In the context of film criticism, since 1897, film critics have borrowed concepts from
Buddhism to address questions of ontology, spectatorship, and aesthetics.\(^5\) In this chapter, I argue that Buddhist philosophy can help us rethink how intersubjectivity is constituted in the process of identification. I do so by scrutinizing two schools of Buddhism: the Mādhyamaka (middle way) school (theory of the emptiness) and the Yogācāra school (theory of existence). Since the Second Buddhist Council (c. 334 BCE), scholars have regarded these two schools of philosophy as two dialectically opposed methods of reasoning.\(^6\) Yet, they are both based on the same underlying assumption: that our sensory-perceptual reality is made up of sentient beings and inanimate objects that exist interdependently, arise and are extinguished from one temporal point-instant to another, caused by a set of *nidānas* (interdependent relationships). It means that these beings and objects are merely *lakṣaṇas* (forms) that have no existential values. They are *anitya* (impermanent) and *anātman* (not-having any existential value, or “empty”).\(^7\)

**Historical Background**

Since the 1960s and 1970s, Lacanian film theorists have pointed out that, in the cinema, the sensory-perceptual subject, who seems to exercise an agency looking at and constituting the image, is in fact constituted intersubjectively *with* the image.\(^8\) Yet, this interdependent relationship between the viewing subject and the image is extremely difficult to grasp experientially, since *my* sense-perception and *my* intellectual reasoning are inevitably based on *my* body. In the 1930s, Shanghai-based Taiwanese screenwriter and critic Liu Na’ou (1905–1940) used the theory of meditation proposed by Yogācāra Buddhism to examine how a spectator approaches cinematographic reality subjectively on the one hand, and how they become one with the image intersubjectively on the other. In the end, for Liu, the cinematographic experience is neither subjective nor intersubjective.\(^9\)

In Europe and North America, Buddhism is often understood as a form of spiritualism. Ironically, all schools of Buddhism reject the notion of the spirit and Buddhism itself was developed out of a philosophical, not religious, discourse in ancient South Asia.\(^10\) The use of Buddhist philosophy as a critical vocabulary emerged in China around the Six Dynasties (220 or 222–589 CE).\(^11\) However, academic studies of philosophical Buddhism declined around the late Tang (618–907 CE) period.\(^12\) In the 1860s, scholar Yang Wenhui (1837–1911), upon “rediscovering” Buddhist logic, established the Jingling kejing chu (Jingling Sūtra Publishing House) in Nanjing in 1866 (renamed the Zhina neixueyuan or China Inner Studies College in 1911).\(^13\)
Seminars organized at the Publishing House and the College were attended by key intellectuals during the Republican period (1911–1949), including Ouyang Jian (1871–1943), Liang Qichao (1873–1929), Wang Guowei (1877–1927), Feng Zikai (1898–1975), and Thomé H. Fang (1899–1977). Many of them wrote comparative studies between Buddhism and European philosophy to propose an alternative mode of intellectual modernity.14

In addition, these scholars were inspired by the Kyoto School of philosophers: Suzuki Daisetsu Teitaro (1894–1966), Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962), and Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990). These philosophers criticized European modernity as a system based on the binary division between the self and the other. For them, Zen Buddhism provided a way to rethink human relationships and world politics in intersubjective terms.15 Nonetheless, the Kyoto School's anti-modernity position was appropriated by the militarists during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Pacific War (1941–1945), which was largely questioned by their Chinese counterparts.16

The Twelve Nidānas and Middle Way Buddhism

The basic principles common to all schools of Buddhism are the twelve nidānas (interdependent relationships), which constitute all phenomena. For Shakyamuni Buddha (c. 563 or 480 BCE–c. 483 or 400 BCE), our unawareness of them is called avidyā (ignorance or unenlightened). The term “ignorance” is not to be taken negatively. Instead, it is the fundamental condition of existence. For example, a table is made up of pieces of wood assembled by a carpenter. Once assembled, this “table” is endowed with a lifespan: formation, endurance, deterioration, and emptiness. Without the interdependent relationships between the raw materials and the act of assembling them, there is no table and the time in which it dwells. We can say the same about a human body and anything that appears to exist in time. Our act of misrecognizing a being or an object as something that exists on its own, by ignoring the interdependent relationships that constitute them, is “ignorance.”17

For Shakyamuni Buddha, ignorance is interdependently related to saṃskara, a cause-and-effect chain from which all forms of existence come into being – a force of life. In Buddhism, it is also known as karma – cause-and-effect cycle.18 The interdependent relationship between ignorance and force-of-life produces vijñapatis (consciousnesses): the abilities to differentiate, from which the abilities to sense, think, act, and become conscious are manifested (nāmarūpa or naming).19 Vijñapatis are sometimes
interchangeable with the six vijñānas (consciousnesses of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind). With these consciousnesses, the six sādāyatana (entrances or organs) are initiated, which enable us to sparśa (come into contact with) āyatana (sense data). Such contact gives rise to vedanās (affections: pleasure, displeasure, non-pleasure, and non-displeasure) and generates tṛṣṇā (desire). With desire, we develop upādāna (attachment) to the self and to those beings and objects desired as though they were bhava (those which exist). With existence, temporality arises, which is manifested through jāti (birth) and jarāmarāṇa (old age and death).

The earliest pupils of Shakyamuni Buddha believed that nirvāṇa (release from ignorance) could be achieved by abandoning the self and sense-perception, so that they could dwell in śūnyata (emptiness). However, in so doing, they effectively treat emptiness as that which exists. Between the second and first centuries BCE, the Mahāsāṃghika sect began to rethink the implications of the theory of nidānas. Supposed that all things sensed and perceived are constituted by the twelve nidānas, these beings and objects have no existential values, i.e. they are śūnya (empty). At first glance, existence and emptiness seem to be two dialectically opposite modes of reality: the former corresponds to the Kantian notion of the phenomenon, the latter to the noumena (things-in-themselves). Between the second and third centuries CE, Buddhist scholar Nāgārjuna (150–c. 250 CE) argued, if emptiness simply refers to the absence of any existential value in the phenomenon, existence is empty, and emptiness is the foundation of existence – the two concepts are not identical, but they are also not different!

Therefore, nirvāṇa is not a release from nidānas in order to reach a state of śūnyata, but from our unawareness that nidānas and śūnyata are interdependently related. For Nāgārjuna, tathātā (the way it is, or the ultimate reality) lies in the mādhyamaka (middle way), or more appropriately, what remains after the differences between arising and extinction (existential difference), permanence and impermanence (temporal difference), identity and difference (spatial difference), and coming and going (difference in movement), have been deconstructed.

In the cinema, for instance, we sense and perceive the image on-screen as a reality with its own temporality. Yet, such a reality is constituted by a set of interdependent relationships: light particles, a projector, a film crew that made the film, actors, and us as the spectators. The reality on-screen is therefore empty, and such emptiness is the foundation of cinematographic reality. Identification is, in this sense, a process initiated from an attachment to existence (temporality), and the self. For example, in a home movie, I form an attachment with the existence of the presence of the family member I
seem to see on-screen, even though this human figure is absent (empty). Yet, for me, this human figure initiates affections in me. Also, its form or appearance (presence) suggests time: I can trace the memory of this family member; they appear to be here; and they should continue to exist in this filmic reality. I therefore attach my *self* to this figure as that which exists: I *presentify* it.

But then, for Nāgārjuna: (i) what existed in the past no longer exists; thus, *existence in the past* does not exist; (2) what will exist in the future does not exist, as *existence in the future* has not come into being yet; (3) in what we call the present, existence in the past has ceased to exist and existence in the future is yet to arise. In this sense, the presence, in which we dwell, is a difference between the past and the future, which has no existential value – or as Meunier argues, *à la* Sartre, a gap between retentionality and protentionality (p. 108). Yet, if neither the past, the future, nor the present has existential value, identification is an instantiation of attachment, an active ignoring of an assemblage of causalities that gives rise to both the sensory-perceptual body and the image. To presentify, personalize, and affectivize is to ignore wilfully that what we sense and perceive (in this case, the cinematic image and my body) is initiated out of an interdependent relationship between *nidānas* and *śūnyata*.

**Yogācāra Buddhism and the Theory of Seeds**

The process of identification can be nuanced with the theory of seeds proposed by Yogācāra Buddhism. For Yogācāra scholars, the first six consciousnesses interdependently arise with the self-consciousness (*manas-vijñāna*), sometimes called the seventh consciousness. For Mādhyamikas (scholars of Mādhyamaka Buddhism), the first six consciousnesses and the self are not identical concepts. However, the self is initiated *when* the six consciousnesses are initiated and what the “self” signifies is the summation of these six consciousnesses. Therefore, these concepts are not different. However, as I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, for Yogācāra scholars, there must be a *je ne sais quoi* from which this interdependent relationship is initiated.

This problem is observed in Yogācāra meditation. First, a meditator observes that what they sense and perceive is an image (or milieu), given form by their own attachment (*parikalpitah-sabhāva*: form arisen from attachment). It is either an imagination (standalone image), a misrecognition (substance-image), or an image that seems to be initiated out of its own self-nature (nature-image). Then, a meditator observes that this image
consists of forms constituted by the twelve nidānas (paratāntra-sabhāva: forms arisen from interdependency). Yogacāra further divides causality into four categories: (1) hetu-pratyaya (immediate and circumstantial causes); (2) samanantara-pratyaya (chronological causes); (3) ālambana-pratyaya (encounter between two sense-media); and (4) adhipati-pratyaya (assisting causes). In this light, the image out there is empty and impermanent. Its existence and temporality are given form by the interdependent relationship between the six consciousnesses and the self. But if so, such an interdependent relationship seems to be existent and permanent.

To circumvent this problem, Yogacāra scholars propose the idea of the ālaya-vijñāna (storehouse consciousness). Within the storehouse consciousness, there lies an astronomical number of bijas (seeds). Each seed is an instantiation of the interdependent relationship between ignorance and force-of-life. When a seed is actualized, the first six consciousnesses arise interdependently with the self-consciousness. Each actualization of a seed initiates a series of smṛtis (awarenesses), and a sequence of awarenesses constitutes an image that exists in time. To complicate matters, Yogacāra scholars argue that seeds are not actualized sequentially, but as an oghā (avalanche). Hence, temporality is not made up of a sequence of awarenesses, but a fabric of interdependently related awarenesses, each producing its own cause-and-effect chain (samskara or force-of-life), and together with it, ignorance. This renewed interdependent relationship between force-of-life and ignorance is instantiated as a new collection of seeds. These seeds therefore carry with them memories from the past, a potentiality, which, once actualized, turns into consequences that will unfold in the future. In other words, the ālaya-consciousness is the site where existence arises out of emptiness. An awareness of it is called parinispanna-sabhāva (ultimate reality).

The Image and Identification

In terms of the theory of seeds, how does identification work? Here, I scrutinize a photograph found in the family archive of my partner John Christiansen, which is a sepia medium close-up of his uncle John Adams when he was eighteen (see Fig. 9). Adams’s picture was taken in autumn 1944 in a drugstore in Brooklyn when he was on leave from the army, shortly before he was sent to occupied France, where he died saving a wounded comrade on the battlefield. The portrait was taken with a low-quality camera and the entire image is out of focus. In this portrait, Adams wears
a slightly oversized leather jacket. Underneath, he wears a plaid shirt with the top button open, thus revealing his white undershirt. Adams’s head is slightly lowered, yet his eyes stare directly into the lens. Correspondingly, his crescent-shaped mouth is slightly open with a smile, as though the smile had yet to be completed or as though he were about to say something. In fact, his slightly lowered head seems to be arrested in the middle of an action. His strong nose sits in the middle of his face, his eyes are wide open and brightly lit, and his thick eyebrows frame the top of his eyes and give form to his tall forehead. His left ear (on frame right) is hidden from the camera, whereas his right ear (on frame left) juts out with a touch of humor. He has a young and handsome face with an air of defiance. He wears a smoothly and immaculately done quiff parted towards the left side of his skull. He is looking at you.

In Yogācāra Buddhism, a nature-image arises when the ability to sense, perceive, and (re)cognize encounters a set of sense data. In 1944, the image of Adams (as a living being) arose through the sensory-perceptual
mechanism of the camera and a set of interdependent relationships. The camera mechanically preserved some of these relationships, especially the way light particles were related to each other and the way Adams comported and looked into the camera that day. Today, the photographic image of Adams arises again through my own sensory-perceptual process, dependent upon some of the same interdependent relationships that gave rise to Adams’s existence. This in fact corresponds to André Bazin’s understanding of photographic ontology. As Roland Barthes comments on Alexander Gardner’s photograph of Lewis Payne in 1865, shortly after he was executed for an attempted assassination of U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward: “He is dead and he is going to die.”

When I behold the photograph, the image is initiated from the operation of my first six consciousnesses, which are in turn dependent upon my self-consciousness. This self-consciousness gives the series of sensory-perceptual instants that take place in the first six consciousnesses an impression of unity and integrity. The self therefore assumes the role of an observer and sees the image as a phenomenon initiated out of a set of interdependent relationships: immediate and circumstantial causes, chronological causes, encounters between two sense-media, and assisting causes. I then come to believe that the photographic image is a nature-image because of my attachment to the self and to the phenomenon.

The operation of the first six consciousnesses, under the supervision of the self, stimulates the seeds that have laid dormant in the ālaya-consciousness and produces more instantiations of ignorance (seeds). Each stimulation is triggered by an activation of a seed, from which an awareness is initiated. Once the first awareness is initiated, the entire sensory-perceptual operation is also initiated as a fabric of complex cause-and-effect chains, experienced by me as a chronological sequence. In this sequence, a second awareness arises, during which the self-consciousness seeks the permanence of the first awareness, i.e. I want this image to persist in time and to discern what it really is. Then, a third awareness arises, which determines what such an awareness is: I can determine that this image is the image of Adams, which exists in time. This is followed by a fourth awareness, in which the qualitative value (e.g. pleasure and displeasure) of the awareness is determined, which then triggers a sequence of awarenesses, which in turn constitutes the photographic image of Adams and the time in which it dwells. This is the way by which I presentify the image of Adams as Adams, a process of identification that is also a process of becoming Adams.
(discontinuity), coming and going – impressions that constitute temporality and spatiality. In short, I identify because my ālaya-consciousness cannot let go of the need to identify, and I cannot let go of presentifying myself.

**Conclusion**

What Yogācāra scholars and practitioners identify, however, is an impasse. The ālaya-consciousness never stops operating. Yogācāra scholars argue that it is a pure potentiality from which permanence and impermanence, existence and non-existence are initiated. Nonetheless, scholar Yin Shun (1906–2005) argues that the concept of the ālaya-consciousness, understood this way, becomes *je ne sais quoi* that closely resembles a “first cause.” For him, ālaya-consciousness is a powerful tool to explicate not only why we are incapable of letting go of the self and of permanence, but also why, in philosophy and theory, we often replicate the same impasse. For us, we can understand perfectly that identification is an intersubjective process. Yet, when we explain how we identify, we are always tempted to assume that a permanent self is in operation.31

Yin Shun therefore suggests that we revisit Mādhyamaka Buddhism for a possible way out of this impasse. According to the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* [Diamond Sūtra]:

> All phenomena are like
> A dream, an illusion, a bubble and a shadow.
> Like a dew drop and a flash of lightning,
> Thus should you view them.32

The cinematic image and our process of identification operate in a way similar to a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, a dew drop, and a flash of lightning. If we simply say that, because it is transient, that it does not exist, we deny the fact that it is a reality initiated out of the twelve *nidānas*. If we say that it exists, we deny the fact that its existence is empty. A film appears to us as a reality that has its own existential value, one that is initiated from the existential value of the photographed being or object in the past. Yet, it remains a set of sense data, an assemblage of light and shadow that runs 24 frames per second. One reality is not more real than the other, and we have a penchant to attach ourselves not only to the image as that which exists, but also to our “selves” as those which exist. In this sense, the cinema is a technical milieu in which these two modes of existence
are neither identical nor different. In this technical milieu, identification is an intersubjective process. Yet, the intersubjectivity of such a process is often ignored both experientially and theoretically. It is because this entire process is driven, in the first place, by a *samskara* that carries memories from the past, memories from which the divide between the self and other, the spectator and the image, and the past and the future are all initiated.

**Notes**


11 (pp. 262–263), 58 (pp. 264–267), 68 (pp. 278–279), 262 (pp. 281–285), 274 (pp. 292–293), 297 (pp. 295–296), 309 (pp. 299–300), 319 (p. 302), 322 (pp. 304–305), 335 (pp. 308–309), 1171 (pp. 315–317), and 1173 (pp. 319–322). See also, Nāgārjuna, *Dazhidulun [Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra or Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom]*, trans. Kumārajiva (Taipei: Shihua guoji gufen youxian gongsi, 2007), juan 5:35–36 (pp. 233–234).


11. For a study of Six-Dynasty aesthetics, see, for example, Chen Chuanxi, *Liuchao hualun yanjiu [A Study of Six-dynasty Theories on Painting]* (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2015). A collection of art theories during this period can be found in Yu Anlan, ed., *Hualun congkan [Anthology of Theories on Painting]* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1989), in two volumes.


15. A collection of the writings of the Kyoto School philosophers can be found in Frederick Franck, ed., *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School and Its Contemporaries* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004).


20. See note 18.


26. Lo, Weishi fangyu [Introduction to Yogācāra Buddhism] (Hong Kong: The Dharmałakṣaṇa Buddhist Institute, 2008), pp. 188–189.


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