

## [Verchery on Cho, 'Seeing Like the Buddha: Enlightenment through Film'](#)

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**Francisca Cho.** *Seeing Like the Buddha: Enlightenment through Film*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017. xi + 177 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-6439-8; \$20.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-6438-1.

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Although the study of religion and film is a niche within the study of religion, it has been gaining traction in recent years with the appearance of several monographs and edited volumes on the topic. This is in response to a palpable demand: not only do scholars continue to diversify the types of media they incorporate into their research in an effort to challenge and broaden the study of religion's traditional bias toward the "primacy of text," but scholars are also increasingly looking to use films as a pedagogical aid in the classroom. As a generation of screen-addicted media consumers comes of age, video and other kinds of visual media become essential to how we learn and communicate. This opens exciting possibilities, but also creates a pressing need for methodologies that can engage filmic sources with as much critical rigor as one would apply to the study of texts. We teach students many methods of textual analysis: how to do close reading, question the socioeconomic factors that underlay a text's production, consider its materiality and ritual use, attend to intertextuality. We teach students how to *read*, but how do we teach them, and ourselves, how to *watch*?

Francisca Cho has been a leading voice in addressing these questions, having contributed to several publications in the area of religion and film, including a special issue of *Contemporary Buddhism* (2014), the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, edited by John Lyden (2009), *Teaching Religion and Film*, edited by Gregory J. Watkins (2008), *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*, edited by S. Brent Plate (2003), and *Imag(in)ing the Other: Filmic Visions of Community*, edited by S. Brent Plate and David Jasper (1999). Cho is notable for approaching film as more than a mere expository or didactic tool for representing religious teachings or practices, but as a primary source that can teach us new ways of seeing. Cho's primary claim in *Seeing Like the Buddha: Enlightenment through Film* is that films help us cultivate a type of attentive awareness that can be understood as a kind of Buddhist practice. Film can help us learn this practice of "seeing like the Buddha" in a way that mirrors the "visual program" of the temple of Borobudur, which guides the pilgrim from low through successively higher stages of realization (p. 20). The temple's first galleries feature didactic narrative iconography drawn from the *Karmavibhaṅga*, *Jātakamālā*, and *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, followed by nonnarrative depictions of the revelations at Maitreya's palace from the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, ultimately ascending to the highest level atop the monument, where the Buddha is aniconically depicted by an "empty stūpa" and "completely obscured and replaced by an open and panoramic view of the world" (pp. 102, 20). Cho argues that film can help us, too, ascend to this highest level, where to truly *see* the Buddha means, ironically,

not to see him at all. That is, where the Buddha ceases to be an *object* of perception and instead becomes the *means* of perception itself. This shift in perception, Cho argues, is the pinnacle of what Buddhism teaches and makes possible: namely, that “the seeing *of* the Buddha can be replaced with seeing *like* the Buddha ... without requiring his explicit form” (p. 24). Cho’s understanding of “Buddhism” not as a discrete object of perception (or study) but rather as a *mode* of perception means that Buddhist ways of seeing can be applied beyond the narrow sphere of ostensibly “Buddhist” works of art, and extend to non-Buddhist and even “secular” aesthetic works as well (p. 4). This is the goal toward which the book’s subsequent chapters gradually usher us.

Each chapter consists of close analysis of a particular film, many brimming with interpretive insights that can only be cursorily touched on here. Because the sequence of chapters mirrors Borobudur’s progression from “form” to “formlessness”—that is, from treating Buddhism as an *object* of representation to a *mode of perception* that is itself a kind of Buddhist practice—the book begins with two narrative feature films that deal with explicitly “Buddhist” content and hail from traditionally Buddhist cultures. In chapter 1, Cho analyzes Korean director Kim Kiduck’s *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... and Spring* (2004), which is set in a Buddhist monastery and explores foundational Buddhist doctrines like karma and the non-duality of *samsara* and *nirvana*. Chapter 2 discusses Thai director Nonzee Nimibutr’s *Nang Nak* (1999), which deals with death, gender, and the supernatural from a Thai Buddhist perspective. This chapter includes discussion of the methodologically problematic opposition of “Buddhism” and “folk religion,” as well as some salient reflections on deconstructing the boundary between imagination and reality in light of the Buddhist tenet that “‘reality’ itself is an illusion” (p. 65).

While we remain squarely in the realm of standard Buddhist doctrine in chapters 1 and 2, the next two chapters shift to Japanese films that are less explicitly Buddhist in their content—Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950) and Hirokazu Kore’eda’s *Maborosi* (1995)—thus beginning to mirror Borobudur’s progression from iconic representation toward an aniconic transcendence of form. Cho highlights how these films move away from didactic depictions of Buddhist teachings, to instead model a certain quality of perceptual awareness by attending to the ambiguities of experience—issues, for instance, such as uncertainty, subjectivity, and the multiplicity of truth—which are expressed through various filmic techniques, such as the nonlinear narrative structure of *Rashomon* and the deliberate use of shadow in *Maborosi*.

Finally, illustrating the ultimate stage of this shift from “*what* is seen to *how* one sees,” the final chapters turn to radically experimental nonnarrative works, devoid of any ostensibly Buddhist content or themes: the films of Terrence Malick, Andy Warhol’s *Empire* (1965), and Anthony Cerniello’s *Danielle* (2013). Although these films do not depict anything “Buddhist,” by turning our gaze toward perception itself, which Cho treats as a kind of Buddhist contemplative practice, these films make “art and aesthetic experiences into equivalents of the Buddha himself” (p. 1). This is the final stage of Cho’s visual program—analogue to the apex of Borobudur where the Buddha is “absent” because he is everywhere—which instantiates what Cho calls the “aesthetic vision” (p. 24): namely, a way of seeing that has transcended the need for Buddhist forms and instead sees Buddhism in everything, including ostensibly non-Buddhist works of art.

*Seeing Like the Buddha* draws on a variety of Buddhist scriptural and literary sources to situate its interpretive method within a longstanding legacy of Buddhist approaches to aesthetic analysis. These

include classic works of the Pāli Theravāda and Mahāyāna canons, and brief forays into Prajñāpāramitā literature and Madhyamaka philosophy. Cho introduces a few doctrinal concepts—*sūnyatā*, *trikāya* theory, *tathāgatagarbha* thought, and the teaching of Buddha-nature—all of which serve to argue for the non-duality of the ultimate and the conventional and, by extension, for the non-duality of formless Buddhist truth and concrete aesthetic forms like film. Cho discusses visualization practices drawn from both Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions—such as the many forms “recollection” of the Buddha (*buddhānussmṛti*) has taken across Buddhist cultures, the charnel ground contemplations of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sūtra*, and visualizations of the Pure Land inspired by the *Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra* and the *Pratyutpanna-Buddha-Saṃmukhāvasthita-Samādhi-Sūtra*—arguing that these visualizations can be likened to the kind of imaginative practice that filmic experience incites. Throughout her discussion, Cho also draws on a wide range of narrative and popular literature from around the Buddhist world (for example, Japanese *konjaku* literature, ghost stories, Chinese *zhiguai* and Japanese *setsuwa* [“accounts of the strange”], *jātaka* tales, and *apadāna* and *avadāna* literature), as well as the *Dao de jing*, traditional Chinese cosmology, Buddhist theories of art and ritual efficacy, Japanese poetic treatises, and even tracts on *yūgen* aesthetic theory and *Nō* drama.

*Seeing Like the Buddha* makes several salient contributions to the field. Of particular note is Cho’s theoretical approach. The book is a welcome expansion on a compelling claim Cho previously made in an essay for *Imag(in)ing Otherness*: “I turn to Buddhism as the *source* of my theory making rather than as the *object* of ideological clarification.... Buddhism is the instrument of my analysis rather than its target.”[1] In *Seeing Like the Buddha*, Cho models what such a project—namely, the deployment of Buddhism as a source rather than an object of theoretical investigation—might look like. This is valuable for at least two reasons. First, as many have noted, the traditional divide between “theory” and “data”—which makes the former the exclusive purview of scholarly authorities and relegates informants and religious “insiders” to the latter—has perpetuated precisely the kinds of problematic power dynamics that so much work in postcolonial, post-orientalist Buddhist studies, and in the humanities more broadly, has sought to dismantle.[2] Seeing Buddhism not only as a source of “data” but also as a longstanding tradition of sophisticated critical and theoretical inquiry in its own right—of relevance within but also beyond the boundaries of those geographical, historical, or cultural spheres traditionally labeled “Buddhist”—is welcome, both as a move toward more responsible scholarship and as a means of enriching critical theory in general.

This use of Buddhism-*qua*-theory also forces serious engagement with the question of what is a Buddhism film? This, in turn, raises the broader question of how we are to circumscribe the category of “Buddhism” itself. Throughout *Seeing Like the Buddha*, Cho urges us to “question the idea that the principle tenets of Buddhism are actually doctrines or statements of metaphysical truth. Instead, they may be understood as observations that induce a particular kind of practice” (p. 79). In the spirit of a Wilfred Cantwell-Smith or a Talal Asad, Cho sees Buddhism not as a discrete set of propositional assertions or metaphysical statements of belief but as the practice of a certain quality of attention. This allows her to integrate ostensibly secular or “non-Buddhist” materials into her analysis, forcing us to challenge and expand preconceived notions about what counts as “Buddhist.” While this could frustrate some readers—who might respond with the familiar anxiety that expanding a term’s definition too broadly risks rendering it meaningless—the very questions this approach raises are methodologically useful, not only for Buddhist studies but also for the study of religion as a whole.

For example, we might consider one salient outcome of Cho's analysis: its attempt to distinguish "Asian cinema" from "Buddhist cinema," by which Cho means films of any geographic or cultural provenance that exemplify a quality of attention that "shifts from telling stories to aiding the practice of focused seeing" (pp. 102, 22). This deconstructs the simplistic binaries of "East" and "West" that have occluded so much of the complex transnational influences that have shaped Buddhism throughout its history. Cho writes, "the origins of Buddhism may be Asian, but Buddhism itself negates the idea that it must be embodied in any particular historical and cultural form." Without denying the specificities of a particular cultural, geographic, or historical setting, this helps us move away from cultural essentialism, as in Cho's analysis of the film *Maborosi*. Without compromising any of its Japanese features, Cho argues that the film can resonate with non-Japanese audiences by virtue of its "Buddhist" qualities, which transcend cultural or geographic particularity (p. 106). While this opens many questions for further discussion, it also models an approach of value for all areas of Buddhist studies, whereby innovations arising from specific contexts might be appreciated for their historical, geographic, or cultural particularities without foreclosing discussion of their broader significance and applicability beyond the confines of their particularities of origin.

While this expansive approach to Buddhism allows for fruitful new interpretive possibilities, some might take issue with the teleological bias in this book's trajectory; that is, the way it moves from "elementary" teachings to more advanced ones, showing a clear preference for the latter: form is superseded by formlessness, the iconic by the aniconic, narrative cinema by experimental cinema, the conventionally sacred by the sacralization of the secular. In adopting this structure, the book espouses what it calls the "Mahāyāna worldview" that sees foundational doctrinal principles, like karma, as preliminary didactic teachings to be succeeded by higher levels of nondiscursive, nonnarrative truth (p. 21). On this basis, *Seeing Like the Buddha* situates "popular" or more mainstream narrative films lower in its hierarchy of "seeing" than highbrow art-house films, like the stream-of-consciousness style of Malick or Warhol's *Empire*, a single eight-hour shot of the Empire State Building. Regardless of whether one's personal filmic preferences jibe with Cho's own taste, we might recall Pierre Bourdieu's famous insight in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* that "to the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts ... corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers."<sup>[3]</sup> Without reducing art to merely the expression of social class, it remains incumbent upon us to consider who—for reasons of socioeconomic, educational background, or, as Bourdieu reminds us, the not uncomplicated issue of "taste"—might find themselves excluded from this approach to Buddhism, in which the highest levels of realization are mapped onto aesthetic works that, for better or worse, are the domain of the cultural elite. While this may not be unlike the class politics that have always been attached to Buddhism, where the possibility of ultimate enlightenment was likewise often assumed to be the exclusive purview of monastics and religious virtuosos, it is nevertheless the case that for much of the Buddhist world today, it is precisely these "lower" mainstream expository teachings that are of central importance. While this issue does get acknowledged in places—the discussion of popular *avadāna* literature, for instance, notes that "the importance and ubiquity of such narratives in the lives of ordinary Buddhists have not always been appreciated by outside observers, who might consider them inferior to doctrinal texts" (p. 30)—the structure of this book remains beholden to this hierarchy of truth.

By the same token, *Seeing Like the Buddha* is undergirded by what some might see as a modernist bent that focuses on meditation and issues of perception. This approach would resonate with many Buddhists today, but not all. Indeed, the view that Buddhism can be understood as primarily

concerned with cultivating mindfulness intersects ongoing debates about the assumed primacy of meditation practice within Buddhism historically. Once thought to be Buddhism's central preoccupation, scholars have argued, the role of meditation, though not unimportant, has been overestimated due to modernist proclivities for focusing on individual psychological experience. Others have shown meditation to be traditionally inseparable from, and sometimes subordinate to, other kinds of soteriological concerns and ritual practices.[4] While cultivating capacities of attention is undoubtedly valuable, for many Buddhists—both historically and for those today whose practice falls outside the trends of “Buddhist Modernism” (see McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* [2008])—the importance of meditation and mindfulness is often secondary to other kinds of more “mundane” concerns, such as issues surrounding purity, precepts, karma, or familial and social obligations. Although *Seeing Like the Buddha* never claims to speak for all Buddhists, and indeed argues for the soteriological value of attention to the quotidian and mundane, the project does place mindful attention at the heart of what it calls “Buddhist.” While many would emphatically agree with this, it remains imperative that we recall the diversity of Buddhist practice, and guard against the tendency to inadvertently dismiss less “modernist” forms of Buddhism—which have always been central to what it means to practice Buddhism, especially in Asia—in favor of the current upsurge of mainstream interest in meditation and mindfulness.

Finally, *Seeing Like the Buddha* is quite strong in its attention to the formal features of cinematic language, such as focal length, camera movement, color, lighting, and composition. However, the book, admittedly, has a strong visualist bias. While this is integral to the overall argument about Buddhist practices of *seeing*, it tends to overlook one of film's most powerful (and underappreciated) elements: sound. Like the paramount yet often ignored role that olfaction plays in taste, the role of sound in film inextricably shapes how and what we think we see. This issue intersects larger critiques of the modern propensity for visualism, in which epistemology and visuality are closely tied (as when Bourdieu says that *seeing*, “voir,” is actually a function of *knowledge*, “savoir,”[5] or as we find in any number of colloquial examples in the English language where understanding is expressed through visual analogies, for example, I *see* what you mean, I *looked into* the issue, I *speculate*, etc.). Many fascinating works have contested the supposed primacy of vision and visualism in (Western) intellectual history,[6] concluding that vision has not *always* been the primary seat of knowledge and that it is often inextricably connected to other sensory modes of knowing.[7] The symbiotic interplay of vision and sound in film is a powerful example of this. While a study of Buddhist modes of seeing need not necessarily include a discussion of sound, a study of film can scarcely justify avoiding it. Indeed, attention to sound would align well with Cho's argument that to *truly* see the Buddha results in his disappearance: it is a common maxim in filmmaking that the more masterful the sound design, the least likely it is to be noticed.

Despite these issues—intended here primarily as questions for further reflection rather than critiques per se—*Seeing Like the Buddha* remains a very valuable contribution to the field. It is strongly recommended for all students of Buddhism with an interest in film, the study of religion, and aesthetics more generally, as well as in the intersections of religion, media, and popular culture. Because of the fruitful methodological and definitional questions it raises—as well as its deft interweaving of textual and non-textual sources—this book would also be particularly productive in an undergraduate theories and methods in the study of religion course, since Cho provides sufficient contextualization for all the major Buddhist doctrinal categories under discussion (*śūnyatā*, *tathāgatagarbha*, *trikāya*, etc.) to make this book accessible to those with little or no Buddhist studies



background. In the final analysis, we might take a leaf from Cho's own evaluative method to assess the overall merit of this book. Throughout *Seeing Like the Buddha*, Cho wants to orient us away from Buddhist metaphysical concerns into practical ones; citing Buddhism's attention to ritual efficacy—which traditionally focuses less on what a sacred image *looks like* and more on what it *does*—we might ask, then, what does *Seeing Like the Buddha* help us do? Cho's goal is to argue that film can train us to see like the Buddha by teaching us to see differently. This is not merely what the book *argues* but also what it *does*. In other words, like film itself, Cho's *Seeing Like the Buddha* teaches us how to *see differently*—and that is a deeply worthwhile and rewarding exercise.

## Notes

[1]. Francisca Cho, "Imagining Nothing and Imagining Otherness in Buddhist Film," in *Imag(in)ing Otherness: Filmic Visions of Living Together*, ed. S. Brent Plate and David Jasper (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), 180.

[2]. For example, Donald S. Lopez, ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Victor Sōgen Hori, "The Study of Buddhist Monastic Practice," *The Eastern Buddhist* 30, no. 1 (1997): 239-261; and Michael Herzfeld, "Anthropology: A Practice of Theory," *International Social Science Journal* 49, no. 153 (September 1997): 301-318.

[3]. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 1.

[4]. Robert H. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen* 42, no. 3 (1995): 228-283; Eric M. Greene, "Meditation, Repentance, and Visionary Experience in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism" (PhD diss., UC Berkeley, 2012), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/92v7t1cg>; and Erik Braun and David L. McMahan, eds., *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[5]. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 2.

[6]. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, eds., *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

[7]. David Howes, "Cross-talk between the Senses," *Senses & Society* 1, no. 3 (2006): 381-390; and Gemma Calvert, Charles Spence, and Barry E. Stein, eds., *The Handbook of Multisensory Processes* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004).

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