



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 11
Issue 2 October 2007

Article 1

8-10-2016

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Recommended Citation

Conroy, Melissa (2016) "Seeing with Buddha's Eyes: Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter...and Spring," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol11/iss2/1>

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Seeing with Buddha's Eyes: Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter...and Spring

Abstract

Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... and Spring presents an alternative way of seeing in contemporary film by embodying vision through the eyes of the Buddha. *Spring, Summer* creates Buddhist subjectivity by keeping vision situated in either the characters or in one of the Buddhas. The narrative of the film concerns how a disciple must learn the way of the Buddha. The visual component of the film likewise does this. Through examining the construction of shots, one sees that the film also teaches the disciple and the audience how to see themselves, and each other, in the way of the Buddha.

In an issue of *Crosscurrents*, S. Brent Plate and Margaret R. Miles suggested the following line of argument for religion and film scholars: "By moving beyond the search for religious characters in film, scholars can look at the larger religious questions involved in the social construction of reality through visual terms."¹ Plate and Miles argue that scholars must move beyond simple narrative analyses of films and towards "explicitly visual analyses."² This paper draws on the filmic construction of reality in order to investigate the religious subjectivity that is created through the work of the camera. Film images, both in how they are shot and from whose eyes they are seen, produce a specific kind of religious subjectivity.

From Luce Irigaray's critique of the fantasy of the all-seeing gaze to Page duBois' desire to give a place from which the disembodied eye of the gaze sees,³ feminists have criticized the legacy of the "disembodied eye" that has created the masculine, god-like position of the gaze of theory. In particular, Donna Haraway's influential essay, "The Persistence of Vision," has accurately pinpointed how this "God-trick" vision has been culturally, linguistically, and theoretically constructed along patriarchal and Christian lines. Haraway's "God-trick" critiques the disembodied place the male Western gaze of theory has created. Suggesting that the "God-trick" is an illusion that creates the belief in infinite vision and thus a detached observer perspective from which "objective" scientific theory is

formulated, Haraway argues that "[t]here is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines; there are only highly specific visual possibilities...."⁴ All theory is a place of seeing. Haraway's goal in deconstructing the "God-trick" of vision is to examine the implicit assumptions, Christian and otherwise, in the idea of theory as an abstract, detached place from which to see.

In following Haraway's project, this paper seeks to investigate the place from which we see. It argues that the religious element of film is not only the world created in the narrative of the film but also in the way a film trains the viewer to see in this world. Miles has argued that films present "ways of relating to other people." She writes,

In this sense, film resembles religion, a worldview, which is fundamentally about how one relates to a larger universe: a natural world, people within one's communities, and who is framed as "other" in order to say who "we" are. All of those things are central – even more central, I would claim, than particular beliefs or practices.⁵

The place from which we see affects how one is able to engage with the things seen. Haraway's suggestion is to work towards a "feminist objectivity." This new place of seeing is one that rejects the "God-trick" of infinite vision and insists on the embodied nature of all seeing: "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object.

It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.”⁶ This paper investigates an alternative way of seeing that exists within contemporary film.

The Korean film, *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... and Spring* (Ki-duk Kim, 2003) presents an alternative way of seeing in contemporary film. Rather than filming the characters through the "God-trick" or even through the use of the other, this film embodies vision by using the eyes of the Buddha. *Spring, Summer* creates Buddhist subjectivity by keeping vision situated in either the characters or in one of the Buddhas or bodhisattvas (a "future Buddha" that has refused Nirvana in order to stay in the realm of dying and becoming in order to help all creatures towards Enlightenment). The narrative of the film concerns how a disciple must learn the way of the Buddha. Each season the young disciple learns one of the Four Noble Truths until he, like his Master, becomes enlightened. The construction of cinematography shows that the visual component of the film, like the narrative, likewise teaches how one learns the way of the Buddha. Through examining the construction of shots, one sees that the film also teaches the disciple and the audience how to see themselves, and each other, in the way of the Buddha. In this paper I will explore three ways the film uses the visual in a way that rejects classical Hollywood codes of cinema in order to create Buddhist subjectivity: 1) by the frequent use of shot/reverse shot, 2) by using the eyes of the Buddha for establishing shots, and 3) the use of parallel editing.

Traditional film making uses a technique that is called "shot/reverse shot" which establishes the viewpoint of the subject in the film and the object of the subject's gaze. Typically the first "shot," shot one, would be of the object in question and is then followed by a "reverse shot" or shot two, the shot that establishes the viewer within the film.

Film theorist Kaja Silverman's analysis of the theory of the semiotic construction of cinema suggests that the viewer's subjectivity is created by the work of editing: a subject is created through the work of the camera shots. It is in this vein that the very construction of cinema, especially classical Hollywood cinema, reveals itself to be in line with the ideology of patriarchal Christianity. Hollywood cinema's interlocking shots typically work to create a viewer that is omnipotent, omnipresent and yet absent, thus placing identification of the viewer with the position of God. The camera shots do this in service of the implicit rules of cinema. For example, the absence of the spectator is created by the rule of shot formation (shot one must always be followed by shot two that is no more than 180 degrees from the original) functions to disavow the presence of the camera.

These explicitly religious implications take on specific forms when used in particular religious films. For example, Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) often places the viewer in the position of Mary, thus in the position where one witnesses Christ's torture. On the other end of the spectrum there is Akkad's *The*

Message (1976) which never has a reverse shot for shots that are seen from the position of Muhammad. Out of respect to Islamic tradition, the figure of the Prophet is never shown, and interestingly, the spectator assumes the position of Muhammad during those scenes.

Spring, Summer likewise embodies vision in a particular way. In the first few minutes of the film we see a shot of a Buddha, followed by the Master. Both shots are head-on shots of each character's face, and are filmed in 180 degrees from each other. Following this the film almost immediately repeats this sequence by having another shot of the Master followed by another 180 degree shot, this time of the Master's young disciple. This parallel shot formation aligns the Master with the Buddha, and shows that the Master looks at the boy just as the Buddha looks at the Master.

Later on in the film ("Summer") the 180 degree shot-reverse shot is used when a sick young woman prays in front of the Buddha. The shots are constructed in such a way that the statue of the Buddha appears to be watching over the woman. As the woman prays and sleeps the audience sees first the shot of the woman and then a reverse shot of the Buddha. The woman and Buddha seem to be looking at each other. Once the woman falls asleep the audience sees a shot from behind the Buddha. We are seeing the woman as the Buddha sees her. Very late in the film ("Winter") this sequence is repeated when another woman prays and cries in front

of the statue. The camera shots alternate between the woman's crying face and the half-smiling smile of the Buddha's face. Seeing with Buddha's perspective we are encouraged, as viewers, to identify with Buddha's compassion as he watches the woman's suffering.

The establishing shot is a shot that delineates space: it is "a shot, usually involving a distant framing, that shows the spatial relations among the important figures, objects, and setting in a scene...."⁷ It "sets up" the scene, often by use of a long shot. One may think of how an establishing shot of house might be used before the audience is shown the interior set of a house. It is often a detached shot, meaning that it is a view that belongs to no one. There is no reverse shot to the establishing shot and so the point of view is the cinematic equivalent of the omnipresent narrator who knows all about every character's thoughts and is not a character per se in the story. For this reason, the establishing shot is sometimes called the "God's eye view" because it shows the larger setting shot from above the scene.

Such a description of vision has specific consequences in feminist thought. In particular, Donna Haraway has written about the dangers of the "god trick" of vision. She states,

"[t]his idea of vision that seems to behold everything at once, a seeing that seems to take no risks, to be free of embodiment, and to pretend to a neutral position free of all desire – this vision has surely never existed. . . .”⁸

Traditional establishing shots in Hollywood cinema likewise give a view from nowhere and do not locate the shot by use of a reverse shot. The long shot of a setting, for example, is not embodied in a particular character.

While *Spring, Summer* has some establishing shots that have no reverse shot, it also has several striking instances where the establishing shot is embodied in a character or, more interestingly, in a statue or carving of a Buddha or bodhisattva. *Spring, Summer's* use of shot/reverse shot during these establishing shots places the "view from nowhere" into the eyes of the Buddha. Shots that establish the grander view of the monastery, the focus of the action and the valleys around the monastery, are situated through reverse shots of Buddhist statues.

In "Spring," the audience sees a little boy climbing up a hill to see the view from up high. The shot is of a lake and the floating monastery. The reverse shot is of the little boy and a Buddha carved into the top of the hill. The first shot, the establishing shot of the temple from afar, is given embodiment by being placed into the eyes of the boy and the Buddha. In "Summer," this shot is repeated when we see the boy, now a young man, climbing the same hill to see the mountain paths

that surround the valley. Once again a reverse shot is given so that we know it is not only the young man who sees but also the stone Buddha.

At the film's dramatic conclusion in "Winter," the monk carries a statue of a bodhisattva to the top of a distant hillside. Placing the bodhisattva statue in front of him, the monk meditates behind it. The shots of the distant monastery in the lake and the mountains surrounding it are perceived to be from the eyes of the bodhisattva firstly, and the monk secondly. The shots, traditional long shots that establish the scene, which are normally given at the beginning of a film, are here placed at the end of the film once the bodhisattva, via the monk, has climbed to this distant spot on the hillside.

Parallelism is "the process whereby the film cues the spectator to compare two or more distinct elements by highlighting some similarity."⁹ There are several repetitive shots in the film that serve to highlight the particularly Buddhist narrative.

Several times in the film the Buddhist idea of impermanence is stressed. Not only does the title of the film suggest the passing of seasons but the film itself also draws attention to the impermanence of life by use of images: one sees a river flowing, clouds floating across the sky, and the beauty of the changing colors of fall leaves.

The Buddhahood of all creatures is stressed in the film by subtle use of animals. In one scene the young monk is shown carrying a statue of Buddha in his backpack, with only the head of the Buddha peeping out. Later on the audience sees the older monk with a similar backpack now carrying a cat with its disgruntled head peeping out. The equation of the cat face with the face of the Buddha is one that is deliberate in the film. In a similar equation, in "Winter" a young mother, her face covered with a purple scarf, arrives at the monastery. She has an accident and drowns in the icy waters of the lake. Her face is not shown to the audience throughout this sequence but her purple scarf is later laid out and the statue of the Buddha is placed upon it. Once again the audience is reminded of the Buddhahood of all creatures. The compassion extended to the dead woman and her equation with the Buddha, reminds the audience that all creatures are "future Buddhas" and need compassion.

The film ends with a new season of spring. The young monk is now the Master and is shown studying a child's face for a drawing. Just as the monk was once a boy who tortured animals, the new disciple is now shown tormenting a turtle. All the while the bodhisattva sits on the hillside, looking down with infinite compassion, knowing that the child, like every being, will make the same mistakes as his teacher. The end of the film shows us the bodhisattva viewing the monastery

and indeed the world with compassion. Film images in *Spring, Summer* produce a Buddhist vision of the world that we, as an audience, are invited to share.

¹ See Margaret R. Miles and S. Brent Plate's "Hospitable Vision: Some Notes on the Ethics of Seeing Film" in Spring 2004 *Crosscurrents*.²

² *Ibid.*, 1.

³ duBois, Page, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 9-10.

⁴ Haraway, Donna, "The Persistence of Vision," in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Kate Conboy, Nadia Medina, Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 283-295, quotation at 285.

⁵ See Margaret R. Miles' interview in *The Harvard Gazette* on 6 June 1996.

⁶ Haraway, Donna, "The Persistence of Vision," 284-285.

⁷ Bordwell, David, and Thompson, Kristin, "A Glossary of Film Terms." From Wayne Cox's professional website, <http://www2.ac.edu/faculty/wcox/>, in the English 102 folder, which is only available when the class is being taught, downloaded February 15, 2007.

⁸ Haraway, Donna, "The Persistence of Vision," 285.

⁹ Bordwell, David, and Thompson, Kristin, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 7th Edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 61.