

World, Symbol, Gaze

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Abstract

As it is written in the *Bhagavad Gita*: 1

The mind wanders,

It's restless at any moment, It needs to be controlled, Accept self-discipline.

The three texts in this portfolio follow a critical, reflexive, and self-constraining first- person perspective. They are, in order: the “World” text, the “Symbol” text, and the “Gaze” text, with the “World” text as the starting point. The “World” text specifically analyzes Khyentse Norbu’s narrative film, *Travellers and Magicians*, and points out the Māyā characteristics of film. The “Symbol” text reflects on the distance between human and the God by combining semiotics and personal experience of devoting self to Buddhism with a research method that is mutually referenced with the Perennial philosophy. Finally, inspired by the first two texts, the “Gaze” text is a summative and complementary text. It takes Benjamin’s research as a starting point to reflect on the ritual value of contemporary spiritual films. These three texts point to each other and suggest a research style and methodology that is closely linked to personal experience, religion, and art.

Keywords: spiritual film, Māyā, symbolism, ritual, Bhagavad Gita

1. World

1.1 The World in Narrative Film

1.1.1 Introduction

Perhaps we can say that the magic of narrative films lies its ability to show us the unreal nature of real life by presenting an “unreal world”, namely, to see the truth in illusion. We shape a world to show what we see — such as text, image, what we want to see... and to show what we don’t see — such as the thoughts and feelings of the filmmakers, and things we are unfamiliar with. Film has a mystical quality, just like Māyā.

In the concept of Hinduism, Māyā creates and is the phantasmagorical world itself in which we live. The Chinese scholar Wen Zhong said, “The nature of Māyā is to make us believe that death is eternal, and that the dark is light, and that the illusory is real. Just as our senses deceive us day and night... there is no permanent world that exists.” Similar concepts are also found in Buddhism, such as when the *Diamond Sutra* says:

*As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp, A mock show, dew drops, or a bubble, A dream, a lightning flash, or cloud,
So should one view what is conditioned.*

In Perennial philosophy, the concept of Māyā was an important point that influenced scholars to shift from dualism to non-dualism in the study of *Brahma Gita*, leading them to believe that the paradigm of the *Brahma Gita* was essentially non-dualist. In turn, it influences and transforms their ontological thoughts. Many religions depict reality and illusion, just as in Hinduism, Atman- Māyā are come in pairs. The Māyā is unquestionably illusory as opposed to the ultimate truth, the Atman. However, they have a non-dualist relationship, and they are not contradictory. The Māyā is the manifestation, radiation, and representation of the Atman, and the Atman can

transform into an infinite form of reality through the Māyā. Thus, it has been suggested that, on the one hand, Māyā is a veil that prevents human beings from fully seeing and understanding reality. On the other hand, it is also a manifestation of reality, a divine incarnation that reveals and manifests the One, or Atman, on “all levels of reality”.

This article does not suggest that there is any necessary or causal connection between the concept of Māyā in Hinduism and the film ontology. In other words, this is not an attempt to project the concept of Hinduism onto film, nor is it an attempt to better understand the Māyā theory through its explanatory appeal to film. Instead, I want to examine the two side by side in order to better understand the possibilities and limitations of meaning and signification. Because I believe that, in their dialogue, they reveal insights that we may not see when exploring independently.

1.1.2 What Is the World?

The Yogi said, “Everything that exists in this world is the expression of thoughts, but thoughts themselves can only be expressed in words. Through these numerous words, unseen thoughts are revealed. This is the meaning conveyed by *The Vedas*.” The Māyā is made up of Nāmarūpa, which means “all mental or conscious phenomena”, as well as “all physical phenomena”. Similar to these, a film is ostensibly a series of combinations of variations in camera angle, distance, dialogue, duration, composition, and action. In narrative film, these form the framework (or external structure) of the world from which the meaning and content of the film is born. Why are films illusory, and why do we derive meaning from these combinations of cinematic languages, or see things that we may not have seen?

Is a cup a cup?

I had an image in my mind of my Guru holding a cup as an example. And I said, yes, of course it is a cup.

Is this really a cup? He asked again. *It looks cylindrical and white, with some water in it... Is this really a cup? Can we call this base a cup? Can we call this handle a cup?*

If these aren't cups, how come they all add up to A CUP?

...

I think the unreal nature of life is similar to that of film. Narrative film imitates life and uses deceptive structures and our imaginations to convince us of our senses. In everyday communication, we often refer to “real life” as if it were a self-evident category: an empirical, factual, “apparent” reality. It is often used to denounce its opposite: fantasy, dream, imagination. However, after careful consideration, our life is not as real as we think, there is always a side of unreality. Sometimes, we experience unexpected dramatic events, such as death, marriage, bankruptcy. But more often, the unreality is reflected in daily details. For example, we can't recall what we were doing on the afternoon of August 9, 2012. The events that happened long ago seem like a dream. Yes, dream. To cite an example from my own everyday experience, I am a person who often dreams when I sleep. Sometimes when I first open my eyes, I still think I'm dreaming. I don't know who I am, if I'm in a familiar room, if my mother is talking... Then the dream sensation gradually recedes until I am fully awake. There are many other examples, such as a mirage in a desert, hallucinated music or voices, colour blindness, signals from a person I love who doesn't love me, a rope that looks like a snake from a distance...

Going back to the cup, we call it a cup because it has the shape of a cylinder, it can hold water, it can sit on a table... all of these characteristics appear on the same object, the *thing*. Because we have those impressions of it, we call it “cup”. In life, we often misunderstand or ignore things, because we are always projecting our own view of things; we are always looking for meaning and patterns, filling in the blanks.

Films adapt to our reflections of life and the things around us, and use the cinematic language to persuade us to feel meaning and contentment. Sometimes the lens makes our projection accentuate some features of reality while downplaying others, presenting various elements in a negative or positive way. In the film *Travellers and Magicians*, for example, when showing the concentration of a man who shoots an arrow (such scenes are usually accompanied by a tense atmosphere): with squinting eyes on his face, his hands are drawn with the bow. Contrary to the close-up of this image, the lower body of the man is not needed to be shown in this scene, because excess information can damage the tension in the imagery. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Travellers and Magicians, Dir: Khyentse Norbu, 2021

Besides, the crosscutting of scenes in the film allows our brain to imagine more information and to build speculation. At the beginning of the film, the scene of a group of men shooting arrows and shouting in an excited mood is cut back and forth with the main character going to the post office alone to pick up a letter, to contrast. This gives us an instant hint: “This character is different and withdrawn, and he has no interest in group activities.” In fact, the plot later validates our speculation, that is, he, the main character, is different from the people who live in the same village. He decided to leave that place.

Like in those examples, these are languages that we don’t consciously notice when we’re watching films, or we just see them in very different ways. Both of these ways of seeing are understandable, but we are rarely aware of them simultaneously. When I watched the film, I was first deceived by its structure. And when I analyze the film *Travellers and Magicians*, as I did above, these structures come back. These make up the film and support the development of the Māyā world, the land of cinematic fantasy.

It’s as though the unreal character of the film is just oscillating between the two shores of dreaming and waking. In a dream, we don’t understand exactly how this dream occurs; we can only be aware of it, and then wake up. It’s as looking closely at the cup in my hand and seeing that it has a bottom, that it’s cylindrical, that it’s white, that it has a handle...

But I keep forgetting, “I thought it was just a cup!”

1.1.3 The Unfolding of the World

Dreams are not real, but only in dreams do I have a chance to wake up. We can only act in this world, in the Māyā, and only in the Māyā do we have the chance to reach the Brahma.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, truth is told as allegorical stories. For a narrative film, the world is unfolded by the story. A story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and lasts for a period of time. It is also complemented by the actions of the characters, the fate of the characters, and the changes of the scenario. Stories or fables often support what is invisible, namely the creator’s feelings, the creator’s thinking, and what is behind his thinking. On the other hand, the emotions we experience when watching a film lead us to understand the connotation of the film. The Yogi said, “All knowledge, whether worldly or spiritual, resides within ourselves. Most of the time, they remain in cover because they are not discovered by us...” As in the case of a narrative film, we usually hope to glean some kind of truth from it. However, this truth is not given to us by the film, but evoked by our own emotions and experiences when we are watching the film. Khyentse Norbu’s film, *Travellers and Magicians*, is a good example.

Khyentse Norbu, also known as Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, is not only a film director, but also one of the world’s most famous Buddhist Gurus. As a Buddhist Guru and a Bhutanese aristocrat, his move to becoming a film maker was not well understood by his fellow citizens, who respect him greatly. But when it comes to motivation, he thought his goal in making films was to promote Buddhism. “If you look at the world today, the most influential thing is the media, and it’s the moving image,” he says, “For better or worse, everyone is

influenced by it... I can't think of a faster and more powerful way to communicate. Wouldn't it be much easier and more efficient if we could teach the Dharma in a way that everyone would be happy to accept?"

In *Travellers and Magicians*, the director uses a dual structure such as the "a story within a story" or the "Butterfly dream" to compose the film, thus guiding the Buddhist experience, which is the experience of Impermanence. Set in Bhutan, the film tells the story of two young people: Dondup, a college graduate, and Tashi, the son of a farmer. They all live in a small, rural village and are not satisfied with their present life, wanting to leave their current circumstances. As mentioned before, Dondup, the young man who doesn't like archery, receives a letter and decides to go to America to pursue his dream. On his journey, he meets a monk, a 19-year-old girl, and her grandfather, an old man selling apples, and other travellers. On their way, the monk tells them a story: the story of Tashi. Tashi was sent to a magic school by his father to learn skills of manipulating reality, but he always day dreamed of "getting a sweet love", and so abandoned his studies. On the other hand, his younger brother is eager to learn magic. One day, while the younger brother was making him a magical herbal drink, Tashi fell into a bizarre fantasy, and while Tashi is stumbling into romantic love with painful complications, Dondup, in real life and in the parallel story, has met a series of problems and begins to question the purpose of his trip, which is "whether the grass is greener in America".

The director's arrangement equalises the length of the two stories, thus indicating that fantasy and reality are equally important. In realistic narrative film, the expressions of "fantasy" and "reality" in the film usually have a clear boundary. Similar to the way dreams or dreamscapes are portrayed in classic Hollywood films (the visual effect of dizziness and chaos or discord), in this film, the director makes fantasy or illusion distinct with clear visual cues. The lack of colour in the image and the faded-out voice of the monk reminds the audience that they should not interpret what is to follow as reality.

In both fantasy and reality, the actions of the two main characters work towards their goals and aspirations. However, just as the dream is not controlled by the dreamer, fate pays no mind to their preferences. Dondup wants to go to the distant United States, but he always misses the bus. We can't help but doubt the feasibility of attaining his goal. When Tashi's passions for the woman he dreamed lead him to make one bad decision after another, we pity him in the pain his conscience caused him. Both characters reflect the audience's own dreams and the experiences of seeing those dreams shattered. The film moves back and forth between the framing story and its internal narrative, inviting the viewer to experience the emotional turmoil of the two protagonists, as emotions shape and reshape their behaviour and influence the behaviour of those around them. When Dondup hears the monk talk about Tashi falling in love with a beautiful woman, he also begins to notice the beauty of the young women around him. In this way, the content and stories of the film evoke our own experiences and our sympathy for them. The film evokes our emotions, while our eyes, ears and brains process the language of the film coherently, we become just another traveller, seeking to find a change that resolves our own conflicts, while watching the film.

In *Travellers and Magicians*, fantasy and reality alternate consciously, and the filmmakers draw the audience into worlds that seem to exist and not exist. Worlds that are shaped by these interrelated Buddhist realities. The audience becomes acquainted with the story of the protagonists in the film and thus feels the Buddhist truth that life is the illusory essence of innumerable interdependent realities. In this film, emotion is connected to desire, desire to illusion, and finally, illusion to reality. The role of hallucinations is to reveal their origin. In this way, by seeing this world, we hope to see the world itself, see the truth in Māyā.

2. Symbol

2.1 Symbols are Established in the Absence of God — A Study of Religious Ritual and Text

In one sense, we cannot think unless we are aided by symbols... In another sense, everything in the universe can be regarded as a symbol. The whole universe is a symbol, and God is the essence behind the universe. The symbol is only established in the absence of God. As the ancient Chinese essay, *Analects of Confucius Ba Yi* says: "Sacrifice to the ancestors as if they were present, and sacrifice to the gods as if they were present. Confucius said, 'If I do not attend the sacrifice myself, it is the same as if there were no sacrifice at all.'" It is because of God's absence that the substitute of God is placed on the altar in his place. The symbols were created in the absence of God, and God can only exist in this way. Now, what kind of symbol is it? In what processes does this symbol work?

2.2 The Tradition of Using Sacred Objects in Tibetan Buddhism

One of the most common symbols in religion is the "sacred object". Some sacred objects have a direct connection with God, such as a Buddha statue, a Buddhist Thang-ka, or a Jesus statue, which usually represents the Buddha or Jesus himself. They are the most obvious symbols to understand. Some sacred objects have no direct connection to God, but to the Dhamma (here, it means "the law of nature"), or they represent the path to the Moksha or the "Highest Release", such as Buddhist prayer wheels, Dharma wheels, and lotus flowers. These

sacred objects become symbols through a historical process of meaning formation, during which they are constantly used and consolidated. Usually, the symbolic object is something obscure, unknown, and covered. Sacred objects are often used in conjunction with rituals. Last August, I attended various ceremonies in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of Yushu, Qinghai Province, in China. The forms of these rituals are complex and diverse, ranging from small and personal, such as scripture chanting, to large-scale with multiple participants, such as smoke offerings (Figure 2). Smoke offerings are alms that consecrate smoke into food, mainly for the consumption of unseen creatures or gods.



Figure 2. *Smoke offering, Qing Hai province, Qi Zhuang, 2020*

When these sacraments are repeated in a devotional spirit, they have a lasting effect: Temples, rituals and even sacred objects in these areas have such an effect that even the most anti-religious and unspiritual visitors are bound to experience something very “sacred” as they walk through them. Some Perennial philosophers believe, however, that we should not think that there is a presence of the holy spirit in the ritual, and thus worship it: “The divine presence within the religious site, building and shrine, the one evoked by the traditional ritual, the one intrinsic to the object, name, and appearance of the sacred ritual — all these are a real presence, but not the real presence of God or their embodiment. It is the real presence of something else. It may reflect divine reality, but is not divine reality.” I will reserve my opinion on this statement for the moment. What is the “other” that the presence has covered? How do believers interact with the “other” through the use of holy objects and rituals?

In my personal experience, relative to other religions, I am more familiar with the relics, traditions, and legends of Tibetan Buddhism. Most Tibetans hope that they can reach the Sukhāvātī (Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss) through the help of monks after death, so that they can be personally enlightened by the Buddha and be freed from the suffering of reincarnation to achieve the purpose of Nirvana, or liberation. On the Pargor Street in Lhasa, almost everyone turns prayer wheels in their hands. Each Prayer wheel contains scriptures, and each turn is equal to reciting the scriptures once. A certain number of recitations will lead a person to a better afterlife and even liberation. It seems to me that religious rituals have the power to liberate or to deviate from liberation, depending on the will of the person using them.

Most people do not seek spirituality and liberation, but rather a religion that gives them emotional fulfilment, prayer response, supernatural powers, and partial liberation in heaven after death. These people want the power they have gained to be used for their own purposes, but reinforcing the concept of “I” makes the practice goal of Anattā (non-self) and complete liberation, increasingly distant. At the same time, there is a small group of people who earnestly seek spirituality and desire liberation, for whom the most effective means are rituals, “repetitions of sutras”, and sacraments. They are strongly reminded of the eternal origin through these actions and words. It is by immersing themselves in symbols, learning to be constantly reminded of the true nature of all things, that they can most easily reach the symbolized God. In their mind, the liberation of self is inseparable from the

liberation of remembering others all the time. Thus, the power of the prayer wheel as a religious symbol or symbolized object lies in the highest awareness of the user.

2.3 The “Absence” as a Symbol in Rituals

The “blank” as symbol exists in some rituals. This symbol points to the “nothingness” in order to attain the highest liberation.

Some Perennial philosophers believe that ritual is for public worship, while spiritual practice is for the individual. In my opinion, rituals and spiritual practices are one and the same. Rituals, “repetitions of sutra”, and sacraments, are not only reminders for the users, but also acts and practices in rituals. As the *Bhagavad Gita* says, “Sacrifice is made by action”. The meaning of ritual is the meaning generated by the ritual activity itself. The purpose of ritual and spiritual practice is to heal — through work, especially “work of devotion”. It is similar to the Karma-yoga promoted by Hindu Yogi Swami Vivekananda. He believes that the study and practice of these rituals and symbols is part of the Karma- yoga. The word “Karma” means “to do”. All actions are Karma, such as breathing, walking, and listening, whether physical, verbal, or mental. According to the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Vivekananda advocates the pursuit of pure selflessness in Karma-yoga (work or action).

In addition to the worship of God,

The world is bound by Karma.

Get rid of the attachment,

and you work for the yajña.

Bhagavad Gita

Things are symbols, actions are sacred, and rituals make people consciously think about both of them. Human actions must be driven by motive. In the idea of Karma-yoga, the tendency to project selfish thoughts must be destroyed, and then people should throw themselves into the external world to work and create with all their might after that. Just like the lotus flower described by Zhou Dunyi, a Neo-Confucianist in the Northern Song Dynasty in his classical Chinese essay *On the Love of Lotus*, “I, for one, love only the lotus — for the way it emerged untrained from the muck, raising cleanly above ripples of water with an unaffected grace...”

In many ceremonies, action and ritual merge into one. For example, the Buddhist work of “giving” is present in almost all rituals, large and small. In Tibet, many people choose to donate their bodies to animals after they die. Common burial methods include “Jhator” or “Sky Burial”, and “Water Burial”. In Jhator, the body is placed on a celestial rock (also known as an altar) for vultures to eat and then recycle. In Water Burial, the body is given to fish (for this reason Tibetans don’t have a tradition of eating fish). I remember when I was in Lhasa, my guide proudly said that he was going to use water burial as a way of giving in the future.

In addition to these large, serious ceremonies, the action of “giving” also occurs in small, daily activities. My friend who studies at a Buddhist university, and is a monk, lives a different life style. When I went to visit her with carrying fruits, she first asked if we could give them as offerings to the Buddha, and then she gave the rest of them to her classmates. During this process, she did not consider herself at all. I was moved by this small action.

These rituals and actions are closely related in life, and are permeated by each other. They form practices through habits, and also influence the awareness of people around them.

In the hustle and bustle of material life, we strive so hard to earn money from others, that there are few opportunities for giving. As a result, rituals have become rarer in modern times. When I was an undergraduate, I was once asked a pointed question: “Are monks beggars because they are raised by others?” You see, we are used to standing there, holding a nickel and saying to beggars, “Take it, poor guy.” We are also good at feeling upset about people who don’t reciprocate. It’s not really giving, it’s just exchanging and taking. In fact, in the relationship between the monks and the people, no one feels like a beggar, because both are giving and giving without asking for anything from either side. Tibetans admire monks because they demand deliverance and continuation of the Dharma despite the hardships of life. Monks hope to solve people’s difficulties and doubts through their wisdom.

It can be argued that the essence of ritual is the meaning of *doing*, the conscious action. In the ritual of giving, the meaning is only “pure gratitude”. The object of this gratitude can be God or gods, it can also be “emptiness”, the world, the people around, but not “myself”. Thus, it can be concluded that this ritual, rather than putting the “I” in a relationship with the “other”, reaches its height by transferring the “I” to the “other” (God, emptiness, the world, people around...). In Buddhism, by making the symbol “I” absent, the habits of greed, obsession, arrogance and so on, have no way out, thus achieving the purpose of healing. The simple action points to some

truth itself, rather than “putting truth aside”.

2.4 The Self-Referential Text as Symbol

Rituals help people achieve their spiritual purpose through the absence of the “I” symbol, while text is a more complex symbol than those of ritual. Language itself is the sign of thought. Despite the imperfections of words and sentences, language is still the most reliable and accurate symbol we have. Because if we want to report facts and opinions accurately, we must resort to text. In Buddhist scripture, the sacredness of text is no less than that of any solemn ceremony or Buddha statue. Of course, people who are taught to think about God in one language have a hard time thinking in other languages that are not sacred to them.

---The Lord asked: What do you think, Subhuti, does it occur to the Tathagata, ‘by me has Dharma been demonstrated’? Whosoever, Subhuti, would say, ‘the Tathagata has demonstrated Dharma’, he would speak falsely, he would misrepresent me by seizing on what is not there. And why? ‘Demonstration of dharma, demonstration of dharma’, Subhuti, there is not any dharma which could be got at as a demonstration of dharma.

The Diamond Sutra

In spite of this limitation, text can still transcend its concept, thus reaching towards God. In addition to the use of language to indicate absence, such as the word “nothingness”, the word “emptiness”, language can also deliberately use self-referential discourse in order to prove and transcend the limits of meaningful language and rational thought.

“Indeed, this Brahman is the emptiness outside the human body. Indeed, it is the emptiness outside the human body, indeed, it is the emptiness within the human body. Indeed, it is the emptiness of the human body. Indeed, it is the emptiness of the heart, it is full, motionless.”

“Aum, that Brahman is infinite, and the phenomenal world is infinite, but ‘this’ is only a projection of ‘that’. (However,) If ‘this’ vanishes, the ‘other’ remains the same and infinite. Aum. Peace to each, peace to the earth, peace to the realm of all living beings.”

Regardless of religion, the transcendent and radically different “other” is embodied in seemingly contradictory language. As Eckhardt said, “The more God is in everything, the more he is outside everything. The more he is in, the more he is out.” Examples of this also exist in the language of art, such as Nam June Paik’s iconic artwork, *TV Buddha* (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *TV Buddha*, Nam June Paik, 1974.

This work consists of a black wood Buddha statue and a television. A camera captures the sculpture and shows it on a closed-circuit television screen at the same time. This work can be understood in the similar language as the text of Chuang Tzu’s famous essay, *Dream of the Butterfly*:

“Once upon a time, I, Chuang Tzu, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering higher and higher, to all intents and purposes, a butterfly. I was conscious only of following my fancies as a butterfly, and was unconscious of my individuality as a man. Suddenly, I awaked, and there

I lay, myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man. Between a man and a butterfly there is necessarily a barrier. The transition is called metempsychosis.”

Like the eternal question, “Did Chuang Tzu dream about the butterfly or did the butterfly dream about Chuang Tzu?” Is the Buddha watching TV? Or is the TV watching the Buddha? Sculpture is a part of television, and television is also the imitation and reproduction of sculpture itself.

Unlike self-absence, this self-referential cycle can go on indefinitely. The text of this artwork is like a symbol without content, without any content except itself, repeating. In this obsessive self-focus, the viewer begins to wonder if there is a subject at all. By cyclic self-reference, without a signified signifier, the text creates a void within itself. And by constantly missing its own reference, the text draws our attention to the limitations of the meaning itself. Therefore, we have doubts about the dependence of the duality between signifier and signified. In *TV Buddha*, both the Buddha and the TV are empty, thus point directly to the “other”.

2.5 Conclusion

Through autobiographical texts and a cross-referential approach to self-experience and perennial philosophy, this paper briefly reflects on the key question: How is the symbol created in the absence of God? As some perennial philosophers argue, the origin and destination of the world, whatever it may be called, cannot be grasped by human conceptual thinking, nor can it be positively and directly expressed by propositional language. As Shankara said, “Brahma is the one who ‘lets words back’”, as in St. John’s “God is beyond grasp”, and as Lao Tzu’s “Empty yourself, to see how it works”, eventually, to point at God, the symbol must be destroyed. Just as the philosophers had to shift their interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita from dualist to non-dualist, this essay advocates a therapeutic concept: By recognizing the limits of symbol and language, even thoughts, we humbly appreciate the infinite that exists outside of ourselves.

3. Gaze

3.1 Spiritual Film Gazing

According to Walter Benjamin, the unique value of art is rooted in theology. This value is ritualistic:

The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable...

Originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult. We know that the earliest art works in the service of a ritual — first the magic, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognisable as secularised ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty. The secular cult of beauty, developed during the Renaissance and prevailing for three centuries, clearly showed that ritualistic basis in its decline and the first deep crisis which befell it.

In response to Benjamin’s viewpoint, art is not divorced from ritual functions. The work was mounted and displayed in galleries, which itself is a secular ritual. When people enter an art museum, they develop a kind of worship and appreciation for the exhibits in the museum. This worship of art is difficult to explain, but I would like to attribute this feeling to “distance”. I think there is always a distance between the audience and the artwork, both mentally and physically. Physically, viewers are largely not allowed to touch the artwork, and sometimes not even to photograph and distribute it. In spirit, the works of the art gallery also occupy a dominant position. Some of the works are difficult to understand, and sometimes a brief introduction makes it more difficult for the public to understand them. The same goes in a theatre, which, like a secular religion, mediates on experiences of otherness, within its sacred spaces and rituals. The act of “going to the cinema” has a ritual dimension, dark and silent, as a medieval church. At the same time, on the functional level, it is both a ritualistic space and a decoder of meaning. These two characteristics are unified in religion.

As Stanley Cavell said, “Art, like religion, must learn to overcome the theatre; to erase the distance between our sight and the object, to make the object become itself, so that it can once again bear the world’s gaze.”

In contrast to museum and theatre, the online platform is usually described as inclusive and extremely popular, almost anyone can enter and anyone can publish works and share their opinions, which greatly shortens the distance between the people and the art.

Artworks on the internet tend to be inspected by the audience. Like responding to people’s expectations so their

TikTok videos will get more likes, they are more communicative and often narrative. The moving image is one of the most widely transmitted media formats of our time, and Benjamin talks about how new technology makes it possible to reproduce indefinitely — how it undermines the authenticity, creativity, genius, timeless value, and mystery of art. He warned that the mechanization of reproduction has dramatically changed the production and consumption of art. The mechanical reproduction and dissemination of art's effects on a large scale undermines the unique presence of art in a given place, as well as its originality and embeddedness of history and tradition.

Just as Benjamin said, the spread of film did inhibit the worship value of art. The audience's attitude towards film is to examine but not to gaze, just like an absent-minded examiner. Most of the time, in the commercial environment, the value of dissemination is greater than the value of worship. Why, then, do certain films still have "cult value" when replicated indefinitely on online platforms?

First of all, what does it mean to have "cult value"? We can refer to the relationship between religion and human beings. In Christianity, the words said by God are thought — provoking, enlightening, and healing. At the same time, God himself is elusive, and we can only think of him through the image of his figure. In my opinion, some films have the characteristics of keeping a spiritual distance from the audience, and being able to be contemplated and gazed at. In this kind of work, it can be "gazed at" meditatively, whether in an art gallery or on a web platform of infinite reproduction. I like to call it a "spiritual film" because of its meditative nature. Referring to the previous text — How is the distance between religion and man? — How does film draw distance between man and it, and reach the similar value of rituals? One is through the absence of symbols and texts; the other is through revealing the self-reference of texts (see the example of *TV Buddha* with the Symbol TEXT); the third is through presenting only the surface to arouse audiences' mystical experience and thinking. By analyzing Bill Viola's work *He Weeps for You*, 1976, (Figure 4) I want to illustrate this third approach.

3.2 *He Weeps for You*, 1976



Figure 4. *He Weeps for You*, Bill Viola, 1976

The first time I saw this work was on YouTube. A drop of water condenses and then falls, accompanied by the sound of dripping. Condense again. Repeat. That is all. Bill Viola — an artist heavily influenced by Eastern religions—then living with his wife in Japan, once visited meditating Buddhists. He said, "The real investigation is of life and being itself; the medium is just the tool in this investigation." You can see many parallels in ancient eastern disciplines of mind and spiritual training. While watching it, I immediately thought of this ancient haiku:

An old pond

A frog jumps in.

Plop.

In the first two lines of this haiku, meaning guides our vision just like gradually filling drops of water, but at the end, meaning is dissolved by the last sentence. And so it is in this work. From the perspective of cinematic language, this work is non-narrative. One of the feature of non-narrative films is "bored". In a narrative film, the

plot leans toward the audience, bombarding them with thrills and trying to grab every second of the audience's attention. Conversely, a film without a plot also employs the technique of creating "nothing" to make it appear to be nothing. But for the audience, the image of this work is extremely familiar and close to life. It is the image of falling water droplets that every one of us have seen at some time in our lives. It can be said that this work is so "surface" and subconscious that the author keeps it there and does not try to make it point to anything beyond itself.

This led me to reflect that often when we attach meaning to an object, what we are really doing is confirming ourselves and our own concepts. (Just like the example of the cup which I described in the World TEXT.) But allowing people to see things as they really are is more illuminating and reflective than predetermined symbolism. We often assume that more is better than less, that high is better than low, that complex is better than simple, that freedom is better than restraint. But this work follows a method, which is "Nothing more, nothing less".

According to Buddhism, we should not project our usual mental discernment onto things, but face them directly as they are. From the point of view of semiotics, the image of the sign is the one closest to reality, and God can only be represented by the symbol of God.

Therefore, when the image is the image itself, it points to the natural reality of it. The power of appearances lies precisely in their superficiality; That is to say, they are, in fact, themselves. This is the opposite of the assumption that value is primarily in depth, in foundation, in revealing what is hidden. The value of appearances lies in appearances themselves. By greatly highlighting the superficiality, this work leads the audience to gaze, so that the audience can look back at themselves. This spirituality exists in every copy of it, and will not change in the mechanization of reproduction; This spirituality compels the viewer's vision, to gaze intently at it, but is not received by the viewer's touch in, as Benjamin puts it, the familiar, the casual, the entertaining way.

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