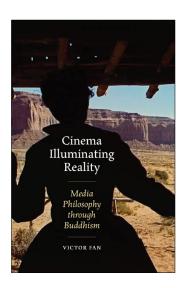Victor Fan, **Cinema Illuminating Reality: Media Philosophy Through Buddhism**, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022, 262 pp., $30.00 (paperback).

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The rise of digital technology in the 1980s forced film theorists to reconsider the relationship between cinematic images and reality. Rather than the traditional method of capturing an imprint of reality (light photons on celluloid), digital images are first processed into code and then reconstructed again on a screen. The ontological difference between these two technologies—that is, their modes of capturing the world and representing it as an image—lead to an "aporia" (a philosophical impasse).

Victor Fan, a reader of film and media philosophy at King's College in London and author of *Cinema Illuminating Reality: Media Philosophy Through Buddhism*, refers to this aporia as his point of departure for the text. Digital technology, the author argues, is neither the cause nor effect of any ontological shift; instead, he proposes a new philosophical framework that uses Buddhism toward a more relational understanding of cinema. A relational framework entails collapsing the subject-object distinction in the human interaction with media, which circumvents the ostensible aporia mentioned above through a discussion on the nature of consciousness.

Consciousness requires one to be conscious of something. The relationship between consciousness and the external sense data it perceives is not a simple subject-object relationship, but rather a mutual process of becoming. Fan describes this in Buddhist terms as "dependent origination" (p. 7). Simply put, this philosophy posits that the things perceived in the world as static objects, including your sense of self, are empty of intrinsic value. Reality consists only of relationality. Everything is produced by mutual relationships that bring it into being, and objects in the world only appear as static.

Fan relies on 20th-century philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Gilbert Simondon for mapping out an understanding of consciousness as it relates to media (what Fan calls "technicity-consciousness," p. 6). Technicity-consciousness is the notion that consciousness does not reside solely in the brain but arises from the relationship between an environment and the sensory organs (an instance of relationality). Fan argues that technicity-consciousness is both an embodied mind and its milieu, including a media milieu (like the cinematic experience). With this view of consciousness explicated, the difference between celluloid and digital media becomes less consequential for the embodied experience of cinema. Since the relationality entailed by this philosophy of consciousness can be understood in Buddhist terms, Fan references Buddhist philosophers (such as Nāgārjuna) throughout the text to construct his argument. While Fan proposes a new framework for understanding cinema and consciousness, as noted above, he will also use this conceptual approach to analyze different films (taking inspiration from Deleuze's film analysis in his volumes *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*). As Fan

writes, "chapter 2, 'The Karma-Image,' and chapter 3, 'The Insight-Image,' are phase-by-phase reworkings of two key concepts proposed by Gilles Deleuze: the movement-image and the time-image" (p. 25).

After carefully constructing a view of consciousness as a process of relational interbecoming, Fan then elaborates on his concepts of the karma-image and the insight-image. "Karma," in Sanskrit, translates most directly to "action." Fan argues that by analyzing the operation of karma in the technicity-consciousness (i.e., the relationship between the embodied mind and the cinematic image), one can become aware of the effects cinema has on the viewer (hence the "insight" in insight-image), which can open up the possibility of instigating change in the realm of ethics, aesthetics, and even politics.

Buddhism, then, provides a framework for generating insight into the relationship between an embodied consciousness and the network of technicity in which it exists. Fan argues that a self-reflexive awareness of the relationships that constitute selfhood (or that even make the illusion of an independent subject possible), is to be mindful of the present moment. This insight can be generated through an awareness of the technicity (relationality) of the cinematic experience as a whole—what Fan calls the insight-image.

The onus remains for Fan in arguing what mindfulness of this relationality does for the subject in concrete terms. Here, Fan arrives at the most political analysis in the book—a Buddhist reading of biopolitical disempowerment. Fan hints at this on the first page, describing how corporate and state powers consolidate "biopolitical management," and the process of actualizing desire to complete consumption (p. 1). This comment on desire anticipates Fan's later use of Buddhism philosophy, which, put simply, argues that desire is one of the main roots of suffering in life. While the intricacies of this philosophy cannot be fully explicated here, the essential idea is that the complete satisfaction of desire is impossible. Desire can only generate more desire or lead to the frustration that satisfaction of desire is only a temporary state.

In relating this concept of desire to media, Fan is at his most elegant. The power relations that exist in our society, Fan argues, can take advantage of the technicity-consciousness (again, the relations that constitute an embodied mind its environment) and repurpose it for "performing consumption" (p. 244). This mode of consumption does not necessarily entail a desire for things but induces desire for its own sake—to fulfill the role of consumer. Fan also refers to the way governments and corporations control the opinions of communities through feeding specific data to users, which is a process that can contribute to political polarization and a breakdown in the functionality of public discourse.

In this grim forecast, insight and mindfulness are a way of regaining some agency in our digital existence. In Buddhism, since everything is empty of existential value, all that exists is pure relationality. This argument is important for the power dynamics of disempowered individuals for Fan. Our digital existence consists of a "matrix of relationships (data)," and Fan argues that the role of the government is to manage such relationships (p. 166). By contrasting a relational view of reality with a world of discrete objects, one can better understand the nature of our "control-society" (a term Fan borrows from Deleuze), and that insight can open up the possibility of political change (p. 166).

Fan's arguments are most effective when his analysis of cinema engenders political theorizing. Of course, these two modes of analysis intersect frequently throughout the book. By the end of the text,

however, Fan will explicitly linger on the nature of violence in the political sense. In the conclusion, Fan is not purely philosophical. This text's most convincing political arguments occur when ontology and epistemology appear alongside concrete examples. Two examples that Fan briefly mentions in the conclusion occurred during the pandemic: the murder of George Perry Floyd Jr. and the federal suppression of protests in the United States, and the suppression of protests in Hong Kong against Beijing's political interventions. Fan argues through Buddhism that ignoring or looking away from these events will harm others. Everything is interconnected. If there appears to be no consequences for ignoring such events, it is only because the effects are "transferred to the overall ecology" of which each human is a part (p. 246).

It is hard not to read this conclusion in the context of neocolonialism to which Fan also attends. The Euro-American subject remains the global political default, which means other values and conceptions of subjectivity (such as Chinese and Indian understandings) are departures from this Western, default subject. Fan argues that, in this sense, Euro-American subjectivity should be understood as an act of violence against other potential subjectivities. The naturalization of the Western subject as paradigmatic is a form of disempowerment.

As an art form, cinema can make the relationalities between subjectivities observable in the cinematographic image, which Fan also discusses in his analysis of films ranging from Chinese queer cinema to independent films that deal with themes of existentialism. In this sense, the relationship of consciousness and cinema can be understood as a media ecology, in that all elements of an ecological environment affect and are affected by the other elements. In his book, he pleads for us to pay attention to both of these modes: how the cinematic form exists in the net of relationalities that constitute a culture, and the acts of violence that make that culture possible.

As a work of comparative philosophy, *Cinema Illuminating Reality* weaves the arguments of myriad theorists together to contextualize the discourse in which Fan intervenes. Fan effectively summarizes the key ideas from Western philosophers like Deleuze and Simondon and dozens of other thinkers (including active scholars in the academy). The breadth is substantial. However, the text reads as an impressive and bold synthesis despite the wide net it casts in the references from Nāgārjuna to Baudrillard.

Fan's book will be useful not only for those interested in cinema but also those interested in all forms of media as it relates to consciousness, time, and, more philosophically, questions of ontology and epistemology. In the second half of the book, Fan seems to ask more political questions, which indicates that perhaps future research could use Fan's Buddhist-media framework for further political theorizing.