

Bodhisattva with a Camera: Reimagining Subjectivities in Contemporary Photography Portraiture with Buddhist Philosophy

Zihan Yuan

Ethel Walker School, Connecticut (U.S.), Simsbury, 06070, USA

ABSTRACT

In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Roland Barthes turned to Buddhism for designations of photography's transcendence over verbal signs: śūnya, "emptiness" immanent in all things, and tathāta, "thus-ness" captured by the immediacy of photographic meaning-making. Invoked only at the outset, these terms and the vast philosophical system behind them nevertheless shaped his pursuit of subjectivity in photography. This practice-as-research project advances Barthes's nascent yet promising dialogue that triangulates photography, subjectivity, and Buddhist philosophy. Drawing on core ideas from early Mahāyāna ("Great Vehicle") scriptures, it reformulates the critical understanding and practical methodology of photographic portraiture. As art historian Catherine Soussloff argues, modern subjectivity was first constructed visually through the genre of portraiture as an inherently social and psychological process that identifies an interior space beneath the informational exterior. Similarly, in early Mahāyāna, various Buddhist sects in conversation across South and East Asia reconfigured their relationship to human society (and subjectivities) through a more altruistic and egalitarian philosophical outlook underscored by Karuṇa (Compassion), Bodhisattvayāna (Bodhisattva Path), and Śūnyatā (Emptiness). Grounded in interdisciplinary research in art history, philosophy, and photography theory, this paper proposes a new ethical dimension of universal compassion and social responsibility in addition to the exterior-interior duality in understanding portraiture and the various subjectivities associated with the making and viewing of this genre.

KEYWORDS

Mahāyāna buddhism; Philosophy; Photography; Practice-as-research; Subjectivity; Emptiness; Lacanian psychoanalysis

1 Introduction

To illustrate a unique reality reproduced by photographs that "could never be repeated existentially," Roland Barthes resorted to Buddhist terms at the beginning of *Camera Lucida* (1980), an extremely personal work that nevertheless gained considerable traction amid the critical fervor around photography during the 1970s and 80s.^①

"In order to designate reality, Buddhism says sunya, the void; but better still: tathata, as Alan Watts has it, the fact of being this, of being thus, of being so;"

He proceeded to give a quite imaginative pseudo-etymological analysis of the Sanskrit word tathata to elucidate what were likely foreign and bizarre ideas to his readership. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it also evokes a stereotypically Zen, witty nonsensicalness that seeks to transcend the realm of linguistic significations.

"Tat means that in Sanskrit and suggests the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying: that, there it is, lol but says nothing else; a photograph cannot be transformed (spoken) philosophically, it is wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope."^②

These Buddhist philosophical categories thus initiated and developed into a sophisticated discussion of photography, culminating in the idea of punctum, the personal, affective detail that "pricks" the viewer and rejects semiotic formal analysis.^③ Such claims of immediate realism and transparency were certainly no oddity among his contemporaries. Susan Sontag, for example, quite poignantly deems photographs "directly stenciled off the real."^④ Kendall Walton further popularized the idea of photography as "transparent" and thus "realist" in his field-defining 1984 essay, which garnered followers and critics alike.^⑤

The Buddhist allusion (or inspiration) of Barthes, though the epistemological cornerstone in his arguments, vanished in the rest of his book as well as in critical discussions of photography in Western academia. Contemporary books on photography and Buddhism are rarities, and often practical manuals that incorporate meditation exercises without seriously engaging with the philosophical grounds of doctrinal buzzwords like "impermanence" sprinkled throughout

① Jay Prosser gives a powerful and poetic account of the very personal dimension of Zen Buddhism and Photography to Barthes. See Prosser, "Buddha Barthes."

② Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 4-5.

③ Barthes contrasts *punctum* to *studium*, which is always socially coded. See *ibid*, 51.

④ Sontag, *On Photography*, 135.

⑤ Walton, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism."

the text.^⑥

Through this Practice-as-Research project, Bodhisattva with a Camera, I thus examine specifically Buddhist philosophy and the artistic practice of photography. As the first step in this project, this paper focuses on photographic portraiture vis-à-vis the early Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophical stance of compassion through the Bodhisattva path. Drawing from art historian Catherine Soussloff's research on the construction of modern (Western) subjectivity as a socially and psychologically determined process via the rise of portraiture as a visual genre,^⑦ I argue that the Buddhist doctrine of "Non-Self (Anātman)," developed into Compassion through the social networks, functions, and commitments of the Bodhisattvas necessitated by epistemological developments in early Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially in the Lotus Sutra, resonates well and adds much to current understanding of subjectivity mediated socially and visually. Informed by these analyses, I propose an ethical dimension of universal compassion and social responsibility in addition to the exterior-interior duality in understanding portraiture and the various subjectivities associated with the making and viewing of this genre.

2 Methodology

This paper, as well as the broader project, subscribes to Robin Nelson's formulation of Practice-as-Research as a rigorous methodology centered around a Praxis, reflective artistic practices, to produce "substantial new insights effectively shared."^⑧ Three kinds of knowledge support the Praxis: know-how, know-what, and know-that.^⑨ In the current project, the know-how is the experiential, embodied knowledge of photographic portraiture; the know-what is the tacit experiential knowledge made explicit and linguistically communicable through creative reflections, that is, what kind of photography methodology works better as informed by a Buddhist epistemological framework, and how Buddhist ideas might be better explained via a visual medium; the know-that is the textual and conceptual research that contextualizes and supports the artistic inquiry. While the know-that is sufficiently accounted for in this scholarly paper, it should be noted that the know-what, and especially the know-how, are necessarily communicated in the less linguistically mediated means of the art practice, that is, the photographs produced during the inquiry.^⑩

3 Portraiture, the modern self, and photography

In her seminal work *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern*, Catherine Soussloff's reconstruction of the process that constructed the "modern subject" through portraiture as a genre started (and concluded) with the "functional dialectic of the portrait representation," which distinguished it from the pre-twentieth-century definition of such arts. The portrait, or portraiture, that we know of nowadays, she argues, operates on "two apparently discrepant claims," a "truth claim of an indexical exteriority, or resemblance, to the person portrayed" and a "claim to the representation of interiority, or spirituality."^⑪ That is to say, to "recognize" any portrait as a "subject," the viewer necessarily assesses an indexical dimension of external resemblance and an iconic dimension of internal identification. At the same time, such multi-dimensional recognition "becomes of great importance to the concept of portraiture precisely because it turns resemblance into a matter of viewing, rather than maintaining that a standard of likeness resides in the portrait itself."^⑫ Namely, the viewers' subjectivity also has to engage with the subject of the portrait in the process of recognition.

Through visual analyses of a series of fin-de-siècle Viennese portraiture, Soussloff discovers that the indexical "truth claim" was increasingly and deliberately disregarded by artists without necessarily posing a difficulty for viewers to "recognize" the subject of the portrait. From Oskar Kokoschka's "radical mode of portrayal" of his sitters through the intersubjective contrast of expressionless faces with hyper-expressive gestures and colors,^⑬ to Heinrich Kühn's photographic portrait that "obliterates the clarity of surface details so common in commercial photography",^⑭ to

^⑥ See, for example, Ulrich, *The Mindful Photographer*.

^⑦ Soussloff, *The Subject in Art*.

^⑧ Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts (and Beyond)*, 19.

^⑨ Ibid, 46.

^⑩ Because of space limitation, this paper will not feature a full-length creative reflection.

^⑪ Soussloff, *The Subject in Art*, 5.

^⑫ Ibid, 6.

^⑬ Ibid, 45.

^⑭ Ibid, 100.

Picasso's cubist portraiture that not only effaces but also abstracts "aspects of the face" and "background details," these increasingly index-less portraits nevertheless do not "diminish the resemblance of portraits" but rather "give us alternatives to the 'objective' level of identification."¹⁵ By emphasizing an iconic interiority, they "give us the subject in art."¹⁶

This modern, visual subject, predicated on "an ethics that depends on recognition, identification, and resemblance,"¹⁷ is constructed, recognized, and reproduced socially. As already put forward by a group of scholars in the Vienna School of Art History at the fin-de-siècle moment, portraiture affords "a way of understanding visual representation as dependent on a multiplicity of points of view, as mutable depending on context, and as contingent depending on viewer."¹⁸ That is to say, any subject that one perceives in a portrait is necessarily fractured, intrinsically unstable, and inextricably intertwined with other subjectivities in society, at least that of the viewers and artists.

In tacit accord with such intersubjectivity and sociality of portraiture in an art-historical sense, Sartre's "illusion of immanence" further theorizes that an image has to be completed by our imagination for our consciousness to reach the object – in the case of portraits, the subject depicted.¹⁹ In the psychoanalysis tradition, Lacan cites the "Imago," the image through the identification with which an infant goes through the mirror stage, where the irreducible specular I turns into the social I, and a recognition of the other becomes possible.²⁰ For Soussloff, this essay is especially significant in positing the visual origin of the modern self in critical and philosophical discourses, as it is "shot through with a view of the subject that articulates as the primordial image—a portrait from the point of view of the analyst, or a self-portrait from the point of view of the subject—of the nascent individual whose ego is not centered on reality but rather on 'a method of symbolic reduction.'"²¹ Referring to Roland Barthes and Judith Butler's development of Lacan's *le sujet*, Soussloff goes on to argue that this subject is not a Hegelian "autonomous human subject" nor a Sartrean "whole individual" as completed by the imagination, but characterized by "mutability," "inaccessibility," and "inextricability from the discourse that surrounds it"²² – the subject as a philosophical and psychological category is thus extrapolated from that in portraiture, or, in Barthes' yet another Zen-like expression, with an empty void in the middle: "The subject is not an individual plenitude ... but on the contrary, a void around which the writer weaves a discourse which is infinitely transformed ... so that all writing which does not lie designates not the internal attributes of the subject, but its absence."²³

Interestingly, by examining only photography portraiture produced much later than Soussloff's subjects, Kendall Walton arrived at similar conclusions, though not as radical, via a different philosophical route. As insightfully elucidated by Cynthia Freeland, for Walton, the "realism" of photography is also twofold: an epistemological claim of "transparency," the literal seeing of informational surface, as well as a psychological claim of "contact," an emotional, fictional seeing, a "make-believe to imagine that I am in [the subject's] presence."²⁴ The former interpretation of photographs as indexes is immediate and transparent enough, but the latter, iconic approach is often underappreciated and glossed over by critics of Walton's work. These iconic, contact properties of photographs, Freeland concludes, are grounded "in attitudes and emotions that both reflect and continue traditional historical practices of making and using portraits as guarantees of presence" and "reflect the desires that gave rise to the practice of portraiture in the first place: desires to sustain contact especially after death."²⁵ Undoubtedly, such a desire for social contact is also requisite to the birth of the fractured, unstable, and intertwined modern subjectivities – "the status of the portrait as the primary instantiation of exacting representation in modernity," argues Soussloff, "is a desire on the part of sitter, artist, and viewer(s) for social connection through visible means. The portrait makes visible what we imagine of others."²⁶

¹⁵ Ibid, 113.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 116.

¹⁸ Ibid, 122.

¹⁹ Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, 5.

²⁰ Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 76.

²¹ Soussloff, *The Subject in Art*, 20.

²² Ibid, 21.

²³ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 35.

²⁴ Freeland, "Photographs and Icons," 64-67.

²⁵ Ibid, 69.

²⁶ Soussloff, *The Subject in Art*, 13-14.

4 Bodhisattvas, non-self, and the camera

This view of the modern subject through portraiture is especially amenable to conversations with and criticism from the early Mahāyāna doctrinal positions. I am primarily going to engage with the Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra (Diamond Sutra) and the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra (Lotus Sutra). The Diamond Sutra is from the Prajñāpāramitā (Perfection of Wisdom) tradition, the oldest set of Mahāyāna doctrinal texts. Although the doctrinal ideas appeared earlier, the sutra itself was considered by some scholars to be a later development in the tradition, possibly established around 300-500 CE.²⁷ The Sanskrit original of the Lotus Sutra was dated slightly earlier, considering that Dharmarakṣa had already finished its first Chinese translation as early as 267 CE.²⁸ I consider these texts to be “early Mahāyāna” because of their relatively straightforward philosophical discussions and vast influence on Mahāyāna as a whole – in fact, these sutras are still widely taught and recited in many Mahāyāna cultures.

How, then, is the early Mahāyāna going to respond to the modern self in portraiture? It will be productive to refer back to Soussloff’s “functional dialectic” or Walton’s two claims, the indexical, exterior, and epistemological “transparency,” and one iconic, interior, and psychological “contact.” In Buddhist analysis through the five aggregates, then, the former involves form (rūpa, the physical body and physical matters in the world) and perception (saṃjñā, recognition of distinct objects through marks and memories), while the latter conjures feeling (vedanā, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral sensations) and mental formations (saṃskāra, emotions and volitions). The last one, consciousness (vijñāna, the awareness and discernment of distinct objects from the self), is always at work.

These five aggregates constitute the entirety of our experienced reality. In basic Buddhist tenets shared by all schools, they are invariably impermanent, non-self, and subject to suffering – the three marks of all dharmas (elements of existence). Brook Ziporyn succinctly and beautifully defined the self here as a “single cause” – “an unconditional entity that is able to continue to exist as what it is solely on its own power, that has the power to be what it is without relying on any contribution from something other than itself.”²⁹ As the Buddha explains in the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (Sutra on the Characteristic of Non-self), a “self” is characterized by the ability to do whatever it wants in absolute permanence, control, and unconditionality. These aggregates that constitute our experience, however, can never be the “self,” as their arising and ceasing are necessarily conditioned by more than one cause. Attachment to such aggregates, which can never be “self” and permanent, necessarily leads to suffering. A proper understanding, or “wisdom” (prajñā), of the nature of non-self is thus indispensable to obtaining the only liberation from, or “extinguishing” (nirvāṇa) of, attachment and desire through the Middle Way between indulgence and repression, that is, awareness and letting go.

Despite apparent ontological differences, such a concept of non-self from early Buddhism already shares some similarities with the fractured, unstable Lacanian subjectivity. What about the subject of portraiture, then? Mahāyāna developments on these early Buddhist doctrinal positions of nonself, especially emptiness (śūnyatā) and the Bodhisattva path, prove fruitful in dialogue. This section from the Diamond Sutra, for example, discusses emptiness as applied to distinctive features necessary for recognition of a distinct subject:

[...] a Realized One cannot be seen by virtue of the possession of distinctive features. Why is that? What the Realized One has preached as the possession of distinctive features has been preached by the Realized One as lacking the possession of distinctive features. That is why it is called the possession of distinctive features.³⁰

In the Prajñāpāramitā literature, emptiness “is an extension of the Buddhist teaching of not-Self ... applied to all things without exception.”³¹ Here, the distinctive features (lakṣaṇa) of the Buddha, a stable set of indices for reliably recognizing his presence prescribed in the Abhidharma texts, are declared to be empty, that is, non-self, that is, impermanent, and conditioned by multiple causes. Like the subjects of portraiture, the physical forms of the Buddha that afford any indexical recognition “are not ‘real existences’ in the sense of being entities with properties, characteristic marks ... What it is is the totality of what it does, and what it does is something it is incapable of controlling, something of which it can never be a sole cause.”³²

However, it does not mean that the doctrine of emptiness entirely precludes the possibility of recognition. In fact, the rhetorical gesture of “What is X? X is not X. That is why it is called X” is a staple and feature of the Diamond Sutra. To sufficiently experience the valence of such a structure, we need to familiarize ourselves with the two-truth system of conventional and ultimate truths in Buddhist discourses. Conventional truths do not operate as “descriptions about what

²⁷ Ibid, 48.

²⁸ Kumārajīva, *The Lotus Sutra*, xiii.

²⁹ Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, 14-15.

³⁰ “Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā,” 154.

³¹ Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 52.

³² Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, 44.

is so, but only as useful tools to attain something we have decided to try to do.”³³ That is to say, these statements are not true ontological or metaphysical claims, but an agreed-upon convenient means of communication. Like the raft abandoned once one reaches the other shore in a famous Buddhist allegory, such conventional truths also “lead to self-transcendence” rather than attachment and suffering.³⁴ Ultimate truth, on the other hand, is only “the experience of Nirvana,” which cannot be described in any linguistic means – in this sense, even “emptiness” is a mere conventional truth.³⁵

It is thus evident that “X is not X” is an apophatic statement pertaining to an ultimate truth, since it cannot be otherwise described, while “That is why it is called X” constitutes a conventional truth permitted to exist and only exist on a linguistic level. Therefore, on a conventional level, we can talk about how the recognition of a subject through indexical information takes place, but not on an ultimate level, where a recognition can only happen, as Barthes pointed out in *Camera Lucida*, by pointing to a thusness (tathātā) without any attempt at semiotic signification. Iconic recognition works similarly. In fact, such “contact” (phassa in Pāli) that elicits strong psychological and emotional reactions is outright admonished by the Buddha as generating craving, desire, and therefore suffering – not dissimilar to Freeland and Soussloff’s claim that certain socially mediated desire was the origin of portraiture.³⁶

Is there a sanctioned way of recognition, or of “putting our own subjectivity into a direct and continuing ... relationship with the image depicted,”³⁷ or with the sitter to be depicted, or any other subject? The Lotus Sutra offers an alternative, an ethical recognition that transcends the duality of index/exterior and icon/interior.

The Buddha addressed Śāriputra, saying: “The Buddha Tathāgatas lead and inspire only bodhisattvas. All the acts of a buddha are always for one purpose. The buddhas manifest their wisdom and insight solely to inspire sentient beings to enlightenment.

A Bodhisattva is somebody who can become an arhat but refuses to enter complete Nirvana. Instead, they take a vow to abide in this world and help all other beings by teaching Buddhist doctrines until they become the next Buddha. This is the only path to Buddhahood, and the only path recognized by Mahāyāna. In the popular Jataka stories of the Buddha’s past lives, for example, the Śākyamuni Buddha is called a Bodhisattva before he reaches Buddhahood.

This path seems unnecessarily cumbersome, for if one only wishes to be liberated, being an Arhat or a Buddha does not differ much. However, Mahāyāna traditions, especially the Lotus Sutra, justify such self-imposed difficulty with the idea of universal compassion built into the concept of emptiness.

Under the emptiness and non-self doctrines, continuity is a matter of causal narrative rather than the property of a stable self, whether between births or moments. Like when a wave moves through water, a certain character transfers through it. “There need not even be any single identifiable thing that stays the same about it: size, speed, shape may all change.”³⁸ Therefore, even in two consecutive moments, a person, as one point in the wave, could have no similarity at all to the person they were one moment before, let alone in different lives.

Nevertheless, they most likely still care for the “someone else” that they are going to be in the next moment, or the next life. Therefore, even the most selfish act is “really always done for ‘someone else’: me in the very near future.”³⁹ So-called selfishness confirms that one is capable of compassion, and it can only determine its limit. Once one understands emptiness, namely the fact that “all things are connected to one another, related to one another,”⁴⁰ there is no doubt that one will eventually acquire a universal, limitless, Bodhisattva-like compassion.

A Mahāyāna-informed subjectivity in and towards portraiture, therefore, is in principle a compassionate, ethical one that transcends the exterior-interior duality afforded by the modern Western understanding and carries a social responsibility to the welfare of all sentient beings. Like the subjects in Western portraiture, it is also mutable and entangled with other subjectivities. However, its peculiarity lies in the vast reach of all humans and other sentient beings, and the ethically charged mission to educate and rehabilitate.

At the same time, like most Buddhist doctrines reaching for the ultimate truths, it needs to be reconciled with the conventional truths of practice, technê, and so on. The camera, with its ability to capture the indexical, the iconic, and the compassionate, thus becomes the celebrated “skillful means (upāya),” both the versatile “means” to alleviate suffering in various circumstances, and the “skill” of compassionate communication to further cultivate.

³³ Ibid, 33.

³⁴ Ibid, 34. For the raft allegory, see Bhikku Ñāṇamoli and Bhikku Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses*, 228-229.

³⁵ Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, 36.

³⁶ Bhikku Ñāṇamoli and Bhikku Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses*, 1130.

³⁷ Soussloff, *The Subject in Art*, 120.

³⁸ Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, 73.

³⁹ Ibid, 76.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 39.

5 Conclusion: practice and aesthetics

By investigating the void in the self, Lacan and his psychoanalytic school sought therapeutic remedies against the affliction of desires. By teaching the doctrine of non-self, the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas aspired to eliminate the suffering brought about by desires. Abiding by the newly proposed ethical, compassionate dimension of portraiture, I endeavor to provide “aesthetic relief” from the ailment of all-controlling selves through my photographic practice. Against the dismissal of a “Buddhist aesthetics,” Archie Bahm argues that the aesthetic for Buddhists is the “goal of life” – Nirvana, “the aesthetic enjoyment of what is as it is.”^④

It thus takes us full circle back to Barthes, and the tathātā as his starting point. The goal of this project, I contend, is a Nirvanic aesthetic, too, to appreciate, comfort, and account for all subjectivities in photography, as they are.

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④ Bahm, "Buddhist Aesthetics."