

***Eutopia Arthouse Film Festival Annual Film Review: Zen's Faraway Verse
and the Audiovisual Practice of Philosophy***

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INTRODUCTION

The Eutopia Arthouse Film Festival (EAFF) is a non-profit international film exhibition dedicated to fostering artistic exchange and development among emerging filmmakers. Organized by Queen's University Belfast and supported by the Queen's Annual Fund, EAFF places a special emphasis on supporting independent filmmakers who lack substantial financial backing. The festival seeks to highlight films that demonstrate a strong artistic vision and innovative filmmaking techniques, offering a platform for creative works that may otherwise struggle to find exposure in mainstream venues. Through this initiative, EAFF aims to nurture emerging talents who are driven by artistic ambition and innovation. The 2025 edition of the festival was held at the Grand Opera House in Belfast, drawing nearly one hundred attendees to in-person screenings on March 12 and 13. EAFF was honoured to host filmmakers from the UK, China, Italy, Ireland, Japan, and the United States, who engaged in post-screening Q&A sessions and direct exchanges with the audience.

As Frank Delaney, the Festival Supervisor and Head of Media and Broadcast at Queen's University Belfast—as well as a renowned BBC director—remarked during the festival's opening ceremony, the Eutopia Arthouse Film Festival is deeply rooted in the open and diverse cultural environment of Belfast. It welcomes works from across cultures and creative traditions to gather and connect in Belfast. In this context, the following review highlights one of the most representative films featured during the 2025 festival programme.

Zen's Faraway Verse, directed by Tianpeng Yao and featuring Hanling Cao, offers a meditative engagement with Zen philosophy through the formal and affective language of cinema. Produced as part of a doctoral practice-as-research project at Queen's University Belfast, the film was selected by the Eutopia Arthouse Film Festival committee as a Special Presentation and featured at the festival's opening ceremony. The film was also screened at the 2025 Annual Conference of the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies

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(BAFTSS), held at the University of Warwick, where it was named runner-up in the BAFTSS Practice Research Awards. The evaluative panel noted that ‘An exploration of the embodiment of zen through cinema, this short film offers stunning cinematography and skilful application of ‘slow cinema’ to evoke the sense of peacefulness and balance.’

This review explores the multi-layered dimensions of *Zen’s Faraway Verse* as both creative and theoretical research. It investigates how film can translate Zen philosophy—particularly its elusive concepts such as emptiness (*śūnyatā*), stillness (*jing*), and the interconnection between human and nature—into experiential cinematic language. As Alan Watts observes in *The Way of Zen*, Zen resists intellectualism, favouring a direct, experiential mode of knowing—precisely what the medium of film, in its sensual immediacy, is able to channel.¹⁹⁹ Traditionally transmitted via scriptural texts, oral teaching, and meditative practices, Zen’s abstract teachings here find new resonance in the audiovisual domain, offering a contemporary, cross-cultural path to spiritual understanding.

I. THE AESTHETIC OF SLOW CINEMA AND LONG TAKES

Zen’s Faraway Verse explores two main concerns: first, it reflects on how cinema might serve as a spiritual and therapeutic medium; second, it engages with cross-cultural theory by examining how Eastern philosophical traditions can be articulated through modern film language.

Zen’s Faraway Verse aligns itself with the aesthetics of slow cinema through its extensive use of long takes and deliberate pacing, crafting a meditative filmic rhythm that stands in direct contrast to the accelerated visual regimes of mainstream media. This extended temporality aligns with Tarkovsky’s conception of cinema as “sculpting in time,” in which the long take becomes not just duration but substance, allowing time to be felt as material.²⁰⁰ This stylistic orientation resonates strongly with Tsai Ming-liang’s *Walker* (2012), in which the protagonist performs ultra-slow walking through public spaces, challenging the viewer’s perception of time, presence, and cinematic motion. Similarly, in *Zen’s Faraway Verse*, Hanling’s slow traversal of Belfast’s streets, forest paths, coastal cliffs, and remote mountain trails becomes a temporal ritual that exceeds representation—it becomes a form of cinematic *kinhin* (Zen walking meditation).

Where *Zen’s Faraway Verse* diverges from *Walker* is in its dynamic use of slow shutter cinematography. It employs motion blur effect to emphasise a phenomenological contrast between the clarity of the meditating

¹⁹⁹ Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957)

²⁰⁰ Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986)

subject and the distortion of her surroundings. In this regard, the visual strategy draws parallels with Wong Kar-wai's iconic slow shutter sequences in *Chungking Express* (1994), where sharply focused protagonists are visually isolated from a world rendered ghostly, ephemeral, and dislocated.

This technique in *Zen's Faraway Verse* is not merely aesthetic; it is ontological. The blurred backgrounds—cars, pedestrians, ambient movement—serve as a visual metaphor for the distractions, attachments, and mental chatter that the Zen practitioner seeks to transcend. In contrast, Hanling remains in sharp focus, embodying clarity amidst flux, stillness amidst chaos. Her walking is not an act of destination, but of presence. It is a gesture of internal purification, an embodied expression of *letting go*—what Zen teachings describe as detachment from illusion (*māyā*) and clinging (*rāga*).

Moreover, this compositional tension between clarity and motion invites the viewer into a haptic intimacy with the walking figure. As the background dissolves into abstraction, the viewer is drawn toward Hanling's interior state, guided by visual cues to feel rather than interpret. This aligns with Laura Marks's theory of haptic viscosity, wherein image reception becomes tactile, affective, and multisensory.²⁰¹ Through slow time, blurred peripheries, and long-duration shots, the film constructs not only a space of reflection, but a space of 'cinematic zazen'—a silent sitting-through of filmic time.

In this way, *Zen's Faraway Verse* transforms the apparatus of cinema into a practice of mindfulness. The long takes do not seek narrative progression, but temporal immersion. They offer a visual corollary to breath awareness: repetition without redundancy, motion without goal. Echoing Teng-Kuan Ng's reading of *Walker* as a form of cinematic ritual,²⁰² this film likewise reorients cinema toward slowness as spiritual act, where each frame becomes a site of meditative attention.

II. THE WALKING BODY AND SONIC MEDITATION

The central motif of the film is the walking body: Hanling's slow, deliberate steps unfold along Northern Ireland's cities and coastlines, beginning at Black Mountain Zen Centre. These movements are intercut with another narrative strand—her performance within Anthony McCall's *solid light* installations—forming a

²⁰¹ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000)

²⁰² Ng, Teng-Kuan. "Pedestrian Dharma: Slowness and Seeing in Tsai Ming-Liang's *Walker*." *Religions* 9:7 (2018): 200.

structure of contrapuntal montage rather than linear development. These two threads are not separate acts but interwoven expressions of a unified spiritual search.

Hanling's ritual of walking is accompanied throughout by the consistent use of the singing bowl, a sonic motif deeply rooted in Zen practice. With each strike, a resonant tone—oscillating between stillness and tremor—lingers and fades into birdsong, flowing water, rustling leaves, and the sound of footsteps. This soundscape becomes an immersive meditation, guiding not only Hanling's rhythm but the viewer's auditory attention. The tonal quality of the bowl—rich, shimmering, with subtle overtone harmonics—evokes a form of sonic *zazen*.

Crucially, the film contains no spoken dialogue or narration. This refusal of linguistic framing allows a sensory continuity akin to Ron Fricke's *Baraka* (1992), where the absence of words opens a contemplative field. As with *Baraka*, the sound design functions as a vehicle of spiritual perception: nature's resonance replaces exposition; bodily movement supplants drama.

III. HAPTIC VISION

Visually, the film adopts a haptic style of cinematography that echoes Laura Marks's theory of touch-based seeing. When Hanling walks through bustling city streets, the use of slow shutter speeds renders pedestrians and vehicles into ghostly trails, while her body remains in focus. This technique recalls Wong Kar-wai's iconic slow-motion blurs in *Chungking Express* (1994), where stillness and speed coexist in expressive contradiction. However, in *Zen's Faraway Verse*, this aesthetic strategy has ontological significance. The blurred crowd is not simply visual texture—it signals Hanling's inward withdrawal from distraction, her turn toward emptiness. This contrast enacts the Zen principle of 'letting go of attachments.' Her solitude, underscored by the visual dissolution of others, reveals an inner spaciousness that visual abstraction helps to perform. Sobchack's phenomenology of film experience reinforces this shift, describing the act of viewing as 'being with one's own eyes' rather than passive seeing.²⁰³ The viewer in *Zen's Faraway Verse* is thus called into embodied perceptual engagement.

IV: ZEN'S SPIRITUAL CORE: LIGHT, EMPTINESS AND ABSTRACTION

A sequence set in the Tate Modern sees Hanling performing a site-specific interaction with Anthony McCall's *Solid Light* installation—an encounter that subtly echoes the film's concern with embodied perception. Her

²⁰³ Vivian Sobchack. "The Act of Being with One's Own Eyes." In *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)

movement through the beams of projected light is neither choreographed nor theatrical; instead, it is meditative and exploratory, unfolding as a ritual gesture that transforms light into a metaphysical partner. She does not merely inhabit the installation—she becomes part of its fluctuating geometry. Passing through the sculpted light with slow, deliberate gestures, Hanling engages with the medium as if playing an invisible zither, brushing her fingertips through immaterial threads, enveloped in a luminous void. These images evoke a primordial Zen iconography—circular enclosures, flickering thresholds, moments of dissolution—and operate less as symbols than as phenomenological experiences.

This sequence does not illustrate Zen philosophy; it performs it. Light becomes a visual manifestation of *śūnyatā*—emptiness—not as absence, but as a field of contingent transformation. The shifting planes of light recall the impermanence of form; the dissolving outline of Hanling’s body visualises the Zen notion of non-self; and the refusal of narrative logic mirrors the practice of silent meditation. These visual metaphors are not decorative—they are ontological, functioning as embodied koans that invite the viewer into direct perception rather than conceptual deduction.

The abstraction of this scene is never evasive or overly symbolic. On the contrary, it creates a space in which the viewer can participate in the dissolution of boundaries—between self and world, subject and medium, presence and void. In this sense, the film draws upon what Deleuze calls the ‘time-image’: an image in which thought itself becomes visible, not through representation, but through sensation and affect.²⁰⁴ Here, Hanling’s body flickers in and out of materiality, foregrounding not an identity, but a state of becoming. Light is not used to illuminate meaning, but to suspend it—to dwell within the very ungraspability of Zen insight.

In this extended moment of embodied abstraction, *Zen’s Faraway Verse* achieves one of its most profound gestures: it relinquishes the security of signification and opens a luminous space where being and non-being are held in delicate tension. Rather than depicting enlightenment, it performs its conditions of possibility.

V. BLACK AND WHITE IMAGERY

The film’s use of black-and-white imagery plays a critical symbolic role in Hanling’s meditative walk. At one point, the slow, deliberate progression of his journey comes to a sudden halt within a monochromatic sequence. This pause occurs in front of a war memorial—sculptures commemorating those who perished in past conflicts—followed by a solemn gesture: raising a white rose in the Garden of Remembrance. Other monochrome scenes depict the stupa complex housing the remains of deceased monastic elders. The visual

²⁰⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989)

motif of black and white evokes death—not merely as an end, but as a liminal state filled with mourning, memory, and the longing for peace.

This visual elegy resonates poignantly with the contemporary global context. In an era still marked by geopolitical unrest, mass displacement, and ongoing armed conflicts, the film subtly gestures toward the cyclical nature of human suffering. Hanling’s walk, though quiet and solitary, takes on the form of a ritualised act—a meditative expression grounded in Zen Buddhist contemplation. It is as though, through the slowness of embodied movement, he carries a silent prayer for a fractured world. Thus, the black-and-white sequence becomes more than a formal device: it articulates a moral and spiritual yearning for cessation—not only of motion, but of violence, desire, and conflict.

VI. NARRATIVE WITHOUT CLOSURE: THE ENSŌ AS STRUCTURAL PHILOSOPHY

Zen’s Faraway Verse adopts a narrative architecture inspired by the ensō —the Zen ink circle traditionally drawn in a single breathstroke, often left open-ended and asymmetrical. As Seo explains, the ensō symbolises not only enlightenment, wholeness, and the void, but also a radical acceptance of imperfection, fluidity, and ongoing transformation.²⁰⁵ It is at once complete and incomplete, capturing a moment of spiritual realisation without claiming finality. In the context of cinematic narrative, this principle becomes the underlying formal logic of *Zen’s Faraway Verse*. Rather than following a teleological arc with climax and resolution, the film loops back upon itself, ending where it began—in a forest, in stillness, in breath—yet subtly transformed. This logic of continual return without finality resonates with Deleuze’s notion of repetition not as sameness, but as difference in becoming. As he articulates in *Difference and Repetition*, true repetition is never static but always transformative—a process through which newness emerges precisely through variation.²⁰⁶

This ensō-like circularity marks a refusal of closure in favour of spiritual recurrence. Hanling’s pilgrimage begins in the urban spaces of Belfast, traversing mountains, forests, and coastal landscapes, and seemingly culminates at the ancient Mussenden Temple, a site infused with historical and metaphysical resonance. Yet just as the viewer anticipates an ending, the final image offers a gentle rupture: Hanling reappears in London, standing beneath the London Eye, facing a new, unknown direction. What appeared to be an arrival is revealed as yet another departure. The return is not a repetition, but a renewal—a continuous opening into further

²⁰⁵ Audrey Yoshiko Seo, *Enso: Zen Circles of Enlightenment* (Boston: Weatherhill, 2007)

²⁰⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994)

becoming. Her journey re-circulates, embodying the Zen logic of the *endless beginning*, where every point of arrival is simultaneously a new point of departure.

In this way, the film challenges conventional cinematic linearity, embracing instead a cyclical model of narrative grounded in the Zen understanding of time as recursive and experiential. Echoing Deleuze's "time-image," where temporality folds rather than advances,²⁰⁷ *Zen's Faraway Verse* proposes a model of storytelling based not on resolution but on presence. Each loop is unique; each repetition, a variation. The narrative becomes an ontological mirror to the Zen path itself: infinite, open, and suspended in the now.

CONCLUSION

Zen's Faraway Verse does not represent Zen—it performs it. In rhythm, in silence, in breath and image, it asks the viewer to be with, not read into, the frame. In this, it aligns with Laura Marks's conception of intercultural cinema as an embodied, ethical encounter with the other.²⁰⁸ This is not merely an experimental film—it is a koan in light and sound. It is a meditation that requires no temple, only attention. As both creative artefact and scholarly contribution, it proposes a new language for the cinematic transmission of contemplative traditions.

²⁰⁷ Gilles Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989)

²⁰⁸ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000)

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