

**Forging a Buddhist Cinema: Exploring Buddhism in Cinematic
Representations of Tibetan Culture**

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by

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Forging a Buddhist Cinema: Exploring Buddhism in Cinematic Representations of Tibetan Culture

Abstract

In contrast to the West where the divide between the secular and the religious is generally perceived as distinct and impermeable, in the Tibetan Buddhist culture, religion is at the root of all political and social formations. The current scholarship in world cinema has shown the importance of situating a particular cinema—whether it is national, transnational or exilic—within a social, political and cultural context. Yet this scholarship subsumes religion under the broad umbrella of culture, effectively limiting what could potentially be a thorough exploration of the representation and place of religion in films.

This thesis explores the centrality and multidimensional features of Buddhism by means of a close textual analysis of four films about Tibetan culture—*The Cup (Phörpa)*, (Khyentse Norbu, India, 1999), *Travellers and Magicians* (Khyentse Norbu, Bhutan, 2005) *Milarepa: Magician, Murderer, Saint* (Neten Chokling, Bhutan, 2006), and *Kundun* (Martin Scorsese, USA, 1997). It argues that a Buddhist ethos forms the core of these films and informs how the language of cinema is used to convey Buddhist themes and principles.

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INTRODUCTION

Representing Tibetan Buddhism Cinematically

The setting of the Hollywood film *Lost Horizon* (Frank Capra, USA, 1937) is a fictionalized utopian village called Shangri-La in the Buddhist nation of Tibet. However, the film eschews any mention of Buddhism presenting instead a serene Christian community whose particular enunciation of Christianity resonates with the Buddhist ethic of non-violence. The film was made during the inter-war period and ostensibly, Capra's goal was to offer a pacifistic alternative to the growing warmongering which was taking center stage in Europe. The film exoticizes Tibet as a place of mystery and magic—people live for several centuries, there are no diseases, and gangrenous limbs can miraculously heal without medical intervention. However the film also renders Tibetan Buddhism in blatantly Christian and colonialist terms. The spiritual leader of the community is Father Perrault, a 250-year-old Christian brother, who travelled from Belgium to the Tibetan plateau several centuries before. At one point, he sermonizes, “it is our hope that the brotherly love of Shangri-La will spread throughout the world. Yes my son, when the strong have devoured each other, the Christian ethic may at last be fulfilled and the meek shall inherit the earth.” Explicitly and unapologetically taken from Christ's Sermon on the Mount, the maxim—“the meek shall inherit the earth”—suggests that he, as the community leader, has “converted” the valley's Tibetan Buddhists to Christianity.

Tibetan Buddhism is rendered invisible in *Lost Horizon*, establishing Christianity's pre-eminence in offering a humanitarian prescription for a modern world driven by war and greed. Moreover, Shangri-La is not even vaguely portrayed as a Tibetan Buddhist utopia but an exoticized Christian paradise, suggesting that an untainted, purified brand of Christianity can thrive anywhere.

Frank Capra may have done a disservice to Buddhism and the Tibetan people by effacing Buddhism to promulgate a Christian ethos. But in his defence, over the years many Western interpretations of Buddhism have been shaped by Western biases. Even now, in this era of post-colonial cultural sensitivity, Western directors continue inscribing their perspective into the films. A case in point is *Seven Years in Tibet* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, USA, 1997). While it seeks to shed light on the systematic annihilation of Tibetan culture since the Chinese Occupation in 1950, it still represents Tibetan Buddhism as a humanistic religion, capable of assuaging the psychological suffering and sense of alienation experienced in the West. In spite of its positive portrayal, the film fails to provide a nuanced depiction of the deeply religious culture of Tibetans, and strips Buddhism of its more esoteric and profound features. Possible reasons for this representation may be the director Jean-Jacques Annaud's conscious effort to appeal to the sensibilities of Western audiences, his inability to mitigate his own intractable Western bias, or perhaps a limited knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism. As a result, *Seven Years in Tibet* offers a discernibly secular interpretation of Buddhism and Buddhist culture of Tibet that is limited in its scope.

Lost Horizon and *Seven Years in Tibet* serve as examples of how biases, no matter how well-intentioned, determine a film's representation of a foreign culture and religion. However, it would be inappropriate to view these films as representative of a general tendency within films about Tibet. The extant corpus of films reveals a variety of perspectives on Tibet and Tibetans, their devotion to Buddhism as well as the multifaceted features of Tibetan Buddhism. Notwithstanding, the documentaries and feature films can be unified by a single point of comparison: Tibetan Buddhism. This function can be explained in part by its enormous effect on quotidian Tibetan life, and its importance in the areas of education, health, politics, organized dissent, and culture.

This recognition of Buddhism as the most unifying facet of Tibetan society informs the subject matter and objectives of this thesis: to provide an overview and explore how Buddhism connects the disparate body of documentaries and feature films about Tibet mostly produced in the 1990s and 2000s. The survey is aimed at contextualizing the films I have chosen for an in-depth study: *The Cup or Phörpa in Tibetan* (Khyentse Norbu, India, 1999), *Travellers and Magicians* (Khyentse Norbu, Bhutan, 2005) *Milarepa: Magician, Murderer, Saint* (Neten Chokling, India, 2006), and *Kundun* (Martin Scorsese, USA, 1997). The close textual analysis reveals that the directors use cinematic devices—parallel editing, sound bridges, visual motifs, shot composition—to allude to Buddhist concepts and also convey a Tibetan Buddhist worldview that fuses material and nonmaterial realms.

The first of these three films are by Tibetan Buddhist filmmakers who are also Tibetan Buddhist lamas, or *rinpoches* (precious ones), born in exile in Bhutan.

Norbu and Chokling have devoted their lives to teaching their followers the meditative, devotional and philosophical aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. Under his religious title of Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, Khyentse Norbu has established Buddhist centres all over the world. They view filmmaking as an extension of this didactic and spiritual undertaking, and have been explicit about what they hope to achieve. In an interview Chokling remarked: “If this film [*Milarepa*] inspires just a single person to become more compassionate, tolerant and patient towards others, I will be more than happy. From a Buddhist point of view, this is the most precious gift that we can offer to the world.”¹ Norbu and Chokling have clearly embraced cinema both for its artistic and proselytizing potential, adapting the aesthetic and dramatic protocols of film to disseminate the fundamental tenets of Buddhism to the world at large.

Conversely, Martin Scorsese repeatedly stated that he wanted to avoid overt didacticism or proselytizing in *Kundun* in order to focus on the universal and emotional aspects of the film’s story about the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Regardless of his aims, the textual analysis of this film reveals a distinctly Buddhist approach in its allusion to an arcane traditional practice of Tibetan Buddhism called the *Kalachakra Tantra*. *Kundun* may lack the nuanced cultural and religious perspectives only a Tibetan filmmaker can provide; nevertheless the film reflects a distinctly Buddhist outlook in spite of its director’s Catholic upbringing.

¹ “Interview with the Director” *Milarepa, the Movie*, <http://www.milarepamovie.com> (accessed July 5, 2010).

It is my position that all films about Tibet address Buddhism, even superficially at times as elucidated in the survey, because it is deeply embedded in Tibetan culture, and viewed as one of the most salient aspects of Tibetan identity. Even the country's political system, formerly a theocracy, was a blend of the secular and the religious, requiring the Dalai Lama to simultaneously perform dual roles as Tibet's spiritual and temporal leader. Despite the Dalai Lama's resignation as temporal leader in March 2011 and exiled Tibetans' vote for a new prime minister, he will likely remain a spokesperson of Tibet's government-in-exile due to his high international profile. Therefore, Tibet will continue to be strongly identified in the West as a Buddhist nation and an exemplar of a national Buddhist ethos.

Tibet's unique Buddhist identity is becoming increasingly nuanced in the West as a growing number of Westerners have become familiar with Tibet's culture and political situation through their engagement with Tibetan Buddhism. After a number of exiled monastic Tibetan Buddhists established Buddhist centres throughout the West and started acquiring students, many Westerners like myself became aware of Tibetan culture once they started studying under a lama. Even as Tibetan Buddhism was becoming an international phenomenon, it was still able to retain its uniquely Tibetan character, due in large measure, to the commitment of the majority of lamas to maintain traditional religious practices. In spite of Westerners' growing awareness of Tibetan Buddhism, many remain unacquainted with its provenance and elementary principles. To ensure that non-Buddhists are not at a disadvantage engaging with this thesis, a short exegesis of Tibetan Buddhism is in order.

The Fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhists maintain that the transmission of the *Dharma* (the Buddha's teachings and spiritual realizations) has remained unbroken and essentially unchanged—passed on from master to disciple—since the Buddha's life 2,500 years ago. Originally named Siddhartha, the Buddha was a prince in Northern India who left his wife and son when he was twenty-nine years old to pursue a spiritual life and find an end to suffering. Choosing to follow the aesthetic tradition of complete self-denial, he was slowly dying of starvation when he realized that spiritual liberation would not be achieved until he also nourished his body. Soon after consuming a bowl of rice and milk, he continued to meditate under a tree and found the path to liberation or *nirvana*. Living to a healthy old age, he travelled all over northern India, teaching his message of spiritual liberation, the *Dharma*. His first teaching, the Four Noble Truths form the essential tenets of Buddhism: all life is suffering; the origin of suffering is desire and clinging to notions of a permanent "soul" or "self"; suffering can be eradicated; following the Noble Eightfold Path can bring the end to suffering. The Eightfold Path is a sort of spiritual manual that addresses three aspects of religious practice: it prohibits moral transgressions (stealing, lying, killing); cultivates wisdom (spiritual insight into the true nature of phenomena); and establishes meditation as a means of sustaining mental discipline and achieving enlightenment.

Given that the Buddha was a human being who gained insight into the cause of suffering and established techniques to eliminate it, Buddhism has tended to focus on the *Dharma*—his teachings—instead of the Buddha as a historical figure. Thus, we find a number of fundamental Buddhist concepts underpinning the films we will be

examining. For instance, the Buddhist understanding of the illusory nature of perception is central in Khyentse Norbu's *Travellers and Magicians*. Believing his hallucinations are real, the film's protagonist exemplifies the Buddhist position that strong emotions and cravings obstruct our minds to such a degree that what we think are ordinary perceptions are actually illusions or delusory thoughts. The film also touches upon the idea of suffering as part of a perpetual cycle called *samsara*, (birth, death, and rebirth) which ceases only upon the cessation of desire. *The Cup* is informed by the Buddhist notion that all phenomena of the material world—experiences, thoughts, emotions—are impermanent and affected by change, and that cultivating awareness of the mind, through meditation and ritual, will eliminate the pain and anxiety caused by impermanence. *Milarepa* touches upon the cosmic law of *karma*, which states that even the smallest action will have a positive, neutral or negative result. We see that Milarepa is terrified of the negative karma he has generated after killing dozens of people and realizes that he cannot escape the consequences of his actions. The opening half hour of *Kundun* often references the Buddhist belief of reincarnation in its depiction of the selection process for the Dalai Lama's successor.

The abovementioned tenets form much of the core of Buddhist thought; however, there are so many different schools of Buddhism, each with its own emphasis and approach, that it is difficult defining it in a few words. The problem stems from the fact that as Buddhism spread north to Tibet, China, Mongolia, Korea and Japan, and south to Thailand, Cambodia, Burma and Viet Nam, it was altered by each new culture, according to the needs of new adherents. Buddhism was gradually

transformed into a diverse religious practice, and can be broken down into two main branches: Theravada (The School of the Elders) and Mahayana (The Great Vehicle). The split occurred early, about a hundred years after the Buddha's death, erupting over the Theravadins' position that only monks could find liberation through individual effort and skill. A number of monks championing the Mahayanist view proposed that all beings could achieve enlightenment with the help of *bodhisattvas*, individuals who vowed to return in each successive life and help all sentient beings attain enlightenment. As the Mahayana tradition developed, it taught that there are an infinite number of buddhas which can manifest themselves, in infinite ways, in the celestial and material realms. Mahayana Buddhism became a more transcendent and mystical tradition of Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism was in turn shaped by its more esoteric elements.

Tibetan Buddhism developed into a subset of Mahayana Buddhism, differing considerably from other Mahayana traditions—like Japan's Zen Buddhism—by becoming far more shamanic. To explain, and occasionally defend, the esoteric and magical elements of their practise, Tibetan Buddhists often refer to the three phases of the Buddha's teaching, called the “three turnings of the wheel of Dharma”. In the first “turning”, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths; in the second “turning”, he focused on the inherent emptiness of phenomena; and in the third “turning”, he taught that the nature of mind is clear light and provided yoga practises for an accelerated realization of the essential nature of mind. Known by countless names such as the Vajrayana Vehicle or Secret Mantra Vehicle, the third “turning” developed into Tibetan Buddhism when it was exported to the Himalayas. This is the only region

where it flourished and endured, largely due to the efforts of the Buddhist master Padmasambhava. He is credited with establishing this unique variety of Buddhism—sometimes called Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism—during his visit around the eighth century.

Epitomizing Tantric Buddhism’s mystical energies, Padmasambhava is said to have used magic to “tame” the indigenous deities of Tibet’s shamanic Bön religion and extract oaths that they would remain the guardians of Buddhism. Still living today as a fully enlightened buddha “in the palace of Lotus Life on the glorious Copper-Coloured Mountain on the subcontinent of Chamara”,² he eluded death by flying on the rays of the sun. He is not the only buddha to manifest himself among the people of Tibet and exert a lasting influence on the nation’s history. The most notable is Chenrezi, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who simultaneously manifests himself in the reincarnations of the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa, the head of the Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Renowned Buddhist scholar and former monk, Robert Thurman, points out that Tibetans are the only Buddhists who believe they are surrounded by living buddhas manifesting as human beings.³ Given that buddhas perpetually reincarnate and affect events in the material world, interpretations of Tibetan history simultaneously incorporate the mundane and the transcendent. Thurman asserts:

The rich tapestry of the activities of these enlightened beings constitutes the Tibetan sense of history itself. Tibetans live in a multidimensional universe, they are quite aware that a single event appears quite differently to different beings. Thus in history they posit an “ordinary perception” [...] and an

² Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000), 23.

³ Robert Thurman, *Essential Tibetan Buddhism* (Edison, New Jersey: Castle Books, 1995), 1.

“extraordinary perception” [...]; or sometimes “outer”, “inner,” and “secret” levels of history.⁴

Thurman gives the example of Siddhartha, the historical Buddha, to illustrate the blending of the ordinary and extraordinary levels of history. On the ordinary level, Siddhartha attained enlightenment 2,500 years ago, only after much effort. On the extraordinary level, however, he had attained enlightenment eons earlier and chose to “incarnate as Siddhartha and manifest the deeds of a Buddha-life in order to educate and liberate the beings of this world.”⁵ This fusion of the ordinary and extraordinary, which is so essential to our examination of the films *Milarepa* and *Kundun*, creates a unique Tibetan perspective that arguably does not exist anywhere else in the Buddhist world.

It is crucial to note that Tibetan Buddhism is remarkably diverse, reflecting the diversity of Tibetans themselves. Reginald Ray, a professor of Buddhist Studies, posits that the physical barriers of Tibet’s geography forced inhabitants to live as nomads on grasslands, farmers in isolated hamlets or artisans in small villages, with each community developing its own dialect, folk traditions, and social and political configurations. The four schools or sects of Tibetan Buddhism—Geluk, Sakya, Nyingma, Kagyü—were also concentrated in particular regions of the country, each cultivating its own approach towards the Buddha’s teachings.⁶ A certain amount of centralization did occur in the more populous and wealthy Central Tibet, with its largest town Lhasa, becoming the centre of politics and the

⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000), 9-13.

residence of the Dalai Lama. Despite the high level of isolation and diversity, Ray asserts that: “Certain patterns bound Tibetan civilization together more or less as a unified whole.[...] Second only to language, Tibetan culture was unified and defined by Tibetan Buddhism itself, providing a history, a worldview, and a manner of living more or less characterizing all Tibetans.”⁷ In short, Tibetan Buddhism defines and unifies the Tibetan people far more than it divides them.

The Scholarship on Religion and Cinema:

We certainly cannot say that a unifying set of principles and perspectives binds film studies scholars and the methodologies they use to account for the diversity of films and cinematic practices. Yet, film scholars on the whole are reluctant to consider religion and exploring works that manifestly express religious themes. Even in the field of world cinema scholars have been reluctant to delve into films of non-secular cultures. Although their work has shown the importance of situating a particular cinema—whether it is national, transnational or exilic—within its social, political and cultural contexts to explain the factors that shaped the films’ production and reception, the general tendency is to subsume religion under the broad umbrella of culture. In the following review of some of the approaches to world cinema, including the small body of work on religion in Asian cinemas, I address the limitations and unsuitability of the existing scholarship for this thesis.

⁷ Ibid., 12.

World cinema scholars have forged various approaches: exploring national cinemas; tracking the cultural/economic exchanges and partnerships of various nation states and peoples; looking at films of a particular diasporic community; or examining the oeuvres of exiled auteurist filmmakers. However, the criteria of these approaches are limited and the methodologies are not appropriate to the study of Tibetan cinema. Even the most inclusive category, national cinema, cannot accommodate all the disparate elements related to Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora for a number of reasons. Firstly, since China's invasion, Tibet is not an independent nation or a fully autonomous region. Tibetans are a minority whether they live in Chinese occupied Tibet—now outnumbered by Chinese settlers—or in India, Europe or North America. Secondly, Tibet does not have a national film industry. In Chinese occupied Tibet, Tibetan filmmakers work under the auspices of the Chinese film industry. The Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India, has instituted a “national film policy” of sorts by providing funds to establish film archives and document Tibetan religion and culture on film and video. But can 100,000 exiled Tibetans reflect a truly national perspective when they represent only a small fraction of the six million still living under Chinese rule? Thirdly, Tibetans are only responsible for a number of the films about Tibet. Since Chinese and Western filmmakers also actively produce films about Tibet, can we say a Tibetan language film set in Tibet is “Tibetan” if the writers, producers and directors are not Tibetan?

At first glance, a transnational approach focusing on mobility, plurality, permeable borders and exchanges appears to be more inclusive and productive. This approach provides us with a critical framework to examine cinemas that fall

between the cracks of the global and the national—those hard to classify practices emerging from cultural and political specific contexts. It also allows us to explore collaborations between Westerners and exiled Tibetan filmmakers, giving Tibetans access to Western technical expertise, financing and distribution networks.

However, transnationalism is inadequate for the study of practices within countries with oppressive regimes like China. How can we discuss mobility, permeability and cultural exchange when it is illegal for Tibetans to cross the Himalayas to Nepal, Bhutan or India, and the government places restrictions on collaborations with foreigners?

Given that it is problematic to classify Tibetan cinema as national or even transnational cinema, Hamid Naficy's category of "accented cinema" appears at first glance as a viable alternative. By focusing on prevailing cinematic modes among exilic and diasporic filmmakers, his approach provides a framework to discuss filmmakers who are so "deterritorialized", liminal or marginalized within their host countries that their films do not—or cannot—exemplify a mainstream or national perspective. However, this approach fails on two fronts. The first is due to Naficy's insistence on creating a genre of "accented cinema" which connects a disparate international group of filmmakers—Abid Med Hondo, Ang Lee, Atom Egoyan, to name a few— by a recognizable "group style".⁸ Since not all diasporic films conform to Naficy's criteria, including those made by Norbu and Chokling, it is unclear whether these films can be classified as "accented" films. This apparent

⁸ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exile and Diaspora Filmmaking* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 21.

willingness to ignore any anomalies severely undermines Naficy's approach, at least for the purposes of this thesis. The second and main drawback is its secular criteria. Although Naficy acknowledges the importance of examining other determinants such as ethnicity, language, gender and social formations, he practically ignores religion. This elision cannot be regarded as an inconsequential oversight since religion is a dynamic and important marker of identity in many exilic or diasporic communities. Hence, this methodology is counterproductive for a thesis examining the multidimensional role of Buddhism in cinematic depictions of Tibetan culture.

An extensive search of numerous databases yields little in the way of film studies scholarship of non-theistic religions in cinema despite the fact that it is an area of study worthy of our attention. Extant scholarship on Central and East Asian film tends to be written by religious scholars, such as Winfried Corduan's examination of East Asian religions in Hong Kong martial arts films⁹ and Francisca Cho's articles on Buddhism in Asian films. Worthy of note is her recent essay exploring the parallels of cinematic illusion and Buddhism's "life-as-dream adage", thus rendering film "a natural medium" for imparting Buddhist lessons.¹⁰ Only a handful of film scholars have broken with the convention of overlooking the Buddhist themes, attitudes and aesthetic sensibilities that permeate Asian cinemas. Kathe Geist has attempted to situate Yasujiro Ozu's film *Tokyo Story* (Japan, 1953)

⁹ Winfried Corduan, "Bottled Water from the Fragrant Harbour," *Faith Film and Philosophy*, Eds. R. Douglas Geivett and James S. Spiegel (Downer's Grove Illinois: IVP Academic, 2007), 225-240.

¹⁰ Francisca Cho, "Buddhism", *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2009), 162-177.

within Zen Buddhist aesthetics. She posits that Buddhism has been absorbed by Japanese culture—thought, behaviour and institutions—to such an extent that a Zen Buddhist aesthetic also informs Ozu’s films, despite his disavowal that his films were Zen-like.¹¹ Also noteworthy is the work of Rachel Dwyer on the centrality of Hinduism in Hindi films, and the illuminating analysis of religion in South Asian cinema by cultural studies scholar Patrick Colm Hogan.

While Dwyer concentrates on the religious genres of Hindi film, Hogan examines cross-cultural patterns or prototypes to facilitate an understanding of religious aspects of Indian cinema, employing cognitive theory to universalize those that, at first view, appear to be culturally specific. In spite of being the result of substantial research, these approaches are not entirely appropriate for my goal of understanding how Buddhism informs films about Tibet. There is not a substantial body of feature films dealing with Tibet to conduct an extensive overview as Dwyer and Hogan have done, or to explore the emergence and development of religious film genres as Dwyer has done. Hogan’s approach is perhaps more fitting for a small corpus of films, but his assertion that there are essentially three universal meta-narratives is problematic for two reasons. On the one hand, the Tibetan world view and culture are shaped by Vajrayana Buddhism, a forbidding geography and centuries of relative isolation, and often defies universal and absolute definitions. On the other hand, Tibetan music, visual-and performing arts have largely been devotional; their aesthetics, themes,

¹¹ Kathe Geist, “Buddhism in Tokyo Story,” *Ozu’s Tokyo Story*, ed. David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 102.

iconography and subjects are designed to facilitate a specific religious experience and, in all likelihood, are not universal.

In light of the paucity of suitable film studies methodologies, I opted for following the framework outlined by theologian John Lyden. Not quite a methodology, this approach can be described as a set of guidelines requiring scholars to identify their personal and cultural biases in order to avoid the pitfalls of relativism and moral judgements. Calling for an unbiased and inclusive alternative to the theological and ideological approaches of religion and films studies scholars that tend towards pre-set readings of religious films, Lyden proposes that we “find the religious voice of the film itself” before critiquing it.¹² Lyden posits that we should equate film to religion, understanding it on its own terms by looking at “how it develops its own distinctive forms of myths, morals, and rituals”¹³ and objectively understand how it “functions for people as a worldview, a system of values”.¹⁴ We do not have to agree with Lyden that film is like religion as long as we recognize that we have to critically engage with the films and seek to understand each one’s unique message. By following Lyden’s suggestion and focusing on the films themselves and their religious messages, we can analyse themes, symbolism and aesthetics relatively unencumbered by personal agendas and biases.

Taking another cue from Lyden and identifying my own personal bias, I must admit being drawn to these four films—*The Cup*, *Travellers and Magicians*, *Milarepa*

¹² John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion, Myths, Morals and Rituals* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003), 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

and Kundun—because of their profound spirituality. From the outset, this project sought to discover whether these films express a distinctly Buddhist ethos or how they fit within Buddhist culture. To achieve my objective, I surveyed the diverse body of films dealing with Tibet in order to provide a context for the work of Norbu, Chokling and Scorsese. After having ascertained the unsuitability of most film studies scholarship for this thesis, I used the four films and selected works on Buddhism as primary sources to conduct an in-depth study of these feature films. This approach enabled me to explore how elements of Buddhism are expressed through cinematic language, themes and narrative structure. I primarily focused on how the films refer simultaneously to material and non-material realms, and how they evoke traditional arts forms—*thangkas* (wall hangings) and storytelling—used by Tibetans to express their devotion and connect with the Buddha’s teachings. Moreover, I explored how Norbu and Chokling, who as Tibetan exiles and lamas, are well versed in the precepts and traditions of Buddhism, use cinema to promulgate a Buddhist message to scores of people who have never been exposed to the *Dharma*. Similarly, I examined how Martin Scorsese uses cinematic language and Tibetan Buddhist rituals and prophecies to give his film *Kundun* a powerful spiritual complexity that few foreign films on Tibet have matched.

A Brief Outline of the Chapters

Chapter One provides a cursory survey of films about Tibet and is organized into three arbitrary categories: documentaries by Western filmmakers; documentaries made by Tibetans; and finally, short films and feature length films by Tibetans and non-

Tibetans. It is designed with two objectives in mind: to argue that Tibetan Buddhism is the main point of intersection for all the divergent perspectives that make up the corpus of films pertaining to Tibet; and to contextualize the films I examine in this thesis.

Chapter Two deals with two feature films by Khyentse Norbu: *The Cup* and *Travellers and Magicians*. Its aim is to illustrate how Buddhism provides a solid spiritual foundation that enables the characters to navigate modernity and change. Consideration is also given to how Buddhism informs the aesthetic of the film, and how cinematic devices—visual motifs, sound bridges, camera focus—sustain the film’s Buddhist themes and message.

Chapter Three explores how *Milarepa* and *Kundun* allude to a uniquely Tibetan multidimensional concept of reality and esoteric elements of Buddhism. Drawing on a rich visual and literary tradition to retell Milarepa’s story cinematically, Chokling uses a formalist aesthetic style to visually represent Milarepa’s state of mind—his perception and experience of an unseen, but very real, dimension that Tibetans believe is only accessible through the mind. In *Kundun*, Scorsese intercuts the Dalai Lama’s escape from Tibet with rituals of a Tibetan Buddhist practice called the *Kalachakra* initiation. The inserted segments allude to a Tibetan prophesy, illustrating how Tibetans imbricate the ordinary and extraordinary, the present and the past, and are used to explain how Scorsese uses cinematic language to depict a Tibetan Buddhist worldview that is complex, captivating and magical.

The conclusion addresses the audience reception of *Milarepa* and *Kundun* to determine whether their projection of a multifaceted Tibetan Buddhist worldview renders them difficult for Western viewers. It also touches upon the popularity of

religious films with movie goers in general, to begin to understand how religious films are received. Religious films speak to a spiritual need felt by many, as film scholars, it behoves us to understand how this is accomplished.

CHAPTER ONE

Tibet and Buddhism in the Cinema: A Survey of Divergent Perspectives

Looking at the body of films regarding Tibet, it quickly becomes apparent that its most salient feature is diversity. One is struck by the disparity of the filmmakers and the conditions of film production. There are the exiled Tibetan filmmakers, often procuring financing, distribution, and film crews from international sources and screening their films at international film festivals. There are a handful of indigenous Tibetans residing in Chinese occupied Tibet, articulating the Tibetan experience of living under Chinese rule. And finally, there are the Chinese and Western filmmakers making films about Tibet for domestic and international audiences. The types of films are no less diverse. There are documentaries and feature films that focus on Tibetans in Tibet, Tibetans living in exile, the Dalai Lama, the political situation, or aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. This diversity poses a challenge to any attempt to formulate a single approach to examine this body of work in its entirety. Restricted by the comparatively narrow scope of this thesis, I have only been able to conduct a limited survey, drawing from an extensive list of films about Tibet posted on the internet by history professor Tom Grunfeld. In this chapter, I contextualize this relatively contemporary corpus of films, most produced in the 1990s and 2000s, by providing information about the films themselves, and the conditions of production, circulation and exhibition. It is the ultimate aim of this chapter to demonstrate that Buddhism is the main point of intersection for all of the divergent perspectives on Tibet found in this corpus of films.

Buddhism was so thoroughly embedded in Tibetan culture before the Chinese invasion—affecting social hierarchies, the arts, education, medicine, even the political system—to the point where it is virtually impossible for any film about Tibet or the Tibetan diaspora not to refer to Buddhism. Even a documentary focusing on political dissent in Tibet would have to touch upon some aspect of Buddhism, because dissent inside Tibet is mostly organized and carried out by nuns and monks who are guided by the Buddhist principles of non-violence. Furthermore, Chinese officials have used cinema and television to attack Buddhism and the Dalai Lama as part of a large scale effort to promote a secular communist agenda. Despite Tibetan resistance, Chinese efforts have partially succeeded since Buddhism's influence is gradually being diminished, thus spurring Tibetan filmmaker Pema Tseden to subtly expose China's destructive cultural policies in Tibet, by making Buddhism a gauge in his films—a way to measure Tibetan's declining religious devotion and their disappearing culture. Even though Buddhism is addressed in multiple ways, reflecting diverse perspectives, the following survey demonstrates that examining the role of Buddhism is the only comprehensive and inclusive approach to this diverse body of work.

A Short Survey of Films about Tibet

Films that focus on Tibet and/or the Tibetan diaspora can be divided into three somewhat arbitrary categories: documentaries by Western filmmakers; documentaries made by Tibetans, most living in exile; and short films and feature length films by Tibetans and non-Tibetans. According the extensive list of over 800 titles of films, videos and TV programs compiled and posted on the internet by history professor,

Tom Grunfeld,¹ documentaries make up the majority of films and videos that focus on Tibet. However, there is a dearth of documentaries originating from China—less than twenty titles on Grunfeld’s list. Primarily screened on Tibetan television to celebrate the “liberation” of the Tibetan Autonomous Region by Chinese forces, an extensive search on the internet reveals that most of the titles are unavailable internationally. There is one notable exception: *Tibet Diary* (Duffy Wang, USA, 2004), a documentary for PBS featuring two Americans, Katy and Moge, who embark on a 10-day visit to Tibet. After enumerating the benefits of the Chinese occupation several days into their stay, Moge, concludes the documentary by saying: “I’m not at all sure that Tibet needs to be an independent state, and I’m not the least bit convinced that most Tibetans even want that.”² As the pair ruminates about the lives of Tibetans, their comments often reiterate the Chinese government’s official rhetoric—that Tibet has profited by China’s modernizing and progressive presence—and perhaps it is for this reason that a free and complete version of the documentary is available on multiple Chinese news/information websites.

Tibet Diary is an anomaly in portraying its subjects’ willingness to even consider the legitimacy of the Chinese government’s colonialist position. The survey I conducted suggests that the majority of documentaries produced by Tibetans and Westerners are critical of the Chinese occupation. Indeed, an in-depth exploration of all the documentaries available internationally, including foreign language films not on

¹ Tom Grunfeld, “Films and Video on Tibet”. Last updated November 1, 2010. <http://www7.esc.edu/tgrunfeld/tgrunfeld.tibetfilms.html> (accessed December 2010).

² The film is available on YouTube to view in segments. An uninterrupted version is available at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=278503142787331149#>.

Grunfeld's list, is necessary to determine whether a unified, pro-Tibetan, pro-independence, anti-Chinese bias is a dominant position. Moreover, the fact that the vast majority of the documentaries on Grunfeld's list are either in English or have English subtitles suggests they are chiefly marketed to Western audiences for the purpose of generating awareness about Tibetan culture and religion and soliciting international support for Tibetan autonomy or independence.

Another interesting dimension of the documentaries and their reception in the West is that a large number of them are Western productions. The 300 documentaries, videos and TV programs (including interviews on news programs) on Grunfeld's list suggest that Tibet has become an abiding interest for many Westerners. We must, therefore, take into consideration that Tibetan culture, religion and politics are being mediated by countless Western-made documentaries, and as such could be reinforcing cultural stereotypes or other commonly held assumptions. Without a comprehensive and ongoing study, we have no way of determining the impact of cultural differences, shifts in cultural perspectives and assumptions informing the multifaceted documentaries by ethnic Tibetans and Westerners. In addition, such a study would need to take into account all the disparate players—the Chinese government, the colonized Tibetan population, the exiled population in India, the diaspora living elsewhere, foreign converts to Tibetan Buddhism, and finally, a curious international community—because their idiosyncratic perspectives inform, at least in part, the documentaries about Tibet.

The task of detecting cultural biases within the 20 or so feature films is much less daunting because of their comparatively small number. While each film has a slightly different focus, Tibetan Buddhism is presented as an indispensable religious tradition

imbued with valuable and timeless insights that can benefit the modern world. With the exceptions of *Milarepa* (Neten Chokling, India, 2006) and *Himalaya* (Eric Valli, France/Nepal, 1999), the feature films tend to show Tibetan culture, and by extension Tibetan Buddhism, as being assailed by foreign cultures, modernity and exile. Acutely aware of the difficulties implicit in the task at hand, I will seek to provide in the following pages a brief, provisional yet hopefully useful overview of the films that focus on Tibet or the Tibetan culture.

Documentaries

The documentaries that appear on Grunfeld's list can be loosely grouped into a number of categories: public talks or teachings delivered by the Dalai Lama; biographies of the Dalai Lama; the teachings or biographies of other prominent Buddhist masters; Tibetans in exile; and Tibetans under occupation.

Grunfeld has catalogued approximately 100 documentaries which either focus on the Dalai Lama's life or his teachings, many of which are available on DVD and sold through distribution companies or independent retailers such as Snow Lion Publications.³ Of these 100 titles, half are film, video or digital records of events, often in the tradition of the Lumière brothers' "actualities". They are minimally edited recordings of the Dalai Lama offering public talks, rudimentary or advanced instruction for specific Buddhist practices, or performing Buddhist rituals like the *Kalachakra*

³ Snow Lion, situated in Ithaca, New York, is one of the largest independent book publishers specializing in Tibetan Buddhist topics, including core Buddhist texts. It is also a major retailer of DVDS on Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, listing over 100 titles, which can be purchased via the internet through its website www.snowlionpub.com.

initiation. The remaining are biographies of the Dalai Lama that conform to more standard documentary practices by incorporating voice-over narration, interviews and complex styles of editing.

The third category, teachings or biographies of prominent Tibetan masters, can also be divided into two separate subgroups: instructional or biographical documentaries. One popular English speaking Tibetan Lama, Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, specializes in instructional documentaries and offers about 20 DVDs on Snow Lion's website, including one called *Atisha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*. Snow Lion's write-up describing the DVD as: "Almost like attending a retreat, this 4-camera, live-mix DVD provides 21 hours of great teaching",⁴ illustrates the didactic role of these documentaries in offering Westerners an opportunity to receive Buddhist teachings from highly respected Buddhist masters. In contrast, the director of *Milarepa*, Neten Chokling's second film, a documentary entitled *Brilliant Moon: Glimpses of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche* (India/USA, 2010), incorporates biographical material with interviews to develop a portrait of a one of Tibet's most illustrious Buddhist teachers Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. Chokling's 56-minute film about his former teacher is jointly narrated by Richard Gere and Lou Reed and features interviews with the Dalai Lama and illustrious Buddhist masters like Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche. Unlike the instructional documentaries which are rarely screened publically, *Brilliant Moon* was screened at

⁴ http://www.snowlionpub.com/search.php?cat_id=147

several public events and film festivals over the summer of 2010 before it was released as a DVD.⁵

The fourth category pertains to documentaries about Tibetans living in exile, mostly in Dharamsala in Northern India, the site of the Tibetan government-in-exile. One example is Tashi Wangchuk and Tsultrim Dorjee's *Miss Tibet in Exile* (India, 2008). Made by their production company Tibet Motion Pictures and Arts,⁶ the film follows the creation of the Miss Tibet beauty pageant in Dharamsala. Another is *Following Kunsel* (India, 2006), written by Jamyang Dorjee and directed by Thupten Chakrishar, which follows an eleven-year-old Indian-born Tibetan singer, Tenzin Kunsel, as she performs internationally.⁷ There is also the 34-minute documentary called *Shining Spirit: The Musical of Journey of Jamyang Yeshe* (Karen Mc Diarmid, Canada, 2009), produced by a Canadian organization called the Tara Cafe Project which supports Tibetan musicians living in Tibet and in exile. It documents a Canadian named Mark Unrau recording music performed by a Tibetan family still living in Tibet and the subsequent efforts of two of their exiled family members, Jamyang Yeshe and his brother Tsundue, using the tapes to make a music CD called *Shining Spirit* in a Canadian studio. The film has been screened at the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival and the Telluride

⁵ *Brilliant Moon: A Glimpse of Dilgo Khyentse* was picked up by Kino Lorber, an independent film distributor, in August 2010 and is distributed and marketed as a DVD through their Alive Mind Collection. The film is also available through Snow Lion Publishers.

⁶ Tibet Motion Pictures and Arts was also responsible for two digital feature length comedies, *Phun Anu Thanu* (*Two Exile Brothers*, India, 2006) and *Richard Gere is My Hero* (India, 2007). One can still visit the production company's website www.tibetanfilm.com even though it hasn't produced any titles in the last three or four years.

⁷ Tenzin Kunsel's official website is <http://kunsel.youngtibet.com/bio/html>.

Mountain Film Festival which also featured a live musical performance by Jamyang Yeshe.⁸

Remarkably, there are more films about Tibetans living in Tibet than about the Tibetan diaspora despite the Chinese authorities' prohibitions against Tibetan and Western filmmakers. Filmmakers also face the challenge of protecting Tibetans living under Chinese rule from any repercussions resulting from their participation in films critical of the Chinese regime. For the documentary *Leaving Fear Behind* (Tibet, 2008,) amateur filmmakers, Dhondup Wangchen and Golog Jigme (also known as Jigme Gyatso) gave their Tibetans subjects the option of covering their faces or being out of focus when they spoke frankly about potentially seditious topics such as the Dalai Lama, Chinese oppression, or the looming 2008 Beijing Olympics. Yet only a small portion of the Tibetans interviewed for the 25-minute documentary chose anonymity. Although the Western press has not reported whether any of the film's subjects suffered negative consequences for their participation, it is known that Chinese authorities arrested the filmmakers shortly after they successfully smuggled the interviews out of Tibet.

A number of documentaries track the journey of exiled Tibetans returning to Tibet to assess the changes to their homeland, such as *Journey Inside Tibet* (Tom Vendetti, USA, 1998), which traces the trip of Lama Tenzin accompanied by Canadian flutist Paul Horn.⁹ *A Stranger in my Native Land* (India, 1998), by the married filmmaking team of Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam, is another example. Sarin shot the footage as she and

⁸ *Shining Spirit* is available to purchase on DVD with an accompanying CD on The Tara Cafe Project's website at <http://www.taracafeproject.ca>.

⁹ The film was originally televised on the American public network PBS, but has since been repackaged and is now included with the film's sequel entitled *Mount Kailash: Return to Tibet*. It is available for purchase on Amazon's website.

Sonam, an Indian-born Tibetan, travelled across Tibet to visit his extended family and the city of Lhasa, the former seat of the Dalai Lama's government. The film is largely a personal account that chronicles the radical changes implemented by the Chinese to either assimilate or marginalize the Tibetan population.

The systematic marginalization of Tibetans has undoubtedly galvanized many in the international community to support Tibetan efforts to maintain their culture, religion and language. Notably, there is a contingent of Western musicians and Hollywood actors who have supported various projects advocating democratic rights and cultural freedom for Tibetans. In 1998, the non-profit organization, International Campaign for Tibet which tracks and publicizes China's human rights violations in Tibet, produced a one-minute public service announcement called *Why are We Silent?* (Robin Garthwait, USA). Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the U.S. Declaration of Human Rights, it features, among others, Harrison Ford, Richard Gere, Goldie Hawn, Alanis Morissette, Julia Roberts and Sting reading from the declaration. With the exception of Julia Roberts, these luminaries have altruistically worked on a number of projects to publicize Tibetan causes. Goldie Hawn, along with actor and political activist Peter Coyote, narrated a 30-minute documentary, *Missing in Tibet* (Robin Garthwait and Dan Griffin, USA, 1996). Screened internationally at film festivals and aired in the United States on PBS television stations, it traces the events that led to the arrest of Tibetan musicologist Ngawang Choepel. Harrison Ford has narrated several documentaries one of which was a *Mustang: the Hidden Kingdom* (Tony Millar, USA, 1994) that aired on the Discovery Channel and explored the state of Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayan region. Ford's more recent contribution was the narration for the feature length *Dalai Lama*

Renaissance (Khashyar Darvich, USA, 2007) documenting a weeklong conference of Western intellectuals under the auspices of the Dalai Lama. Martin Sheen, Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins and Ed Harris lent their voices to the documentary *Tibet: Cry of the Snow Lion* (Tom Peosay, aka Tom Piozet, USA, 2004). Kris Kristofferson narrated the aforementioned *Journey Inside Tibet* and John Cleese narrated the short documentary *47 Years in Tibet* (Camilo Gallardo, UK). Arguably, Hollywood stars have been responsible for generating a sub-category of celebrity narrated documentaries pertaining to Tibet.

However, no Hollywood star has been more closely associated with Tibetan causes than Richard Gere. In 1993, in front of an international audience of millions, Gere risked hurting his career by straying from his script at the 65th Academy Awards and extemporaneously urging the Chinese leader at the time, Deng Xiaoping, to relinquish China's control over Tibet. As a long-standing convert to Tibetan Buddhism, Gere has worked tirelessly to heighten international awareness about the plight of Tibetans, establishing the Gere Foundation¹⁰ which, among other things, awards small grants to organizations and groups committed to preserving Tibetan culture. His efforts extend to assisting filmmakers, often providing the narration for documentaries. He has been involved in no less than eight documentaries, some of which have been televised on PBS such as *Destroyer of Illusion* (Richard Kohn, USA, 1986)¹¹ and *Mustang: Journey of Transformation* (Will Parrinello, USA, 2009). Not all of his projects are for general viewership, such as the instructional 2-DVD set of fundamental Buddhist practices,

¹⁰ The foundation website is: <http://gerefoundation.org/>.

¹¹ *Destroyer of Illusion* was re-released as a DVD in 2006 by Festival Media and is now available for purchase on their website <http://www.buddhistfilmfoundation.org/festival-media/destroyer-of-illusion>.

entitled *Discovering Buddhism* (Christina Lundberg, USA, 2004) which he narrates with Keanu Reeves.¹² He was also executive producer for the fiction feature film *Dreaming Lhasa* (Sarin and Sonam, India, 2004).

Gere also sits on the advisory council of the Buddhist Film Foundation (BFF), an organization based in Los Angeles which is “committed to presenting, archiving and preserving Buddhist-themed or Buddhist inspired cinema of all kinds from all over the world.”¹³ The BFF also sponsors the International Buddhist Film Festival held in various cities to provide venues for filmmakers dealing with Buddhist subjects or themes to screen their works internationally. Film funding is another activity of the BFF: it accepts proposals from filmmakers, solicits outside funding by offering tax-deductions to donors and supplies limited funds to translate, subtitle and/or master films in the final stages of production.

In addition to BFF, the Kham Film Project has a mandate to assist fledgling filmmakers. Working with a small group of partners like the film division of Columbia University School of the Arts, this organization supports the efforts of students and monks from four separate communities in eastern Tibet to produce short films.¹⁴

Similarly The Meridian Trust,¹⁵ a London based archive of video, film, and digitalized

¹² *Discovering Buddhism* is available to purchase on Snow Lion’s website at www.snowlionpub.com.

¹³ Buddhist Film Foundation website: www.buddhistfilmfoundation.org/filmmakers/call-for-entries/ (accessed December 2010).

¹⁴ The short films are available to purchase on the Kham Film Project’s website: <http://www.thekhamfilmproject.org/purchase.php>.

¹⁵ The Meridian Trust is a charitable organization founded in 1985 at the request of its patron, the Dalai Lama, to preserve Tibetan Buddhist culture on film and video. According to its website, it has archived 2,400 hours of footage of prominent Tibetan lamas imparting Buddhist teachings which it makes available to filmmakers and Buddhist practitioners. The Trust’s DVDs are available through international distribution networks (including Snow Lion). The Meridian Trust’s website is <http://meridian-trust.org>.

footage of Tibetan Buddhist teachers, has produced a substantial number of instructional or devotional DVDs available through an international distribution network. Even though the Trust has not produced many documentaries for the film festival circuit, it is worth noting that it enlisted Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam to make their first major documentary *The Reincarnation of Khensur Rinpoche* (UK/India, 1991), effectively launching their careers.¹⁶ Funding opportunities are also provided to filmmakers by large established organizations of prominent Lamas. For instance, Neten Chokling's previously mentioned *Brilliant Moon* was produced by the deceased Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's sizeable organization to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birth.¹⁷ The Pundarika Foundation, Tsokyni Rinpoche's non-profit organization, has used its considerable resources to fund Victress Hitchcock's *Blessings: The Tsokyni Nangchen Nuns of Tibet*; in return, half of the film's earnings go to one of the foundation's beneficiaries, the Nangchen nuns.¹⁸

Documentaries, as well as fictional feature films by Tibetans, do not generally benefit from extensive theatrical exhibition and distribution. They are more likely to be screened at international film festivals, universities and repertory theatres, but also at specialized festivals such as the Toronto Tibetan Film Festival, held in April in 2010, and sponsored in part by grassroots organizations supporting Tibetan autonomy or Tibetan independence. However, screening films on the subject of Tibet can often raise the ire of Chinese authorities. In January, 2010, Chinese government officials withdrew two of

¹⁶ According to their website at <http://whitecranefilms.com/films/films-on-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama>, Sonam and Sarin worked with the Meridian Trust to document a number of visits the Dalai Lama made to Britain between 1987 and 1990 for the Trust's archives.

¹⁷ Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's website www.shechen.org and the film's website is www.brilliantmoonmovie.com.

¹⁸ Victress Hitchcock's website is www.chariotvideos.com/documentary/index.shtml.

their submitted films—*Nanjing! Nanjing!* (Lu Chuan, 2009)¹⁹ and *Quick, Quick, Slow* (Ye Kai, 2009)—from the Palm Springs Film Festival to protest the festival’s screening of Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin’s recent documentary, *The Sun Behind the Clouds: Tibet’s Struggle for Freedom* (India, 2009).²⁰

China has done its utmost, both internationally and at home, to restrict the number of films that address its systematic and effective subjugation of Tibetans and their religion and culture, and intimidate or punish the supporters and producers of the films. Chinese authorities exert pressure on high profile Hollywood stars to silence criticism. Richard Gere, Brad Pitt and Harrison Ford are among a number of stars who have been banned from China or Tibet for publicly opposing China’s repressive measures in Tibet or for supporting film projects sympathetic to the Dalai Lama. Within its borders, the Chinese government reacts punitively when filmmakers are critical of China’s Tibet policies. It was reported that one of the makers of the previously mentioned *Leaving Fear Behind*, Golog Jigme, was tortured when he was first arrested in March 2008,²¹ and in January 2010, Dhondup Wangchen was sentenced to six years in prison.²² Even film projects not actively subversive or oppositional can generate severe punishment. The aforementioned Ngawang Choephel, a musicologist and director of *Tibet in Song* (2009), was detained by Chinese officials in August 1995 and was later found guilty of “espionage and counter-

¹⁹ *Nanjing! Nanjing!* was released internationally as *City of Life and Death*.

²⁰ Cratke, “Chinese government fails to block Tibet screening at major festival in US”, *International Campaign for Tibet*, January 7, 2010. <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/chinese-government-fails-block-tibet-film-screening-major-festival-us> (accessed July 6, 2010).

²¹ Lobsang Wangyal “Labrang monk Jigme Gyatso re-arrested”, *Tibet Sun*. March 18, 2009. <http://www.tibetsun.com/archive/2009/03/18/labrang-monk-jigme-gyatso-re-arrested/> (accessed January 26, 2011).

²² Jane Macartney, “Film-maker Dhondup Wangchen jailed for letting Tibetans tell their tale”, *The Times*, January 8, 2010. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6978798.ece> (accessed July 22, 2010).

revolutionary activities”²³ for videotaping Tibetans performing traditional folk music. He was sentenced to 18 years in prison, but was released in 2002 after serving six and a half years because of poor health.²⁴ Consequently, any film—by Western or Tibetan filmmakers—critical of China’s repressive policies towards Tibet or openly supportive of the Dalai Lama will have to overcome Chinese attempts to obstruct it.

A Survey of Feature Films by Non-Tibetans

Despite China’s repressive measures, the cause of Tibetan autonomy was prominently championed on several fronts in the West in the 1990s and a number of feature films representing Tibet were released: *Little Buddha* (Bernardo Bertolucci, Italy, 1993); *Kundun* (Martin Scorsese, USA, 1997); *Seven Years in Tibet* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, USA, 1997) and *Himalaya*. In varying degrees, all these films deal with the prospect of Tibetan culture and its unique brand of Buddhism either being eradicated by the authoritarian and hegemonic policies of China or being attenuated by foreign influences.

Kundun and *Seven Years in Tibet* illustrate the blatant imperialism of Chinese aggression and its deleterious impact on Tibetan culture. While both films deal with the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, and Tibet’s responses to the Chinese invasion, they avoid detailed enunciations of the tenets of Tibetan Buddhism. Written by Melissa Mathison, *Kundun* could be defined as a hagiographic depiction of the Dalai Lama’s early life until he seeks asylum in India in 1959. It delineates the Dalai Lama’s crucible of reluctantly assuming power as an inexperienced teenager to ameliorate Chinese

²³ Amnesty International website. www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA17/006/2002/ PDF download. (accessed August 18, 2010).

²⁴ Ibid.

aggression and control, and possesses some notable features that will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Three.

Seven Years in Tibet takes a similar approach by focusing on the personal challenges of the main protagonists, at the expense of explaining key elements of Tibetan Buddhism to uninformed viewers. However, as noted in the introduction of this thesis, it moulds Tibetan Buddhism into a peculiar blend of humanist psychology and Eastern mysticism. The film is based on German mountain climber, Heinrich Harrer's memoir of the same name, and details his adventures in Tibet: escaping from British internment camps; his ordeals surviving the hostile Himalayan environment; and his role as the adolescent Dalai Lama's unofficial tutor. The film differs from the book on a couple of key points. Unlike the portrait Harrer paints of himself in the book, the film portrays him as troubled, driven and uncaring. He is intent on climbing mountains even if it means abandoning his pregnant wife, using people to his advantage and going to physical extremes to attain his goals. Harrer's estrangement from his wife and young son—prominent in the film—is never mentioned in the book where he recounts instead his adventures, the ethnography of Tibet and his relatively short stint teaching the Dalai Lama about the West. By focusing on Harrer's personal transformation into a compassionate human being and his informal relationship with the Dalai Lama, the film suggests that he is as much the Dalai Lama's pupil as he is the Dalai Lama's teacher. Thus, the portrayal accentuates the film's humanist message that Tibetans can learn about and benefit from Western technology and scientific knowledge and in turn, the West can learn compassion and personal actualization from the Dalai Lama, Buddhism and Tibetan society.

That *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun* were released the same year is not a coincidence as both films reflect the West's heightened public interest in the Dalai Lama during the 1990s. After the Tibetan leader won the prestigious Nobel Prize for Peace in 1989, many Westerners began taking an avid interest in him—reading his numerous books, attending his speaking engagements, and following news reports about his meetings with international political leaders. In this period, Tibetan autonomy became a *cause celebre* in the West: the Dalai Lama became its venerated figurehead and the popular Tibetan Freedom Concert festivals raised aid money internationally for Tibet between 1996 and 2001.

Equally relevant is how *Seven Years in Tibet* reiterates the Dalai Lama's ethos of pan-cultural and ecumenical inclusivity—a secularized Tibet Buddhism that he often disseminates when addressing predominately Western audiences. It is not unusual for the Dalai Lama to sidestep a discussion about the distinctive characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism by stating that his religion is kindness. His overall project—to underscore the universalizing principles of Tibetan Buddhism and religion in general—is evident in the following statement from one many of his public lectures.

The main aim of different religions is to cultivate positive feelings and increase positive human qualities, and to reduce the negative ones. Therefore every major religion teaches us love, compassion, forgiveness and a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. Although there are different explanations and different shades of meaning given to love and compassion, broadly speaking every faith teaches the same essential thing. And so far, I have found along with some friends of mine who belong to other religions that through dialogue and through constantly exchanging our views and experience, we can develop mutual respect and mutual learning [...] Some of my Christian friends already

practise certain Buddhist methods and likewise there are many things we Buddhists can learn from our Christian brothers and sisters.²⁵

A casual perusal of many of his speeches will find them remarkably free of any mention of the more shamanic or esoteric aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. He proposes a universal application of Tibetan Buddhism by repeatedly stressing that people and the world's religions are essentially the same, and Buddhism's emphasis on inner peace and compassion can help anyone regardless of whether he or she is Buddhist or not. To the extent that the Dalai Lama tailors his message to make it comprehensible and palatable for Westerners, it is not surprising that *Seven Years in Tibet* similarly offers a more ecumenical portrait of Buddhism, one which is more in keeping with the Dalai Lama's humanist message.

However, a closer look at Tibetan Buddhism suggests that it is more multifaceted than the ecumenical Buddhism the Dalai Lama often promulgates. The Dalai Lama is revered as a highly skilled Buddhist master and customarily imparts sacred Tibetan Buddhist teachings like Dzogchen²⁶ to large gatherings of lamas, monks and lay people. To the Tibetan Buddhist community, which now includes a substantial number of Westerners, his knowledge and wisdom are not only profound, accruing from years of academic study, but also innately esoteric. One simply has to go to Dalai Lama's official website²⁷ and read about the controversy in the Tibetan community regarding the veneration of the wrathful deity Dorje Shugden (also known as Dolgyal) to see the salient esotericism

²⁵ The Dalai Lama, *Dzogchen: Heart Essence of the Great Perfection*, trans. Geshe Thupten Jinpa and Richard Barron, ed. Patrick Gaffney (Ithaca and Boulder: Snow Lion Publications, 2004), 225.

²⁶ Dzogchen, also known as the Heart Essence of the Great Perfection, is a central teaching of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. It was brought to Tibet from India around the eighth century by one of the founders of Tibetan Buddhism, Padmasambhava.

²⁷ www.dalailama.com/messages/dolgyal-shugden/his-holiness-advice (accessed July, 2010).

characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism.²⁸ Hence, the Dalai Lama's religious role within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is far more mystical than the more ecumenical and ambassadorial role he plays in the West.

Arguably, Eric Valli harboured few, if any, reservations about revealing the more shamanic aspects of Tibetan Buddhism in his film *Himalaya*. Chronicling the competition between the old chief Tingle and his younger rival Karma as they race their caravans southward over the dangerous Himalayan passes, the film documents the way of life of the Dolpo-pa. Valli clearly intended the film to be an ethnographic depiction of the threatened culture in the Himalayas by including, for instance, the time-honoured practice of transporting locally procured salt by yak caravans to Nepal's southern valleys to trade for food. In the "Making-Of" documentary, Valli addresses the Tibetan cast of non-actors and tells them, "Your country's culture is [...] melting away like snow under the sun. If we all work together and do a good job, our children's children, a long time after we're gone, will be able to see and understand how you lived."

Reflecting the film's ethnographic aims, Valli focuses on the ancient and more arcane rituals of Buddhism: the lamas perform divinations for a safe departure date for the yak caravans; the Dolpo-pa chant mantras to provide protection from the demons residing in the mountain passes; the old chief Tingle performs a divination to accurately predict a dangerous snowstorm. While Valli risks exoticizing the Dolpo-pa as a backward and superstitious people, he has also provided a reasonably accurate ethnographic portrayal

²⁸ Dolgyal-Shugden is said to be the malevolent manifestation of a rival of the Fifth Dalai Lama. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama has strongly urged Tibetan Buddhists to stop propitiating Dolgyal-Shugden, stating that it is a form of sectarian spirit worship and is "detrimental to the welfare of beings in general and the Tibetan government headed by the Dalai Lama in particular." www.dalailama.com/messages/dolgyal-shugden/his-holiness-advice (accessed July, 2010).

of Tibetan Buddhism and underscores its centrality in Dolpo-pa life. The film incorporates numerous extra-narrative sequences of less shamanic and esoteric Buddhist rituals as well, such as a lama performing funeral rites and an extended scene of lamas performing ritualistic prayers. Ritualistic practices are also inscribed within the film. At one point, the film's musical score is a rendition of the renowned sacred mantra of Tibet, "Om mani padme hung". The film's depiction of Tibetan Buddhism is somewhat superficial and exoticizing, but it fittingly situates Buddhism as one of the community's central unifying elements. However, unlike Norbu, Chokling and Scorsese, the directors examined in Chapters Two and Three, Valli does not creatively employ cinematic devices to cultivate or reinforce Buddhist themes but focuses instead on plot and character development.

Unlike *Himalaya*, Buddhism is central to the narrative and formalistic elements of the 2001 film *Samsara*, shot in Ladakh with a Tibetan cast by Indian director Pan Nalin. The film's title is a Sanskrit²⁹ word which means the "cycle of existence" and is one of the central tenets of Buddhism, namely, the belief that one can be freed from the cyclical existence of the births and rebirths of *samsara* and ultimately find liberation in *nirvana* (the cessation of suffering). The film's circular narrative structure—the protagonist's departure from and return to monastic life—reiterates the notion of *samsara*. The protagonist is Tashi, a monk since childhood, who finds himself being pulled by strong erotic desires that threaten his religious vow of celibacy after he meets a beautiful young woman named Pema. Once she becomes the object of his desire in a series of powerfully

²⁹ Sanskrit is an ancient, now defunct, Indic language. Tibetan Buddhist texts and terms were originally translated from Sanskrit.

erotic dreams, Tashi renounces his vows and pursues his sexual passions, leaving the monastery and working on the farm of Pema's father. Soon thereafter, he and Pema marry, have a family and become wealthy farmers. Eventually, repulsed by his all-consuming lust, Tashi realizes he must abandon his worldly life and return to the monastery. In a letter to Pema, he explains that his departure mirrors Buddhism's foundational story of the historical Buddha leaving his wife and child to pursue a monastic life.

Samsara is an intensely spiritual film, thematically and aesthetically articulating many of the essential principles of Buddhism. Its formal structure underscores Buddhist themes. Instances where dream and reality overlap reaffirm the Buddhist tenet that the powerful passions that we construe as real are in fact illusory. In a key scene, after Tashi has abandoned Pema, she suddenly and inexplicably appears as he turns a corner. She tells him that no one ever remembers the name of the Buddha's wife or recounts how she had to inform their son of his father's departure. Just seconds after Tashi realizes the pain he has caused and he says that he will return to her, she walks away. Then as she reaches for the reins of her horse, her image dissolves in a swirl of dust, inferring that not only is Pema an illusory manifestation of Tashi's overpowering erotic passions, but concomitantly, his passions are also illusory.

Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* is the most didactic of all the feature films listed above—unapologetically so. It has two very distinct and simultaneous storylines. The first one centers on a little American boy in Seattle who is possibly, along with two other children, the reincarnation of an exiled Tibetan lama. Despite his parents' initial reluctance, he is taken to Bhutan to be put through a series of tests to ascertain whether

he is the lama's reincarnation. The second storyline is the cinematic visualization of a children's picture book given to the boy to introduce him, and the viewers, to the essential tenets of Buddhism. It retells the foundational story of the Buddha, including the details of his birth, his introduction to death and suffering, and finally his struggle to achieve enlightenment.

The film stands out for its ability to convey the multidimensional aspects of Buddhism in accordance with Robert Thurman's explanation of "ordinary" and "extraordinary" perception previously mentioned in the introduction of this thesis. These two levels of perception are established and underscored by the film's use of two divergent aesthetic styles, each one representing a different level of perception. "Ordinary" perception, referring to our perceptions of the material world acquired through our physical senses, is clearly established in the film's depiction of the boy's "ordinary" life with his parents in Seattle—he goes to school, does homework, plays soccer and dresses in jeans—and is stylistically reflected by the cool grey tones that suffuse the scenes shot in the urban fast-paced Seattle. The camera work is brisk, with numerous cutaways showing Seattle's monorail, the boy's ultramodern house, skyscrapers and urban vistas. In sharp contrast, the scenes depicting the Buddha's story reflect "extraordinary" perception, in other words the reliance on intuition, dreams and divinations to perceive elements of an unseen and immaterial universe. The transitions to a mystical place and time are made evident by the formal aesthetics—the languid pace and golden hues of the scenes—and the narrative depicting the "extraordinary" events that occur during the scene of the Buddha's birth. Confirming that this is indeed a magical realm, the film meticulously stages the miracles of his birth: a tree that bends to

support the Buddha's mother; his ability to speak and walk moments after his birth; and the lotus blossoms that spring up in his footsteps. Reinforced by the film's formal devices, these miracles situate the Buddha's birth in a mythical timeless cosmos in contradistinction to the little boy's modern life in Seattle.

It is also important to note the film's connection to Khyentse Norbu, who was one of the religious advisors for the film and the director of *The Cup (Phörba)*, (India, 1999) and *Travellers and Magicians* (Bhutan, 2005). The central preoccupation of *Little Buddha*—how Tibetan Buddhism can accommodate global integration and modernity as long as the integrity of the Buddha's teachings is maintained—can also be found in Norbu's films. Obviously influenced by Bertolucci, Norbu also used distinctive cinematic styles in *Travellers and Magicians* to represent the “ordinary” and “extraordinary” dimensions of Buddhism. This aspect of the film will be discussed at length in Chapter Two.

The documentaries and feature films examined to this point vary widely in their understanding of Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism. Whereas the instructional documentaries focus exclusively on Buddhist teachings and practices, the vast majority of documentaries carefully examine Buddhism's centrality in Tibetan life, with only a few made by Westerners—Duffy Wang's *Tibet Diary*—reducing Buddhism to a cultural artefact of a disappearing culture. The feature films produced by Westerners also vary in their depictions of Buddhism. Concerned with documenting the culture of the Dolpo-pa before it disappears, *Himalaya*, for instance, frequently references Buddhism in relation to wider social and cultural practices. In contrast, Buddhist themes form the backbone of *Samsara* and are reinforced by the film's cinematic elements. The feature films by

Tibetan filmmakers also exemplify divergent perspectives on Buddhism, as I will discuss below.

A Short Survey of Films by Tibetans

The first Tibetan feature length films to be made were *Windhorse* (*Lungta*, Paul Wagner and Thupten Tsering, USA, 1998) and Norbu's *The Cup*. In the following decade, a cohort of young directors produced seven more features. Only a few of these successfully secured international distribution deals, and were screened at small international film festivals. *The Cup* may have triggered this spurt of Tibetan film production since it was widely screened and enjoyed considerable success in the West. However, along with Norbu's other film, *Travellers and Magicians* (Bhutan, 2005) and Neten Chokling's *Milarepa*, *The Cup* is an anomaly within this corpus with its profusion of non-politicized Buddhist themes because it circumvents the issue of the Chinese occupation entirely.

Interestingly, even the Tibetan feature films that tend towards overt politicization address Buddhism, and—in varying degrees of intensity—recognize it as an integral part of the social fabric. Co-directed by an American, Paul Wagner, *Windhorse* stridently opposes the Chinese occupation, which is not surprising considering that the film's co-director and co-writer, Thupten Tsering, is a Tibetan activist. Even the circumstances surrounding the film's production were politically charged. This collaborative effort of Americans and Tibetans—a number of the crew and the bulk of the cast were Tibetan—

was filmed with a three chip digital camera and later transferred to 35mm film,³⁰ enabling Western crew members to pose as tourists and clandestinely shoot the majority of the film's outdoor establishing shots in Lhasa and rural Tibet, in direct contravention of Chinese government dictates. In the behind-the-scenes-featurette included in the film's 2005 DVD release, Thupten Tsering states that the filmmakers' intention was to show candid images of Tibet to a younger generation of the diaspora, many of whom have never seen Tibet. Wagner asserts in the DVD's featurette documentary that "through this collaboration with the Tibetan community, we were able to give a little bit more of an inside[r's] perspective. It's really true that the film has been authored by the Tibetan people."³¹ Despite Wagner's overarching conclusions about authorship, the film provides an interesting—and pointedly biased—depiction of the political situation inside Tibet, and is designed to appeal both to Tibetan and Western audiences.

Windhorse focuses on the impact of the Chinese political apparatus on the youngest generation of a Tibetan family living since childhood under occupation. It opens with siblings Dolkar and Dorjee and their cousin Pema playing in their small village when the police come to their home to summarily execute their grandfather for his political resistance. The film picks up the story eighteen years later after the family has moved to Lhasa and depicts how each copes with the repressive occupation. Dolkar has opted for complete assimilation, becoming a rising pop star and singing Chinese propaganda songs. Dorjee is unemployed, disillusioned and spends his days playing pool and drinking beer with his friends. Pema, who has become a nun, is the most politically

³⁰ *Windhorse*. Directors Paul Wagner and Thupten Tsering. 1998. New Yorker Video, 2005. DVD: Featurette documentary.

³¹ *Ibid.*

engaged and is arrested by the Chinese secret police for defiantly shouting the slogan, “Tibet belongs to Tibetans! Long live the Dalai Lama!” in a crowded Lhasa market. When the Tibetan guards overhear her singing a Tibetan protest song in her cell, they brutally beat her and then release her to her family to die. The remainder of the film tracks the politicization and resistance of Dolkar and Dorjee as they try to smuggle a videotape of Pema’s account of her torture to India.

The film situates Pema’s monastery as the main axis of resistance, effectively turning the practice of Tibetan Buddhism into a political act of defiance. At one point, early in the film, the monastery is put under strict orders not to display or possess any pictures of the “counter-revolutionary Dalai Lama.” The edict also forbids any thoughts of Tibet’s spiritual and temporal leader. During a surprise inspection in the middle of the night, Pema and her roommate tear down the banned pictures of the Dalai Lama in their room, but when the search uncovers a single photo of the Buddhist leader, the nun who admits responsibility is arrested and thrown into jail. *Windhorse* situates Tibetan dissent largely within the monastic community to emphasize its non-violent and non-threatening nature. Generally speaking though, the film is more concerned with spurring the Tibetan lay community and Westerners to political action than it is in portraying spiritual essence of Tibetan Buddhism.

Another political feature-length film is *Dreaming Lhasa* (India/UK, 2004)—a rarity for its directors, Tibetan exile Tenzing Sonam and his wife Ritu Sarin, who are better known for their documentaries like the recent *The Sun Behind the Clouds* (India, 2009). *Dreaming Lhasa*’s primary focus is the Tibetan struggle for political autonomy; however Buddhism still occupies a prominent place in the film. Taking place in Northern India, it

follows a young American-Tibetan woman Karma who is interviewing nuns and monks for a documentary she is making about torture in Chinese prisons inside Tibet.³² One of her interview subjects is Dhondup, a former monk who wishes to return home to Tibet after he delivers a charm box at the behest of his deceased mother to her friend Loga whom he has never met. The film is essentially a road movie as Karma and Dhondup travel in Northern India to meet with Tibetans—some of whom have been engaged in the resistance against China—in order to learn of Loga’s whereabouts. Buddhism is frequently inscribed in the film with numerous shots of prayer flags and prayer wheels. Buddhist rituals—a monk filling water into bowls on a shrine, a funeral ceremony—punctuate the narrative, appearing regularly and infusing expositional scenes with a uniquely Tibetan religiosity. Buddhism is so central to the Indo-Tibetan identity in the film that withdrawing from political activism to embark on a spiritual retreat is not regarded as betraying the cause of Tibetan independence. In this way, the film construes Tibetan Buddhist monasticism as a viable form of resistance against the Chinese policy of Marxist secularity.

We’re No Monks (Pema Dhondup, India, 2004) is perhaps the most polemical film by an Indo-Tibetan filmmaker because it challenges the standard notion that all Tibetan political activists are pacifists. The film tells the story of four friends living in Dharamsala who ultimately resort to acts of terrorism—one becomes a suicide bomber—as a means to end Chinese rule. Before the film’s release, Pema Dhondup and the production company issued a press release, describing what the film was attempting to

³² In the DVD’s Special Features, the filmmakers state that the video clips of Tibetans describing their experiences of torture in Chinese prisons was actual documentary footage.

address: “Caught between the expectations of a traditional society and the realities of the present world situation, these four friends attempt to reconcile their dreams and aspirations with the social and political influences that push them down the path of terrorism, which is naturally against the non-violent teachings of the Dalai Lama.”³³ Even though the film considers the possibility that Tibetan protest could eventually become violent, Dhondup remains acutely aware that the characters breach the fundamental Buddhist tenet of non-violence, a point incidentally not lost on its audience. Mara Matta, a freelance writer and researcher, saw screenings of the film in Naples and Rome in 2004 and recalls: “Part of the audience reacted very strongly to what they regarded as an act that could not possibly be committed by a representative of the ‘peaceful Tibetans’ and vented their anger at the director, accusing him of misrepresenting his own culture”.³⁴ Matta’s anecdote indicates to what extent some audience members associate Buddhism and Tibet, thus making it difficult to accept that Tibetans are capable of violence.

The low-budget digital films *Phun Anu Thanu* (*Two Exile Brothers*, India, 2005) and *Richard Gere is My Hero* (India, 2007) by Tashi Wangchuk and Tsultrim Dorjee are romantic comedies, depicting characters not completely steeped in Buddhism. The first film tells the story of two brothers trying to win the hearts of two sisters, and the second details the lives of four young Tibetans who question the expectations and traditions of their parents respectively. In a scene of the second film, traditional Tibetan

³³ Pema Dhondup and Rupin Dang, “The first Indo-Tibetan digital feature film,” Press release (Summer 2003), http://www.wildfilmsindia.com/press_wnm.htm (accessed July, 2010).

³⁴ Mara Matta, “Rebel with a cause: debunking the mythical mystical Tibet”, *ias newsletter*, Number 47 (Spring 2008), http://www.ias.nl/files/IIAS_NL47_32.pdf (accessed January 13, 2011).

shamanism is good naturedly lampooned when three of the young friends approach a monk who uses divinations to cure people. One of the friends asks him whether Tibetan medicine is as effective as Western medicine in treating his friend's grandmother. The monk replies affirmatively and then assures them that a treatment of mantra butter on the grandmother's ailing leg followed by his prayers will cure her. The young men dissolve into laughter, admitting the grandmother died several years ago. The film's irreverent treatment of traditional Buddhist divinations suggests that Buddhism still plays a pivotal and defining role in the formation of cultural attitudes among older and younger Tibetans.

Tibet in Chinese Films

Predictably the Chinese government has never celebrated Tibetan Buddhism, vociferously condemning the Dalai Lama's theocratic governance of pre-invasion Tibet, and promulgating its position that Buddhism is incompatible with Communism. In his examination of the collision of Communism and Buddhism in Asia during the 1960s, Ernst Benz delineates the key points of conflict with the following assessment:

Buddhism counters the Communist call for class hatred, revolution and world conquest by its own commandments of kindness, friendliness, sympathy and tolerance. Buddhism begins reforming the evils of the world not by outward measures, but by purifying the heart; that is the premise for all social reform. The peaceful methods of tolerance and goodwill, not hatred and violent revolution, must be employed to bring about the improvement of social conditions.³⁵

³⁵ Ernst Benz, *Buddhism or Communism: Which Holds the Future of Asia*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Garden City: Anchor Books Doubleday and Company, 1965), 171.

The Chinese government has repeatedly stated that the goal of its invasion of Tibet has been to “liberate” Tibetans from the feudalism and inequality that had plagued Tibet for centuries. For instance, in 2008, the Information Office of China’s State Council released a policy paper on Tibetan culture alleging that:

The Dalai and his clique are the chief representatives of the backward feudal serfdom system and culture of theocratic rule and religious despotism that used to prevail in Tibet. The Democratic Reform in 1959 abolished the feudal serfdom system and overturned the unfair ownership and distribution system of Tibetan cultural resources, which had been monopolized by a small number of feudal serf owners. Furthermore, the reform removed theocratic rule and religious despotism over social and political life, cleared away the decadent and backward cultural scum which had been obstructing social progress and development, accomplished the democratization and modernization of Tibetan culture, and freed the productive forces of Tibetan culture, enabling Tibetan culture, protected and carried forward as a common spiritual wealth of all Tibetans, to keep up with the times and develop prosperously.³⁶

Furthermore, the Chinese government has often been openly hostile towards Tibetan Buddhism. Many exiled Tibetans have accused the Peoples Liberation Army of destroying the vast majority of Tibet’s monasteries and killing untold numbers of monks and nuns during and after the invasion. Many Tibetans feel that their religious freedoms have been consistently circumscribed by official government policies. As a result, Tibetan Buddhism is either glaringly absent or is unsympathetically represented in the few Chinese feature films about Tibet, overtly reinforcing the government’s secularist and political policies. In these films Tibetan culture is inordinately backward and superstitious and in dire need of political and social reforms. For instance, *The Serf* (Li Jun 1963) tells the story of a young Tibetan boy whose parents are killed by a cruel

³⁶ “Protection and Development of Tibetan Culture” *The Information Office of China’s State Council*. Published September 2008. Reproduced December 10, 2008 at <http://chinatibet.people.com.cn/96058/6550857.html> (accessed September 1, 2010).

landowner and is consequently forced to work for slave wages. Near the point of starvation, he steals some barley cakes from a Buddhist shrine and is severely beaten by monks. The film ends with a series of battles in which the People's Liberation Army puts an end to feudalism in Tibet, thereby freeing the boy.³⁷ Although the film pits the Buddhist Theocracy and the nobility against the Tibetan peasant, Tibetans resisted the film's politicization of Tibetan Buddhism. Exiled political activist Jamyang Norbu writes in a blog that Tibetans in Lhasa referred to the film as *The Torma Thief* (*torma* refers to the barley cakes that were stolen from the shrine). Norbu states that the "theft of a religious object (even a negligible one as a tsampa cake) assum[ed] more significance in the Tibetan mind than the class struggle and revolutionary aspects of the film."³⁸

More recent films generally appear to be far less propagandistic and portray Tibetan culture and Buddhism in a more neutral light. One such film is *The Horse Thief* (1986) by Chinese filmmaker Tian Zhuangzhuang—incidentally the first feature film about Tibet to be released and acclaimed in the West.³⁹ According to Jamyang Norbu, the film avoided depicting Tibetans in the same racist or disparaging terms as earlier Chinese films yet "presumed without question, that Tibetans were savages. Perhaps a noble savage in the case of [the protagonist] Norbu (who is often shot in profile, posing dramatically against the Tibetan skyline) but savages nonetheless."⁴⁰

Perhaps the most auspicious indication of a budding Chinese tolerance may be the recent emergence of the promising Tibetan director Pema Tsenden (Wanma Caidan in

³⁷ Jamyang Norbu, "The Happy Light Bioscope Theatre and Other Stories (Part 2)", *Shadow Tibet*, February 22, 2010, www.jamyangnorbu.com/.../the-happy-light-bioscope-theatre-other-stories-part-2/ (accessed July 8, 2010).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Chinese). Tseden now lives in Beijing, but he was born to Tibetan Nomads in an area of Tibet once known as Amdo (now called Qinghai in Chinese).⁴¹ He was the first Tibetan admitted to the Beijing Film Academy and started his filmmaking career in 2003 with two short fiction films, *The Silent Holy Stones* and *A Day of the Little Living Buddha*. He has also made a couple of documentaries, *The Grassland* (2004) and *Love Story* (2005). To date, he has directed two feature films, *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005) and *The Search* (2009). In an interview conducted by the Asia Society of Columbia University at a screening of his feature films and later posted on YouTube, he stated, “Tibet has always been my theme. All my actors are Tibetan. I shoot on location in Tibet and the dialogues are all in Tibetan. My films reflect Tibetan thinking. So since my short films, we’ve been trying to find our own film language.”⁴² He has described his work as employing a “traditional Tibetan aesthetic” which he derives from Tibetan *thangkas*, or religious wall hangings.⁴³ In *The Search*, the Tibetan style is characterized by a very static camera, long takes and a predominance of long shots.⁴⁴

In interviews with the Western press, Tseden frankly admits that filmmakers in China are limited in the topics they can film. However, Buddhism figures prominently in both of his feature films despite the Chinese government’s antipathy towards it. In *The Silent Holy Stones* a 10-year-old monk temporarily leaves his monastery to visit his parents in their village for *Losar* (Tibetan New Year); but once he sits in front of the family TV and

⁴¹ “Pema Tseden: Tibetan Films for Tibetan People”, *Asia Society*, April 10, 2010, <http://asia.society.org/arts-culture/film/pema-tseden-tibetan-films-tibetan-people> (accessed February 11, 2011).

⁴² *YouTube*. www.asiasociety.org/arts-culture/film/pema-tseden-tibetan-films-tibetan-people (accessed July 6, 2010).

⁴³ Louisa Lim, “Director Seeks To Capture Life in Modern Tibet”, *Canada Tibet Committee Newsletter*, July 2, 2009. www.tibet.ca/en/newsroom/wtn6988 (accessed July 6, 2010).

⁴⁴ Tenzing Sonam, “Some Thoughts on Pema Tseden’s *The Search*”, *Phayul*, June 19, 2010, www.phayul.com (accessed July 6, 2010).

VCR he becomes completely engrossed in a Chinese television series called *Journey to the West*, refusing to turn off the TV to attend a traditional Buddhist opera staged by the villagers. While the film depicts Tibetans adjusting to the alien cultural practices imposed by the Chinese, it quietly laments Buddhism's diminishing influence. A similar theme is found in his latest film *The Search*. It chronicles the story of a Tibetan filmmaker who travels to various Tibetan villages to cast a movie based on a revered traditional Tibetan opera, *Drime Kunden*. The opera recounts the story of a *bodhisattva*⁴⁵ named Prince Drime Kunden who sacrifices everything—his wife, children, and even his eyes—so that he can help others.⁴⁶ The film follows the protagonist as he holds auditions in bars, night clubs and construction sites for singers who can still perform the roles of the opera. Many of the aspiring performers cannot remember the songs and frequently the best candidate for the role is either unavailable or unwilling. In the case of one singer, renowned for performing the role of Drime Kunden, he angrily refuses because he detests it. By the end of the film, the filmmaker finds a performer who is willing and capable but is unable to take a leave of absence from his job as a public employee. Indo-Tibetan filmmaker Tenzing Sonam notes that even though Tseden's film does not directly address the Chinese presence in Tibet, the audience senses "the changes that are taking place in terms of the dissolution of traditional culture in the face of the encroachment of the modern world. Along the way, the director begins to question his own faith in the spiritual purity of Prince Drime Kunden's sacrifice. The film has an

⁴⁵ A bodhisattva renounces enlightenment to remain within the cycle of rebirth and pledges to help all sentient beings achieve enlightenment.

⁴⁶ Tenzing Sonam, "Some thoughts on Pema Tseden's *The Search*", *Phayul*, June 19, 2010, www.phayul.com (accessed July 6, 2010).

elegiac quality to it; a loving farewell to a fast-disappearing way of life tinged by a sense of apprehension at what is to come.”⁴⁷

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the aim of this survey is to demonstrate the centrality of Buddhism within this diverse corpus of films dealing with Tibet. Drawing on Grunfeld’s list, I have identified the general categories and trends within the relatively large number of documentaries on Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora: public talks and biographies of the Dalai Lama and other prominent lamas; Tibetans in exile or under occupation. Yet this overview is partial and provisional because a more comprehensive account would exceed the scope of this thesis.

In contrast, the much smaller canon of feature films, directed and written by Tibetans and non-Tibetans, is far easier to catalogue and analyse in terms of their treatment of Buddhism. There are Chinese films like *The Serf* that depict it as a negative force in the lives of Tibetans, reinforcing the official narrative. *Himalaya* adopts an ethnographic perspective of Dolpo-pa culture to preserve it for posterity and does not cultivate significant Buddhist themes. *Kundun* and *Seven Years in Tibet* combine a historical and political perspective on the invasion of Tibet, yet also emphasize different aspects of Buddhism. *Dreaming of Lhasa* and *Windhorse* exemplify Tibetan films that pursue the political, societal and cultural ramifications of the Chinese invasion and situate Buddhism as a marker of Tibetan national identity and as a site of resistance to Chinese authority. However, the most interesting films, both thematically and formally, explore the enigmatic and multidimensional facets of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism is central to Nan Palin’s film *Samsara*, forming the core of its subject matter and themes.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Furthermore, its circular narrative structure underscores the Buddhist notion of *samsara* and the Buddhist concept of illusory perception is reiterated formally in the film when the final image of Pema self-consciously dissolves. Pema Tseden is going a step further by forging a new cinematic aesthetic based on traditional Tibetan *thangkas* and thoroughly exploring in his films how Buddhism is being systematically eroded in Chinese occupied Tibet. The films I examine in depth—*The Cup*, *Travellers and Magicians*, *Milarepa* and *Kundun*—are not only thoroughly grounded in Buddhism; they use cinematic techniques and conventions to underscore their Buddhist themes far more extensively and ambitiously than the other feature films mentioned in this survey. The following chapter will probe the two films of Khyentse Norbu—*The Cup* and *Travellers and Magicians*—to elucidate how Buddhist themes structure the cinematic language of his films.

CHAPTER TWO

Khyentse Norbu: Film as a Modern Day Thangka

In *The Cup* (*Phörpa*, Khyentse Norbu, India, 1999), the young monk Orgyen watches as two novice monks are helped into their Buddhist robes for the first time. “You’ll get used to it,” he tells them, “It’s a 2,500 year old fashion.” Orgyen’s little joke draws attention to the radical transformation the novice monks have just undergone, discarding baseball caps, running shoes and jeans for shorn heads and traditional monastic garb. In a monastery where monastic rituals and protocols have remained relatively unchanged for centuries, the sight of monks looking at sexy pinups or watching soccer on television may appear incongruous or even dismaying; however, as Tibetan Buddhist scholar Reginald Ray opined, “Buddhism is a particularly interesting tradition because it has one foot in the past and one in the present.”¹ Khyentse Norbu’s two feature films, *The Cup* and *Travellers and Magicians* (Bhutan, 2005) address the problems encountered by a traditional Himalayan culture navigating the changes wrought by an intrusive modern world. They address the collision of the past and present but importantly, they establish the unchanging tenets of Buddhism as a bulwark against the potentially deleterious effects of Western modernity. The modern world Norbu depicts in his films is grounded in the timeless ultimate reality of the Buddha’s teachings. This belief in an ethereal and timeless domain reflects a multidimensional concept of time and reality that

¹ Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000), 2.

is quintessentially Tibetan and anchored in Buddhism. Never portraying modernity as a threat to monastic traditions or Buddhism itself, Norbu's films reaffirm Buddhism's capacity to accommodate modernity within the Tibetan monastic culture.

In his dual role as a filmmaker and venerated Buddhist lama known as Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, Khyentse Norbu exemplifies a fusion of past/present, tradition/modernity, preservation/change, and East/West. Norbu has never been afraid to stray off the path of tradition, augmenting his Buddhist studies with a Western education from the London School of Oriental and African Studies, and film school. His first foray into filmmaking was as an advisor in Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* (1993) and then went on to direct a number of short films—*Etto Metto*, *9 1/2* and *The Big Smoke*—before his first feature film *The Cup*. Despite the apparent incongruity of his two roles, he views his filmmaking activities and teaching responsibilities as an incarnate lama as complimentary: he uses the modern medium of cinema to teach the core principles of Buddhism. He defends his distinctively modern didacticism by stating: “In its 2,500 year history, we can see that Buddhism has adopted many methods of expressing the dharma [Buddha's teachings]—through painting, sculpture, architecture, performing arts. [...] So there is an old tradition in Buddhism of using images, and film can do that, too.”² Indeed, in forging a uniquely Tibetan/Bhutanese cinema, using Buddhist themes, meditative slow pace, visual motifs, and aesthetics, Norbu has proven that the cinema is particularly adept at modifying the aesthetics of the traditional Buddhist art forms.

² Kelly Roberts, “What Changes and What Doesn't: An Interview with Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche” *Shambhala Sun*, November 2000, www.shambhalasun.com (accessed July, 2010).

Norbu stated that he considers his films a “modern day *thangka*”.³ What can we interpret this to mean? A *thangka* is a highly stylised wall hanging that functions as an aid to meditation. Depicting iconographic images of the historical Buddha, cosmic buddhas, deities, or bodhisattvas, it uses symbolism to convey a specific aspect of the Buddhist teachings. The *thangka*'s formalistic elements take on the same vital role as its content in espousing Buddhist concepts and illustrating celestial realms. In Norbu's hands, the cinema becomes a *thangka* of sorts. Cinematic devices, such as slow pacing and visual motifs, mimic the *thangka*'s role as a meditative tool and its use of symbolism. For instance, the numerous extra-narrative shots of Buddhist rituals in *The Cup* create a slow pace that put viewers into a meditative state, encouraging them to pay attention to the actual experience of watching the film, rather than becoming distracted by an all-absorbing narrative. In *Travellers and Magicians* the image of storm clouds gathering as the protagonists becomes lost in a world of illusion, becomes the symbol of a mind clouded by unbridled passions and illusions, reinforcing the Buddhist idea that our perceptions can cloud our minds and obscure the mind's true essence.

Norbu's admirable skill as a filmmaker is marked by his ability to use cinematic devices to subtly draw attention to fundamental Buddhist principles. In a scene from *The Cup*, for instance, he directs the viewer's eye to a statue of the Buddha on a distant wall by simply changing the camera's focus from the foreground to the background, subtly conveying the enduring relevance of the Buddhist teachings in the transitory and material world of *samsara*. In another scene, the visual motif of swirling smoke creates a visual “passageway” from ephemeral cinematic images to the unchanging truth of the

³ Ibid.

Buddha's teachings by alluding to the incense smoke used in a ritual that facilitates the transition to invisible celestial realms. Several sound bridges in *Travellers and Magicians* connect two disparate worlds, referring to the existence of concurrent levels of reality, reflecting the Buddhist belief that multiple levels of perception are possible in a multidimensional universe.

Norbu also delves into the imaginary alternative world fostered by the narrative to reiterate the Buddhist tenet that our perceptions and strong emotions are illusory—merely ephemeral constructs of a deluded mind. In *Travellers and Magicians*, a monk recounts the mythic tale of a man who believes his experience of a dream is real, thus the 'story within a story' narrative structure of the film foregrounds the dangers of becoming lost in the seductive illusions and passions of the mind. Lastly, by employing cinematic devices, such as cutaway shots, *Travellers and Magicians* alludes to a Tibetan Buddhist reality made up of visible and invisible elements and bridges the two narratives' disparate worlds of myth and modernity.

In Norbu's films, cinematic language and conventions become as important as the film's narrative and Buddhist themes in conveying Buddhist precepts. The Buddha's timeless teachings provide a solid spiritual foundation for Norbu's characters who are trying to navigate a tumultuous modern world, but the teachings also form the foundation of the cinematic language of the films themselves. To ascertain how the cinema, as a modern mode of representation, affects the elaboration of traditional Buddhist teachings, this chapter explores how Norbu uses cinematic techniques and conventions in *The Cup* and *Travellers and Magicians* to convey, sustain and underscore the films' Buddhist themes.

The Cup (Phörpa): “Dharma is the tea and culture is the cup”

The Cup was shot at the Pema Awam Choegar Gyurme Ling Monastery in India, and drew most of the amateur cast of monks and lamas from the monastery’s residents. The daily activities of the monks—washing up in the morning, playing a spontaneous game of soccer with a Coke can, making tea, meditating, or chanting—not only form the backdrop of the film, but also firmly situate it within a Tibetan Buddhist milieu. However the film traces the incursion of modern technology into an otherwise traditional society as the minimalist plot follows two young soccer-obsessed monks Orgyen and Lodo as they slip off late at night to watch the television broadcasts of the 1998 FIFA World Cup championship held in France. Except for the arrival of two young Tibetan exiles, Palden and Nyima, very little happens in the cloistered world of the monastery, until Orgyen and Lodo are kicked out of the only local venue for viewing soccer because they are too noisy. Impelled by the prospect of missing the final game, they convince the monastery’s second-in-command, Geko, to appeal to the abbot to allow the entire monastic community to rent a TV and satellite dish to watch the game. After they successfully obtain the abbot’s permission, they fail to garner enough donations among their fellow monks to raise the entire rental fee. Orgyen then presses young Nyima to relinquish a watch his mother has given him to secure a loan for the rest of the rental fee on the condition that they pay it the following day or forfeit the watch. After all the monks pitch in and hook up the TV and satellite dish, Orgyen leaves in the middle of the game, feeling a rising sense of guilt at how deeply Nyima misses his treasured watch. Orgyen is searching his cache of treasured items to trade for Nyima’s watch when the concerned Geko enters his room. Sympathetic to Orgyen’s predicament, Geko assures the young monk that he and

the abbot will pay the remainder of the fee. Orgyen and Geko return just in time to view France's soccer team celebrating their victory.

Upon watching the film, one is first struck by the playful irreverence of the main protagonists, Orgyen and Lodo, towards Buddhist ceremonial practices. During the recitation of prayers they pass notes about upcoming soccer games, make origami figures and finger puppets or, as a practical joke, sew a sleeping monk's robe to a cushion. Arguably they challenge the preconceived notions many of us have of pious monks in Tibetan monasteries engaging only in serious study. In one scene, Lodo shows his fellow monks—who have been studiously chanting prayers—the advertisements in his soccer magazine of female models in body hugging sportswear, while he remains on the lookout for Geko making his rounds. The young monks in *The Cup* continually break the rules and avoid their studies. Their piety is quite possibly superseded by their love of soccer. “This is my shrine,” Orgyen says, pointing to his bedroom wall, adorned with a collage of his favourite soccer players which threaten to eclipse his wall poster of the Buddha. Moreover, Orgyen is not above distorting Buddhist doctrine to justify watching the final game; impatiently dismissing Nyima's request for his watch, by glibly saying, “Not now. Anyway, Buddhists shouldn't be so attached.” This comment refers to the Buddha's assertion that desire and the attachment to emotions are the root causes of suffering. Thus, a major tenet of Buddhism becomes an empty platitude for Orgyen to assuage his guilt.

More importantly, Orgyen and Lodo's impropriety extends to the wider monastic community. Monks wrestle with the imperfections of human nature through the course of the film; they make bets about which team will win the next game; they swear; they

fill a wall with graffiti; they make sarcastic comments about their Indian neighbours. Thus, *The Cup* delineates the inevitable disjuncture that occurs when a group of human beings try to implement what is regarded as a perfect, untarnished doctrine in a very imperfect world. However, the monks' misdemeanours do not undermine their fundamental goodness, which is borne out when Geko—impressed by Orgyen's developing compassion towards Nyima—tells the young monk, “You're so bad at business; you'll be a good monk.” The monks may be all too human, yet this film is not decrying the attenuation of Buddhist practice in a modern Tibetan monastery. By looking at the monks' harmless transgressions, the film makes a distinction between their superficial misdemeanours and their inherent goodness or what Buddhists refer to as “buddha-nature”. The essence of buddha-nature is the same in ordinary sentient beings as it is in enlightened buddhas; it is simply manifested differently because it is:

[c]overed over by inessential, adventitious defilements. Yet, though these superfluous stains cover and hide the Dharmakaya [the formless pure “mind-essence” of the buddhas] within, they do not harm or taint that wisdom in any way. No matter how confused, neurotic and even crazy we may be, the Dharmakaya wisdom within us remains always itself, always full and complete, utterly untouched by those stains.⁴

This idea that human behaviour can encompass many variations and still not contravene basic Buddhist principles is reinforced in *The Cup*. The monks in the film are fundamentally incorruptible; they do not always have to meet impossible standards of saintliness and devotion to be considered good Buddhists.

By extension, culture is accorded the same level of flexibility: as long as Buddhism forms a solid foundation for the moral principles, the community is invulnerable to

⁴ Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000), 436.

superficial and innocuous cultural permutations. Thus, the film presents a positive and encouraging outlook on the modernizing cultural changes besetting the monastic community. In one scene, empty Coke cans—the most ubiquitous symbol of modern disposable culture—are rendered as suitable receptacles for the holy butter lamps an old lama places on his shrine. In fact, there are multiple instances in the film when modern practices are not only benign but necessary, particularly regarding the matter of personal hygiene. At one point Orgyen tells the old monk whose body odour draws numerous comments, that “this isn’t Tibet; it’s India. If you don’t wash you’ll get sick.” Orgyen also tells Palden, a recent refugee from Tibet, that now that he is in India, he cannot bathe once a year any more, that in India, they have to wash every day. “You’ve got a lot to learn from us,” he tells Palden. In another scene, when the lights momentarily go out during the final soccer game, one of the monks laments, “When will this country ever develop?” These scenes instantiate the film’s positive stance towards development and its accompanying changes, however it is measured.

It is crucial to note that *The Cup* does not advocate modernizing or modifying Buddhism itself. In an interview Norbu stated, “I totally oppose people attempting to make Buddhism more adaptable to the West or to the modern world. It is not required: Buddhism has always been up to date. From the moment Buddha taught, the essence of the teachings hasn’t changed, and it shouldn’t change.”⁵ According to the director, what can be changed, are the outer manifestations or “external trappings” of Buddhism which

⁵ Noa Jones, “If I’m Lucky, They Call Me Unorthodox”, *Shambhala Sun*, November 2003, www.shambhalasun.com (accessed July, 2010).

coalesce with “Tibetan culture and customs”.⁶ He is careful to explain that there is a fundamental distinction between culture and Buddhism, noting:

As the wisdom of Buddha traveled [sic] to different countries over different ages, the culture and tradition of each particular time or place became intrinsic to the teaching. Culture is indispensable because without it, there is no medium to convey the teachings. Dharma is the tea and culture is the cup. For someone who wants to drink tea, tea is more important than the cup. [...] If necessary, I am ready to change the cup, and for that reason you can say I have a modern mind.⁷

Consequently, and as the examination of Norbu’s films in this chapter reveals, his work gives priority to *traditional* Buddhist principles and represents the acceptance of modernity as a purely cultural factor.

Impermanence of the Temporal World

Although the monastic community in *The Cup* may frequently seek out the cultural accoutrements of modernity, its preservation of traditional Buddhist practices and teachings is embodied by the abbot. Despite his advanced age and his longing to return to Tibet, his amenability to change reveals Tibetan Buddhist culture’s capacity to modernize. While his complete immersion in traditional Tibetan culture is treated humorously when Geko has to explain the alien game of soccer to him, he is nevertheless able to assess the changes that are altering his community. In one notable scene, as the young monks are transporting the TV and satellite dish back to the monastery, the soundtrack features a voice-over of the abbot reciting a letter he is

⁶ Kelly Roberts, “What Changes and What Doesn’t: An Interview with Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche” *Shambhala Sun*, November 2000, www.shambhalasun.com (accessed July, 2010).

⁷ Noa Jones, “If I’m Lucky, They Call Me Unorthodox”, *Shambhala Sun*, November 2003, www.shambhalasun.com (accessed July, 2010).

writing to Palden and Nyima's family. He starts the letter with: "Things are not like they used to be. These days, our young monks are exposed to many things that older ones like myself never even dreamed of." The abbot then appears in profile writing the letter. The background is out of focus until he dips his pen into the ink and the camera reveals the Buddhist shrine behind him. With a small statue of the Buddha clearly visible in the centre of the frame and the body of the old abbot in soft focus, he continues: "Don't worry about your boys. I will make sure that they receive traditional training. I hope they'll continue to uphold Buddha's lineage according to these modern times." When the focus switches from the abbot to the shrine, the camera transforms his clearly defined image into a vague outline of a human figure. By shifting from a substantial body to one existing only as a ghostly presence in the foreground, the film is formally alluding to his impermanence and undermines his agency as an individual. Moreover, the film ascertains that despite his wisdom and prominent position, the abbot is still materially affected by change and the only unchanging and ultimate reality resides in the Buddha and the teachings.

The film's final scenes also foreground the Buddhist teachings' immunity to change and decay. As the monks watch the final soccer game, the eerie two dimensional black and white images on TV flicker and slip away—constantly disrupted by static—and become a modern analogy of the ancient Buddhist teaching that our perceptions of the world are insubstantial and illusory. However, as the French players celebrate, the images are suddenly obliterated by static and the scene seamlessly changes to smoke gently rising in the darkness from sticks of incense. Then the scene changes to the abbot imparting a number of the essential teachings of Buddhism to a group of young monks

and as he talks, images of the monastery, prayer flags and a mantra wheel appear. As the abbot's words continue in a voice-over, the camera follows a monk preparing for and then performing a ceremonial dance. These images of ritual objects and devotional practices coming directly after the TV images, suggest a connection: they could be interpreted as the ephemeral outward manifestations of the more essential teachings we hear on the soundtrack, or conversely, the images of devotional practices, coupled with ageless Buddhist scriptures, could also be offering Buddhist teachings and ceremonial rituals as a well-tested solution to impermanence and delusion. In either interpretation, the transitory nature of existence is underscored. Moreover, the abbot's lesson is not just a counterpoint to the images of impermanence and delusion; the timeless essence and absolute truth of the lesson itself is an antidote to the painful mutability of perception and existence.

Demonstrating his skill as a filmmaker, Norbu is also able to cinematically fuse the temporal world with the Buddha's timeless wisdom through the visual motif of smoke. Smoke conspicuously emanates from incense at three points in the film: when Orgyen prepares incense for the morning prayers; the transition shot of incense at the end of the final soccer game mentioned above; and a monk's ritualistic dance that compliments the abbot's voice-over in the scene that follows. Orgyen preparing the incense is perhaps the least significant since it fits seamlessly with the countless extra-narrative scenes that simply depict life in the monastery. However, the use of smoke in the other two scenes becomes deeply significant when interpreted in relation to Buddhist rituals. Smoke is an

important aspect of one of the most common rituals in Tibetan Buddhism, the *lhasang*,⁸ which is performed for purification “for both mundane and supermundane purposes”.⁹ Not only does the *lhasang* call upon the lesser spirits and deities dwelling in *samsara* and the bodhisattvas and buddhas in the celestial realm, it can also be performed by either lay people or lamas as a purification against internal or external negative energies.

But the ritual also performs a second function:

The fragrant smoke travels up to the heavens, attracting the higher beings of *samsara* and the enlightened ones; thus the smoke becomes a kind of passageway or lightning rod down which their blessings can descend, filling participants with a sense of well-being, understanding, and happiness.¹⁰

In the film, the smoke bridges the gap between the temporal and the timeless. Once the TV images turn into static, they dissolve into the swirling smoke from sticks of incense, thereby facilitating the transition from the mundane images of the soccer game to the abbot’s dissemination of Buddhist teachings to the monks. Literally and symbolically, the smoke from the burning incense creates a visual “passageway” from the ephemeral TV images to the unchanging truth of the Buddha’s teachings, melding the two apparently disparate worlds of *samsara* and *nirvana*. The ensuing cutaways of the monk performing the ritualistic dance within a light haze of smoke swirling around him emphasize Buddhist rituals’ access to a spiritual realm. The monk is unequivocally concrete and firmly rooted in *samsara*. The wisps of smoke moving around him, conversely, refer to the Buddha realm in that they may seem insubstantial and formless

⁸ *Lhasang* means “higher purification offering.” For a more complete description of the ritual, see Reginald Ray’s *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000), 57-61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

but are nevertheless real and pervade *samara*. In both these scenes, the motif of smoke either establishes the transition to a deeper reality or alludes to it.

The fusion of the mundane and supermundane realms is maintained by the contemplative pace of the film during the numerous extra-narrative depictions of Tibetan Buddhist rituals. Given Norbu's insider status as a Buddhist lama, these ritual sequences are not merely ethnographic representations of a strange and mystical culture. Their recurring insertion attempts to increase our level of awareness through a meditative spectatorship. A case can be made that in theistic religions ritual facilitates communication with an unseen being or beings which inhabit a realm that is "outside" of us. However, in Buddhism all mystical beings and realms reside "inside" of us and are accessible through the mind. We simply have to develop a pure awareness to perceive this ultimate dimension of reality or what Buddhists sometimes refer to as the void nature of the mind. Tibetan Buddhism has created a vast array of rituals and religious practices that cultivate pure awareness by calming the many disturbances that afflict the "ordinary" mind.¹¹ The pace of the film has a similar effect. Often suspending the narrative to depict ritual practices or simple day to day activities such as making butter tea, the slow pace of the film forces us to be more attentive to what we are watching, rather than getting mindlessly caught up in the narrative. Norbu is encouraging us to become aware of the processes at work—our expectations, curiosity, boredom—as we watch the film itself. Watching becomes a ritual of sorts, calming our

¹¹ "Ordinary mind" is the term many Tibetan Lamas use to refer to the mind that is "temporarily obscured and distorted by thoughts based upon the dualistic perceptions of subject and object." The Dalai Lama, *Dzogchen: The Heart Essence of the Great Perfection*, trans. Geshe Thupten Jinpa and Richard Barron (Ithaca and Boulder: Snow Lion Publications, 2004), 31.

minds and facilitating a small measure of mindfulness and, perhaps, helping us on our path towards pure awareness and *nirvana*.

Travellers and Magicians: The Illusions of Dreamland

Norbu's second feature film *Travellers and Magicians* is far less meditative than *The Cup* and arguably conforms more to general expectations of complex story-telling, which could explain, in part, why it was able to secure a total budget of 1.8 million dollars. It was filmed in Bhutan, a small nation nestled in the Himalayas between Tibet and India. Premiering in the Bhutanese capital, Thimphu, on August 2, 2003 and appearing a little more than a month later at the Venice Film Festival, *Travellers and Magicians* is Bhutan's first full-length feature film in Dzongkha—the official national language which, incidentally, is very similar to Tibetan.

Even though the film features a number of distinctly Bhutanese cultural practices, like the national sport of archery, *Travellers and Magicians* can still be included in our project of examining Tibetan Buddhist cinema for two reasons. First of all, Norbu is a Tibetan exile born in Bhutan. "I'm recognized as a reincarnation of one of the great Tibetan masters [...] in this life I'm Bhutanese," he explains. "I feel more Bhutanese than ever. And in many ways I'm proud of being Bhutanese. But my Buddhist training comes from the Tibetan tradition, so I feel very loyal and sympathetic to Tibetan culture and people."¹² Secondly, Tibet and Bhutan share many of the same cultural and religious practices. Reginald Ray, an instructor of Buddhist studies states that Tibetan civilization

¹² Noa Jones, "Gentle Voice," *A Newsletter of Siddhartha's Intent*, October 2003, www.siddharthasintent.org/gentle/GV20.pdf (accessed July 29, 2010).

extended well beyond Tibet's political borders into the nearby countries, namely into "portions of Assam in the east, Bhutan, Sikkim, and parts of Nepal to the south and southwest; and Ladakh to the west. Although, heavily damaged in Chinese-occupied Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism continues to be practiced in these other Tibetan cultural locales."¹³ Buddhism has unified Tibet and Bhutan ever since 747 C.E. when the Indian saint Padmasambhava (also the patron saint of Bhutan) first visited Tibet and Bhutan, bringing with him the unique practice of Tantric Buddhism.¹⁴ Furthermore, until the spring of 1959, when the Tibetan uprising prompted the Chinese to shut down the southern Tibetan border, Bhutanese lamas customarily travelled to Tibet to acquire their higher religious education.¹⁵ After 1959, numerous Tibetan lamas were granted refuge in Bhutan and established monasteries, thus completing the centuries old cycle of religious exchange.

Despite its provenance and distinctive cultural perspective, *Travellers and Magicians* also elaborates a Tibetan Buddhist sensibility. Aside from developing the universal Buddhist theme of illusion, the film also draws upon the Tibetan Buddhist imagination that consistently unifies the ordinary material world and the extraordinary immaterial world, by integrating mystical elements—magic potions, visions and spells—into its story-telling. Furthermore, the 'story within a story' narrative structure and stylistic elements of the film draw attention to the Tibetan Buddhist worldview that is grounded in

¹³ Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000), 7.

¹⁴ First developed in India, Tantric Buddhism took root in the Himalayas when Padmasambhava succeeded in turning the people of Tibet and Bhutan away from the indigenous and shamanic Bön religion.

¹⁵ Ram Rahul, *Modern Bhutan* (Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore, Kanpur, London: Vikas Publications, 1971), 95.

and informed by a multidimensional universe. Indeed, *Travellers and Magicians* was marketed as a Bhutanese film, but a thorough examination will reveal that its sensibilities are no less Tibetan than those expressed in *The Cup*. Drawing on Norbu's use of narrative conventions, the *mise-en-scène*, visual motifs, and transitional devices, we will explore how Buddhist themes structure this film.

Storytelling: “Long, long ago—but not too long ago”

With its ‘story within a story’ the film’s narrative is considerably more ambitious than *The Cup*. The film opens with Dondup, a Bhutanese civil servant of an isolated sleepy village, impatiently awaiting a letter from America. Missing the nightclubs, pretty girls and fast pace of the city, he has been living unhappily in the village for only a month and is hoping the letter will bring him news about job opportunities in America. Once he receives the letter, he realizes that he has only a couple of hours to catch the biweekly bus to Thimphu, Bhutan’s capital city, and he still has to seek permission from his boss to obtain leave from work. Under the guise of attending a religious festival, he is able to get a week off; however his boss has taken so long deciding—pausing the meeting at one point for an update on the day’s archery contest—that Dondup misses the bus. As he waits to hitch a ride by the side of the deserted gravel road, he is joined by an old man carrying a basket of apples. Signs of a generation gap emerge as Dondup turns up the volume of the rock music playing on his boom box, smokes cigarettes and rudely ignores the old man. After Dondup travels up the road to improve his chances of getting a ride alone, a monk carrying a bag and a traditional instrument—a *dramyin*—sits down and tries to strike up a conversation by asking Dondup where he’s going. Dondup ignores

him and stares at the road. The monk gently chides him, saying “There’s no point staring at an empty road. You know, Buddha said hope causes pain.” Angered by what he deems as the monk’s “preaching” Dondup remains largely unresponsive. But later that night as the three travellers sit together by the roadside eating a meagre meal by the fire, the monk again asks Dondup where he’s going. “I’m going very, very far away to the land of my dreams,” Dondup answers. “To a dreamland?” the monk asks, “You should be careful with dreamlands because when you wake up, it may not be very pleasant.” The monk starts to tell him a story about a man who—like Dondup—was not happy with village life and sought greener pastures elsewhere.

The film’s narrative structure emerges at this point as a story within a story as the monk plays his *dramyin* and begins his account: “Long, long ago—but not too long ago.” The monk’s voice-over narration introduces Tashi and his younger brother, Karma. Despite Tashi restlessly “daydreaming of faraway places”, he has to remain in the small village to finish his studies at a nearby school of magic. Assigned the job of bringing Tashi his lunch, Karma—the brighter of the two—eavesdrops on the master’s lessons, quickly picking up a rudimentary knowledge of magic. One day, as a joke on his older brother, Karma mixes up a potion and puts it in Tashi’s wine. As Tashi imbibes the wine, he says, “I wish I could travel far away, somewhere I’ve never been before. This magic stuff is incredibly boring. Anyway, it never works; it’s just superstition.” “How do you know it doesn’t work?” Karma asks, teasingly. A moment later, Tashi looks up at the family’s donkey as it munches on grass and envisions a spirited white horse in its place. Despite Karma’s warnings that the “horse” is unaccustomed to riders, Tashi impulsively mounts it and starts riding over the fields at

breakneck speed. Clouds gather and streak across the sky, as if propelled by an approaching gale. Thunder crashes and lightning pierces the growing darkness, clearly establishing that Tashi is now at the mercy of a potent magical force.

After riding a considerable distance through a violent storm, the horse throws him to the ground and abandons him inside a thick forest. Sustaining an injury to his knee, Tashi is still able to hobble through the forest in the slashing rain until he arrives at a small cottage. The old man living there reluctantly agrees to give Tashi shelter for the night. As he prepares for bed, Tashi notices what appear to be a young woman's bare legs stretching out from under the blankets of the old man's bed. The next morning, Tashi confirms that the old man's wife is indeed young and beautiful. Over breakfast, Tashi learns that the taciturn old man, Agay and his wife Deki earn their living by weaving *kiras*¹⁶ to sell at the market of a distant village. Agay reluctantly agrees to allow Tashi to remain another day or two until his knee heals well enough to make the long trek. However, the days pass and the sexual attraction between Deki and Tashi grows, making it apparent that she is trying to prolong his stay.

Finally losing patience, Agay decides that he can spare the time to take Tashi at least part of the way. But after Agay sends him on his way into the dense forest, Tashi gets hopelessly lost and, as chance would have it, ends up back at the cottage. Acutely aware of Tashi's increasing infatuation with her, Deki gets Agay out of the way by plying him with barley wine so that he spends most of his days drunk and oblivious. Tashi and Deki enjoy an illicit affair until Deki informs him that she is pregnant and that Agay will kill her if he finds out. She quickly hatches a pre-emptive plan to murder him

¹⁶ Traditional ankle-length dresses worn by Bhutanese women.

first after Tashi offhandedly mentions his limited knowledge of poisons. Tashi reluctantly goes along with the plan and concocts a lethal potion which causes Agay's slow and painful death. Horrified by his own culpability and Deki's transformation into a cruel demonic spectre, Tashi flees into the forest followed by the sound of Deki's plaintive pleas to return. He stops in his tracks when he hears Deki scream, off in the distance. He backtracks to the river he has just crossed and finds her red shawl floating on an eddy by the shoreline. As he cries out her name, the scene changes to Karma asking Tashi who Deki is. Tashi looks up, tears streaming down his face and sees his younger brother looking at him. He looks over Karma's shoulder and sees the donkey standing quietly as before. Tashi slowly realizes that he has been experiencing a vivid dream that seemed to last months, but was only an hour or so at most.

Tashi's mystical story is intertwined with the modern day road movie that makes up Dondup's story. As the three roadside travellers spend the next couple of days catching a variety of rides along the road to Thimphu, the monk continues the story at various intervals. About the third of the way into their journey, they meet up with an old paper maker and his beautiful young daughter Sonam. As the small party makes their way in fits and starts to Thimphu, Dondu's anxiety about catching a plane to the United States begins to wane and he spends more time with Sonam. Nearing the film's conclusion, Dondup has become so lackadaisical about getting to the plane that when a bus arrives with one remaining seat, he suggests the old man carrying the apples should take it. After the monk's story concludes, he and Dondup hail a ride from a small tractor with only enough room for two, but it is clear that the young civil servant will remain in the little bucolic village of Bhutan to settle down with Sonam. As the monk and Dondup sit

in the back of the tractor, the monk says, “Let me tell you another story. A long time ago, in a very beautiful village, there lived a man. And although he was a government officer, he wanted to go to America to pick apples. But along the way, he met this very beautiful girl.” Dondup starts to laugh and finishes the story: “And so he forgot all about going to America.” In the film’s last shot we watch the tractor rounding a corner to disappear behind the vast Himalayan Mountains.

Discerning the Illusion: “Watching a movie, knowing it’s a movie”

Given that Dondup eventually rejects the allure of America, the film can mistakenly be construed as a critique of modernity’s impact on Bhutan’s traditional society, particularly if we examine the film in relation to the public debate that surfaced in the late 1990s in Bhutan around the question of unchecked material progress. The debate started in 1998 when the government implemented its official policy of the “Gross National Happiness” to counteract the standard international measurement of development, the Gross Domestic Product. Thus, Bhutan’s king prohibited TV transmissions, along with advertising and other consumer items such as Coca-Cola, in an effort to stave off rampant consumerism and preserve the nation’s religious and traditional values. However, bowing to public pressure in 1999, TV was eventually introduced, inundating Bhutan with 46 channels of 24-hour programming provided by Rupert Murdoch’s Star TV network. The ensuing fallout led to a feature story four years later by *The Guardian* on the burgeoning crime statistics and the social upheaval attributed by many Bhutanese to

the advent of satellite TV.¹⁷ Many of the Bhutanese interviewed by *The Guardian* expressed concern for the generational rift which was developing, as one government official noted: “My generation, the ministers, lamas and head teachers have our grounding in old Bhutan and can apply ancient culture to this new phenomenon. But the ordinary people, the villagers, are confused about whether they should be ancient or modern, and the younger generation don’t really care. They jettison traditional culture for whatever they are sold on TV.”¹⁸

We can see the reverberation of this concern in *Travellers and Magicians*, primarily in the opening scenes which carefully delineate Dondup’s enthusiastic embrace of Western cultural forms to the point where he is obviously out-of-step with the tranquility of village life. He is first seen with earbuds on, listening to music tapes, oblivious to the traditional archery game going on a few yards away. The overtly sexual pin-ups of the Western calendar models on the wall in his room, a secular shrine to the *images* of the West, effectively mirror Bhutanese TV’s mediated representation of the West. He dances wildly to the Western style music on his boom box in the isolation of his room. He has also adopted many of the trappings of the West: his hairstyle is fashionably long; he wears white high top running shoes and a t-shirt with the American slogan “I love New York” emblazoned on it; and he’s the only Bhutanese to smoke in the film. However by the film’s end, his boom box has stopped functioning because the batteries are depleted. He also discards his package of un-smoked cigarettes and realizes that his dream of living

¹⁷ Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, “Fast Forward Into Trouble”, *The Guardian*, June 14, 2003, www.guardian.co.uk (accessed March 18, 2011).

¹⁸ Ibid.

and working in the United States is no longer worth entertaining. Although these details suggest a generalized disenchantment with modernity, foreign media and Western consumer culture, Norbu's perspective is far subtler and affirms a key Buddhist principle that ordinary reality is illusory.

Norbu's film is not a critical analysis of modernity or—more specifically—the televised or cinematic images of Western corruption and materialism. It is more concerned that people will misinterpret all of their perceptions as an unmediated reality when, in fact, they are not. This concern originates in one of the foundational principles of Buddhism that is the illusory nature of our perceptions and thoughts. Tibetan Buddhist master Dilgo Khyentse explains that all phenomena:

[a]re like magical illusions. Nowhere in the whole universe is there a single permanent, intrinsically existent entity to be found [...] Everything is like a drama in which actors play out wars, passions, and death. Everything is like a dream, sometimes good and sometimes a nightmare.¹⁹

In *Travellers and Magicians*, Dondup and Tashi are convinced that their aspirations for a more exciting life are not merely dreams or illusions but can actually be realized and generate lasting happiness. However, when Dondup and his two travelling companions board a truck and discover a drunk sitting in the corner, the film conveys that such imaginings are little more than seductive illusions generated by a troubled mind. After the drunk asks them where they are going, the monk replies that two of them are going to Thimphu, but the third one, Dondup, is going to a dreamland. “A dreamland?” echoes the drunk, “I want to go too.” The monk laughs and says, “Looks like you're already there.” This exchange clearly establishes that Dondup's desire to go to America—or “a

¹⁹ Dilgo Khyentse, *The Heart Treasure of the Enlightened Ones* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1992), 41.

dreamland” as the monk calls it—arises from an impaired and imperceptive mind. The point is underscored when Tashi makes the trek to the forest under the spell of Karma’s hallucinogenic potion and becomes infatuated with Deki. Tashi is completely under the illusion, literally, that the intensity of his experience makes it real. Murdering Agay leaves him with an overwhelming sense of guilt and anguish which subsides only when he realizes that his intense passions were the insubstantial delusions of his intoxicated mind. In *Travellers and Magicians* it is the *supposition* that the images we perceive are real which is considerably more harmful than the images themselves.

The story-within-a-story is a metaphor establishing that our ordinary experience of life is as illusory as a fictional narrative but, perhaps more importantly, it conveys the message that attaining happiness and well-being depends primarily on our ability to discern the fiction that we habitually construct. Tellingly, the two protagonists display markedly divergent levels of awareness. Dondup is far more aware than Tashi since he knows Tashi’s story is indeed a story, but he still makes the blunder in believing that the United States is the land of plenty, choosing to ignore that he will have the demeaning job of picking apples and lose the prestige he enjoys in the village. As Norbu once said in an interview: “There’s a big difference between watching a movie without knowing it’s a movie and watching a movie knowing it’s a movie[...] if you know it’s movie and then watch it, there’s leisure, there’s humour, there’s a readiness to let go.”²⁰ Dondup gradually realizes that his desire to go to America is just as fanciful as a fictional story, so that when the monk says, “Let me tell you another story: a long time ago [...] there

²⁰ Siddhartha’s Intent website, <http://www.sidhartasintent.org/gentle/GVII-3.htm> (accessed July 29, 2010).

lived a man. And although he was a government officer, he wanted to go to America”, Dondup is able to laugh at himself and finish the story. This valuable insight allows him to realize the illusory nature of his desires to go America and he starts living happily in the illusory here and now.

Delusions of a Cloudy Mind

Unlike Dondup, Tashi is plunged into the murky depths of a deceptive world governed by passion, jealousy and obscuration, devoid of insight and happiness. The film’s mise-en-scène incorporates the Buddhist trope of clouds to denote his passage into an all consuming world of delusion. Tibetan Buddhists describe the true nature of the mind as made up of nothing more than clear light, often comparing it to a cloudless sky. Conversely, the “ordinary” or unsettled mind, according to Buddhist master Dilgo Khyentse is “constantly changing, like the shapes of clouds in the wind”,²¹ and Jamgön Kongtrül calls the mind disturbed by emotional upheavals the “cloudy mind”²². The scuttling dense clouds which begin amassing as soon as Tashi sips the potion, eventually obscuring the entire sky, illustrate the increasing confusion that clouds his awareness and judgement. A counterpoint to the metaphor of a cloudless sky is the dense forest with its dense undergrowth and innumerable trees. It symbolizes the obscuring thoughts and passions that make it impossible for Tashi to think clearly and navigate his way out of the chaos. While in the forest, he experiences an intoxicating

²¹ Dilgo Khyentse, *The Heart Treasure of the Enlightened Ones* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1992) 104.

²² Jamgön Kongtrül, *Cloudless Sky: The Mahamudra Path of the Tibetan Buddhist Kagyü School* (Boston and London, 1992), 82.

manifestation of *samsara*, the “state of ignorance characterized by suffering”,²³ becoming a prisoner both of the environment and his passions. Unable to see his obsession for Deki as an invention of his confused mind, he commits the monstrous act of murdering Agay. His journey into the nether regions of his mind, clouded by passions and delusions, brings nothing but suffering and offers no hope of liberation from the nightmare until Karma’s potion wears off. Drawing on the metaphors extant in Buddhist philosophy, the film’s *mise-en-scène* effectively draws parallels between the physical setting of Tashi’s chimerical world and a mind clouded by the ignorance and delusion rife in *samsara*.

Not simply demarcating Tashi’s world of magic and delusion and Dondup’s world of modernity and materiality, *Travellers and Magicians* employs several cinematic devices to create portals that bridge the two disparate worlds. At first, the aesthetic features of the monk’s story only seem to create a symbolic space, conspicuously distinguishing it from Dondup’s world by saturating the sequences with golden and bluish green hues. The film literally and figuratively offers a representation of reality through a lens or filter, reinforcing the well-known Buddhist simile that life is like a dream. But the film also evokes two co-existing levels of reality—mystical and empirical—that reiterates a Tibetan Buddhist world view, as Reginald Ray points out:

In the classical Buddhist view, the world is defined not only by what we can perceive with our physical senses and think about rationally. It is equally made up of what cannot be seen, but is available through intuition, dreams, visions, divination and the like. The senses and rational mind provide access to this immediate physical world, but it is only through the other ways of knowing

²³ Ibid., 131.

that can one gain access to the much larger context in which this physical realm is set.²⁴

Even though the film's aesthetics seem to demarcate two divergent worlds, several disruptive sound bridges and a cutaway shot connect them in a brief overlap. The first sound bridge occurs when Tashi is lost in the forest trying to find the nearest village and the jarring sound of a truck engine starting is heard a full second or two before the visual track cuts to a truck's smoking exhaust in Dondup's world. The second sound bridge occurs when Tashi is watching Deki bathe and loud and disconcerting rock music initiates the transition. The film belatedly cuts to Dondup hearing the music blasting from an approaching car and as he rushes to flag it down, a brief cutaway reveals that the car's driver is Deki dressed in modern attire. Deki's crossover into Dondup's empirical world suggests that a permeable line divides the mythic and modern worlds, thus creating the possibility for more convergences and exchanges.

The characteristics of cinematic sound enhance the notion of two simultaneously occurring levels of reality. Since sound is insubstantial and can be heard whether we see its source or not, the film's audio track is actually able to traverse two visual spaces at once. Because they do not emanate from a visible source initially, the two sound bridges in *Travellers and Magicians* are startling and disconcerting. Sound with no obvious visual corollary has been used effectively in horror films to evoke a mysterious realm that is not anchored by materiality—a ghostly, magical realm. Yet Norbu's choice of sound to effect the transition from Tashi's magical world to Donup's more prosaic one implies that the magical realm is governed by some of the principles that

²⁴ Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000), 17.

affect sound: inherently intangible and invisible, mystical phenomena can still resound in our material world whether we see the forces that produce them or not.

To instantiate the connection between the immaterial and material worlds, *Travellers and Magicians* employs Buddhist iconography as another transition device. The opening and conclusion of the penultimate instalment of Tashi's story is bridged by a shot of a rock painting of the eighth-century tantric yogi Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche). While Padmasambhava is a historical figure known for establishing tantric Buddhism in Tibet and Bhutan, he is chiefly celebrated for magically subduing the indigenous Bön religion's wrathful deities, obligating them to become protectors of Buddhism, an achievement which still resonates with Tibetans today. As Tibetan Buddhist scholar Angela Sumegi notes, the deities are still "treated with caution, and in daily religious practice they are continually reminded of their defeat and their sworn promises. Each ritual invocation recalls the past struggle, renews the oath, and most importantly enacts, in the present, the victory of the Dharma over the obstructing forces of indigenous loyalties."²⁵ Not only is Padmasambhava's subjugation of the deities ritually re-enacted to this day, he is also thought to be still living and, according to the Dalai Lama, Tibetans "believe that any ruler of Tibet must have some special relationship with Padmasambhava".²⁶ His role is exceptionally liminal: he is a historical figure, a human being, whose mythical role is still part of a timeless and ongoing narrative. Consequently, when the image of Padmasambhava frames the sequence of Agay's

²⁵ Angela Sumegi, *Dream Worlds of Shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 77.

²⁶ Thomas Laird, *The Story of Tibet: Conversations with the Dalai Lama* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 57.

poisoning, Tashi's story becomes an eternal narrative about how we must always be aware of our passions, obsessions and strive to subdue them. In the final chapter of the monk's story, just when Deki emerges from the cabin to tell Tashi about the poison's progression, her face has a bluish hue, evoking the many blue-faced wrathful deities of Buddhist iconography. By visually drawing parallels between Tashi's personal struggle with his conscience and inner demons and Padmasambhava's battle with the pernicious deities that once plagued Tibet and Bhutan, *Travellers and Magicians* highlights a struggle that is at once personal, universal and timeless.

In conclusion, after *The Cup* was released, an interviewer suggested to Khyentse Norbu that he was trying to show something profound about the ordinary lives of the monks in the film. Norbu responded: "Whatever I do, I have no profound motivation. I just wanted to make a movie." The interviewer persisted, "But your film contained quite profound teaching." Norbu again skirted the issue by saying, "That depends on the person watching. Not everybody sees it the same way."²⁷ This exchange encapsulates what makes Norbu such an interesting filmmaker. His films are fundamentally grounded in Buddhism, but one never gets the sense that he is sermonizing or re-creating a rigid Buddhist schematic. Addressing universal themes—becoming an adult in an ever changing world, seeking a better life in greener pastures, or falling prey to all-consuming emotions—Norbu's films retain a broad appeal, enabling viewers to approach them without a thorough understanding of Buddhism. Notwithstanding, the director has taken traditional Buddhist art in a new direction by innovatively employing modern cinematic

²⁷ Kelly Roberts, "What Changes and What Doesn't: An Interview with Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche", *Shambhala Sun*, November 2000, www.shambhalasun.com (accessed July, 2010).

techniques—mise-en-scène, aesthetics, visual motifs, pacing—to disseminate the 2,500-year-old Buddhist teachings to the West, and in the process of modifying traditional aesthetics, Norbu has managed to forge an inspiring and unique Tibetan Buddhist cinema.

CHAPTER THREE

Milarepa and Kundun: The Magic, Miracles and Mystery of Tibetan Buddhism

While Khyentse Norbu's films focus on universal themes that elaborate a distinctive Buddhist perspective and aesthetic, Neten Chokling's film *Milarepa: Magician, Murderer, Saint* (2006) and Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997) are grounded in a uniquely Tibetan esoteric cosmology. While they are hagiographic depictions of revered Tibetan icons, Milarepa and the Dalai Lama, respectively, they are not conventional dramatised depictions of real-life figures in the vein of countless Hollywood "biopics" such as *Erin Brockovich* (Steven Soderbergh, USA, 2000) or *Milk* (Gus Van Sant, USA, 2008) which focus on the tangible social achievements of ordinary but exceptionally capable individuals. Patently eschewing the more pragmatic and historical approach of many Hollywood biographies, both films reflect a Tibetan world view that not only foregrounds but normalizes magical and mystical events. Attaining astonishing spiritual proficiency, Milarepa and the Dalai Lama are portrayed as being able to straddle the mundane and the extraordinary because of their exceptional understanding of the supernatural forces that are intrinsic to Tibet's indigenous shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism. Furthermore, *Milarepa* and *Kundun* do not merely mythologize the lives of their subjects, altering historical events to create a more dramatic effect or impart a sense of ineluctable destiny. Instead they mine a richer territory by underscoring the magical elements that imbue the lives of all Tibetans. The films reveal that Tibetans' experience of the physical world is

not limited to what can be perceived by the senses and the rational mind; there is an added unseen dimension accessible through “intuition, dreams, visions, divination”.¹ Moreover, the films are consistent with Tibetan beliefs that inanimate objects—rocks, trees, streams, mountains—can be inhabited by malevolent or benign nonhuman beings,² thereby shaping the Tibetan experience of the world into a synthesis of materiality and immateriality. Before elaborating on how these beliefs are represented, a brief explanation is in order.

As noted in the introduction of this thesis, the Tibetan world view is marked by “ordinary” and “extraordinary” modes of perception. Buddhist scholar and former monk Robert Thurman explains that Tibetans “live in a multidimensional universe” which allows them to cultivate “ordinary perception” and “extraordinary perception” of history.³ Tibetans are able to perceive the “extraordinary” or mythical dimension of seemingly “ordinary” events because they “believe that every event in the life of an individual and of a nation is susceptible to such a multileveled analysis of meaning.”⁴ Consequently, there are countless historical or “ordinary” narratives in Tibetan lore that are burgeoning with supernatural or “extraordinary” incidents, whose veracity and reliability is never questioned.

The Tibetan propensity to fuse “ordinary” and “extraordinary” perception into a seamless convergence of history and apparent myth is probably most evident in the biographies of illustrious Buddhist figures such as the Buddha or Padmasambhava, one of

¹ Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000), 17.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

³ Robert Thurman, *Essential Tibetan Buddhism* (Edison, New Jersey: Castle Books, 1997), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

the founders of Tibetan Buddhism. On the “ordinary” level, Tibetans see a figure like Padmasambhava as a yogi who established Tantric Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth century; but on the “extraordinary” level, he defied death and continues to live in “ ‘a pure land’, the Copper-Coloured Mountain that exists outside of ordinary time”.⁵

Tibetans venerate Padmasambhava as an important historical figure and yet also interpret the metaphysical facets of his biography quite literally.

The cinematic representations of Milarepa and the Dalai Lama in the films directed by Chokling and Scorsese teem with metaphysical occurrences that are not didactically explained within the context of Tibetan Shamanism and Buddhism nor put into a more rational framework adaptable to Western positivism. Magic, premonitions, divinations are simply shown to exist in a world in which such occurrences are almost commonplace, thus provoking a broader question: how do Chokling and Scorsese use the medium of film to represent the Tibetan perception of a multidimensional mysterious reality that may appear perplexingly alien to Western viewers? As I will argue, the directors avoided the overtly didactic protocols of documentary and some of the expositional devices of fiction films. Instead of employing the conventions of voice-over narration or expositional dialogue, Chokling and Scorsese simply “show” the Tibetan protagonists straddling the ethereal and material dimensions of the Tibetan universe.

I have chosen one key sequence from each film to illustrate how arcane Tibetan religious practices are inscribed in the films and how cinematic devices are used to reveal a Tibetan worldview characterized by magic, miracles and invisible beings. In *Milarepa*,

⁵ Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000), 107.

the scene in which malevolent Bön deities confer upon Milarepa the power to conjure devastating storms, best exemplifies the uniquely shamanic Tibetan belief systems. Cinematic devices, such as extreme close-ups, camera movement, a self-conscious formalist style, are able to convey an interior state of mind that represents another dimension of reality. In *Kundun*, I examine the extended sequence of the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet with its multiple cross-cuts to the *Kalachakra* initiation ritual which obliquely refer to a Tibetan prophesy and concomitantly to a multidimensional universe.

Milarepa: An Exploration of a Mystical and Magical Universe

Perhaps nothing situates *Milarepa* more firmly in the Tibetan magical universe than the filmmakers' strategies to overcome the numerous obstacles they faced. An article posted on the film's website by the first assistant director and associate producer Isaiah Seret describes the behind-the-scenes religious practises of the Tibetan filmmakers to ensure the project's success. According to Seret, there had been countless attempts to turn Milarepa's life into a film, leaving "[a]t least a dozen scripts, a number of treatments, and one half-finished film [...] floating around, none of which have seen the light of day."⁶ He asserts that Tibetans blame this unfortunate track record on two sorts of supernatural beings: female deities called *dakinis* who are protective of Milarepa and will only allow worthy projects about him to proceed; and the *döns* which are "supernatural harmful spirits who try to impede all actions that could bring goodness into the world, such as making a movie

⁶ Isaiah Seret, "The Making of *Milarepa* and the Madness of *Mo*", *Milarepa, the Movie*, www.milarepamovie.com (accessed July 5, 2010).

about a sinner turned saint”.⁷ To harmonize these disparate metaphysical forces, the film’s production was inaugurated by:

An enormous puja (Tibetan offering and meditation ritual), filled with many juniper bonfires billowing dense white smoke, instruments invoking the deities, chanting, offering cakes, bottles of whiskey poured onto the flames, and lots of maroon-robed monks.⁸

Seret also relates how the filmmakers often resorted to asking the *Mo* (a Tibetan ritual of divination) to answer crucial questions related to the technical and artistic elements of the production such as: “what film stock to use, where to rent cameras, who should be the cinematographer, who should play the leading role, and so on.”⁹ At one point, when two cameras jammed, it was discovered through a number of *Mos* that several negative “spirits” were responsible and round-the-clock *pujas* were performed to pacify them.¹⁰ The fact that the film’s website posted a five-page article detailing the more esoteric aspects of its production, underscoring the importance accorded to these behind-the-scenes supernatural occurrences and rituals, indicate that the Tibetans involved with this project considered them an important aspect of the filmmaking process.¹¹ Thus the Tibetan shamanic and Buddhist world view is not only embedded in the film’s diegesis but also in its very production.

Despite their efforts to propitiate negative forces and remove obstacles, the filmmakers were often stymied by insufficient financing. In interviews promoting the film’s release, Chokling repeatedly stated that raising the money for the 1.5 million

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ In the end-credits, *Mo* is also credited with doing the casting for the film.

dollar budget was a major stumbling block, although most of the cast and crew were monks volunteering their time to keep production costs down. At one point, he had to stop filming to raise funds to pay the international crew and was forced to delay post production for several months to attract more investment. Lack of finances may have also played a role in limiting the scope of the project. *Milarepa: Magician, Murderer, Saint* was intended to be the first of two instalments, the second slated for release in 2009, yet two years later there is still no word that production will resume, looking less likely that it will ever be made. Even though the director was optimistic during an interview in 2006¹² that he could start shooting in 2009, indications are that he has been unsuccessful in generating sufficient interest in the film to raise adequate funds.

Nevertheless, in an interview posted on the film's website, Chokling hints at practical and financial reasons for dividing the story of Milarepa into two parts. With only two months to prepare a script, assemble an international film crew and cobble together enough funding to start the project, he expressed his disappointment that the film's "tight budget" and his inexperience as a director could not elevate the film to match the "splendour and beauty of the [Milarepa] biography".¹³ Given that the second half of Milarepa's life contains even more magical deeds, undoubtedly requiring expensive special effects, one has to wonder if Chokling did not want to scrimp too

¹² Larry Jaffee, "The Monk Who Would be a Director: Neten Chokling on 'Milarepa'", *Student Filmmakers Magazine*, October 2006, http://studentfilmmakers.com/news/how-to/The-Monk-Who-Would-Be-a-Director_Neten-Chokling-on-Milarepa-2.shtml (accessed January 21, 2011).

¹³ Ibid.

much on production values and hoped that the earnings from the first film¹⁴ would help finance the story's costlier conclusion.

If expeditious storytelling had been Chokling's primary goal, the relatively uncomplicated story of Milarepa could have been told in a single feature-length film. The story begins with his father's premature death when Milarepa is still a boy. The family fortune is left in the care of Milarepa's uncle and aunt who greedily steal it and force Milarepa, his mother and sister live in near destitution, working like slaves. However, once Milarepa comes of age, his mother sends him to learn the art of black magic, giving him the ultimatum that she will commit suicide in his presence unless he acquires these new skills to vanquish his aunt and uncle and exact revenge on the village. Returning to the village after he has learned the art of conjuring hailstorms, Milarepa unleashes a massive storm that causes wanton destruction and kills dozens of people. As his mother gleefully celebrates her revenge, Milarepa surveys the ruin he has caused. Filled with immeasurable remorse, he discovers that the only way to eradicate his negative *karma* is to pursue the path to liberation under an enlightened Buddhist master. The film ends as Milarepa sets off to find the famed yet unconventional master, Marpa the Translator.

However, the traditional version goes on to relate in considerable detail Milarepa's relationship with Marpa. At first, Marpa pretends to reject his entreaties but craftily sends Milarepa on a course of penance, ordering him to build and then demolish several towers over the course of a few years. Convinced that he will never receive the Buddha's teachings after his efforts to build a third tower fail to gain favour, Milarepa is

¹⁴ The film had a dismal showing at the box office, eventually bringing in only \$200,000 (US) worldwide.

about to commit suicide when Marpa finally relents and openly acknowledges him as his disciple. Under the master's guidance, Milarepa retreats to a cave to meditate, enduring great privation and sustaining himself with nothing more than nettles and the odd donation of food. During this time, he is able to cultivate yogic powers which, among other things, keep his naked body warm in the middle of winter and enable him to fly through the air. After a dozen years or so, Milarepa finally achieves the rare feat of enlightenment in one life time, becoming renowned throughout Tibet as a great yogi and the founder of the Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

The chronicle of Milarepa is steeped in a timeless and limitless world of Buddhist mysticism, black magic, miraculous deeds, telepathy and premonitions, all of which eclipse the revenge theme of the story. Yet, in an interview on the DVD's Special Features, Chokling reports how he found Milarepa's "ordinariness" appealing, stating that "some people think that dharma can only be practiced by monks and nuns. Milarepa, himself, was an ordinary person who had killed many before he became enlightened [...] We know from his life story that ordinary people [...] can become enlightened."¹⁵ Indeed, the fact that he was an ordinary man who overcame enormous odds gives Milarepa's story its power and lasting appeal. Nevertheless, the miraculous elements are essential to the narrative and cannot be effaced without diminishing Milarepa's stature as a yogi. A specialist in Tibetan Buddhism, social and cultural anthropologist Geoffrey Samuel explains that magic is seen as a "natural by-product of

¹⁵ *Milarepa: Magician Murderer Saint*. Director Neten Chokling, 2006. Cinequest, 2007, DVD.

yogic practice itself¹⁶ and can also be seen as an indicator of the practitioner's spiritual development.¹⁷ Accordingly, Milarepa's forays into magic are regarded as evidence of his spiritual proficiency and were likely instrumental in establishing his fame as a great yogi and saint. Furthermore, his magical exploits have broader cultural and religious ramifications and have been used to illustrate a number of distinctions between the shamanic practices of Buddhism and Tibet's indigenous Bön religion. Tibetan Buddhist scholar Angela Sumegi recounts a contest of magic between Milarepa and a Bön priest. Culminating in a race with Milarepa outmatching his opponent by flying effortlessly to a nearby mountain summit, the contest champions Buddhist shamanism. In the story's conclusion, Milarepa's superior magical abilities are largely credited to "the nature of his enlightened mind".¹⁸ Milarepa's skilfulness in magic is both celebrated in the story and presented as a proof of Buddhism's pre-eminence.

Magical elements also pervade the film adaptation and are not limited to the exploits and accomplishments of Milarepa, but establish the mystical Tibetan perspective informing the film. For instance, the first incident of magic occurs relatively early with an anonymous traveller arriving at Milarepa's family home and asking to stay the night. As he eats the simple meal Milarepa's mother has prepared, the nearby butter lamp goes out, enshrouding the room in total darkness. Just as Milarepa's mother goes to fetch some more butter for the lamp, the room suddenly lights up. Startled, she looks back to see that the traveller is still nonchalantly eating his meal, and she quickly surmises that

¹⁶ Geoffrey Samuel, *Tantric Revisionings* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 88.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁸ Angela Sumegi, *Dreamworlds of Shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 75.

he was able to reignite the lamp through a mysterious act of magic. This ostensibly superfluous scene foregrounds magic as a fairly conventional aspect of daily life since Milarepa's mother is neither amazed nor alarmed when she observes the traveller's mysterious talent; rather, she shrewdly regards it as an opportunity to inquire later about lessons of magic for her son. Magic is almost an ordinary occurrence in *Milarepa*. There are numerous instances of magicians performing phenomenal feats—materializing out of thin air, performing telekinesis, enveloping a band of horsemen in thick mist, communicating through telepathy, and taking minutes to accomplish what should be a three-day journey. The prevalence of these extra-narrative supernatural acts in *Milarepa* situates magic within the Tibetan ethos, and effectively highlights it.

Proselytizing Buddhism through Cinema

Although it is always hazardous ascribing intentionality to a director's work, we can safely contend that Chokling did not make this film to simply portray the state of sorcery in Tibet during the Middle Ages. Chokling adapted the story of Milarepa to disseminate one of the most cherished Tibetan Buddhist stories in a popular modern format to the world. Chokling remarked in an interview that:

The Buddha always said, 'Help according to the time and in that moment, whichever way is the best way to help.' In his generation, of course they didn't have movies or anything like that to reach people and help them learn about Buddhism. Now we do. We have this incredible way to reach many people in a way that is both informative and entertaining, with the possibility of making a real emotional connection.¹⁹

¹⁹ "Interview with the Director", *Milarepa, The Movie*, www.milarepamovie.com (accessed July 5, 2010).

Like Khyentse Norbu, Chokling is inspired by cinema's potential to proselytize Buddhism in an entertaining format. His comments indicate that he regards cinema primarily as a teaching tool to impart the essential teachings of the Buddha around the globe to both the initiated and uninitiated. The film's artistic director, Orgyen Tobgyal—who also performs the role of the sorcerer Yungton Trogyel—goes a step further and associates the cinema's ability to forge emotional connections with a capacity to transform viewers' way of thinking on spiritual matters. He explains that if “you see Milarepa in moving pictures, it will be imprinted in your mind and you won't forget it [...] And if you can retain [it] in your mind and remember [it] again and again, it could bring more benefit.” These comments reveal that Chokling and Tobgyal were eager to exploit the popularity of cinema to explore new dimensions of Milarepa's story in a way that would also resonate with international audiences and enhance their spiritual development.

Moreover Tibetans believe that Milarepa's name and story possess inherent mystical properties which have an impact all their own. In an accompanying DVD, which can be purchased with the film,²⁰ Tobgyal states that “[f]rom a spiritual point of view, it is said that those who are connected to Milarepa will not be reborn in the lower realms. It is believed that [this] is due to the blessings of Milarepa's practices and accomplishments.” Right before his death, Milarepa is said to have bestowed blessings on all those who were to hear his name spoken. Thus, the makers of *Milarepa* believe

²⁰ *Teachings on Milarepa*, Cinequest, 2007, DVD. It features interviews and lectures about Milarepa by Tibetan Buddhist masters, such as Sogyal Rinpoche and Ani Pema Chodron.

that the audience is actually able to receive a very real spiritual blessing just by seeing Milarepa's story on the screen.

The decision to adapt Milarepa's biography to film also stems from the venerated and highly visual Tibetan tradition of storytelling. *Milarepa* may be a modern cinematic representation of the traditional story, but there has been a long standing tradition of iconographic depictions of Milarepa—often recognizable by his long hair and skeletal, half naked body—in *thangkas* which have been edifying and engaging Tibetans for centuries. It is worth briefly noting that illustrated renderings of Milarepa's story have even also been embraced by Western students of Tibetan Buddhism. In 1991, Dutch artist Eva Van Dam retold the story of Milarepa in English in an illustrated, large format book in the style of Western comics²¹ which became an entertaining method to teach my own children about Milarepa when they were growing up. Moreover, the Dalai Lama recounts how, as a youth, his introduction to Milarepa's story quickly assumed a visual dimension. He remembers that he used to look at the *thangkas* of Milarepa and the founders of the Kagyu school,²² hanging them in front of him as he read their biographies. His account gives the impression of a “low-tech” cinematic experience since he describes that the overall effect was “almost like a show or entertainment to look at these paintings [...] So I would look at the painting and then read the biography, back and forth, for hours. Often I would cry when I read these

²¹ Eva Van Dam, *The Magic Life of Milarepa: Tibet's Great Yogi* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1991).

²² The lineage of the Kagyu school actually starts with the Indian yogi Tilopa, followed by Naropa, Marpa and then Milarepa.

stories, because they were so moving, especially Milarepa's story, which was very moving to me."²³

The Representation of Internal and External Dimensions

Chokling and Tobgyal not only drew on a rich visual and literary tradition to retell Milarepa's story cinematically, but used cinematic devices which distinguish the film version from traditional modes of representation. As previously mentioned, cinematic conventions severely limit feature films' ability to provide extra-narrative exegesis, giving viewers considerable latitude in interpreting subtly conveyed notions, themes, and sentiments. Arguably, feature films are much better at "showing" what is happening on screen than offering explanations, and in the case of *Milarepa* the protocols of narrative cinema are used effectively to convey the character's point of view or state of mind.

Formalism in *Milarepa* serves to visually represent various states of mind by simply "showing" them. Devices associated with this style are crucial to vividly depict "ordinary" perception and "extraordinary" perception in the scene of Milarepa performing the secret rites that will empower him to accomplish black magic. "Ordinary" perception is depicted in the sequence of flashbacks accompanying the shot of Milarepa sitting in a stone enclosure. The images of Milarepa playing by a pond as a boy, his father's death, and talking to his childhood friend Zezay can be understood as distracted memories derived from "ordinary" perception. "Extraordinary" perception is

²³ Thomas Laird, *The Story of Tibet: Conversations with the Dalai Lama* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 83.

cinematically represented just moments after his teacher checks on his progress, establishing that Milarepa's visions are not just the delusions of a distracted mind. The teacher warns that "in the dark, the mind has no leash. Thoughts become strong and reckless and visions emerge from chaos. If you are trapped by these illusions, you will accomplish nothing." The warning underscores the differing levels of awareness, some of which are delusory. However moments later, when Milarepa is meditating with his eyes closed, the camera zooms in slowly onto his face, the drumbeat of the musical score speeds up and becomes louder, and his eyes suddenly open to stare at the camera. There is a brief cut to the teacher standing outside Milarepa's enclosure, witnessing beams of effulgent light emanating through the crevices of the enclosure. These beams of light signal that Milarepa's "ordinary" perception is dissolving to allow subtle—"extraordinary"—perception to emerge.

In this scene, the dazzling light acquires the function of an indispensable visual motif because Tibetan Buddhism characterizes consciousness free from discursive or conceptual thought as pure light. This idea is described in a famous quotation by the Buddha: "The mind is devoid of mind, [f]or the nature of mind is clear light".²⁴ To clarify this enigmatic axiom, the Dalai Lama explains in one of his books that there are several experiences of clear light, two of the main ones caused by the "dissolution [of ordinary perception] due to the influence of liberation and dissolution due to the influence of confusion".²⁵ The first experience of clear light occurs only after the Buddhist practitioner has utterly mastered meditation and yoga practice and experiences

²⁴ Dalai Lama, *Dzogchen: The Heart Essence of the Great Perfection* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2004), 126.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

pure awareness; the second is experienced normally by unenlightened human beings at the point of death when “the coarser levels of mind—sensory faculties, sensory consciousness and the coarse levels of mental consciousness—are all dissolved.”²⁶

Although Milarepa is neither experiencing the pure wisdom of a Buddha nor dying in this scene, his ordinary mind of delusory thinking is dissolving to the point where he is able to discern subtle manifestations of reality.

The scene’s formalism situates us within Milarepa’s interior state of mind. After the brilliant light signals Milarepa’s transition to the “extraordinary” mode of perception, the camera moves into a tight close-up of his face. His features become less distinct as they dissolve into a bluish haze of smoke, only his eyes are visible for a moment or two until they disappear into smoke. By this point, the sequence’s transition to formalism conveys that we are no longer watching the “ordinary” reality of the flashbacks. The film’s abrupt change in style, coupled with the extreme close-up of Milarepa’s eyes, initiates the transition from an “outward” to an “inward” perception of reality. It is important to note that the musical score at this point is evocative of the chanting, ceremonial horns, cymbals and drums of Tibetan Buddhist rituals, suggesting that Milarepa is undergoing a ritualistic transition to a mystical dimension.

Then, out of the bluish smoke three dancing figures emerge in the background and subsequently disappear. One deity with a reddish face appears in close-up, a distorted voice emanates from it until the deity transforms into a dynamic amorphous pinkish light. In a long shot, Milarepa seems to emerge out of the smoke, sitting in meditation. The pink light circles around his head and hovers for a moment before it enters

²⁶ Ibid., 168.

Milarepa through the crown of his head and is absorbed into his body in a blinding white flash that ends the scene.

This scene dramatizes a process which is very similar to a practise in Tantric Buddhism, called Guru Yoga which at “its essence is what is called ‘purification of perception’. The student resolves to reverse the normal critical outlook on the world, and to find all faults caused by his or her own failure of perception”.²⁷ The process is quite complex but one of its key elements involves the Buddhist practitioner visualizing his or her “ordinary form dissolving, then arising as a deity”, initiating a transformation that changes his or her outlook “from ordinary perception to a clearer state of purity”.²⁸ The process culminates with the practitioner visualizing his or her guru (teacher) dissolving into light and flowing into the student through the crown of the head so that the student and guru become indivisible in “body, speech and mind”.²⁹ Furthermore, at one point the practitioner visualizes the guru surrounded by a “whole pantheon of enlightened beings” which later “melt into light and dissolve into the mentor”.³⁰ Guru Yoga allows the student to merge with the enlightened beings and derive the benefits of their wisdom and compassion. There is a similar transference of power in the film when the deity transforms into pink light and subsequently dissolves into Milarepa, giving him direct access to the extraordinary powers extant in the universe but normally invisible to “ordinary” perception. In this manner, the film provides a dynamic visual representation of this very real but unseen dimension.

²⁷ Robert Thurman, *Inside Tibetan Buddhism: Rituals and Symbols Revealed* (San Francisco: Collins Publishers, 1995), 62.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

Film's unique characteristics—shot composition, style, symbolic visual motifs—defly lend themselves to representing the “ordinary” and “extraordinary” minds states extant in Tibetan Buddhism. These cinematic devices allow us to glimpse a representation of a dimension that is normally inaccessible to us. We have an immediate sense that we are seeing what Milarepa is seeing and experiencing as we watch it unfold through his point of view. Apart from the cinema, there is no other Tibetan Buddhist art form that gives us the impression of experiencing first-hand an individual's state of mind by simply “showing” us what is being perceived. Thus, Chokling is able to use the cinema to powerfully convey what it is like to experience a deeper level of reality, one that reflects the multileveled Tibetan perception of the ordinary and extraordinary.

***Kundun*: “You don't just hear about the dharma, you see them living it”**

Kundun renders a mystical and nuanced treatment of the Dalai Lama's role as Tibet's spiritual teacher, mining the symbolic dimensions of Tibetan Buddhist rituals and prophesy to effectively develop multiple levels of meaning. Unlike *Seven Years in Tibet*, (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1997) which, as mentioned in Chapter One, downplays some of the more shamanic aspects of the Dalai Lama's role, *Kundun* reveals his visions and his participation in esoteric rituals.

Despite their contrasting treatments of Tibetan Buddhism's magical elements, the directors of *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun* faced many of the same obstacles bringing the Dalai Lama's story to the screen. To begin with, both were forced to shoot outside of Tibet—Morocco was the principal location for *Kundun* and *Seven Years in*

Tibet was shot primarily in Argentina—because of the Chinese government’s vocal resistance to the films’ sympathetic treatment of the Dalai Lama. It is worth noting that just after Disney Studios agreed to distribute *Kundun*—when the film was still in production—the Chinese government threatened to curtail Disney’s economic expansion into China if they did not shelve the film.³¹

The threat of Chinese retaliation paled in comparison to the filmmakers’ problem of authentically representing Tibetan culture and religion without making the films inaccessible to American audiences. While Scorsese and Annaud sought to render a reasonably accurate depiction of indigenous Tibetan culture and featured Tibetan casts, they opted for shooting in English, probably to appeal to the films’ target audience, American movie-goers, who tend to avoid subtitled films. However the filmmakers’ decision can also be viewed negatively in so far as it “Americanizes” Tibet by undermining its cultural authenticity for purely economic reasons. Another key problem the filmmakers faced was how to seamlessly introduce Tibetan culture, details of the Dalai Lama’s biography and historical facts of the Chinese invasion to an international audience without being too didactic.

Kundun deliberately avoids enumerating some of the key tenets of Tibetan Buddhism and the details of the historical relationship of Tibet and China for the edification of Western audiences. Scorsese remarked in an interview that he was drawn to the project because “it wasn’t a treatise on Buddhism or a historical epic in the usual sense. It’s just too much to know about Tibet and China and their relationship over the past fifteen

³¹ Robert W. Welkos and Rone Tempest, “Hollywood’s New China Syndrome”, *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 1997. <http://articles.latimes.com/1997/sep/01/entertainment/ca-27816> (accessed June 22, 2011).

hundred years. That was all incidental. What you really dealt with was the child and the child becoming a young man—his spiritual upbringing.”³² Clearly, Scorsese felt that *Kundun* should focus on the universal and emotional aspects the Dalai Lama’s story and reject overt didacticism. In another interview—for a BBC Television series available on YouTube—Scorsese was even more pointed in his assertion by stating: “we weren’t about to explain the culture of Tibet. We weren’t about to explain Tibetan Buddhism. We weren’t about to explain Tibetan history.”³³ Instead, he opted to shoot the film from the Dalai Lama’s point of view by using numerous low angle and point of view shots because “the outer trappings of the [Tibetan] culture are so foreign that the only way we could make a Western audience—particularly an American audience—identify with it would be to deal with the people and to [...] just see what the little boy [the Dalai Lama as a child] sees [...] or understand what the little boy understands, which isn’t much at first.”³⁴ The result is a very subtle rendering of the Tibetan worldview that attempts to “show” viewers the Dalai Lama’s perspective of Tibetan life rather than “explain” it.

Possessing no previous knowledge of Buddhism before she started writing the screenplay for *Kundun*, scriptwriter Melissa Mathison researched her topic diligently, spending “a lot of time in Dharamsala interviewing people. Also we went to Tibet. The story got deeper and deeper [...] and I was able to make it more detailed and

³² Gavin Smith, “The Art of Vision: Martin Scorsese’s ‘Kundun’”, *Film Comment*, Volume 34, Issue 1, January, 1998, 23.

³³ Mark Cousins, “Scene by Scene with Martin Scorsese”, *Scene by Scene*. BBC Scotland, 1998. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3B21xaf1zIV> (accessed on YouTube, June 23, 2011).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

interesting.”³⁵ Moreover, as her knowledge increased and she recognized Tibetan Buddhism’s centrality to the Dalai Lama’s story, *Kundun* became “more profound and descriptive” leading her to remark: “My understanding of the dharma influenced my writing, because what we had to do was make the teachings obvious in the life of the people: you don’t just hear about the dharma, you see them living it”.³⁶ Like Scorsese, Mathison wished to allow events to seemingly “unfold” in front of the camera without resorting to undue exegesis.

From the start, Mathison was interested in “the story of this boy [the Dalai Lama] who was destined to have an extraordinary life”³⁷ and when she pitched her idea to the Dalai Lama, she stated that she did not want the film to exist only as “a history and a biography of him”, but to “cover the stages of his life from infancy to young adulthood, that within the context of his upbringing and Tibet’s history, it was a microcosm for the ages of man, the ages of child.”³⁸ We can only speculate whether the Dalai Lama was persuaded by Mathison’s desire to highlight the universality of his story, but he approved the project, granting her numerous interviews, interpreting events, and verifying the accuracy of the script. In keeping with Mathison’s original vision, the film provides a relatively uncomplicated narrative tracing the Dalai Lama’s early years—from toddler to teenager—in Tibet. For instance, it re-enacts the series of tests he underwent at two years of age to affirm his reincarnation as the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Also included are scenes of the Dalai Lama as an older child, learning Buddhist

³⁵ Angela Pressburger, “The Making of Kundun”, *Shambhala Sun*, January 1998, www.shambhalasun.com (accessed April 30, 2011).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

scripture with his tutors and witnessing political power struggles between a few of the senior monks. A considerable portion of the film delineates his failure to negotiate fair terms with the Chinese which eventually forces him to flee to India. The mystical dream-like tenor of the film deepens during the last 30 minutes, with surrealistic images of the Dalai Lama's prophetic visions: blood spilling into a goldfish pond; hundreds of blood soaked monks lying at his feet; defeated guerrilla fighters hanging lifelessly from their bloodied horses. The film culminates in an extended sequence—to be discussed in depth later in this chapter—that merges scenes of his escape, images of the esoteric *Kalachakra* ritual and a voice-over narration of Buddhist scriptures into a subtle allusion to Tibetan Buddhism's unique combination of magic and religion.

The Enigmatic Prophecies of the *Kalachakra Tantra*

When I first saw *Kundun*, I thought the film did not articulate a complex or clearly defined Tibetan Buddhist sensibility. While Tibetan Buddhist rituals, like the Nechung oracle,³⁹ admittedly receive considerable attention, I saw them as an exotic backdrop to the larger story of the Dalai Lama's personal and political crucible of assuming power as a teenager in the midst of the Chinese invasion. Moreover, I mistakenly surmised that Buddhism functioned in the film only to delineate the deep-rooted cultural differences between Tibet and China, and illustrate the blatant imperialism of the Chinese invasion and its deleterious impact on Tibetan culture and political

³⁹ The role of the Nechung Oracle (also known as the State Oracle of Tibet) is performed by a monk who enters a trance and becomes possessed by the deity Dorje Drakden, a protector of Tibetan Buddhism. Aided by monks from the Nechung monastery, the Nechung Oracle prognosticates the future and advises the Dalai Lama during a secret ceremony. For a thorough exploration of the Nechung Oracle, see John F. Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of Snows* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 191-217.

independence. It took me several viewings to realize that *Kundun* actually integrates the Tibetan concepts of “ordinary” and “extraordinary” perception into its interpretation of the Dalai Lama’s biography, thereby making it a profoundly complex film.

It was while watching the scene near the end of the film—when the Dalai Lama and his retinue make the decision to flee Tibet for the sanctuary of India—that I began to suspect the film’s deeper connotations. Since the Dalai Lama’s flight is intercut with the *Kalachakra* initiation ritual, I decided to research the ceremony’s essential principles and its significance in relation to the film. Admittedly, I was ignorant about the more complex elements of the *Kalachakra Tantra*. I only knew that it is a 12-day initiation, often performed by the Dalai Lama involving the creation a phenomenally intricate sand *mandala*,⁴⁰ and unlike most initiations, is open to thousands of Buddhist practitioners. It was only when I read Robert Thurman’s explanation of the Tibetan notion of “ordinary” and “extraordinary” levels of perception⁴¹ that I became aware that *Kundun* is much more informed by Tibetan Buddhism than I first realized.

In his explanation, Thurman uses the example of the Chinese invasion of Tibet to illustrate the Tibetan belief that every phenomenon can simultaneously lend itself to “ordinary” and “extraordinary” levels of interpretation. He starts by situating the invasion within the “ordinary” or factual level: “[I]n the last forty-six years, Tibet has

⁴⁰ The sand mandala of the Kalachakra Buddha deity is over six feet in diameter, containing three palaces—the body, speech and mind of all the buddhas—and 722 deities. After several days of initiations and rituals, all the sand of the mandala is swept up and placed in an urn. The ceremony is completed after the sacred sand particles are released into a body of water, their blessings to be carried far and wide by the currents. See Robert Thurman, *Inside Tibetan Buddhism: Rituals and Symbols Revealed* (San Francisco: Collins Publishers, 1995) for a brief description of the *Kalachakra* initiation and colour photographs of the sand *mandala*.

⁴¹ Robert Thurman, *Essential Tibetan Buddhism* (Edison, New Jersey: Castle Books, 1997), 7-8.

been invaded, occupied, and annexed by the People's Republic of China."⁴² He goes on to enumerate the effects of the Chinese invasion on Tibet's eco-system, the Tibetan people, their religion and culture. Subsequently, he suggests that the invasion can be explained on the "extraordinary" level in relation to the prophesy from the *Kalachakra Tantra*, stating that in the next couple of centuries there will be a materialistic dictatorship that is inimical to all spiritual practices. A spiritual human realm that is not of this world called *Shambhala* will emerge "from behind an invisible barrier"⁴³ and eventually conquer the dictatorship's military, and "the enlightened people" of *Shambhala* will usher in a golden age of spirituality that will last for eighteen hundred years. According to Thurman, Tibetans believe the "destruction of the Buddhist institutions in their homeland is a sign of the nearing of the age of liberation, for the whole world, not just for Tibet."⁴⁴ Incidentally, the prophesy also states that anyone who has received the *Kalachakra* initiation will have an advantageous rebirth during the age of *Shambhala*, which Thurman concludes, is the reason so many Tibetans undertake difficult pilgrimages to attend the ceremony.

While there are no expositional references to the profound significance of the *Kalachakra* initiation or its prophesy in the film's narrative, scenes of its rituals are intercut with scenes of the Dalai Lama's escape. The frequent juxtaposition of these two disparate visual and narrative streams effectively allows the "ordinary" and "extraordinary" levels of interpretation to coalesce in a uniquely Tibetan way. The Dalai Lama's flight remains anchored within an "ordinary" or historical interpretation because

⁴² Ibid., 7

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 8.

the film realistically depicts the ordeals of his escape. Given that the inserts of the rituals of the *Kalachakra* ceremony are extra-narrative, they shape our interpretation of the Dalai Lama's escape without distorting its basic details. While the sequences of the Dalai Lama's escape could stand alone as a historically accurate, "ordinary", portrayal of his ordeal, the integration of images of the initiation ritual suggests that on the "extraordinary" level the Chinese invasion and Dalai Lama's subsequent exile is a reiteration of the prophesy: the anti-religious dictatorship has begun, but it will ultimately fail. Furthermore, since the *Kalachakra* initiation is often associated with world peace, its use in the film insinuates that escape—rather than staying and mounting an armed insurgency—is the Dalai Lama's only moral and constructive response to Chinese aggression.

The multiple cuts to the *Kalachakra* initiation in the film's final scenes elucidate *Kundun*'s intricate rendering of time. The juxtaposition of the Dalai Lama's escape with his performance of the ritual highlights the frequent convergence of the temporal and timeless in Tibetan Buddhism, and suggests Dalai Lama is able to simultaneously straddle both realms. The temporal is borne out by the historical fact that the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in the early spring of 1959. However, he concomitantly re-enacts the timeless role of the Buddha because it was the Buddha who first gave the initiation to the King of Shambhala and his 96 minor rulers. The *Kalachakra* initiation is also called the "Cycles of Time" or "Wheel of Time" because "it shows the Buddha as emanating himself in the form of a 'time-machine' or 'history machine,' an embodiment of what the unenlightened perceive as the flow of time, adopting such a form to show his

commitment to the future enlightenment of all beings.”⁴⁵ Thus the use of parallel editing in the closing sequence emphasizes that the Buddha is still actively continuing his commitment to beings through the human agency of the Dalai Lama, associating the *Kalachakra Tantra* and the Dalai Lama even though the deeper spiritual elements of “ordinary” and “extraordinary” perception are not explained.

A thorough knowledge of the intricate details of the *Kalachakra* initiation would undoubtedly enrich our understanding of the final sequence and provide illuminating insights into the esoteric worlds of Tibetan Buddhism. Yet, the lack of exegesis of the initiation’s significance should not be considered a weakness of the film. *Kundun* operates within the conventions of narrative cinema whereby detailed explanations are limited for the sake of narrative progression. Notwithstanding, the film manages to allude to the ordinary and extraordinary levels of perception, primarily through crosscutting and extra-narrative inserts. In this way, the film creates an entry point to the mystical dimension of the *Kalachakra* initiation, and reinforces it by means of the Dalai Lama’s voice-over quoting Buddhist scripture and his surreal visions—such as the image of blood seeping into the goldfish pond. The poetic tone of the quotations and dreamlike quality of the images suggests that the film is not simply depicting historical events but requires a more intuitive interpretation. These devices encourage the viewer to make the transition to the multidimensional universe represented by the *Kalachakra* rituals. In addition, editing constructs multiple layers of meaning, and by means of the images of the ritual, offer the viewer a glimpse into the deeper mystical levels of the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.

Tibetan worldview. While the *Kalachakra* ceremony scenes have no practical bearing on the historical or “ordinary” representation of the Dalai Lama’s escape, they are a poetic, extra-narrative rendering of the mystical Tibetan imagination.

Directors cannot regulate how their films are going to be interpreted or received; they can only anticipate what the reaction will be. When Chokling was asked in an interview whether he had any particular aspirations for *Milarepa* he answered:

The story of Milarepa itself is beautifully inspiring with lots of wonderful teachings [...] If this film inspires just a single person to become more compassionate, tolerant and patient towards others, I will be more than happy. From a Buddhist point of view, this is the most precious gift that we can offer the world.⁴⁶

Chokling clearly hoped that by expressing universal Buddhist principles—compassion, tolerance, patience—in a compelling film adaptation of Milarepa’s life, viewers would grasp its spiritual message. However, that message may have fallen flat because of the film’s reliance on narrative conventions instead of extra-narrative exegesis to get the message across. By portraying more arcane Tibetan practices, the director was indeed able to endow the film with a spiritual sophistication and complexity that non-Buddhist viewers may not have been able to grasp, such as the relationship between Milarepa’s procurement of power from invisible entities and the Tibetan Buddhist practices like Guru Yoga. Cinematic conventions dictate that Buddhist concepts, such as the pure light essence of mind, can only be alluded to. Yet, without any further contextualization, the Western viewers’ understanding of the nuanced and multi-layered Tibetan worldview informing this key scene remains limited. A similar challenge exists for

⁴⁶ “Interview with the Director”, *Milarepa, The Movie*, www.milarepamovie.com (accessed July 5, 2010).

viewers of *Kundun*. In light of Thurman's Tibetan interpretation of the Chinese invasion according to "ordinary" and "extraordinary" perception, the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet is situated within an esoteric Tibetan Buddhist universe of such complexity that it is conceivably lost upon most Western viewers. As well, the nuanced meaning arising from the juxtaposition of the *Kalachakra* initiation and the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet may be puzzling to Western audiences unfamiliar with the prophesy it perpetuates.

By making reference to the esoteric religious practices, Chokling and Scorsese took a calculated risk because these arcane aspects of Tibetan Buddhism project a distinctive worldview that is almost inaccessible to non-Buddhist viewers. The issues raised by the directors' choices are addressed in the pages that follow by means of a comprehensive examination of the reception of *Milarepa* and *Kundun* and the Western viewers' difficulties with the films' more esoteric and multidimensional elements.

CONCLUSION

Towards a More Inclusive Methodology

We have not addressed in any depth whether there is a limit to what a film can simply “show” of a foreign culture’s religion without some contextualization and still engage viewers. As noted in the previous chapter, by depicting events Tibetans consider comparatively normal—black magic, omens, telepathy, prophecies, visions, spirit possession, and reincarnation—*Milarepa* and *Kundun* may have been too esoteric and difficult for Western audiences to grasp, a point supported by the fact that neither film did well at the box office. *Milarepa* reportedly earned just over \$200,000 (US) worldwide and *Kundun* earned less than six million dollars in North America. A sample of reviews posted on the internet indicates that the overall reaction to these two films was mostly negative. The reviews posted on the website *Rotten Tomatoes* reveal that both films also elicited tepid responses, although several were more pointedly critical. One reviewer of *Milarepa*, Phil Villarreal from *The Arizona Star* opined, “Buddhism teaches suffering is inseparable from existence. Suffering is certainly inseparable from the experience of watching *Milarepa*.”¹ *Kundun* drew the following disparaging review from John Nesbitt on his website *Old School Reviews*: “Recitations on the Four Noble Truths may excite

¹ Phil Villarreal, “Milarepa”, *Arizona Daily Star*, October 25, 2007.
http://azstarnet.com/entertainment/article_8ca180e1-5085-568e-9fld-306594fb2c2.html

devoted Buddhists and students but will send more viewers to oblivion than enlightenment.”²

However, the negative reactions of these reviewers may speak less directly to the films’ quality—or lack thereof—and more to their subject matter. As Ryan Cracknell wrote of *Kundun* on his website, “There’s no denying the artistry of *Kundun*. Its heart also appears to be in the right place. But for those like me who don’t have a versed [*sic*] history in the modern history of Tibet or Buddhism, the scope is ultimately too large.”³ Cracknell’s frustration may have stemmed from the fact that *Kundun* avoids spelling out Tibetan Buddhism’s doctrine. Most likely the average Western viewer unacquainted with Tibetan Buddhism or Tibetan history is unable to construct a richly meaningful and nuanced reading of *Kundun* or *Milarepa*. In addition, Tibetan Buddhism’s cosmology of unseen multiple realms of existence inhabited by nonhuman supernatural beings contravenes widely held Western attitudes, even those of Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. As Reginald Ray observes:

Many [Western Buddhists] have felt unable to entertain the ideas of reincarnation or of the six realms [of existence]. For them, many of the traditional Tibetan rituals dealing with other beings and other realms do not make sense. Sometimes this extends to thinking that even talk of nonmaterial buddhas, bodhisattvas, and protectors is “symbolic” and that there is really nothing that corresponds to these designations.⁴

Indeed, the cosmologies of East and West are so dissimilar that their respective worldviews appear to be difficult to bridge or reconcile.

² John Nesbitt, “Kundun”, *Old School Reviews*, posted August 1, 2002.

http://oldschoolreviews.com/rev_90/kundun.htm (accessed April 29, 2011).

³ Ryan Cracknell, “Review: Kundun”, *Movie Views*, posted October 30, 2006.

<http://movieviews.com/2006/10/30/review-kundun> (accessed April 29, 2011).

⁴ Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000), 56.

A concrete example of a Westerner resisting the enigmatic elements of Tibetan Buddhism is American journalist Thomas Laird's account of his interview with the Dalai Lama. Incredulous of the myths of Padmasambhava (one of the founders of Tibetan Buddhism) visiting an incalculable number of people and places as an emanation of his physical form and flying on the rays of the sun to avoid death, Laird asks the Dalai Lama to explain these miraculous phenomena. The Dalai offers the following elucidation:

I know that it is difficult to accept for Americans. However, for us as Buddhists, depending on our level of experience and belief, there are no difficulties for us to explain the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can easily accept this because of the fact that we accept that there are these two levels [the ordinary and extraordinary]. From a Buddhist viewpoint there are no difficulties to accept the resurrection of Jesus Christ at the second [extraordinary] level.⁵

Interestingly, the comparison of Padmasambhava to Jesus Christ allows Laird to understand how Padmasambhava simultaneously straddles the "ordinary" and "extraordinary" in the Tibetan worldview. The Dalai Lama's reference to Christianity illustrates as well that all religious traditions, including those of the West, allow for the occurrence of miraculous events. Notwithstanding, these events are often explained and understood in culturally specific terms so their intercultural universality is not always readily apparent or translatable. For instance, Tibetans believe shamans, lamas and yogis⁶ can routinely perform miraculous feats, whereas Laird's scepticism about the myths of Padmasambhava is perhaps shaped by Western notions that only exceptional religious figures or saints can perform such deeds and only on rare occasions.

⁵ Thomas Laird, *The Story of Tibet: Conversations with the Dalai Lama* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 61.

⁶ Yogi is a term given to individuals who live outside of the monastic community, often meditating for long periods in caves or remote hermitages, and are often able to execute magic. Milarepa is considered a yogi.

At stake here is the challenge posed by *Milarepa* and *Kundun* of cinematically representing the Tibetan perception of a multidimensional reality without the benefit of alluding to recognizable cultural reference points, or resorting to an explanatory text or narration to clarify perplexing concepts. Unlike documentaries, there is a general disinclination against overt didacticism in feature films, arguably for the purpose of facilitating and preserving the spectators' emotional involvement, leaving it up to the viewer to discern nuances or detect cultural allusions. For feature films that are either foreign made or based on a little known historical event, strategies are often developed to compensate for the viewers' inability to infer subtle but important information. Dramatic re-enactments, for instance, often compensate for the lack of exposition by situating their subjects within a comprehensible context, providing background information either through dialogue, an introductory text, voice-overs, or flash-backs. Although these strategies tend to effectively compensate for the gaps in the viewers' knowledge, problems may still arise.

Milarepa and *Kundun* open with introductory written texts situating their respective true-life subjects within a historical context, but with differing results. *Milarepa* locates the narrative within a magical dimension. With the statement that "11th Century Tibet was a land of Buddhists and mystics, where lamas and sorcerers roamed and yogis were seen flying through the sky", the film sets up a framework for the enigmatic and mysterious events that follow. The introductory text in *Kundun* steers clear of the familiar, straight forward facts about the Dalai Lama's role as Tibetan Buddhism's spiritual leader and his peaceful efforts to reinstate Tibetan self-determination in Chinese occupied Tibet. Instead it declares that he is "the human manifestation of the

Buddha of Compassion” and that upon the discovery of his reincarnation a “Buddha had been reborn”. Arguably, it is a mental leap for many Westerners to envision the gentle smiling Dalai Lama occasionally seen on television news broadcasts visiting foreign dignitaries, as a “human manifestation of the Buddha of Compassion”. There is no further elucidation about the Dalai Lama’s role or, for that matter, who or what is the Buddha of Compassion, leaving viewers to sort out whether the Dalai Lama is a human being or a god or a combination of the two. The confusion arising from blending well known factual details with the more esoteric aspects of Tibetan Buddhism conceivably makes it difficult for Western audiences to create a single cohesive narrative while watching *Kundun*. Spectators may be unable to ascertain whether they are to view the cinematic biography of the Dalai Lama as a factual representation of modern historical events, as a magical allegory, or a fusion of history and myth.

Since there are numerous reasons for the financial failure of a film, it is problematic to contend that box-office returns are an indication of audiences’ difficulty working through the cultural nuances of a film. In the cases of *Milarepa* and *Kundun*, we also have to gauge how religious films usually perform in the market place to determine what other factors may have affected the films’ lacklustre reception rather than relying on broad claims about the unpopularity of religious films. In fact, this assumption is problematic because it overlooks the tradition of religious films as popular entertainment. Georges Méliès’ first film was *Christ Walking on Water* (1898) and Cecil B. De Mille made countless religious films during the silent era. Recently several Hollywood films—such as *Bruce Almighty* (Tom Shadyac, USA, 2003), and *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, USA, 2004)—have reinterpreted popular religious narratives and have done well

at the box office. Moreover, religious genre films in India pervaded screens long before the days of Bollywood and attracted large audiences.⁷ It remains unclear whether today, religious films remain consistently popular given that they represent only a fraction of Hollywood or Bollywood's total output. Only Nigeria's nascent Nollywood is the exception to the rule, producing a substantial number of well-received video-films with strong religious themes. Often pitting evangelical Christian pastors against the shamans of indigenous religions in a dramatic "showdown", these films appeal to the Christian sensibilities of many southern Nigerians. However, a sub-genre of Christian video-film that represents a small portion of Nollywood's total output is produced by many of Nigeria's large evangelical churches and marketed directly to their lay communities.⁸ These examples of targeted marketing suggest that explicitly religious films, focusing more on specific religious doctrines, are more likely to appeal to smaller niche audiences.

From this perspective, it is worth noting that *The Cup* and *Travellers and Magicians* were popular with the relatively small film festival and art-house audiences rather than with the general public. Moreover, Chokling's recent documentary, *Brilliant Moon* (2010), commissioned by deceased Tibetan Buddhist master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's organization to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birth, bypassed the international film festival circuit and large distribution deals in favour of limited screenings and marketing the DVD directly to Dilgo Khyentse's followers. Consequently it is debatable whether *Milarepa* and *Kundun* could have countered the niche trend and

⁷ Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2006).

⁸ Asonzeh Ukah, "Advertising God: Nigerian Christian Video Films", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 33, 2. 2003. www.jstor.org.proxylibrary.carleton.ca (accessed April 15, 2010).

found a large audience of Buddhists and non-Buddhists, in spite of the optimism of their filmmakers that the Buddhist elements would not alienate or confuse viewers.

Undoubtedly, filmmakers take a risk of alienating viewers when they approach films from a religious perspective if only for the reason that religion can be a deeply divisive topic. A religious film's accessibility is even more complicated when the religion is esoteric, complex, or reflects an uncommon, little understood worldview. As we have seen, there are multiple aspects of Tibetan Buddhism which are culturally specific with no evident parallel in the major theistic world religions, making it somewhat inaccessible to non-Buddhist viewers. Thus, are we to expect filmmakers to make only films with universal religious themes, reinforcing the idea of a single meta-religion? In the name of diversity, I hope not. Films that attempt to delve into the deeper spiritual dimensions of human experience can touch us in profound ways. Accordingly, they have a place in cinema whether they are understood and appreciated by a vast number of viewers or not. So how do we approach these films?

First and foremost, it is incumbent on us to know and understand the philosophy, tenets and cosmology of the religion in question. In order to discuss the popularity of religious films in India, the United States and Nigeria, it is not enough to examine the films' religious perspective solely in relation to audience reception and the wider social context. Had I taken this kind of approach, and only regarded the films as exemplars and products of culture, I would not have perceived the multidimensional Buddhist concepts extant in *The Cup*, *Travellers and Magicians*, *Milarepa* and *Kundun*. Thus, in accordance to theologian John Lyden's framework previously mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the films themselves and the religion that informs them were

the starting points of my analysis. Secondly, I attempted to avoid cultural relativism by promoting inclusivity and celebrating diverse perspectives. In my examination of Martin Scorsese's *Kundun*, the primary aim was to demonstrate that not only Tibetans can promulgate an "authentic" Buddhist perspective.

I also undertook the study of the highly spiritual films of Khyentse Norbu and Neten Chokling in hope that their unique perspectives could reveal the heart and soul of a 2,500-year tradition and give us a cinematic rendering of a world governed by compassion and wisdom. And most importantly, I wanted to celebrate the multiple perspectives that infuse this diverse corpus of films about Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora. Each one of these films brings us a richer understanding of what it means to be human in this ever-changing world of *samsara*.

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