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# Enlightenments: The Interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism on Screen

## Abstract

The Tibet Buddhist tradition is a specific system for a vertical and horizontal transmission of the culture of one generation to the next. This transmission is realized through a relevant training or initiation. The holy text has an absolute value, while its further hermeneutic development in the way of interpretations and comments is a priori viewed as secondary, complementary and commenting. The cinema art is a kind of modern, interpretative commentary of Buddhism. Through the audio-visual media the religious transmissions have been delivered, transformed and incorporated in new forms, utilizing the semiotic power of the cinema language.

The proposed paper examines three very different films which articulate various views of Tibetan Buddhism, its sacral continuum, symbolism, and being on the screen. In these case studies the interpretation of religious narrative is determinate as a process of gradual transformation. The main focus is on *Milarepa* which has been studied as a cinematic kind of *namtar* (*spiritual biography*) which visualizes the pure doctrine and corresponds closely with the didactic tradition in Tibetan holy poetry. Additionally the analysis traces interpretations of the life of the Tibetan yogi in Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's and Liliana Cavani's works.

## Keywords

Tibetan Buddhism, tradition, Milarepa, cinematic transmission, canon, globalization, contemporaneity

## Author Notes

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According to the theory of zone-forming cultures, and the typology of Eastern literature (Braginskiy, 1991), the East is divided into three broad areas that do not coincide exactly with geographic borders. One of them is the Indian-Southeast, which includes the Hindu literature and culture of India, and the Buddhist literature and culture of India. A subsection includes the culture (including religious literature) of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal and Mongolia. They are also called integrated cultures, but retain their indigenous cultural identity. In the zonal cultural community, and in the others as well, there is unity of ideological concepts (religious-philosophical, ethical, aesthetic notions), as well as stability and orderliness of internal relationships. “This type of culture is monocentric, authoritarian, canonical and traditional. /.../ Traditional – this term is used here to signify culture’s own identity, stability, the inviolable transmission of “What’s Right” from one generation to another” (Braginskiy, 1991: 17). The zone-forming theory examines cultural heritage namely as a collection of sustainable, potential traditions that have the energy charge and the vital ability to influence ideologically, conceptually, ethically-aesthetically, and so on, with no relation to the historical time.

In the etymology of the European languages the word tradition is basically associated with handing down knowledge referring to the values of the Christianity and the apostolic and post-apostolic standards controlling the spiritual inheritance. Not until later did the Catholic theology establish the Latin term *Traditio* in the sense of divine, transcendental handing down of the spiritual tradition. In the 18th century, with the advance of ideas in science and economics, the understanding of the term “tradition” appeared to be a kind of antithesis, challenging the evolution of man and deterring the progress of a free, clear mind.

The Western missionaries and those studying the East were the first to understand and interpret the concept of Far Eastern tradition and traditional culture as a complicated object including the full set of treatises and standards invariably bound by the past as well as the

present and future. “The tradition – this is a way of thinking in the categories of the cultural code. /.../ The manifestation of the cultural code, characteristic of each culture, is connected with the form of the collective conscience. The traditional culture – that is the culture of the meaning.” (Golgina, 1995: 146-147).

The cinema of Asia works with the system of values and stereotypes built during centuries – factors which not only set the direction of the cultural orientation of the Eastern society, but also define the specifics of the civilization. Asian cinema can be said to be neo-traditionalist. The prefix “neo-“ unambiguously shows that tradition is not only changing but is being modified, as there are different phenomena (literature, theatre, cinema) in the culture of the East. The neo-traditionalism appears in diachronic (horizontal) and synchronic (vertical) aspect. The vectors of neo-traditionalism are consciously moving in two absolutely opposite directions:

*Diachronic*: cultural renewal by taking Western, different elements or by total turn to Western-making. In this case the factor of traditionalism plays the role of the necessary tradition left.

*Synchronic*: returning of the old tradition, with the purpose of its conscious practical restoration and building up of the artifacts.

The neo-traditionalism in the Asian cinema displays well the synchronic aspect; the traditional turns into a basic communication bond between the spectator and the film. The interpretation of the traditional values in the cinema is invariably connected with the canon, which is “the unanimity of the whole culture, including in its symbol system the integrity of life. The canon is a kind of well, in which a person can comfortably descend to the depth described in the ancient texts, and reach the level of the experienced. The canon is something, in which a person gradually discovers himself.” (Pomerantz, 1972: 75). The very word canon involves the idea of exactness as well as width.

It is around the canon that integrated cultures manage to build their own (cultural) identity. This is because a zone-forming culture creates and maintains codes for centuries, and canonical structures incorporate within them community's notions of the world and include them in various elements. (Here we think of the concept of culture defined by Lotman: "historically created hierarchy of codes" (Lotman, 1990: 262). The appearance of cinema actually turns out to be another very conducive environment and opportunity for interpretation of the cultural canon; the traditional pierces the frame and turns into a major mode of communication between the viewer and the film. Alexey Losev (1978: 13) points out that the artistic canon is not an aesthetic category, but rather it is logically interrelated to aesthetics and its manifestation in a work of art, because "it combines various understandings of the model" (Losev, 1978: 13) and has a quantitative-structural feature.

The centuries-old Indian art and religious-philosophical theory and practice affect certain aspects of the integrated peculiar area where Tibetan Buddhism is widespread. Geographically, these are the areas of the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalayas; Bhutan, Sikkim, Ladakh, and high alpine regions of Nepal. From a cultural perspective, the canon here is again meant as a compendium of contingent and strictly prescribed rules of divine origin, described in various treatises and their supporting commentaries.

Tibetan Buddhism is often referred to in Western literature as Lamaism. This is a form of Mahayana Buddhism, and is characterized by a specific, complex fusion of the old monastic practices of Sarvastivada<sup>1</sup> with the cult methods of Vajrayāna<sup>2</sup>. When Buddhism spreads in the

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<sup>1</sup> In Sanskrit it literally means "*doctrine which states that everything is*" - a school separate from the Hinayana tradition, whose main thesis is that everything - past, present and future - exists simultaneously. Typical for it is the denial of the reality of the Self, the substance and soul (Anatman) and the establishment of the existence of instant units - or the so called dharmas - the last inseparable realities that exist from the onset. It is assumed that the school is a transitional stage between Hinayana and Mahayana. Sarvastivada's canon is written in Sanskrit, partly preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translation.

<sup>2</sup> Or the so called *Diamond Way/Wheel/Chariot*, which extends Buddhist notions on magical practices. The doctrine is characterized by a pronounced ritualistic nature, which must be understood as a psychological method. It is passed on from the teacher (guru) to the students. Due to the use of certain sacred syllables (mantra),

Tibetan region, much of the Indian Buddhist literature is translated in Tibetan. The four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism are Nyingmapa<sup>3</sup>, Kagyupa<sup>4</sup>, Sakyapa<sup>5</sup> and Gelugpa<sup>6</sup>. Each of them is characterized by its own specific synthesis of the philosophical theory and its practical application in meditation. Before the introduction of Buddhism in the Tibetan region, the dominating autochthonous religion was Bön<sup>7</sup>. The Tibetan Buddhist canon contains more than 6000 works divided into *Kangyur* ("The Translation of the Buddha's Word", or a translation of what was said and the precepts of the Buddha), and *Tengyur* ("Translation of Treatises", or Tibetan commentary and translation of the Indian comments accompanying Buddha's teaching).

The Divine in Buddhism is seen primarily through the prism of the state of Buddha, which, as the ultimate spiritual state, has divine and cosmic undertones. According to Buddhist teaching, even the most recalcitrant can change their temper and gain wisdom and spiritual merits, which can bring them closer to the cherished goal of Buddhists - the attainment of enlightenment. They can not only become followers of the Buddhist doctrine, but also its defenders.

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the Tibetan Buddhism of Vajrayāna is marked sometimes as Mantrayāna. It is also known as the esoteric part of Buddhism.

<sup>3</sup> Lit. *The School of The Elders* - the earliest forms of Buddhism moved from India to Tibet by Padmasambhava (lit. *The One Born From the Lotus*), one of the historic founders of Tibetan Buddhism, accepted and honoured as a Second Buddha. It is interesting to note that his main task was the taming of local demons that are embodied in the natural forces, through religious practices and meditation techniques. Padmasambhava is also known as Guru Rimpoche (*Precious teacher*).

<sup>4</sup> Literally - *The School of Oral Tradition*, which passes on the precepts from teacher to student. The major names associated with this school are Naropa, Marpa Lodzava and Milarepa.

<sup>5</sup> A main school of Tibetan Buddhism. The name comes from the monastery Sakya (lit. *Gray land*) and the figure of Sakya Pandita - outstanding scientist both in the secular and the religious sciences. And most of all, translator of Sanskrit, known not only in Tibet but also in India and Mongolia. The school seeks to systematize tantra literature, but also addresses the problems of Buddhist logic.

<sup>6</sup> Literally, School of the Virtuous - founded last in Tibet. It is of crucial importance for compliance with the rules by the monks, and for the main study of authoritative texts. It is leading in Dalai Lamas' institution.

<sup>7</sup> From Tibetan, "*I call, recite.*" – an umbrella term which comprises of the different religious trends in Tibet before the introduction of Buddhism.

The main objective of Tibetan Buddhism is also “to calm the anxiety and suffering, which are the characteristics of human dissatisfaction” (Rimpoche, 2015:13). In Buddhism the universe and the creatures that inhabit it are called *The World* (skt. *loka*), known in Tibetan canon with the name *Explanations for the world* (tib. “*Jig rten bstan pa*”). This world, however, is divided into three (skt. *triloka*), in which kalachakra is performed, or the cycle of samsara. It features:

1. *The World of Desires* (skt. *kāmaloka*), which is comprised of the six kingdoms of the inhabitants of hell, the hungry ghosts, the animals, the humans, the demigods and the gods.
2. *The World of Shapes* (skt. *rūpaloka*) is inhabited by the gods residing in the so called „*Dhyāna*<sup>8</sup> heavens” or “*the paradise dimension of meditation*”.
3. *The Shapeless World* (skt. *arūpaloka*) is purely a spiritual dimension, whose inhabitants do not have a physical form.

The highest and most secure way to achieve enlightenment is to follow the *Great Perfection* – a compendium of teachings and meditation practices which are intended to help the practitioner achieve the natural state of their mind, to discover its true nature. The teaching of emptiness (skt. *śūnyatā*) is also fundamental. Its realization is comparable to the realization of Buddha. Due to ignorance, objects can be seen as existing, regardless of causes and conditions, without them being able to be perceived in their true nature – as inherently empty and as a magical manifestation. Vajrayāna Buddhism emphasizes the same idea, but in a different way. In the finishing stages of tantric practice a kind of merge is done with the illusory body of a particular deity (skt. *māyādeha*), which is similar to a magical illusion. According to the general Buddhist perspective, there is nothing in life that is not an illusion. Passion is all

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<sup>8</sup> State of perfect equanimity and awareness.

that associates or connects individuals with the samsaric (earthly) world of suffering. It supposedly has value, but it is in fact an illusion, because it detains the individual in the process of gaining karma and ensures the wrong attitude toward the world. According to Vajrayāna, however, full enlightenment or the state of Buddha is possible to achieve in one lifetime.

It is becoming clear that Tibetan Buddhism is a complex religious system with many nuances and specifics. It could not be separated from the Tibetan culture, including contemporary culture (and cinematography). Naturally, not every film coming from an area where Tibetan Buddhism is widespread is a Buddhist film, and some films are less focused on the interpretation of the teaching than others. As John Whalen-Bridge points out, three factors must be taken into account:

When defining a Buddhist film: (1) representation, (2) intention, and (3) interpretation. ‘Representation’ simply means that films portraying Buddhist characters, communities, practices, and visual markers (such as temples or sand paintings) in a prominent way are likely candidates. Representation involves not only visual imagery but also sound, including dialogue, voice-over language, and music from within or outside the story-world. /.../ some movies never mention Buddhism and yet are organized around plots or themes that appear, at least to some viewers, to connect with Buddhism in a more than incidental way. ‘Intention’ refers to the viewer’s inference from the cinematic themes or dialogue that the film is about Buddhism, albeit indirectly (2014: 46).

In the context of film art, the interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism can be analyzed through several methodological approaches. One is Buddha-oriented; related to the strict articulation of specific categories, terms and concepts of Buddhist teachings, closely



incorporated in the film narrative. Another is philosophical; related to the development of the logos (theosophy) and largely determining the characters' worldview and the environment in which they develop their personalities. One can also approach the films as cultural, aesthetic artifacts as film researcher and critic; they are related to the Asian cinema field (and specific film artifacts) which are connected in a stylistic unity. One can suggest an interpretation of the main traditional aesthetic and ethical categories that occur in Asian cinema, which are linked with the aesthetic parameters of the cinematograph itself. Cinema is also linked with traditional arts and with religious-philosophical traditions. Combining various approaches in different ratios (in accordance with the research purposes and approach) help us to analyze films of a wider range of audiences. This is particularly important when the object of research is connected to the East - often perceived as foreign, different, even exotic and more spiritual compared to the West. As Michele Desmarais points out:

The presentation of Buddhism in film has changed over the last seventy years. Western filmmakers, entranced especially by the exoticism of Tibet and other Asian countries, presented a pristine, idealized view of Buddhism. This view largely persisted until Buddhist-born directors began presenting their own perspectives on Buddhism. Such perspectives humanize Buddhism and show how Buddhism tends to merge with other cultures and traditions as it moves from South Asia to East Asia and the West (Desmarais, 2009: 48).

In any case, dealing with a religious system and filmmaking requires an understanding of the canon in the synergy of cultural identity.

## The Avatars of Traditional Canon and their Film Modulations

In the context of cultural identity Tyulyaev (1978: 114) defines three types of canons that continue to exist in modern times:

- *Natural*: coming from and fixed in artistic rules. The canon is flexible, subject to change in the course of evolution of the arts.
- *Sign one*: established on the basis of life observations. There is no fixation in the artistic rules, but instead in conventional signs that convey messages.
- *Allegorical*: fully conditional, having pure symbolic load and specific meaning.

The canons of the second and third type do not evolve in such dynamic a degree as the canon of the first type, as they are related to iconicity and iconography. The nature of the film allows for it to work with all three canons, especially with the second and third, because of the strong figurative charge.

In the case of the articulation of Tibetan Buddhism in the films, the canon has a fundamental function for the various aspects of interpretation. Wolfgang Iser defines canonization as a process of selection of texts, which will become translated and will have copied authority (Iser, 2004: 35).

Precisely such pattern is observed in “*Milarepa*”<sup>9</sup> – (Bhutan/India, 2006, director Neten Chokling). The namtar (Milarepa’s hagiography, tib. *rnam-thar*) is perceived as unique and exceptional, but the artifact of its screening can be seen as a meta-text that complements,

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<sup>9</sup> Also called: 1) Great hermit, poet and yogi; 2) Thrice great; 3) Asia’s Socrates. According to Lama Kunga Rinpoche (look in Fedotoff, 2003: 22), Milarepa is endowed with three phenomenal things: **body** like Vajrapāni (one of the main bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism, The Lord of Secrets); **voice** similar to Mañjuśrī’s voice (bodhisattva of The Ultimate Wisdom); and **compassion** like Avalokiteśvara’s (A Great Bodhisattva, embodiment of the compassion of all Buddhas)

enhances and extends the familiar sacral story of the life of the Buddhist saint. The subject of interpretation in this variation forms the so-called by Iser *open canon*, because the namtar is upgraded in the reality of the cinema art. Milarepa's transference of authority in the course of interpretation of the reading of the canon is of particular importance, as it creates a translation for the community life. And from there – it asserts (once again) the validity of the originator (the canon) and its correct understanding. The validity itself in turn has an ambivalent nature because it exists due to the prestige of the text, but it also enriches the text's authority.

With regard to Milarepa's song biography, known as *Milagurbum*,<sup>10</sup> Alexander Fedotoff (2002a, 2003) clarifies that generally, namtars<sup>11</sup> in Tibetan religious literature can provide complete, but not the most reliable, information about the life of an individual, because they alternate between "the real and the surreal, and between the mystical and the mythical and true" (Fedotoff, 2002a:113). All versions of the saint's biography are always split into two parts: 1) The path of darkness; 2) The path of light; i.e. Milarepa's life before and after he accepts Buddhism. The Bhutanese film is conceived in the context of this canonical diptych. Undoubtedly the choice to do a kind of "film incarnation" of Milarepa is very important in the context of Tibetan Buddhism. Moreover, the historical figure of the saint represents "the mystical in Buddhism, which teaches that the world cannot be known. Buddhist mystics believe that rational considerations of the truth in the world are useless. This is why they deny the existence of literature and philosophical tradition and acknowledge only contemplation. You have to reach the truth alone through contemplation." (Fedotoff, 2003, p. 16).

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<sup>10</sup> Lir. *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* (tib. *Mi la ras pa'i mgur 'bum*)

<sup>11</sup> In fact, there is a huge corpus of namtars about Milarepa in Tibet. The famous one (written in 1488) is signed by an author with quite pictorial pseudonyms: "*The mad yogi from Tsang*" and "*The yogi who wanders in cemeteries*" - or Tsangnyön Heruka. The real name of the Buddhist monk is Sanggye Gyeltsen. (Look in Dilykova, 1985:148; Fedotoff, 2002a:114). "*Tsangnyön Heruka's representation of Milarepa has formed the yogin's enduring image in both Tibet and the West*" (Quintman, 2014:26).

Actually, Neten Chokling's film is a wonderful example of a synergistic combination of the three canons mentioned above – the natural, the sign one, and the allegorical. That is why the film will predominantly be discussed in the second part of the text. Furthermore, the central figure of Milarepa very successfully refers to interpretations in European (Western) art – in particular, in cinema (Liliana Cavani's film) and in literature (Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's narrative).

The source of the canon also is represented, but only in a partial interpretation of another film, *Silent Holy Stones* (China, 2005, director Pema Tseden).<sup>12</sup> On one hand there is a representation of a Buddhist community (sangha) and the strong relationship between teacher and young adherents, disciples. On the other hand, there is the recurring theme of theatre and film adaptation of the story of King Drime Kunden (tib. *Dri med Kun ldan*) – a narrative<sup>13</sup> deeply rooted in Tibetan Buddhism and cultural tradition. Overall the film examines the clash of traditional religiosity, globalization and westernization. It tells a story of a young child - monk, who spends several days with his family at home. The boy's journey brings to light the intertwined forces of consumerism that are a powerful presence even in a small Tibetan farming community. Therefore we can safely say that this film works with the sign canon, and partly with the allegorical canon.

In Pema Tseden's work, the construct is based on the model of Buddhist upbringing, obedience and education. The relationship between the mentor (the Buddhist family teacher is an institution in Tibet) and the novice can be active or passive, and this determines the nature of the Buddhist teaching, which flexibly adapts to the local conditions, in this case, Tibet. The

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<sup>12</sup> Pema Tseden (his Chinese name is Wan Ma Cai Dan), born in 1969 in Amdo, graduated from the Northwest University for Nationalities, Beijing Film Academy and Lu Xun College respectively. Chairman of the Directors Association of China, he is also a member of the Filmmakers and Literary Societies of China. Since 1991, he has published more than forty novels and short fiction works in both Tibetan and Chinese languages.

<sup>13</sup> This Buddhist story of the compassionate *King Drime Kunden*, who sacrifices everything, including his wife and children, and finally even his eyes, for the benefit of others. The story is founded by namtar and it is one of the eight national dramatic plays in the traditional musical drama of Tibet. Actually the play is an eponym of the Buddha's life. (Look more in Ahmed, 2006).

transmission of Buddhism is always associated with the specifics of the methodology and didactics, the discourse of creative freedom, the idea of equality and mutual love, the not-fear of death, development of permanent peace, and self-awareness of one's own responsibility for their actions (i.e., everyone forges their own karma). In Mahayana and in particular the Tibetan religious tradition, it is normal that in a family in which most children are boys, one of the brothers is to become a monk from young age and to be a kind of spiritual support for the family. This is how the model of spiritual harmony and reconsideration of the world is passed on through generations.

*Silent Holy Stones* very interestingly corresponds with the identical storyline of Thomas Balmès's documentary *Happiness* (2013, coproduction between Finland, France and Bhutan). In 1999, King Jigme Wangchuck approved the use of television and Internet throughout the largely undeveloped nation of Bhutan, assuring the masses that rapid development was synonymous with the "gross national happiness" of his country, a term he himself coined. Director Thomas Balmès's film *Happiness* begins at the end of this process as Laya, the last remaining village tucked away within the Himalayan kingdom, becomes enmeshed in roads, electricity, and cable television. Through the eyes of an eight-year-old monk impatient with prayer and eager to acquire a TV set, we witness the seeds of this seismic shift sprouting during a three-day journey from the outskirts of Laya to the thriving capital of Thimphu. It is here the young boy discovers cars, toilets, colourful club lights, and countless other elements of modern life for the first time.

The difference between the two films, however, is the critical attitude towards the violation of tradition - something that is absent in Thomas Balmès's work, but it's quite elegantly highlighted in Pema Tsenden's. Furthermore, in the Tibetan independent filmmaker's work the cultural and religious-philosophical tradition permeate the entire film, sometimes to a painfully large extent. Enlightenment here is a non-occurring, even cruel metaphor – the light

in the mind of novices suddenly comes not because of the teaching of the canon of Buddhism, but because of the light from the screen - the TV. This remediation, represented by the multiple viewing (to the extent of learning by heart) of "King Drime Kunden" actually leads to kitschisation of the canon. Even more so, it creates desires and passions, building on an illusion, and all of this is happening on the days of a sacred holiday – the Tibetan New Year. "The Illusionary pseudo-meditation" in front of the TV is more attractive than the true one that brings divinity. The little Alive Buddha (child-God incarnation) and the younger monks-novices are excited not so much by the "King Drime Kunden" narrative, but far more by the television news. Comically-sad situations arise from the incomprehensibility when upon seeing police action in America, the children comment, "Some Western people are playing." Or when they watch *Journey to the West*<sup>14</sup> episodes, "It's another thing to see it" (as opposed to read it), says the father of the young monk glued to the TV on New Year's Eve. Subculture also penetrates the Buddhist monastery – the students learning the religious teachings are happily singing a famous pop-singer's songs, and may be beginning to dream of his/her life—and not of the life of Buddha. All of this is in conflict with the classic presentation of this narrative in the canons of the traditional Tibetan musical drama *Lhamo*<sup>15</sup> – also a parallel leitmotif in *Silent Holy Stones*. Actually, the director will develop this element in his next piece of filmmaking – *The Search* (2009), a classic road movie. This film uses perfectly framed long takes, from a largely distant yet intimately engaged camera, to tell the story of a film crew driving around Tibet looking for

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<sup>14</sup> Published in 1590 during the Ming dynasty, authored by Wu Cheng'en. The fantasy satirical plot tells the story of the journey of a monk named Xuanzang, who takes the Silk Road to get to India and to bring Buddhist sutras. To this day the novel is still one of the most interpreted and adapted works of art, including adaptations for theatre, film, video and television.

<sup>15</sup> Tibetan musical drama (quite wrongly referred to with the European term "opera"), (i.e., *lhamo*), is one form of Tibetan traditional performance that includes elements of dance, operatic vocalizations, and epic scripts. The main repertoire is drawn from Buddhist stories and Tibetan folklore. *Lhamo* (lit. "elder sister, female celestial" or "sister goddess") originated in central Tibet. It may have been drawn from sources such as the ceremonial spectacles of the Tibetan imperial period (7th-9th century), local songs and dances and Indian Buddhist drama. However, the founding of a specific theatre tradition in Tibet is ascribed to the 15th-century yogi and scholar Thangtong Gyälpo.

actors to play in a filmed version of the traditional theatre play “King Drime Kunden.” It wraps this quest around two concurrent love stories, and the whole becomes a masterpiece of understated emotional longing set against an urgent desire to preserve a disappearing culture.

As Yu writes:

Pema Tsenden’s realism in the current phase of his filmmaking leans toward modern elements that are destabilizing to traditional practices of Buddhism among Tibetans. He invites his audience to see and touch the landscape of his homeland as if it were a changing body: its surface is undergoing an entire transformation. Buddhism in the midst of the changes becomes an object of a human search for the lost ‘soul’ of Tibet and is brought to Pema Tsenden’s cinematic foreground as a subject of moral contention on and off the screen, between his characters and among his audience. All happenings, and the feeling tone that fully saturates the characters’ inner and outer worlds, are enveloped in the forceful advancement of modern practices and values. The Tibetan landscape is no longer a composite of the Buddhist worldview and its practices. Modernization and its material consequences are seeping into the Tibetan Buddhist landscape and changing its appearance with a different set of spatial and psychological orders. (Yu, 2014: 134).

The whole movie *Silent Holy Stones* is full of articulated elements inherent to the sacred world of Tibetan Buddhism. We see a number of sutra texts and superstitions associated with deities like Yama/Yamaraja; Tara; the concept of dharma and karma, and so on in the film. The dialogue is colourful and constantly brings the teaching to the surface. But the emphasis that Pema Tsenden puts is still on the problem of change and replacement; on the dying of oral tradition; on commercialism; on the abandonment of traditional values which suddenly acquire

the status of mouldy and somewhat useless. What do we sacrifice when we modernize our world? What do we lose and what do we gain? What does it mean to be rich and successful – are we accumulating material or spiritual wealth? Where does the meaning of the age-old longing for pilgrimage to Lhasa go - to achieve enlightenment or to buy new electronic devices? The film engages in a criticism of the modernity (in the quasi-documentary style of Tseden) which eats away and alters the canon and the didactic tradition, and moves on to slowly assimilate the Tibetan national identity into the unifying globalization. If we go back to the interpretations of the canon defined by Tyulyaev, *Silent Holy Stones* is an example of recreating the *sign canon*: created on the grounds of life observations. There is no fixation in the artistic rules there, but instead in conventional signs that convey messages.

The interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism seems hiding in the subtext and has a meta-narrative function in the third film, *Dreaming Lhasa* (debut feature film, India, 2005, dir. Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam). Karma, a Tibetan filmmaker from New York, goes to Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama's exile headquarters in northern India, to make a documentary about former political prisoners who have escaped from Tibet. She wants to reconnect with her roots but is also escaping a deteriorating relationship back home. One of Karma's interviewees is Dhondup, an enigmatic ex-monk who has just escaped from Tibet. He confides in her that his real reason for coming to India is to fulfill his dying mother's last wish, to deliver a charm box to a long-missing resistance fighter. Karma finds herself unwittingly falling in love with Dhondup even as she is sucked into the passion of his quest, which becomes a journey into Tibet's fractured past and a voyage of self-discovery.

In fact here reigns the *allegorical canon* (again in Tyulyaev's terms), because the interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism is non-dominant but it creates a common frame of mind, and it sets the mood of the cultural identity; it's a basis and a background for the psychological characteristics and specifics of the characters' motivation.



*Dreaming Lhasa* is a remarkable debut, a great example of the so-called Hamid Naficy (2001) *accented cinema* - marking filmmaking in the diaspora and the work of filmmakers in exile.<sup>16</sup> Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam in a very balanced and elegant way intertwine the strong political messages with the categories of Tibetan Buddhism.

The film is full of authentic historical testimony of monks who had left their monasteries in the late 50s and late 80s of the twentieth century to protest actively against the Chinese occupation. Because of the demonstrations, many of them were imprisoned and tortured. Others lost their lives. Others had managed to survive and to continue their illegal activities for the independence of Tibet in India (in the communities in Dharamsala, Delhi, Jaipur, the Tibetan monasteries in Clement Town, etc.). This typology of characters is also transferred to the fictionalized characters – the central of which is one of the old rebel monks from the resistance named Loga. In fact, if we go back to the plot of *Dreaming Lhasa* the documentary filmmaker Karma decides to help Dhondup, who must fulfill the legacy of his deceased mother. Before she died, the old woman had left Dhondup a typical Tibetan charm-box (tib.*ga`u*). The relic belongs to the monk Loga, whom Karma and Dhondup are searching for throughout the film. In the end, when they find the elderly monk, now a hermit in a remote area of northern India, Dhondup finds out that the man is his real father.

Tibet, and Lhasa in particular, become a painful metaphor of the impossible physical return, and also a metaphor of the possible and constant homecoming on the eternal paths of the spiritual. Faith, in every sense of the word, is the umbilical cord that connects the characters with the ancient Tibetan life – the way that it was, that it is, and that it could be. The force of attraction of Lhasa is present in the minds and the imagination of everyone. It is no accident

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<sup>16</sup> That concept of accent cinema has many forms marking the transnational practices of cultural hybridity: *intercultural cinema*, *ethnic cinema*, *immigrant cinema (migrant cinema)*, *cinema of the diaspora*. (For more details see Naficy, 2001). As Mara Matta (2009: 34) also notes on the characteristics of Tibetan cinema in exile, "Films are a way to understand and overcome the drama of exilic life. Far from looking back with nostalgia to a remote past and a remote land, Tibetan filmmakers are using their imagination and creativity to cope with frustration and displacement. With the sense of absurdity which grips their lives."

that the director Karma who had never been to Tibet because she was born and raised in America, says in the film, "sometimes, I don't know where I am...it's like I'm living, breathing, dreaming Lhasa."

Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam's film is interesting and interpreted extensively in texts by Galván-Álvarez (2011) and Matta (2009) through the vectors of literary heritage (Tenzin Tsundue's poetry) and the theoretical views of leading authors such as Arjun Appadurai, Wimal Dissanayake, and Benedict Anderson. However, I would emphasize the interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism in *Dreaming Lhasa*.

Human existence, according to the teaching, is divided into four continuously interlinked realities: 1) life; 2) dying and death; 3) after death; 4) rebirth. These four realities are known as *bardo*<sup>17</sup> - respectively the "natural" bardo of this life, the "painful" bardo of dying, "the luminous" bardo of dharma, and the "Karmic bardo" of the creation. Each reality provides unlimited opportunities for release, and everything we do during those opportunities has long-lasting consequences. Tibetan Buddhism postulates that everything we do in life will affect what we become after death. The bardo of life and death bring pain, but must be accepted as is, because they offer an invaluable gift – the ability to discover what is beyond the sorrow. Thanks to the spiritual practice, the compassion, and the achievement of enlightenment, the followers of Tibetan Buddhism can go beyond grief and pain.

These realities, however, are disrupted in the life of the monks - various characters from *Dreaming Lhasa*. The Wheel of Kalachakra spins too fast, almost as if it starts skidding, because it had been spinning for too long around the axis of samsara. They "take a sip" from one of the three poisons according to the Tibetan teaching: *anger* (tib. *zhe sdang*, sanskrit - *dvésa*), which prevents people from realizing their Buddha nature. Also the ancient Buddhist

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<sup>17</sup> Lit. *In-between two states, two positions*. In the theosophy of Tibetan Buddhism it is most often used in terms of the wandering between physical death and the next reincarnation – it is described in the Tibetan "*Book of the Dead*." There is also *Bardo of conception*, *Bardo of sleep*, and *Bardo of mental concentration*.

concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence)<sup>18</sup> is injured in the film. How can a devoted monk become an assassin who utters a mantra<sup>19</sup> while taking somebody's life?

Some of the monks (like Dhondup) cross from the religious life to the secular one, and remain there forever accepting their karma. Others, like Loga, return to religious retreat in order to clean up at least a little their karmic accumulations, and to get beyond the pain and sorrow through enlightenment.

### **Towards Bhutanese cinema and the Cross-cultural incarnation of Milarepa**

Bhutan annually produces between 20-30 films.<sup>20</sup> Another intriguing fact is that this very young Bhutanese film art has its own leading directors who manage to combine the calling of the profession with their spiritual destiny of lamas who've undergone their spiritual development in Tibet.

The first national film appeared in 1989: *Gasa lamai singye*, by Ugyen Wangdi, based on an old Bhutanese ballad.<sup>21</sup> In 1999, *The Cup* ("Phörpa") was released, by lama Khyentse Norbu.<sup>22</sup> It is a charming fairytale of a young Tibetan monk passionate for football and dreaming to play in the qualifiers for the World Cup. In 2003 the same director shoots

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<sup>18</sup> An interesting point of view on this issue gives the expert of Tibetan history and Tibetan-Chinese relation Elliot Sperling (2001).

<sup>19</sup> Concretely, the cited mantra is "*Om mani padme hūm.*"

<sup>20</sup> Data provided by the Motion Picture Association of Bhutan.

<sup>21</sup> The girl Galem and the man Singye were true lovers, but evil people came in between. The girl died when he was away to Gasa to serve the Lama of Gasa. Upon hearing the news, he came running from Gasa and what he saw he couldn't bear. He saw the funeral pyre of the girl and people were unable to burn it. Singye couldn't bear the loss of his love and he jumped into the pyre, where in an instant the fire gutted up furious and the lovers united upon death. This is the girl's house that remains today and the story is famously known as Gasa Lamai Singye.

<sup>22</sup> The director is connected to cinema also through Bernardo Bertolucci and his film *Little Buddha*, for which Norbu was a consultant on the specifics of Buddhism. In 2000 the Tibetan lama was inspired by Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* and Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Seven years in Tibet*, and decided to make his own film about the life in Tibet and its religion.

*Travellers and Magicians*. The plot of the film masterfully combines the folklore and mystical tradition of Bhutan (largely identical to the Tibetan's) with the main character, Dondup's, desire to escape to the American Dream and the modern, western lifestyle. *Travellers and Magicians* is one of the most popular titles representing Bhutan in front of the film world.

In 2006 the Bhutanese film industry produced two works imbued with mysticism. One of them is called *49th Day* by Namgay Retty, and it tells the story of a woman travelling from the countryside to the capital Thimphu to seek her missing daughter. Along the way, however, the mother has an accident and dies. Her spirit still roams restless looking for the young girl, who is hurt and offended by her former husband and his new sweetheart. Only through the spirit of the deceased, the living can understand the truth about life and what exactly happened. If a connection is established between the inhabitants of the earth and the afterlife, then the spirit of the mother will find peace and all the Bhutanese traditional funeral rites could be performed. The second film permeated with mysticism was released in 2006, *Milarepa* by Neten Chokling. For the viewers who closely follow the development of Asian cinema, and in particular the emerging Bhutanese cinematography, the name of this director is not entirely unfamiliar. In the aforementioned *The Cup* by Lama Khyentse Norbu, Neten Chokling was the lead actor, and in *Travellers and Magicians*, Chokling is an assistant director, who also has a bit part role and even performs some of the stunts. As part of the film diptych (the sequel was scheduled to appear on screens by the end of 2009, but it was never shot), the first part of *Milarepa* focuses on the samsaric life of Thöpaga<sup>23</sup> – a demonic magician seeking satisfaction, punishment and justice through uncompromising vengeance.

In 1973 the Italian director Liliana Cavani offered a free interpretation with references to modernity in her film *Milarepa* (Cavani and Moscati, 1974). Although she was far more

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<sup>23</sup> Actually, Milarepa's full name, given to him at birth, is *Mila Thöpaga* – tib. *Thos-pa-dga'*, which means „*Mila, the pleasant to the ear*“. „*Mila*“ on its own means „*human*“. And it is only later when he becomes a hermit that he gets his name Milarepa - "*Mila, the one with the coarse garment*".

popular with her film *The Night Porter (Il portiere di notte*; 1974, starring Dirk Bogarde and Charlotte Rampling), cinema historians assess her *Milarepa* as a successful continuation of the geometric philosophical tradition in Italian cinema whose dominant emanation is evident in the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini.<sup>24</sup> However, her work is rarely screened and commented on today. Another interesting interpretation of the life of the Tibetan yogi is Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's work, *Milarepa* (1997). The writer often expresses the interesting thought, "Cinema does not like words, and even less – Language," and his books<sup>25</sup> are abundant with elegant, philosophical parable-like language. The text on *Milarepa*, like Cavani's film, is a jump into the recesses of time - the world here and now, and the world of *Milarepa*, which come together into one whole to accommodate Simon/Swastika's monologue (*Schmitt's* main character). Simon is a contemporary Parisian who, at first in his dreams, and later in his psychological world, portrays a man named Swastika. It becomes clear in the beginning of the story that he is *Milarepa's* uncle-villain, who has to tell the story of his nephew 100 thousand times<sup>26</sup> in order for his criminal soul to find peace.

The Bhutanese director and Tibetan lama Neten Chokling has repeatedly said that reading the story of Milarepa is always an inspiring occupation:

Every time I read Milarepa's story I find it very inspiring. There's much to learn from his story, what he goes through, where he comes to. Milarepa's life is perhaps a Buddhist version of the traditional "rags to riches" fable, except in this case the "rags" are the unfortunate circumstances, misdeeds, and negative actions Milarepa accumulates early in life. And the "riches" are his coming to the path and attainment of

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<sup>24</sup> According to Pasolini's essay, which appears in *Cinema Nuovo* magazine; the so called geometry (visual geometry) summarizes all possible viewpoints on life (Pasolini, 1974)

<sup>25</sup> *Mr. Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Koran* [2001, original French title *Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran*, 2001; *Oscar and the Lady in Pink* [2002, original French title *Oscar et la dame rose*].

<sup>26</sup> Direct reference to *Milagurbum (A Hundred Thousand Songs)* by Milarepa.

enlightenment. His story shows that the path to enlightenment is accessible to all and can be anyone's aspiration and realization. As he says, "Any ordinary man can persevere as I have done! I believe making a film about the life of such a person as Milarepa has meaning just in itself. But filmmaking is also hard work." (Rinpoche, 2006).

The Bhutanese film *Milarepa* is stylistically very close to the vision and the aesthetic of the Indian film *Samsara* by Pan Nalin, shot by the acclaimed Bulgarian cameraman Rally Ralchev. Neten Chokling transforms the unique Tibetan landscape into a projection of the psycho-physical conflict raging in the soul of Thöpagä (Milarepa). Although this cinematic work doesn't feature any professional actors, this fact does not have a negative effect at all. We can safely say that the actors's performances are characterized by a high level of nonchalance, ease and imagery in the use of interpretive techniques. There is no sign of over-performing - on the contrary, an expressive simplicity is the main characteristic of the acting, which adds an extra sense of depth in the internal and external conflicts within the film. The character of Milarepa (Thöpagä) himself is depicted as an ordinary man torn by passion for revenge, lack of satisfaction, fear of groundless actions, and the feeling of self-destruction. The film has very successfully used oneiric ellipses of the main character, combined with hallucinations. Thus, Milarepa often hears through the "ears" of his conscience and his internal intuitive consciousness the consequences of his magic acts - the screams and cries of the people, the echo of the destructive power, the ultimately futile energy harnessed in the devastating cavalry of revenge at all costs. One of the most powerful scenes in the Bhutanese film is precisely when Milarepa (Thöpagä) climbs on a rocky hill and sends, through magic, a devastating storm over the village. The only corrective of the deed are the bitter tears in the eyes of an old man, who is by chance sheltered in the rocks.

Here, a parallel can be drawn between Milarepa and an analogous person from Orthodox Christianity; Saint Cyprian (who was also a sinister warlock before accepting God's faith and relinquishing his magical powers):

*... because I too, O God, kept the clouds from raining,  
Tied the ground so it couldn't bear fruit,  
The vines were not leafing, the flocks gave no milk,  
I made it so that men would not join with their wives and they would not become  
mothers,  
Brothers would not see each other, families would separate,  
I made winter be summer and summer be winter.  
Everything bad that I could do, I did...<sup>27</sup>*

While Neten Chokling diligently follows the structure of Milarepa's biography in the first part of the film diptych, the Western writers-interpreters of the Tibetan hagiography insert in it a meta-text intertwined with modernity.

The protagonist in Liliana Cavani's film is Prof. Bennet, who suffers a traffic accident. Somewhere between life and death his student Leo appears and translates a text on the life of Milarepa. The two - Prof. Bennet and Leo - find themselves at the foot of the Himalayas. The imaginary trip suddenly turns into a journey to themselves. Leo assumes the appearance of Milarepa, and, instigated by his teacher, begins to tell the story of the Tibetan sage. Bennett assumes the appearance of Marpa (Milarepa's guru). The three stages of the life of Milarepa intertwine with the actual, modern biographies of the student and the professor: the black magic

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<sup>27</sup> From the orthodox prayer to St. Cyprian.

Retrieved from: [http://www.pravoslavieto.com/molitvoslov/molitvi/sv\\_Kiprian.htm](http://www.pravoslavieto.com/molitvoslov/molitvi/sv_Kiprian.htm)

(represented as well as the relationship between Leo and his mother), the white magic (the change under the influence of Bennet/Marpa) and the transformation (the catastrophe as reaching absolute detachment from material reality).

In interviews and comments about film, the Italian director has repeatedly said that she has attempted a Jungian interpretation of *Milarepa* to crystallize the global and universal message of the sage's life. Namely, the idea of liberation of the soul, which passes through all cultures according to her, including the Italian one:

The film tells the story of a man and a boy who identify with/through the story of Milarepa. To travel only with thoughts is an imaginary adventure. Leo and Bennet travel only through the images and quotes from the sage's life, which intertwine in complex reconstructions of what is happening today. The line between real and imaginary is sometimes lost to the viewer so that they can take in the meaning of the film as emotionally as possible. My *Milarepa* is a very personal film: this is my trip from one culture to another, organized so that I can take what I want (Cavani and Moscati, 1974).

When the Italian interpretation of the Tibetan hagiography was released, the film critics were fascinated by Cavani's work. While emphasizing that one Italian can hardly understand the true Tibet, in the complex imaging environment of *Milarepa* Cavani manages to present Tibet exactly not as a place of reality, but as a place of the soul.

Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's *Milarepa* is probably the most didactic work, if we use this criterion to compare it with Neten Chokling's and Liliana Cavani's films; curiously, the most devoid of didacticism is the Bhutanese movie. The text is also monologue and parable-like, and the enlightening elements intensify increasingly in the course of the plot to such an extent



that the image of Simon (the contemporary Parisian) is gradually fading after its merge with Swastika's image, so that it can eventually elegantly and imperceptibly become the image of Milarepa. Schmitt actually creates a perfect characters triptych, without confusing the reader and instead actually making them more deeply fascinated with the spiral of life and the philosophical message. And despite the fact that Schmitt has based the story on a Tibetan namtar, he skilfully weaves a web of invisible threads that capture Buddhism in its entirety.

It is exactly in the French author's work that we find the vivid uniting link between the three manifestations of Milarepa in the context of this comparison, namely; dreams, visions and darshanas.<sup>28</sup> They are everywhere and they are crucial to Schmitt, Cavani, and of course, Neten Chokling. The text of the French author itself begins the story like this: "It all started with a dream..." (Schmitt, 1997: 1) and continues after a few paragraphs with "The dream was slow. But the dream returned. Where do dreams come from? And why did this dream in particular fall upon me?" (Schmitt, 1997: 6). Introducing unobtrusively a whiff of the didactic, the author continues, "What door did my dream open?" (Schmitt, 1997: 7); later, when merging two of his main characters: "Now I got used to being two people at the same time, Simon and Swastika, as I got used to living two lives – this, with a short black coffee on the marble table, and that, to which deep sleep was leading me now" (Schmitt, 1997: 17), and finally, finishing the text with, "Is tonight the hundred-thousandth time? /.../ According to the prophecy, I will find out after the night falls. Darkness." (Schmitt, 1997: 54).

The interpretations of Tibetan Buddhism on screen inspire and could lead us to more rich analyses in the context of dialogue between East and West, East and East. The process of identifying and decoding the signs and meanings of Tibetan religion and culture, and its interpretation in the various cinema's fields is certainly provocative. The expression, the content and the message of the film, can be likened (if we follow again Lotman, 1990:336) not

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<sup>28</sup> Sanskrit *darśana* - an auspicious sight, a vision, apparition, or glimpse in theophany.

to a *note* (first type message), but to a *cloth* (second type message); to a *cloth with a knot*, tied to help us remember something. Something very important and universal – that all human beings are equal before the Divinity.

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