Time-images in Khyentse Norbu's *Travellers and Magicians* (2003): the possibility of critical Buddhist cinema

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Like many other critical Third World films, Khyentse Norbu's *Travellers and Magicians* (2003) is orientated less around meeting Hollywood entertainment standards, and more around a neorealist reflection upon the socio-cultural and politico-economic changes that have occurred, within traditional society, as a consequence of globalisation. In this regard, *Travellers and Magicians* takes as its focal point the confrontation between traditional Bhutanese culture and modernity. However, not only is the neorealist relationship between Khyentse Norbu's film and other similarly orientated Third World films obscured by the exclusive evaluation of the former against standard Hollywood fare. In addition, such an evaluative approach also eclipses the manner in which *Travellers and Magicians* advances beyond its Third World counterparts, through its creative elaboration upon the neorealist formula, via the inclusion of a series of complex time-images within its narrative. Indeed, through this, Khyentse Norbu's film does more than simply reflect critically upon the changes currently taking place within traditional Bhutanese society as a result of globalisation. That is, via its thematization of the actual-virtual processes through which subjectivity is constituted, in relation to both simple stories and the multi-dimensional mass media, *Travellers and Magicians* also opens up the possibility of critical Buddhist cinema. In other words, cinema which serves a critical social function, through its representation of subjectivity as a media construct that can be de-constructed, as it were, via both a growing sensitivity to the subtle processes of such construction, and a corresponding diminishment of the compulsion to unwittingly submit to them. In effect, this article is orientated around drawing such features of Khyentse Norbu's film into conspicuousness, in the interest of considering the (Buddhist) cinematic possibilities that it thereby opens up.
Key words: neorealism, movement-image, time-image, Buddhism, 'any-space-whatever'

Voorstellings van tyd in Khyentse Norbu se *Travellers and Magicians* (2003): Die moontlikheid van kritiese Boeddhistiese film
Soos talle ander kritiese Derde Wêreld films is Khyentse Norbu se *Travellers and Magicians* (2003) nie primêr op die bereiking van Hollywood se vermaaklikheidstandaarde gerig nie; dit bied eerder 'n neo-realistiese refleksie oor die sosio-kulturele en polities-ekonomiese veranderinge wat as gevolg van globalisering in tradisionele samelewings plaasgevind het. In hierdie opsig fokus *Travellers and Magicians* op die konfrontasie tussen tradisionele Bhoetanese kultuur en moderniteit. Die neo-realistiese verhouding tussen Khyentse Norbu se film en ander soortgelyk-georiënteerde Derde Wêreld films is egter nie al wat versluier word deur dit uitsluitlik aan die gewone Hollywood-produkte te meet nie; inteendeel, so 'n beoordeling versluier ook die wyse waarop *Travellers and Magicians* met die insluiting van 'n reeks komplekse voorstellings van tyd in sy eie narratief skeppend op die neo-realistiese formule uitbrei, en sodoende verder as sy Derde Wêreld eweknieë beweeg. Daardeur gaan Khyentse Norbu se film verder as om bloot krities oor die veranderinge wat huidiglik in die Bhoetanese samelewing as gevolg van globalisering plaasvind, te reflekteer. Met ander woorde, met die tematisering van die werklik-virtuele prosesse waardeur subjektiwiteit in verhouding tot sowel eenvoudige verhale as die multi-dimensionele media gekonstitueer word, open *Travellers and Magicians* ook die moontlikheid van kritiese Boeddhistiese film – dit wil sê: film wat deur sy voorstelling van subjektiwiteit as 'n media-konstruk as't ware 'n kritiese sosiale funksie verrig met die gepaardgaande toenemende sensitiwiteit vir die subtiele prosesse van sodanige konstruksie, asook 'n ooreenstemmende vermindering van die dwangmatige onderwerping daaraan. Hierdie artikel bring sodanige kenmerke van Khyente Norbu se film na vore met die oog op die oorweging van die (Boeddhistiese) kinematiese moontlikhede wat dit open.
Sleutelwoorde: neo-realisme, bewegingsvoorstelling, tydsvoorstelling, Boeddhisme, 'willekeurige ruimte'

The post-1945 crisis of the action-image, detailed by Gilles Deleuze in his 1983 work *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, is not just a matter of film history, because Third World cinema currently finds itself in an analogous predicament. That is, just as Europe once found itself unable to respond decisively to the traumatic changes ushered in by the Second World War, so too, much of the Third World now finds itself unable to respond decisively to the rapid changes brought about by globalisation. As such, it comes as no surprise that significant aspects of Italian neorealism – which comprised the most succinct cinematic expression of the above paralysis on the part of Europe – have been creatively appropriated by Third World directors, to express

their comparable situation. Arguably, Khyentse Norbu's film *Travellers and Magicians* (2003) is a good case in point, not only because of its thematization of the recent confrontation between traditional Bhutanese culture and modernity – which arose as a consequence of globalisation – but also because of its highly creative appropriation of (and elaboration upon) the neorealist formula. Indeed, with regard to the latter, it has not only effectively raised the bar within the ambit of Third World cinema, on account of the incorporation of a series of complex time-images within its narrative, but has also thereby opened up the possibility of Buddhist cinema. That is, cinema which serves a critical social function, through its representation of subjectivity as a media construct that can be de-constructed, as it were, via both a growing sensitivity to the subtle processes of such construction, and a corresponding diminishment of the compulsion to unwittingly submit to them. In the interest of examining the above, in what follows, Deleuze's explanation of how the crisis of the action-image is expressed through Italian neorealism will be discussed, alongside Wolfgang Sachs's perspective on the crisis currently facing the Third World as a consequence of globalisation. Next, the manner in which Third World directors – in South America, Africa and India – have creatively appropriated the neorealist formula, to express their varied experiences of globalisation, will be elaborated upon. Then, after a brief overview of the history of Bhutan and its relationship with the rest of the world, the way in which recent development initiatives within this country are represented – via a neorealist lens – in *Travellers and Magicians*, will be investigated. Finally, the time-images within the narrative of Khyentse Norbu's film will be explored as critical features that may yet open up a new form of (Buddhist) cinema.

Deleuze and the crisis of the action-image

To begin with, as Deleuze explains in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, the action-image found in cinema prior to the Second World War, which assumed either a large or a small form, communicated a belief in the possibility of effective agency. This is because, while in terms of the large form, "the milieu and its forces…act on the character, throw him a challenge, and…[t]he character reacts in his turn…to modify the milieu" (Deleuze 1996: 141), in terms of the small form, "it is the action which discloses the situation [and]…which triggers off a new action" (Deleuze 1996: 160). However, after the war, the belief in such effective agency was severely undermined, and replaced by an acute lack of direction and a chronic sense of indeterminacy. This was not only a consequence of the devastation caused by the war, but also – in the wake of the demagogues who had helped precipitate the war – the result of growing doubt over the predictability of any grand politico-economic or socio-cultural design, no matter how benign it initially seemed. In short, while the large form of the action-image became suspect, as "there was no globalizing situation which was able to concentrate itself in a decisive action," the small form suffered a similar fate, as "there was no preformed action whose consequences on a situation could be foreseen" (Deleuze 1996: 205-206). For Deleuze, the most salient manifestation of this crisis of the action-image occurred in Italian neorealism.[1] This form of cinema, via its focus on such things as helplessness, clumsiness, and abortive efforts at restitution – all of which took place in 'any-space-whatever'[2] – declared the "reign of clichés, both internally and externally, in people's heads and hearts as much as in the whole of space" (Deleuze 1996: 212). That is, during this time, the broad vision and goal orientated direction of pre-war cinematic narratives became anachronisms, which were either rejected out of hand or partially paraded (in a highly self-conscious manner) as fragmented platitudes in which no-one still believed.[3] In many ways, the manner in which neorealist films mirrored the *zeitgeist* of the era was rendered all the more poignant as a consequence of the neorealist formula. Accordingly, the films were characterised by, among other things, "a preference for location filming, the use

of nonprofessional actors, the avoidance of ornamental *mise-en-scène*, a preference for natural light, a freely-moving documentary style of photography, a non-interventionist approach to film directing, and an avoidance of complex editing" (Shiel: 2006: 2).

Sachs and the crisis of development

Although the era of neorealism in Italy is generally considered to have ended around the middle of the 1950s,[4] neorealist cinema was arguably only in its *infancy* at this point. This was because, as the fortunes of Europe improved in the decades following the Second World War, the situation in much of the 'underdeveloped' and 'developing' world rapidly began to approximate the post-war Italian experience – in terms of poverty, homelessness and the fragmentation of social bonds through industrialisation, urbanisation, and migrant labour practices. In this regard, it should be remembered that, as Wolfgang Sachs points out in *Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development*, although the 'development idea' was only broached by president Harry Truman in 1949 – when he defined the greater part of the globe as 'underdeveloped' against the benchmark of 'development' epitomised by America – in the years that followed, his idea rapidly gained international credence. In effect, this precipitated immense development projects in Third World countries, which included "an unprecedented flowering of agencies and administrations…to address all aspects of life – to count, organize, mindlessly intervene and sacrifice, all in the name of 'development'" (Sachs 1999: 3, 6). However, although the accompanying industrialisation and urbanisation improved the lot of many, a great many more in the Third World became subject to displacement and destitution, such that poverty not only followed, but also grew exponentially, in the wake of development.[5] Yet, despite the obvious failure of the development idea, it "was repeatedly stretched until it included both the strategy that inflicted the injury and the strategy designed for therapy" (Sachs 1999: 33) – a practice which in many guises continues unabated to this day. As such, the gravitation of aspects of Third World cinema toward neorealism was, in a sense, over-determined. This is because, while the socio-cultural conditions in the Third World began to mirror the Italian post-war experience, Italian neorealist films – ironically through export under the auspices of politico-economic globalisation – reached Third World directors, and provided them with a model for the expression of their circumstances.

Italian neorealism and Third World cinema

This is, of course, not to say that Third World directors merely followed blindly in the footsteps of the Italian neorealist directors; on the contrary, the former critically and carefully appropriated aspects of the neorealist formula, rather than adopting it wholesale as dogma. To be sure, in Latin America, for example, an initial infatuation with Italian neorealism did exist, and impelled key literary figures (who would later become key cinematic figures) to travel to Rome for the purposes of studying at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC), and working on the sets of neorealist films. In this regard, Tomás F. Crowder-Taraborrelli's article "A Stonecutter's Passion: Latin American Reality and Cinematic Faith," neatly traces the initial paths of, among others, Argentine poet Fernando Birri and Colombian writer García Márquez. Both of them journeyed to Rome to immerse themselves in neorealism, after viewing such films in their home countries in the 1950s. However, importantly, while for Birri, Italian neorealism was attractive because it revealed the *underdevelopment* that was rife in a country that expounded the rhetoric of development, for Márquez, Italian neorealism served as a useful model upon which Latin American filmmakers could *build*, in their pursuit of self-representation in the wake of colonialism and imperialism (Crowder-Taraborrelli 2007: 128-131). Such critical and

careful appropriation allowed for an effective rearticulation of neorealism in Latin American cinema, in relation to the development idea and its problematic consequences – rather than in relation to the devastation of the Second World War, as was the case with Italian neorealism. In this regard, it must be remembered that, in Márquez's work, "modern development and expansion in Latin America always brings tragedy" (Crowder-Taraborrelli 2007: 128-131). A similar relationship existed between Brazilian cinema and neorealism. That is, as Antonio Traverso explains in "Migrations of Cinema: Italian Neorealism and Brazilian Cinema," the key figures of Cinema Nõvo, such as Pereira dos Santos and Glauber Rocha, *were* initially enamoured of Italian realism. However, it was ultimately *their* circumspect appropriation of the neorealist formula – in relation to Brazilian social circumstances – which served as inspiration for subsequent Brazilian directors (Traverso 2007: 172-176). As such, although it is certainly possible to compare recent Brazilian films such as Hector Babenco's *Pixote* (1980) to Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (1947), and for that matter Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund's *City of God* (2002) to Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1946), any simplistic reduction of the Brazilian films to their ostensible Italian neorealist 'essence' should be carefully avoided. This is because such a reductive approach would eclipse not only the unique social reality and cultural dynamics to which the Brazilian directors are responding, but also both the valuable idiosyncrasies of their cinematic contributions, and the ways in which these contributions are part of the legacy of Cinema Nõvo rather than Italian neorealism. For instance, it is clear that, in *Pixote* and *City of God*, the tragic figures are street children who find themselves surrounded by "the icons of third-world corporate capitalism and…an adult world so absorbed in itself that it has neither time nor compassion for the[m]" (Traverso 2007: 165).

In African cinema, although significant reflections of Italian neorealism do occur, it is more difficult to trace the path of such influence for a number of reasons. That is, a desire to break completely with European influence as they entered a new era of independence – which was aided by the absence of a language and cultural aspects that tied them inextricably to Europe – resulted in conspicuous silence, on the part of most African film directors, on the subject of their intellectual debt to Italian neorealism. As Rachel Gabara points out in "'A Poetics of Refusals': Neorealism from Italy to Africa," only two African film directors to date have explicitly connected their work to Italian neorealism. That is, while, on the one hand, the father of African cinema, Ousmane Sembène, was happy to explicitly "ally…himself with the neorealist project to 'excavate' an often unpleasant [social] reality" (Gabara 2007: 200-201) through film, on the other hand, the emerging director Mahamat Saleh Haroun – against the backdrop of his recent *Bye Bye Africa* (1999) – openly expressed his faith in the future of neorealism in Africa (Gabara 2007: 205). In addition, the silence of other African directors on this issue is rendered even more complicated by the possibility that the significant reflections of neorealism found in their films may well have derived from Latin American cinema, rather than directly from Italian neorealism. Understandably, Latin American cinema has been embraced more readily by African directors, both because it is a Third World cultural product and because many of its critical themes resonate with the immediate socio-cultural concerns of Africans, who find themselves in similar politico-economic situations. In short, "in a comparable postcolonial situation to that of Latin America but with independence a much more recent event, African filmmakers have until recently distanced themselves from any possible European influence" (Gabara 2007: 205-206). Arguably, the result of this has been a highly eclectic appropriation of, and elaboration upon, the neorealist formula within the African context, the direction and unique orientation of which – rather than its paternity – serve as rich areas of exploration and theorisation. In this regard, the manner in which Haroun's above mentioned *Bye Bye Africa* (1999) plays self-reflexively with an array of formal features against a neorealist backdrop, such that it defies attempts to define it under any one genre, is a good case in point.

In relation to Indian cinema, the question of the influence of Italian neorealism is, paradoxically, both easier and more difficult to answer. As Moinak Biswas argues in "In the Mirror of an Alternative Globalism: The Neorealist Encounter in India," on the one hand – unlike in Africa – the date of the Indian encounter with neorealism is clearly established as 1952, along with the venue, namely the International Film Festival, where several Italian neorealist films were screened. In addition, Indian directors at the time were far less hesitant than later African directors to express their interest in utilising the neorealist style in their own work (Biswas 2007: 72, 85). However, on the other hand, the above evidence is far from conclusive, because a range of other domestic factors also powerfully influenced the direction of Indian cinema. That is, not only did the orientation of the twentieth century Indian novel *already* resonate deeply with neorealist themes, but the crisis within the mainstream Indian 'studio *Social*' films – which called for a more neorealist orientation to address the poverty and political unrest of the 1940s – also predated the 1952 International Film festival (Biswas 2007: 75, 79, 82). As such, not only would it be very simplistic (and presumptuous) to consider neorealism in Indian cinema as a flame sparked solely by European genius. In addition – as with Latin American and African cinema – it would be counter-productive, insofar as such a reductive approach would stand to eclipse the nuances and idiosyncrasies of Indian neorealism, which derive from the many other domestic factors that also precipitated it and which continue to inform its growth. Arguably, the way in which the neorealist elements in Deepa Mehta's acclaimed trilogy – *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998), and *Water* (2005) – are complemented, in their critical address of key socio-cultural issues, by the other cinematic styles utilised alongside them, is indicative of the dynamism and exploratory nature of current Indian neorealism.[6]

Bhutan and Khyentse Norbu's *Travellers and Magicians*

From the above, it is clear that cinematic innovation in relation to neorealism is the rule rather than the exception in the Third World, and when one examines Khyentse Norbu's film *Travellers and Magicians*, it becomes equally clear that Bhutan's young cinema industry has taken up the challenge.[7] Indeed, the innovative aspects of Third World neorealism mentioned above all have their counterparts in *Travellers and Magicians*. That is, on the one hand, in a manner akin to Babenco's *Pixote* and Meirelles and Lund's *City of God*, the film contains a thematic reorientation of neorealism around issues relating to corporate capitalism and development. On the other hand, like Haroun's *Bye Bye Africa* and Mehta's *Fire/Earth/Water* trilogy, *Travellers and Magicians* exhibits the formal conjunction of neorealism with other cinematic styles. That Khyentse Norbu's film includes within its thematic ambit a deep concern with capitalism and consumerism – and the manner in which their embrace affects traditional culture – is entirely understandable, because this has become an issue of increasing controversy in Bhutan, as the country progressively opens up to the rest of the world. To be sure, Bhutan was never entirely the peaceful, isolated *Shangri-la* that it is often made out to have been by the contemporary mass media. Rather, as Bhutanese author and historian Tshering Tashi explains in *From Jesuits to Jetsetters: Bold Bhutan Beckons – Inhaling Gross National Happiness*, up until "the 17th century…Bhutan was still…in the dark ages. Most local leaders…used might and…[t]he universally understood language was fear" (Fischer & Tashi 2009: 27). Although the move toward greater unification and stability in the country began to gain momentum around this time, such transformation was concomitant with attempts on the part of Portuguese Jesuits to spiritually colonise the people of the territory. Subsequently, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Bhutan lost an array of border conflicts with the British in India and, although it remained free from the British colonial yoke, Bhutan was nevertheless subjected to the debilitating agreements forced upon it in terms of the corresponding treaties (Fischer & Tashi

2009: 14-20, 32-35). Moreover, this growing subjection did not end with the granting of Indian independence in 1947, because Jawaharlal Nehru visited Bhutan in 1958 and encouraged it to follow India's lead in the pursuit of development,[8] which it duly did (Fischer & Tashi 2009: 188-191). Of the many things that this entailed, four in particular are noteworthy: firstly, the construction of roads and highways;[9] secondly, the creation of a hydro-electric plant;[10] thirdly, the adoption of a modern economy;[11] and fourthly, the recent embrace of democracy in 2008.[12] However, this four-fold change had a devastating effect on traditional Bhutanese culture. That is, through the introduction of the above mentioned road networks, electricity, and consumerism, a rapid process of modernisation took place, such that, already in the early 1990s, it was clear that "Bhutan's true cultural uniqueness survive[d] in its dynamic form *only* in the rural areas" [my italics] (Dujardin 1994: 158). In turn, democracy in Bhutan was only achieved after the effective marginalisation of the Bhutanese-Nepalese as a political entity. In short, "feeling threatened by the Bhutanese-Nepalese minority…the Royal Government of Bhutan…declared a national cultural policy called *Driglam Namza*…in the 1980s…result[ing in]…the emigration, statelessness and refugee status of the Bhutanese-Nepalese" (Barman 2009: 57).

All four of the above issues, in different ways and to various degrees, are thematized in Khyentse Norbu's *Travellers and Magicians*, which follows quite strictly the neorealist formula discussed at the beginning of this article. Indeed, in the latter regard, *Travellers and Magicians* emerges as a Third World neorealist film not only because it was shot on location in Bhutan, and because the local non-professional actors/actresses who formed its cast portrayed characters similar to themselves – namely individuals grappling with their recent leap from pre-modernity into the post-modern global village. In addition, the film also emerges as neorealist both because of its rejection of ornamental *mise-en-scène* in favour of a focus on the far-flung rural area of Bhutan – which of necessity is captured using natural light – and because of its free-moving documentary style of cinematography, necessitated by the dominant theme of the narrative, namely the journey on foot of a group of people along a mountain road. In short, *Travellers and Magicians* tells the tale of a young Bhutanese official, Dondup Norbu (Tshewang Dendup), who is tired of his subordinate position within the local government structures of the village to which he has recently been assigned, and who wishes to journey to America, which he regards as the consumerist panacea for his discontent with the traditional culture of his homeland. However, he is held up by traditional cultural obligations and misses the bus to a neighbouring town, which functions as the only departure point for America. Forced to make the journey on foot and by hitch-hiking, he meets with other travellers and, through interaction with them, reflects on his decision to leave Bhutan. Importantly, the film ends on an indefinite note, without *any* indication of whether or not Dondup carries out his plan of travelling to America, with the consequence that – in true neorealist fashion – no decisive action permeates the text.

In relation to this neorealist orientation, the thematization within the narrative of *Travellers and Magicians* of the four above mentioned issues, namely the introduction into Bhutan of road networks, electricity, consumerism, and democracy, plays a crucial part in constituting the space of the narrative as an 'any-space-whatever.' As already discussed,[13] this key feature of neorealism derives from the way in which, "with the dissolution of the sensory-motor schema, space no longer presumes a predetermined action or movement and therefore becomes indefinite, ambiguous, and even contradictory" (Stubblefield 2007: 231). To begin with, the introduction of roads *for* automobiles into a domain that up until recently was primarily pre-modern, stands to significantly compromise the integrity of the traditional cultural sensory-motor schema of that domain. This is because, after acquaintance with such roads (and with what they both indicate about the world and bring), the inhabitants of rural spaces can neither continue to presume the ubiquitous and enduring validity of their cultural practices, nor undertake the predetermined activities or movements of traditional culture without growing self-consciousness and doubt

over their value. Moreover, in the film, the character of Dondup, the Bhutanese official, has travelled these roads from a modern city to his assignment in the village, and for him the road comprises a lifeline between the desperate obscurity of his present rural occupation, and the attractive lights of his future urban existence. Yet, as such, he unavoidably constitutes a cultural catalyst within his village, since no one can interact with him without detecting his profound discontent with the limitations of traditional, rural life – a discontent that is informed by an acquaintance with the dynamism of the city, which is in principle now accessible to everyone *because* of the roads. However, although the road provides Dondup with the means of escape, insofar as it is via such road networks that he both receives a letter confirming the possibility of his emigration to America, and travels to a neighbouring town from which to make his departure, as mentioned above, the film ends on an *indefinite* note in the middle of one such road. That is, it ends without giving any clear indication of whether or not Dondup actually leaves Bhutan. Indeed, the 'any-space-whatever' of the film is permeated not only by indefinite action in this sense, but also by associated *ambiguity*. In short, while Dondup's staid public kowtowing to the authority of his superior at work remains in tension with his dynamic private iconoclasm – which is reflected in his choice of consumerist home décor and clothing, made available via the roads – his personal rejection of traditional culture sits awkwardly with the public respect for tradition he exhibits toward his neighbour, even though the latter causes him to miss his bus. Similarly, his later relationship with the young female traveller of his group, Sonam (Sonam Lhamo), involves a series of awkward *contradictions*, as Dondup vacillates between pursuing his plan of leaving Bhutan for America, and returning to his village to remain with her. Arguably, the indeterminacy of all of the above is inextricably intertwined with the presence of the new roads, along which the characters' journey takes place, and which – insofar as they precipitate such indefiniteness, ambiguity and contradiction in the lives of the characters – situate the narrative of *Travellers and Magicians* in an 'any-space-whatever.'

Just as the roads shatter the integrity of the traditional cultural sensory-motor schema through the transformation of space, so the introduction of electricity does the same through the transformation of time. That is, although electricity makes possible Dondup's journey to America, this is conditional upon his compliance with (increasingly) intense time-scheduling. To a large extent, his initial failure to do so provides the basis of the narrative, insofar as his journey on foot and interaction with his fellow travellers occurs because he misses his bus. Similarly, his initial growing hurriedness, and corresponding frustration with obstacles to his progress, occur against the backdrop of this new form of pressurised time – a time with which his fellow travellers, by way of contrast, remain thoroughly unfamiliar. Arguably, the tension between them and Dondup in relation to this issue is a key indicator of a profound *indefiniteness* that pervades the narrative; an indefiniteness which renders its terrain an 'any-space-whatever.' This is further accentuated by Dondup himself, when he *contradicts* his earlier stance in relation to such pressurised time, by passing up some opportunities to make rapid progress to the neighbouring town, in favour of remaining by the side of the young female traveller of his group, Sonam, in whom he has taken an interest. However, this gesture notwithstanding, the narrative still ends with him again operating within the context of such pressurised time – albeit with *ambiguous* laughter – insofar as he finally accepts a lift and thereby leaves Sonam behind in favour of reaching his destination *on time*.

The consistency of the traditional cultural sensory-motor schema is also broken through the introduction of consumer items into the rural village, such as Dondup's radio/rock music cassettes, cigarettes, sneakers, and 'I Love NY' t-shirt. That is, not only does the level of Dondup's involvement with this Western style of music make it clear that he has identified completely with its cultural associations, to the point of being thoroughly possessed by them. In addition, the very way in which his radio brings to life such music in the heart of Bhutan

– music which was previously separated from the latter by thousands of kilometres – also has a destabilising effect on his domain. This is because, by definition, such music cannot remain a private affair, insofar as it resounds from his house to enter (and change) the public space. Similarly, Dondup's cigarette smoking must be understood within the Bhutanese cultural context, in terms of which tobacco has been vehemently condemned since the seventeenth century as something not only poisonously foreign but also dangerously profane. In fact, the controversy raging over cigarettes – the increased use of which appears to have followed the opening up of Bhutan – reached its apogee just after the release of *Travellers and Magicians*, when, "in 2005, Bhutan became the first non-smoking nation. On 17 December, 2004, sale of tobacco products was declared illegal…[and f]ollowing the ban, two months later on 22 February, smoking in public places was not allowed" (Fischer & Tashi 2009: 29). As such, the flare and exaggerated posturing with which Dondup smokes, rather than constituting the hallmark of mere self-indulgent pretentiousness, emerge as important components of an overt act of cultural resistance to both prevailing normativity and impending legislation. Hence, Dondup's enjoyment of both rock music and smoking renders the space he inhabits *indefinite*, insofar as it problematizes any clear demarcation between Bhutanese and Western culture. Analogously, the presence of sneakers within the rural domain of the village – which are worn not only by Dondup but also by several other members of the community, while they practice archery – imbues the latter activity with significant *ambiguity*. This is because sneakers constitute the tools of the new privatised sporting activities of late/advanced capitalism, which are indissociable from a focus on aggressive individualistic hyper-achievement and the endless pursuit of enhanced performance. As such, because the *ethos* attached to them is largely incompatible with the stylised and ritualistic aspects of the national Bhutanese sport of archery – aspects which bind it to the community – the introduction of sneakers into this cultural practice and domain makes the future trajectory of both significantly ambiguous. Indeed, this ambiguity is matched only by the *contradiction* reflected in Dondup's clothing. That is, beneath his traditional outfit or *gho* – which Bhutanese males are required by law to wear in public places – he wears an 'I Love NY' t-shirt, the practice of which constitutes him as a site of cultural contestation in an obvious way.

Finally, the introduction of democracy into Bhutan, perhaps more than anything else, has destroyed the sensory-motor schema of traditional Bhutanese life, insofar as it has reversed the movement toward greater unity and stability since the seventeenth century, through the exclusion of the Bhutanese-Nepalese, in the manner already described. That is, the simultaneity of their marginalisation and the drive toward the formation of a cohesive national culture, under the auspices of *Driglam Namza*, has created an ironic situation in Bhutan, in which "the violation of rights of citizenship…and [the] move towards democracy run parallel to each other" (Barman 2009: 57). Indeed, the position of the Bhutanese-Nepalese is not only rendered highly *indefinite* through this process, but also remains highly *ambiguous* because – their political marginalisation notwithstanding – the men and women are nevertheless still required by law to wear the national Bhutanese outfit; the *gho* and *kira*, respectively. As such, they are obliged to live in a perpetual state of *contradiction*, involving their concomitant inclusion within and exclusion from Bhutanese national identity. There is, admittedly, no overt thematization of this in Khyentse Norbu's *Travellers and Magicians*, which has instead been lauded by Siok Sian Dorji of Bhutan's daily news site, *Kuenselonline*, as the first Bhutanese feature film in the Dzongkha language featuring an all Bhutanese cast.[14] However, as Robert Stam and Louise Spence have so eloquently pointed out in "Colonialism, Racism and Representation: An Introduction," the complete absence from a film of an ethnic group otherwise common in the area in which the film is set, ironically, has the inverse effect of drawing them into greater conspicuousness (Stam & Spence 1983: 877-891). At least to a certain extent, this is true of *Travellers and Magicians*, and

the shadow of the indeterminacy of the Bhutanese-Nepalese in particular, and of the associated "negative impact on the nation's multi-ethnic and polyphonic composition" (Barman 2009: 62) in general, hangs over Khyentse Norbu's film in a way that, again, forces the narrative to play out in an 'any-space-whatever.'

Time-images in Khyentse Norbu's *Travellers and Magicians*

However, for the most part, critics of *Travellers and Magicians* rode rough-shod over the above neorealist subtleties, ignored the intricate ways in which they are linked with the socio-cultural and politico-economic situation in which Bhutan currently finds itself – a situation with strong parallels to the post-war Italian experience – and sought to evaluate the film solely against the entertainment benchmark of Hollywood cinema. From reviews of the film, it appears that, on the one hand, the simplicity of Khyentse Norbu's film did not sit well with many mainstream audiences who, schooled on a diet of action films, found the lack of substantial action in the narrative, and the plodding pace of Dondup's journey on foot toward an uncertain future, quite unpalatable. On the other hand, some audience members did concede – somewhat patronisingly – that the film was pleasantly light and entertaining because of this simplicity, and thus a relatively good 'early' product for a cinema industry still in its infancy. However, in doing so, the latter stance still implicitly endorsed the same Hollywood benchmark, insofar as it evaluated *Travellers and Magicians* more positively only because its simplicity was deemed consonant with the undemanding superficiality of clichéd Hollywood films – a consonance which Khyentse Norbu was moreover encouraged to pursue further in future. The result of this was not only the erroneous advancement, on the part of both sets of critics, of the rare footage of Bhutan's scenic splendour as a vindicating feature of the film, which might moreover encourage tourism – when in reality such scenes amount to the Bhutanese equivalent of the 'any-space-whatever' characteristic of neorealism. In addition, a further consequence was also the misapprehension of the film as a fable, despite significant evidence to the contrary. In short, the *fabula* of *Travellers and Magicians* – already mentioned – is radically interrupted by a number of devices, such as the use of a 'story within a story,' and the breaching of the parameters of these stories by characters that traverse the discursive divides between them in a highly self-reflexive manner.[15] The result is arguably a *sjužet* that, on account of its complexity, cannot be reduced to the level of a fable. [16] To be sure, like a fable, *Travellers and Magicians* has an ethical orientation of sorts, in its very broad recommendation to the Bhutanese to carefully consider all the new possibilities that are appearing before them, prior to undertaking any path of action. However, to reduce the film to this simple element is also to lose sight of its complex relationship with time – a relationship that springs, ironically, from its neorealist simplicity. To understand this complex relationship, and how it derives from neorealism, it is necessary, once more, to return to Deleuze's work on cinema.

In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Deleuze not only details how movement-images, particularly through variants of montage found in cinema before World War Two – in the films of directors such as Griffith, Eisenstein, Gance, and Murnau – give rise to indirect time-images, or representations of (historical) change through movement (Deleuze 1996: 29-55). In addition, he also goes on to elaborate upon how, beyond such montage, indirect time-images emerge similarly through the perception/affection/action-images of other forms of pre-war cinema. That is, while, via the focus of the camera – or point-of-view shot – the audience is able to see what the character sees (Deleuze 1996: 71-86), and while, through the close-up of a character's face the audience is able to see how he/she is affected by such perception (Deleuze 1996: 87-122), by following the character's subsequent actions the audience is able to see time, albeit indirectly, through his/her movements that usher in change (Deleuze 1996:

123-140, 141-177). To simplify things, in the above regard, the audience is able to see time *indirectly*, insofar as the latter action involves the *actualization* of the *virtual* processes that occurred during such perception and affection, but which remained largely hidden from the audience. For quite a long time this remained the case, because pre-war cinema privileged the representation of action over the thematization of the complex dynamics of such fleeting affection, the nuances of which are extraordinarily difficult to represent. Indeed, this is not least because such dynamics and nuances are necessarily related to a past that accumulates around, and remains contemporaneous with, the present – instead of drifting away into oblivion through forgetfulness and the passing of time. As Deleuze explains in *Bergsonism*, time is not simply something abstract – that is, something measurable (and calculable) in minutes and seconds – but rather the process of exchange between an *actual* present that constantly passes, and a *virtual* past that is always present, albeit at different levels of contraction, cohesiveness and intensity (Deleuze 1991: 57-60). As such, history is in a sense more substantial than the changing present in which we find ourselves, but it becomes so only insofar as its *virtuality* is drawn upon in relation to the *actuality* of the present, which both confronts us and requires us to act. However, not only is the cinematic representation of this tricky, but it also failed to receive priority in the pre-war era, dominated as it was by belief in the possibility of effective agency. Yet, Deleuze concludes *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* by advancing that the above related cinematic schema – which privileged the representation of action – was radically compromised by the shock and disillusionment which followed in the wake of the Second World War; and that the most salient expression of this occurred in Italian neorealism. That is, particularly (but not exclusively) within Italian neorealism, either the negative affection arising in response to perception of the surrounding devastation was too powerful to be processed into decisive action – such that it resulted in a paralysis of sorts. Or such perception and affection failed to translate into action because of profound doubt over the efficacy and viability of any strategic design – in the wake of the many broken promises and flawed visions of the demagogues who had helped precipitate the recent conflict. Accordingly, this "crisis of the action-image" gives rise to a "new kind of image[, through which]…the sensory-motor links tend to disappear, [and] a whole sensory-motor continuity which forms the essential nature of the action-image vanishes" (Deleuze 1996: 205-213).

As Deleuze explains further in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, this new image is the pure optical-sound image, and the associated "optical and sound situations of neo-realism contrast with the strong sensory-motor situations of traditional realism…[and] become…established in what we might call 'any-space-whatever'" (Deleuze 1995: 3, 5).[17] It is this shattered, indeterminate space, along with the corresponding inability of people to respond actively and decisively to the sights and sounds that they encounter therein, which open up the possibility of the *direct* time-image – rather than just an *indirect* perception of time through the action-image, as was previously the case. In sum, this involves the opening up of "a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent" (Deleuze 1995: 2), insofar as the emphasis now falls less on the agency represented in cinematic narratives, and more on the virtual/actual processes that give rise to such agency. However, this new form of cinema, involving the subtle perception of thought and time, does not involve a simplistic 'turning inward,' of the type that occurs in those cinematic narratives which feature 'recollection' sequences (mnemosigns) – also known as 'flashbacks' – or 'dream sequences' (onirosigns). This is because both such mnemosigns and onirosigns still form part of a sensory-motor circuit, insofar as one recollects in order to act, and dreams only to awaken to reality. In either case, the virtual (recollection/dream) is easily discernible from the actual (action/reality) (Deleuze 1995: 18, 44-67). The time-image, or the perception of thought and time, by way of contrast, occurs through the crystal image (hyalosign), in which the virtual image and the actual image coalesce, to the point of being indiscernible. To be sure, "the

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crystal-image…[i]s not time, but we see time in the crystal[-image,]…the perpetual foundation of time, non-chronological time[,]…the gushing of time as dividing in two[,]…the 'vanishing limit between the immediate past which is already no longer and the immediate future which is not yet'" (Deleuze 1995: 68-74, 81). Through such cinematic images and in relation to them 'thought' begins to take place, insofar as we begin to think ourselves anew as 'time-beings' and as 'beings-in-time' – and it is for their genetic capacity in this regard that such cinema remains so very valuable.

In many ways, the mirror image provides helpful clarification of the above. That is, "the mirror-image is virtual in relation to the actual character that the mirror catches, but it is actual in the mirror which now leaves the character with only a virtuality and pushes him back out-of-field" (Deleuze 1995: 70), rendering him opaque. At the same time, what is made limpid and actual in the mirror constitutes the seed or "the virtual image which will crystallize an [actual] environment which is at present…amorphous" (Deleuze 1995: 74). Through the latter process, such an actual environment gets caught in the virtual mirror of the seed, and the circuit continues from the beginning again. And this process occurs *ad infinitum*. As such, "the crystal is expression[, and]…the same circuit…passes through three figures, the actual and the virtual, the limpid and the opaque, the seed and the environment" (Deleuze 1995: 74). More simply put, when one is actually reflected in a mirror – either a real mirror or a narrative in which one sees oneself reflected – this virtual reflection captures certain aspects of oneself and renders them limpid and actual. Simultaneously, it ignores other aspects of oneself and renders them opaque and virtual. At the same time, what the mirror captures and makes limpid and actual in this way, also constitutes a virtual seed that, in future, will alter an actual environment – which could be the environment of oneself, of other people, of one's relationship to other people, of the world, etcetera. In effect, this alteration would occur the moment such an actual environment sees itself reflected in the virtual mirror of the seed. A very simple – and rather tragic – example of this is the contemporary spiralling growth of 'image-consciousness' in relation to the fashion industry. In terms of this, actual individuals see and become mesmerised by virtual reflections of a cosmeticised aspect of themselves in a mirror – both a real mirror and the mirror of the fashion industry – in a process which relegates the remainder of themselves to the realm of opacity and virtuality. Through this, such reflected aspects of the individuals not only become limpid and actual, but also thereby constitute a virtual seed that will alter the actual environment of the individual him/herself in future, insofar as it subsequently impels them to seek out and obtain increasingly 'better' clothing, cosmetics and accessories – to meet with the latest fashion standards. Having done so, they actually return to the mirror and, in relation to its virtual reflections, not only find themselves wanting again – in a way that perpetuates and propagates the cycle of consumerism. In addition, they also become further distanced from those *other* aspects of themselves which were initially rendered opaque and virtual, because such aspects are now driven even further into opacity and virtuality.

To be sure, the above example of the fashion industry and its endless production of desire features prominently in Khyentse Norbu's *Travellers and Magicians*, insofar as the walls of Dondup's traditional home are covered with the latest avatars of its excess, from centre-fold pinups to rock stars. As such, at a basic level, the narrative of *Travellers and Magicians* in its entirety arguably constitutes a broad hyalosign of sorts, because, situated as it is in an 'any-space-whatever,' it plays out as the above mentioned indiscernible 'vanishing limit' between the past of traditional Bhutan – which is already no longer – and the future of modern Bhutan – which is not yet. However, this is not why the film stands out among Third World neorealist cinema; rather, its prominence in this regard derives from its provision of more innovative time-images – indeed, a range of significantly complex hyalosigns – which occur through the interface between the travellers' actual environment and the virtual 'story within a story' told by

the monk. That is, as already mentioned, in terms of the narrative, Dondup misses his bus and is obliged to walk and hitch-hike to the neighbouring village from which he hopes to depart for America, and along the way he is joined by several other characters. These include a Buddhist monk (Sonam Kinga) who narrates the 'story within a story' to the other travellers, an elderly man (Dasho Adab Sangye) who manufactures rice paper, and his beautiful daughter, Sonam (Sonam Lhamo), who has left her studies to assist her father with his business. As the travellers proceed, however, a mutual interest develops between Dondup and Sonam, which complicates not only their individual strategies for the future, but also the designs of Sonam's father. That is, while Dondup's plans to leave Bhutan for America are increasingly problematized by his growing interest in Sonam – who happens to live in his village with her father – the potential loss of his daughter to Dondup through marriage, and with it the loss of a helper without whom he cannot produce his rice paper, increasingly concerns Sonam's father. Accordingly, Sonam finds herself in the unenviable position of being torn between her obligations to an old man, namely her father, and her growing desire for a young man, namely Dondup. In effect, the tensions between these three characters – Dondup, Sonam, and her father – which derive from their different interests and concerns, are neatly mirrored in the 'story within a story' told to them by the Buddhist monk, during rest periods along the road. And it is through the interface between their actual individual situations and the virtual reflections of each in the mirror of this 'story within a story' that the time-images of *Travellers and Magicians* emerge. In this regard, Khyentse Norbu is meticulous in his attribution of each virtual reflection to a specific character, easily identifiable through either a close-up of their face or a point-of-view shot from their position immediately *after* footage relating to the 'story within a story.' In short, a close-up of a character's face indicates that their virtual reflection – within the mirror of the 'story within a story' – has just been depicted on screen, *unless* such a close-up can be attributed to the point-of-view of another character, in which case it is the latter character's virtual reflection that has just been viewed by the audience.

The 'story within a story,' which interrupts the narrative of the travellers' journey on five occasions, is virtually appropriated, respectively, by Dondup, by Sonam, and then by Sonam's father, before Dondup does so a second time, followed by Sonam and her father who simultaneously appropriate the tale, just before the end of the film. On the first occasion, the monk directs the first part of the 'story within a story' – which has as its central theme the danger of cultivating one's dreams into obsessions – to Dondup, as a cautionary tale or a curative for his excessive preoccupation with America. This 'story within a story' is set in the distant past of Bhutan, and concerns the rivalry between a boy, Karma (Namgay Dorjee) – who wants to study but who is relegated to farm work by his father – and his older brother, Tashi (Lhakpa Dorji) – who is sent to study but who remains more preoccupied with the opposite sex. Having far more guile than Tashi, Karma drugs him one day during lunch and causes him to enter a dream world where, lost and injured after a fall, Tashi stumbles upon the home of an old man, Agay (Gomchen Penjore), and his beautiful young wife, Deki (Deki Jangzom). Here he is given shelter and, as he drifts off to sleep, the narrative cuts suddenly to a close-up of Dondup's face as he awakens – which cannot be attributed to the point-of-view of another character – and it becomes apparent that he fell asleep *during* the monk's story, such that many of the previous images have been of his dream and not of the story. Thus, this 'story within a story' cannot constitute either a pure mnemosign or a pure onirosign because, while it is partly recollected by the monk, it is also partly created by Dondup through the process of dreaming. Rather, *between* such a mnemosign and such an onirosign, a direct time-image emerges, because of the indiscernibility which characterises their relationship. That is, it is impossible to discern where the virtual images of the monk's narration – which captured and reflected an actual aspect of the character of Dondup – end, where Dondup's actual, limpid appropriation of this reflection

through his dream begins, or, indeed, how the subsequent virtual seed has crystallized the actual environment of his relationship to America, upon his awakening. Yet, that he has begun to reflect critically on his preoccupation with America – albeit through mediated means – is clear.

On the second occasion, the monk tells the next part of the 'story within a story' – which has as its central theme the problematic dynamics of illicit love – to the group of travellers that now includes, alongside Dondup, an elderly manufacturer of rice paper, and his beautiful daughter Sonam, who, as already discussed, has given up her tertiary studies to assist her father. That is, as they wait for the truck on which they briefly hitched a ride to be repaired, he begins his narration and the film cuts to Tashi, as he awakens to the sounds of Deki at her loom. Subsequently, though, Deki's growing reciprocation of the young man's interest in her infuriates Agay, who attempts to get rid of Tashi by directing him home, and Tashi once again finds himself lost and wandering in the mountain forests. At this point, the sound of the truck starting up again penetrates into Tashi's world, and signals a return to the story of the travellers, who are shown a split-second later, continuing silently with their journey – all lost in thought. Although a close-up of Dondup's face again occurs, this is followed by a similar close-up of the monk's face, before it becomes apparent that they are being looked at from Sonam's point-of-view, which indicates that the preceding virtual appropriation of the 'story within a story' has been hers. Accordingly, she has cast herself as Deki, Dondup as Tashi, and her father as Agay, because, like Deki, she too is prevented from being with a young man because of her obligations to an older man. Again, it is impossible to discern where the virtual images of the monk's narration – which captured and reflected an actual aspect of Sonam's character – end, where her actual, limpid appropriation of this reflection through her daydream begins, or exactly how the subsequent virtual seed has crystallized the actual environment of her relationship with her father and Dondup. However, that she has begun to loathe her earlier decision to sacrifice her tertiary education and the freedom that this afforded her, to help her ageing father in a rural environment, is palpable.

On the third occasion, the monk tells the following part of the 'story within a story' – which has as its central theme the usurpation of power and authority by the young – to the whole group of travellers in general, but ostensibly to Dondup in particular, as they all rest together after travelling far on foot. Accordingly, Tashi winds his way through the forest only to arrive, once more, at Agay and Deki's home, where he again takes up residence. However, Agay, aware of Tashi's interest in Deki, and the manner in which it is increasingly being reciprocated, discusses his concerns with Tashi and, saddened by the imminent loss of his wife, drinks and falls asleep. Taking the opportunity afforded by this, Tashi approaches Deki in the bath, yet just before reaching her he gets distracted by the sound of rock music and turns around to see its origins – rock music which again stems from the world of the travellers, to which the narrative then cuts. However, although the monk originally addressed this part of the 'story within a story' to Dondup, and although the narrative cuts from a focus on Tashi to a close-up of Dondup's face, a subsequent establishing shot reveals the latter to be the point-of-view of Sonam's father, who is conspicuously seated apart from the others and to the right of Dondup. As such, the preceding virtual appropriation of the monk's narration belongs to Sonam's father, and not to Dondup. Yet again, though, it is impossible to discern where the virtual images of the monk's narration – which captured and reflected an actual aspect of Sonam's father's character – end, where the latter's actual, limpid appropriation of this reflection in relation to the 'story within a story' begins, or exactly how the subsequent virtual seed has crystallized the actual environment of his relationship with both his daughter and Dondup. Yet, that he has begun to experience concern over losing Sonam to Dondup is clear.

On the fourth occasion, the monk tells the penultimate part of the 'story within a story'

– which has as its central theme the relationship between all-consuming desire and terrible crime – to the group of travellers as they fall asleep one night beneath a rocky overhang, during which time Dondup both listens to the monk and gazes at a sleeping Sonam. The 'story within a story' becomes particularly tense at this point, because Tashi goes so far as to poison Agay, in order to claim his wife Deki for himself. That this is indeed Dondup's virtual appropriation of the monk's narration becomes clear when the eyes of the poisoned Agay – in the last scene of the 'story within a story' – become the eyes of the Buddhist deity painted on the wall of the cave above Dondup's head; eyes which can only be seen from his point-of-view as he awakens in the morning. Once more, it is impossible to discern where the virtual images of the monk's narration – which again captured and reflected an actual aspect of Dondup's character – end, where Dondup's actual, limpid appropriation of this reflection in relation to the 'story within a story' begins, or exactly how the subsequent virtual seed has crystallized the actual environment of his relationship with Sonam and her father. Nevertheless, that his interest in Sonam has led him to equivocate over his decision to go to America, and that his change in this regard stands to have dire consequences for Sonam's father, are both clear.

On the fifth occasion, the monk tells the final part of the 'story within a story' – which has as its central theme the arising of remorse after the commission of crimes of passion – to the group of travellers in general, but in particular to Sonam and her father, both of whom urgently request that he completes the tale. The monk does as they ask and concludes the 'story within a story' by recalling how Deki and Tashi, guilt-ridden over the poisoning of Agay (who continues to suffer terribly and refuses to die), fight with one another until Tashi flees. Although Deki pursues him she accidentally falls into the river, and Tashi, despite returning to save her, finds only her *kira* or traditional outfit floating in the water. Here, what is arguably the most intricate time-image of the film occurs, through which Tashi returns from the virtual world of the 'mirror' to which his brother Karma subjected him – namely the drug-induced dream in which he has been lost since the beginning of the tale – to the actual world that he shares with his brother. This begins when Deki's *kira*, afloat in the rapidly flowing river, morphs into her face, only to be followed, firstly, by the dissolution of the surrounding river water into the wine of his cup (that Karma gave him earlier during lunch), and secondly, by the dissolution of Deki's face into the wine, as it is disturbed by his falling tears. At first, Tashi battles to distinguish between the virtual situation of his dream and his actual situation beside his brother, and he expresses deep shock and anguish over his murder of Agay, while Karma tries to point out that it was all 'just a dream.' However, what the young boy fails to understand is that there is no such thing as 'just a dream,' because Tashi's murder of Agay is a virtual seed that has crystallized the actual environment of his relationship with both the world and himself. That is, through his actual reflection in the virtual mirror of the drug-induced dream, certain ethical aspects of his character were rendered virtual and opaque, while other aspects – primarily his delusion, greed and anger – were rendered actual and limpid. Yet, what was captured in this way by the mirror, namely those aspects of him which culminated in his murder of Agay, also constituted a virtual seed that, upon his awakening, crystallized his actual environment in a different way from before. In short, he was subsequently forced to include such extreme stupidity, selfishness and cruelty as aspects of himself, which he had hitherto not been obliged to do, having never before found himself in a situation that so radically engendered these aspects. Moreover, the time-image does not end here, because as Karma leads Tashi home, the noise of a tractor overlaps with their departure before the narrative cuts back to the world of the travellers, and to the approaching vehicle from which the noise derives. At this point, close-ups of Sonam's father's face, followed by Sonam's face – neither of which can be attributed to the point-of-view of another character – indicate that it is their simultaneous virtual appropriation of the monk's narration that has just been seen. Once again, it is impossible to discern where the virtual images of the monk's narration

– which captured and reflected actual aspects of both Sonam and her father – end, where their simultaneous actual, limpid appropriation of this reflection in relation to the 'story within a story' begins, or in what way Sonam's appropriation diverges from her father's appropriation. However, it is now possible to see how the subsequent virtual seed crystallizes the actual environment of their relationship with one another and with Dondup. That is, Sonam's father, galvanised into action by this virtual seed, not only flags down the approaching vehicle – which only has room for two passengers – but also insists that Dondup and the monk leave, all of which serves to avert a realisation of the pain and loss he saw in the mirror of the 'story within a story.' Similarly, as they ride off, Sonam stands next to her father and waves happily, with none of the sadness she exhibited earlier at the departure of a somewhat less consequential member of their group. In effect, she thereby indicates the manner in which the above mentioned virtual seed has crystallized her actual environment around detachment from Dondup, for reasons akin to those of her father. The film then concludes on a very wry note, as the monk and Dondup again collaborate – this time very *consciously* – on the playful project of turning their recent actual journey into another 'story within a story' or virtual mirror. Accordingly, this virtual mirror reflects and thereby renders limpid and actual Dondup's interest in remaining in Bhutan and marrying Sonam, while it simultaneously ignores and thereby renders opaque and virtual his plan of going to America. However, the film ends shortly thereafter, without indicating, in any way whatsoever, how the resultant virtual seed will crystallize the actual environment; that is, without hinting at whether or not it will actually lead to Dondup abandoning his plans of travelling to America.

The possibility of critical Buddhist cinema

On the one hand, against the backdrop of the above, it is arguably important to consider Khyentse Norbu's *Travellers and Magicians* within the context of Third World neorealist cinema, rather than against the entertainment benchmark of Hollywood cinema, because of the way in which the latter path reduces and distorts the significance and relevance of the film, respectively. As discussed, these derive from its origin within a developing country, where the experience of globalisation has been characterised by progressive socio-cultural and politico-economic subordination – in contrast to the American experience of this world-altering phenomenon, which has been characterised by wholesale dominance. However, on the other hand, it is also important not to pigeonhole *Travellers and Magicians* as simply another Third World rearticulation of the neorealist formula, because such a path is equally reductive, and indeed destructive, insofar as it succeeds in grouping together divergent forms of cinema in a way that negates the creative differences between them. Arguably, in this regard, Khyentse Norbu's film is significant not only because of its appropriation of the neorealist formula to articulate the Bhutanese experience of globalisation *as* the experience of an encroaching 'any-space-whatever' – on account of the shattering of the traditional cultural sensory-motor schema by development. In addition, *Travellers and Magicians* is also significant because of its elaboration upon the neorealist formula, via the inclusion – within its neorealist narrative – of time-images, which in terms of the history of cinema were precipitated by the pure optical-sound images of neorealism, but did not coincide with them. This is, moreover, not mere formal novelty on the part of Khyentse Norbu either, but rather the means by which *Travellers and Magicians* opens up the possibility of Buddhist cinema, as a reflective, socially orientated, critical tool within a world dominated by the mass media.

That is, because Buddhism is the national religion of Bhutan, for the most part a Buddhist schema informs the psychological, ontological, and indeed cosmological, understanding of the characters within *Travellers and Magicians*. In terms of this, *samsāra* is the ocean of

ignorance, *attachment* and *anger* within which sentient beings wander aimlessly for countless lifetimes, constantly harried by the waves of (re-)birth, old age, sickness and death. Yet, this situation is not interminable because it is possible for sentient beings to liberate themselves from it, provided they develop both sufficient insight into the inherent emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all things, and corresponding compassion (*karuna*) for those surrounding them who do not. That is, insight into the constructed nature of everything (including the self-image each of us has), which predisposes everything to inevitable transformation or disintegration; and compassion for those who remain *ignorant* of this reality and who suffer accordingly – both from their limiting *attachment* to things that cannot remain the same, and from their experience of all-consuming *anger* when whatever they have so loved invariably slips from their grasp. In Buddhist terms, the culmination of such insight – which is indissociable from universal compassion – is the attainment of *enlightenment*, or liberation from the very last traces of such *ignorance*, *attachment* and *anger*. Ironically, though, after its emergence in India around the fifth century BCE, Buddhism not only spread throughout Asia and dynamically imbricated itself with the different cultures it encountered.[18] In addition, in certain instances, it also ossified into a rigid, unimaginative, maintenance of rules and rituals, involving a somewhat *ignorant attachment* to rites and ceremonies – accompanied by proportional *anger* when their legitimacy was challenged.[19] Indeed, for a long time, on account of the relative cultural isolation that preceded globalisation, a lack of the means of comparison ensured that, for the most part, the latter instances of Buddhism escaped criticism and continued to wield authority, often in close association with secular power.[20] However, in the wake of globalisation, this situation has changed, insofar as the adoption of a critical, comparative stance has become almost *de rigueur* among large numbers of educated Buddhist laity and clergy. And this continues to inspire a constant search for the 'heart' of the Buddha's teaching, beneath the more weighty cultural elements that Buddhism has accumulated during its long history.[21] Arguably, this temperate iconoclasm is neatly reflected in *Travellers and Magicians*, not only explicitly, via the characterisation of the monk as interfering and annoying, and via Dondup's expression of doubt in the reliability of monks, but also implicitly, through Khyentse Norbu's *distillation* of Buddhism, which involves a focus on its meditative spirit – rather than on its canonical letter.[22] As discussed, this distillation manifests in the series of complex time-images within the narrative of his film, which directly illustrate the actual-virtual dynamics by means of which subjectivity is constituted – in a way that bypasses the indirect philosophical explanations of such constitution that occur in the Buddhist canon. Yet this distillation of Buddhism produces a critical standpoint not only in relation to simple stories, such as the one told to the travellers by the monk, but also in relation to multi-dimensional narratives, such as those of the mass media. In this regard, not only does Dondup get caught up in the mirror of the monk's tale, but from the outset of the film, he is also already caught up in the mirror of mass media narratives. This is important because, via the thematization of his predicament, *Travellers and Magicians* not only reflects upon how globalisation has obliged the Bhutanese to inhabit an 'any-space-whatever,' but also reflects upon how globalisation itself is part of the greater and more primordial 'any-space-whatever' of *samsāra*. In terms of this, as Buddhist social theorist David Loy argues in *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution*, the *ignorance*, *attachment* and *anger* of *samsāra* have become institutionalised – and thereby exponentially exaggerated – respectively, through the mass media corporations, the capitalist economic system, and the militarism of the United States (Loy 2008: 89-94). And it is toward the associated promises of gratification, the endless acquisitiveness, and the immense power of this leader of globalisation, that Dondup is drawn for the duration of Khyentse Norbu's film.

To be sure, the idea that subjectivity is constituted in problematic ways by the mass media is neither a new insight, nor a uniquely Buddhist insight. Rather, it dates back to the critical

theory of the Frankfurt school, and is a concept which has subsequently been elaborated upon by a wide range of media theorists – including Deleuze himself. Yet, to theorise about the mass media and subjectivity is often to write for a relatively limited critical audience, while to make a film that directly illustrates to subjects their actual-virtual relationship with the mirrors of the mass media – mirrors in which they simultaneously lose and find themselves – is to visit upon them an accessible critical vision, neither quickly nor easily forgotten. Khyentse Norbu's *Travellers and Magicians* is one such film, insofar as it shows not only how easily one can become lost in the virtual mirrors that one encounters, but also, in relation to the virtual seeds that form within their depths, how easily one can subsequently be condemned to experience the crystallization of one's environment in problematic ways. However, whether or not this will be elaborated upon in future, so that a recognisable form of critical Buddhist cinema emerges to match the current increase in socially-engaged, critical Buddhist theory,[23] only time will tell; but that the foundations for such a possible form of cinema have been established through Khyentse Norbu's *Travellers and Magicians*, is clear.

Notes

1. Italian "neorealism [w]as a more or less coherent movement of particular directors, writers, cinematographers, editors and actors who were loosely connected to each other through personal and professional associations, who shared anti-fascist convictions and leftist politics, and who produced a recognisable body of work from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s. Three directors produced most of the generally recognised masterworks of neorealism – Rossellini's *Rome, Open City*, *Paisà* (1946), and *Germany Year Zero* (*Germania anno zero*, 1947), De Sica's *Shoeshine* (*Sciuscià*, 1946), *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948), and *Umberto D*, and Visconti's *La terra trema* (1948)" (Shiel 2006: 2-3). In short, such films tried "to confront the irony, contradictions, and disappointments of life…[and to] explore ways in which life is not happy, evil is not always punished and good rewarded, and human relationships and lives are immensely complex" (Cardullo 1991: 8).

2. Thomas Stubblefield provides a succinct explanation of Deleuze's concept of 'any-space-whatever' in his article entitled "Re-creating the Witness: *Elephant*, Postmodernism, and the Neorealist Inheritance." In this work he advances that, with the dissolution of the combined ability to perceive the situation that confronts one, and to act decisively in relation to it, or in other words, "with the dissolution of the sensory-motor schema, space no longer presumes a predetermined action or movement and therefore becomes indefinite, ambiguous, and even contradictory" (Stubblefield 2007: 231).

3. In relation to such clichés, Deleuze goes on to argue: "Did not *Païsa* already propose all the possible clichés of the encounters between America and Italy? And [while] in *Strangers* Rossellini catalogues the clichés of pure Italianness, as seen by a bourgeois woman out walking; volcano, museum statues, Christian sanctuary…[, i]n *General della Rovere* he drew out the cliché of the manufacture of a hero" (Deleuze 1996: 212). For supportive elaboration upon Deleuze's perspective of Italian neorealism, see Landy, M. 2000. *Italian Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4. It has been argued that the "last neorealist film, Vittorio de Sica's *The Roof*…made in 1955[, already comprised a]…hopeless attempt to return to the original aesthetic" (Huaco 1965: 197).

5. As Sachs goes on to point out, the 'development idea' was from the outset prejudiced against non-commercial modes of existence, which were automatically defined as manifestations of the 'poverty' endemic to 'underdeveloped' regions. However, on the contrary, such modes of existence constituted ecologically and socially sustainable economies of 'frugality,' rather than manifestations of 'poverty.' Nevertheless, when the ecological and social infrastructure which made such 'frugality' possible became eroded through development initiatives, the communities which were thereby displaced rapidly became subject to increasing poverty and, ultimately, to destitution (Sachs 1999: 16-18). Recent examples of such devastating development initiatives are the Polonoroeste Project in the Amazon, the Narmada Dam Project in India, and the Nam Theun 2 Dam Project in Laos. For more in this regard, see Goldman, M. 2004. "Imperial Science, Imperial Nature: Environmental Knowledge for the World (Bank)." In Jasanoff, S. & Long Martello, M.

(eds.). 2004. *Earthly Politics: Local and Global in Environmental Governance*. Cambridge: The MIT Press; and Chapter 7 of Clapp, J. & Dauvergne, P. 2005. *Paths to a Green World: The Political Economy of the Global Environment*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

6.   See the Introduction of Galt, R. & Schoonover, K. (eds.). 2010. *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*. New York: Oxford University Press.

7.   *Travellers and Magicians* is Khyentse Norbu's second film, after his widely acclaimed *The Cup* (1999), which also involves a creative appropriation of, and elaboration upon, the neorealist formula.

8.   See note 5.

9.   See Rahul, R. 1968. "The Development Program in the Himalaya." In *Asian Survey* (1968) 8/8: 666-677.

10.   Seeh http://www.bhutannewsonline.com/hydro_electricity.html

11.   See Ura, K. 1994. "Decentralisation and Development in Medieval and Modern Bhutan." In Aris, M. & Hutt, M. (eds.). 1994. *Bhutan: Aspects of Culture and Development*. Stirlingshire: Paul Strachan.

12.   See http://www.ipcs.org/seminar/india-the-world/democracy-in-bhutan-827.html

13.   See note 2.

14.   See http://www.kuenselonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=2245

15.   For example, the character of Deki (Deki Jangzom), who features in the 'story within a story' told by the monk to his fellow travellers, also emerges momentarily in their world. This occurs when she plays the role of a different character who races past them in her car.

16.   Umberto Eco, in his *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, neatly summarises the Russian formalist distinction between *fabula* and *sjužet* with reference to time. According to him, a *fabula* – or fable/story – "proceeds in a linear fashion from an initial moment…toward a final moment…[T]ales, such as fairy tales,…have only a story, without any plot. 'Little Red Riding Hood' is one of these. It begins with the little girl's leaving home and entering the wood, and ends with the death of the wolf and the girl's return home." A *sjužet* or plot, in contrast, involves the interruption of the linearity of time with flashbacks (or, for that matter, flashforwards) and has been the hallmark of 'high' literature from Homer's *Odyssey* to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Eco 1994: 33-36).

17.   See note 2.

18.   See Krüger, J. S. 1995. *Buddhism: From the Buddha to Asoka*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

19.   As J. S. Krüger indicates in *Turning-points in Buddhist Mysticism and Philosophy*, discontent with the perceived ossification of Buddhism under the authority of the Hinayana (Theravada) schools, led to the emergence – approximately two centuries after the Buddha's death – of a more critical approach on the part of "the Mahasamghikas[, which was later]…picked up and developed further by the Mahayana tradition…around the first century before the Common Era" (Krüger 2007: 52, 57). However, as Bernard Faure also explains in *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism*, *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality*, and *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity and Gender*, the various Mahayana schools that subsequently developed were also plagued by powerful conformist tendencies, rather than solely orientated around increasing openness and dynamism (Faure 1991: 242; Faure 1998: 98-143; and Faure 2003: 219-249). Indeed, as Keith Dowman points out in *The Flight of the Garuda: The Dzogchen Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism*, even the later Vajrayana Buddhist tradition within Tibet – which developed out of the above Mahayana tradition –became rigid and ossified by the middle of the twentieth century (Dowman 2003: 6).

20.   See Chapter 1 of Loy, D. R. 2003. *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*. Boston: Wisdom Publications; and Jerryson, M. K. & Juergensmeyer, M. (eds.). 2010. *Buddhist Warfare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

21.   See Thich Nhat Hanh. 1998. *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy and Liberation*. London: Rider. Admittedly, though, caution is also necessary here. To be sure, the ossification of Buddhism at certain moments during its historical development is widely recognised (see note 19). However, as Donald Lopez points out in *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*, the pursuit of the *essence* of Buddhism that took place in the late nineteenth century – and which took as its philosophical point of departure European scientific thought – was no less responsible for an ossification of Buddhism. That is, in its de-contextualisation of Buddhism, and concomitant eschewal of large amounts of Buddhist ritual as contaminating cultural accretions, it produced an *essentialised* form of Buddhism, which was comparable

in terms of its rationality to Enlightenment philosophy, but which bore no resemblance to any living form of Buddhism whatsoever (Lopez 2008: 10-38). As such, the latter pursuit of an 'essential' or 'scientific' Buddhism is not what is being referred to here. Rather, it is the more moderate approach of socially-engaged Buddhism that is being referred to; an approach which respects the cultural aspects of traditional Buddhism, but which also seeks to make Buddhism increasingly relevant to the contemporary era, in relation to pressing social issues.

22. In many ways, this comprises a cinematic reflection of the new, dynamic textual practices of modern Buddhism, detailed by David McMahan in *The Making of*

Buddhist Modernism. According to him, the recent widespread availability of canonical Buddhist texts has led to an increasingly creative interpretation of them, well beyond the boundaries of meaning to which they were previously subjected, through Buddhist pedagogic hierarchies (McMahan 2008: 17).

23. See Loy, D. R. 2002. *A Buddhist History of the West: Studies in Lack*. New York: State University of New York Press; Loy, D. R. 2003. *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*. Boston: Wisdom Publications; Loy, D. R. 2008. *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution*. Boston: Wisdom Publications; and Sivaraksa, S. 2005. *Conflict, Culture, Change: Engaged Buddhism in a Globalizing World*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

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