



Critical Note

Travelers and Magicians: Bhutan, Globalization, and the Buddhist Film

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This article critically examines Khyentse Norbu's 2003 film *Travelers and Magicians* as a cinematic exploration of spiritual and cultural transformation amid Bhutan's rapid globalization. Employing a dual methodological approach combining textual analysis with John Whalen-Bridge's (2014) three-factor framework of a Buddhist film, the article argues that the film critiques consumerism-driven cultural change in Bhutan, especially how the pursuit of commodified happiness leads to spiritual emptiness. By exposing the futility of chasing illusion, the article contends that the film creates a contemplative space for reflecting on identity, desire and transformation through a contemporary Buddhist lens.

Keywords: Bhutan; cinema; globalization; impermanence; media studies; orientalism; suffering; Tibetan Buddhism

Transcending conventional and traditional boundaries, Buddhist philosophy is increasingly finding new forms of expression in global media, popular culture, and hybrid spiritual discourses. Cinema has become a powerful medium through which this shift is taking place. A compelling example is Khyentse Norbu's *Travelers and Magicians* (2003), which offers not only aesthetic experiences but also a unique platform for philosophical introspection.

To understand how *Travelers and Magicians* conveys its philosophical depth, it is essential to first examine its narrative structure. The film unfolds through a framed narrative. The outer story follows Dondup, a discontented young government official in a remote village, who is determined to leave for America in search of a better life. When he misses the only bus on his way to Thimphu to process his visa, he is forced to hitchhike with a group of fellow travelers, including a monk and a 19-year-old girl, Sonam. As the group journeys together, the monk begins to narrate a story, forming the inner frame. The monk's story follows Tashi, who, like Dondup, is also dissatisfied with his life and longs for an escape. After drinking a magical wine, he finds himself drawn into the web of lust, jealousy and violence. The film's setting thus shifts between the travelers' journey and the monk's tale, weaving the two together throughout its duration.

While the narrative offers rich philosophical layers, its reception in the West often focused on surface-level aesthetics. Western reviewers praised *Travelers and Magicians* for its visual beauty, contemplative pacing, and ethnographic authenticity, framing it as a rare cinematic window into a remote and spiritually rich culture. Susan Yung (2006), for example, described the film as offering a microscopic view of beautiful, relaxed, and peaceful Bhutan, while Marc Savlov (2005) emphasized the film's meditative rhythm and scenic immersion. Similarly, Frederic Brussat and Mary Ann Brussat (2006) praised the film's rustic charm.



These reviews and interpretations of the film reinforce what Jane Naomi Iwamura (2011) terms as “virtual orientalism,” a tendency in which Western media sources aestheticize Asian cultures while sidelining their socio-political contexts. However, beyond this orientalist framing, the film explores profound themes such as impermanence and the dangers of illusion, while also engaging with contemporary anxieties around migration, identity and cultural rupture. This thematic interplay situates the film within “Buddhist cinema” (Whalen-Bridge 2014), where narrative structure and visual aesthetics converge to evoke spiritual insight and existential questioning. According to Whalen-Bridge, a film may be considered “Buddhist” through three interrelated factors: representation (the depiction of Buddhist symbols or teachings), intention (the filmmaker’s purpose in conveying Buddhist ideas), and interpretation (how audiences engage with the film’s Buddhist elements). I will examine the film’s thematic currents using these factors as a framework, with special focus on intention and interpretation.

Travelers and Magicians illustrates how desire is a destabilizing force when it arises from illusion and attachment. Catherine Benton (2018) observes that the characters suffer most when they are caught in the vicious circle of desire and try to cling to impermanent conditions. In the inner frame, Tashi encounters an old man and his young wife, Deki, deep in the forest. The old man lives in isolation, away from the world, because he fears other young men in the village will take his wife, revealing possessiveness as a form of self-imprisonment. His jealousy, masked as protection, reflects attachment to youth, beauty, and control—a delusion that ultimately leads to his murder.

Tashi’s own actions are similarly driven by desire. His longing for Deki blinds him from ethical consequences and spiritual discernment. His moral downfall unfolds through seduction, secrecy, betrayal, and, ultimately, complicity in murder. Deki, too, is driven by attachment, first to Tashi and then to the fantasy of escape with him, abandoning her old husband. As she drowns while trying to flee with Tashi, her fate reinforces the film’s thematic suggestion that grasping at illusions can result not in freedom but in suffering and ruin.

In the outer frame, Dondup’s fixation on going to America reflects a broader, recent phenomenon that equates success with material wealth and external validation. Despite being an important and respected figure within his community, Dondup remains dissatisfied, highlighting the irony of his longing. This tension mirrors the Buddhist critique of craving and illusion, where desire for what lies elsewhere blinds individuals to the richness of the present.

The film’s nested narrative structure creates a mirrored allegory of modern *saṃsāra*. Dondup’s fixation on America parallels Tashi’s descent into lust and violence. Both are expressions of untamed minds that abandon what they have for an imagined “better” existence, each driven by illusion and craving—Dondup through his idealized vision of America and Tashi through his enchanted journey (Benton 2018).

Through the interweaving of these parallel journeys, the film critiques fantasies of escape while offering Buddhist insight as a tool for engaging with the discontentment of globalized modernity. The monk’s warning to Dondup, “You must be careful with dreamlands because when you wake up, it may not be all pleasant,” serves as a caution against mistaking illusion for liberation. The film ultimately reframes dreamland not as a physical place, but as a mental construct, one shaped by global ideologies and sustained by craving.

These thematic intentions are established from the very beginning of the film when a bowman (Khyentse Norbu himself) shoots an arrow directly at the camera and by extension towards the audience, which Georgios T. Halkias (2018: 209) beautifully interprets as a metaphor for Khyentse Norbu’s message that “pierces through the viewer’s illusions and targets at the heart of the cinematic story.” Khyentse Norbu, in an interview, stressed that since many people no longer find time for traditional spiritual practices such as reading spiritual texts and meditation, cinema can serve as a powerful medium to help bridge that gap and awaken people’s consciousness.

This statement from the filmmaker affirms his deliberate intention of using the film as a vehicle for spiritual reflection, aligning with Whalen-Bridge's second factor of a Buddhist film—the filmmaker's purpose.

Having explored the film's intention, we now turn to its interpretation, particularly in the context of Bhutan's cultural and spiritual transformation. Bhutan's opening to the outside world in the 1960s after centuries of remaining insulated from Western influence, and the subsequent introduction of television and the internet in 1999, marked a significant turning point. This development ushered in a flood of global influence, including new paradigms of identity, success and social aspirations—particularly among urban youths—creating tensions between inherited values and global influences.

Travelers and Magicians captures this cultural inflection point through Dondup's Westernized appearance and aspirations. His long Western-style hair, an exclusive collection of foreign rock music, and posters of Western models signal a symbolic detachment from traditional Bhutanese culture. His desire to migrate to America further presents him as a character reflecting an aspirational connection to the globalized, consumer-driven world.

Dondup's behavior throughout the film illustrates this alienation. When he requests leave under the pretext of attending a *tshachu* (religious festival), he reduces sacred practice to merely a means for achieving his personal goals. Such transactional engagement with tradition highlights modernist Buddhist thought influenced by modern rationalism (Barker 2022). From Whalen-Bridge's perspective of interpretation, viewers can see Dondup's struggles and detachment from tradition as reflections of Buddhist concerns with desire, attachment, and the tension between worldly ambitions and spiritual values.

In contrast to Dondup's alienation, the monk and Sonam function as subtle but powerful agents of spiritual and cultural guidance. The monk, through his parable, delivered with quiet persistence, challenges Dondup's desire to leave and encourages him to reflect on his obsession with seeking fulfilment elsewhere. Notably, although the monk carries the symbolic authority of his robes and monastic identity, he does not rely on them in provoking Dondup to reflect on his decisions and actions. Instead, his wisdom is embedded in narrative and encounter, echoing Ann Gleig's (2019) analysis of postmodern Buddhist pedagogies that emphasize accessibility, reflexivity, and relationality over hierarchy and orthodoxy.

Similarly, Sonam becomes a quiet moral counterpoint to Dondup. Her patience, humility, and lived devotion to her father contrast sharply with Dondup's self-oriented aspirations. While Dondup seeks to escape his responsibilities, leaving behind his aging parents for his personal ambitions, Sonam chooses to remain in the village to care for her widowed father despite qualifying for higher studies, reflecting a lived ethic of interdependence and duty.

Just like the monk, Sonam's influence is subtle but significant. She does not preach or confront, but her actions and demeanor speak to a deeper sense of duty and connection that Dondup has severed. Her embodiment of traditional Bhutanese values offers a lived critique of the individualistic attitude that Dondup has internalized. Together, the monk and Sonam, who initially appear as ordinary companions—modest, unassuming, and peripheral to the protagonist's ambitions—serve as important guides, prompting him to reflect on his decisions not through overt instructions but through their relational presence and narrative engagement.

In the film's closing moments, when the monk playfully begins a new story: "Long ago, in a beautiful Bhutanese village, there was a government official who always dreamt of going to America. On his journey, he met a beautiful girl..." Dondup interrupts, smiling: "And he forgot all about going to America." This final gesture suggests a shift in his perspectives from the dream of elsewhere to the appreciation of the richness of what surrounds him.

To conclude, this critical note has demonstrated how *Travelers and Magicians*, through its layered narrative and symbolic imagery, exemplifies Whalen-Bridge's (2014) framework of a Buddhist film. Highlighting the film's purpose, the paper has shown that the film functions not only as a cultural narrative or cinematic homage to Bhutanese life, but also as a philosophical exploration of dilemmas of modernity, identity, longing, and transformation in a rapidly changing Bhutan.

Further, the film invites interpretive engagement with core Buddhist themes such as desire, detachment, and spiritual awakening, enabling the audience to reflect on the tension between tradition and modernity. It ultimately creates a contemplative space in which both Bhutanese and global viewers are invited to reflect on the costs of chasing illusions and the possibilities of finding meaning in the present.

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