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Road as Time-Image: Pema Tseden's Rewriting of the Road Movie Genre

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Abstract. This article draws on Gilles Deleuze's concept of the time-image to examine how Pema Tseden reworks the road movie form. Conventional road cinema builds upon the movement-image, centering on quests, physical action, and the linear construction of personal identity. While Pema Tseden keeps the outer structure of the road movie, he subordinates plot-driven action so that time can appear directly on screen. In The Search (2009), an unfinished search turns the journey into a space for recollection-images, where the past surfaces through physical movement and diegetic narration. In Jinpa (2018), the highway functions as a crystal-image: actual and virtual elements, dream and waking life, mirror one another. This dynamic unlocks Deleuze's "powers of the false," allowing fictional narrative to generate tangible ethical outcomes. Pema Tseden therefore revises the internal logic of the road movie genre: the narrative priority shifts from spatial "arrival" toward the "emergence" of time and memory. These transformations recast the road as a vehicle for temporal experience rather than mere geographic progress.

Keywords: Pema Tseden, time-image, road movie, Deleuze, Tibetan New Wave

1. Pema Tseden and the Tibetan New Wave

Pema Tseden (1969–2023) ranks among China's most internationally recognized Tibetan filmmakers. Working as a novelist, screenwriter, and director, he has brought strong literary sensibilities to his films since the very beginning. His debut feature *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005) [1] was the first mainland Chinese feature directed by a Tibetan creator with full Tibetan-language dialogue. It established core concerns that would run through his later work: stories set in the Amdo Tibetan region, focusing on ordinary local people, and rejecting exotic, sensationalized depictions of Tibet. After his debut, he completed six feature films: *The Search* (2009) [2], *Old Dog* (2011) [3], *The Sacred Arrow* (2014) [4], *Tharlo* (2015) [5], *Jinpa* (2018) [6], and *Balloon* (2019) [7]. All of these films form one of the most cohesive bodies of Tibetan-language cinema. A consistent formal trait across these works is the recurring motif of roads and physical movement.

In *The Silent Holy Stones*, a young monk travels back and forth between monastery and family home. In *The Search*, a director and his cinematographer drive across Amdo to find an actor for a legendary royal role. In *Old Dog*, an elderly man rides his motorcycle between county town and grassland, trying to recover his stolen Tibetan mastiff. *Tharlo* follows a shepherd traveling between grassland and police station, in which identity crisis unfolds through physical movement. Almost all

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of *Jinpa* unfolds along a highland highway, where two men both named *Jinpa* meet, confuse one another, and then go their separate ways. Even the seemingly static *Balloon* relies on road travel: Drolkar's trip into town for medical care and her sister's departure both take place along roads.

In Pema Tseden's films, the road is more than a simple narrative element. It operates as an image-space with its own formal functions. Movement rarely results in geographical arrival. Instead, traveling stirs up memories, feelings of guilt, and questions of personal identity. His films adopt the structural framework of classic road movies, yet they operate according to a different internal logic.

Pema Tseden's works have helped shape what critics term the "Tibetan New Wave." He first encountered this label in 2010, during a screening of his work held at Indiana University in the United States. Critics later adopted the phrase to describe a circle of early-twenty-first-century Tibetan-language filmmakers. Key figures include Pema Tseden, Sonthar Gyal, Lhapal Gyal, and Dukar Tserang, with Pema Tseden serving as the group's initiator and guiding figure.

The Tibetan New Wave stands apart from older, broader categories such as "Tibetan-themed cinema." Its creators share working methods and local backgrounds, mostly coming from Amdo. They are connected through mentor–student relationships, shared film crews, and hometown ties. Sonthar Gyal worked early in his career as art director and cinematographer on *The Silent Holy Stones*, *Old Dog*, and *The Search*. Dukar Tserang collaborated closely with Pema Tseden for many years as his long-term sound designer. These personal and professional ties mean their otherwise separate films share distinct collective qualities.

The sharpest divide between the Tibetan New Wave and earlier "minority-nationality films" lies in its shift from external to internal points of view. Rao [8] notes that scholarship on ethnic-theme cinema must clarify conceptual boundaries: neither descent-based ethnic identity nor cultural identity can serve as the sole standard for defining minority cinema. This exclusion of identity-first classification aligns with the Tibetan New Wave's stance: Tibetan stories should be defined by an insider perspective, not purely by ethnic markers. For many years, cinematic representations of Tibet were largely created by outsiders. Films presented Tibet as plateau scenery, mysterious rituals, or a vulnerable community in need of rescue, amplifying cultural difference into exotic visual spectacle [9]. Pema Tseden, by contrast, sought to depict his home region on its own terms and offer more grounded representations of local life.

Two important qualities in these films follow from this insider viewpoint. One is that religion, folk customs, and rituals are not highlighted for spectacle; they are woven naturally into everyday Tibetan existence. The young monk in *The Silent Holy Stones* is fascinated by Journey to the West and wears a Sun Wukong mask, and the casting search in *The Search* grows out of ordinary local life. The other concerns the human-centered treatment of Tibetan settings and characters. Stories set in Tibet are not inherently special because of their location; human relationships and moral struggles hold universal relevance. Rather than framing Tibetan life as exotic spectacle, the New Wave develops an internal way of seeing the world.

2. Deleuze's time-image

Read only from an external standpoint, Pema Tseden's road-oriented films might be casually labeled "Tibetan road movies," valued primarily for their setting and Tibetan characters. Standard road movie storytelling follows the logic of Deleuze's movement-image: protagonists set out, action drives plot, and spatial journeys move toward clear goals — searching for someone, escaping hardship, returning home, or seeking redemption. Reaching the destination brings transformation in character or self-understanding. Pema Tseden retains the surface form of road cinema, yet he suspends movement-image logic. He presents journeys that do not arrive, and actions that fail to

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produce clear transformation. The movement-image framework is emptied out, making space for the time-image. Action no longer builds toward arrival. Movement no longer organizes narrative meaning. Instead, time manifests directly within the visual track.

Work on Pema Tseden's road-themed films has largely addressed political, cultural, and religious questions. Frangville [10] reads *The Search* through the theory of minor cinema. Berry [9] explores identity politics in his road-oriented work, and Smyer Yu [11] analyzes transnational Buddhist visual motifs. This article asks a different question: how these films reorganize cinematic time and rewrite road movie temporal logic from within the genre. Gilles Deleuze's time-image framework — and specifically the concepts of the recollection-image, the crystal-image, and the "powers of the false" — provides the analytical vocabulary for this task [12]. Fan [13] brings Deleuze's time-image into sustained dialogue with Buddhist theories of mind, arguing that the time-image cultivates "mindfulness of the here and now." Fan's close reading of Pema Tseden's *Tharlo* (2015) demonstrates how this mindfulness enables consciousness to shape its own becoming. That reading supports this paper's central claim that Pema Tseden restructures cinematic time from inside film form.

The "movement-image" is Deleuze's core term for the logic of classical pre-Second-World-War cinema. It operates via the "sensory-motor schema": characters perceive a situation, react emotionally, and act to change their surroundings. Their actions in turn create new circumstances. Viewers observe actions unfolding over time; time itself remains indirect, perceptible only through plot progression. Classical Hollywood narratives and action-driven road movies exemplify this pattern: departure, encounters, choices, arrival. Protagonist self-change unfolds as a causal chain of connected actions [14].

The "time-image" marks a shift Deleuze identifies in *Cinema 2*. Emerging alongside Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave, post-war cinema breaks the sensory-motor chain. Characters face situations they cannot fully understand or respond to. They often simply observe and listen, functioning as pure on-screen spectators. When action cannot generate new circumstances, "pure optical and sound situations" emerge. Time breaks free from subordination to movement and becomes directly visible on screen [12]. Deleuze distinguishes two modes of time. Time within the movement-image is measurable and divisible. Time in the time-image corresponds to Bergsonian "duration": layered inner experience where past, present, and future interpenetrate. A simple illustration clarifies this contrast:

Movement-image scenario: A character drives toward Lhasa. Action propels the story, and time unfolds through physical progress along the route.

Time-image scenario: A character drives through Lhasa. Landscapes pass outside the window, and memories of the past surface. Action slows or stalls, and time becomes tangible through perception and remembrance.

The "recollection-image" is especially relevant to journey-based storytelling in Pema Tseden's work. Past events are not inserted as separate flashback sequences. Instead, the past persists and surfaces within present-moment perception. Conventional cinema uses flashbacks: shifting in lighting or color signal to audiences that the scene belongs to the past, keeping past and present clearly separated. The recollection-image works differently. Memory does not replace the present scene; it overlays it, infusing the present with traces of what has gone before. Its purpose is not merely to reconstruct past events, but to reshape how audiences perceive the present. A character's gaze, tone, and pauses can all carry echoes of prior experience [12].

The "crystal-image" describes the foundational structure of the time-image, where actual and virtual images grow hard to tell apart. In chapter four of *Cinema 2*, "The Crystals of Time," Deleuze

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calls the crystal-image "the inner limit of all images." Borrowing a physical metaphor, he describes how the actual present moment and virtual preserved past are clearly different yet blur into one another. The crystal is not a simple juxtaposition of two images. Actual and virtual constantly reflect and exchange with one another, with no firm dividing line between them [12]. This marks a key distinction from the recollection-image: recollection-images deal with the emergence of the past within the present; crystal-images center on the indiscernible boundary between actual and virtual. Deleuze names mirrors, water surfaces, windows, and forks in the road as spatial thresholds for this effect. This reading extends Deleuze's crystal-image framework onto the figure of the road itself. When highways stop moving in one single direction but instead branch, loop, double back, or reverse, they function as temporal crystals. The road traveled and the road ahead, with departure and return, actual and virtual states reflect one another and become indiscernible.

Closely linked to the crystal-image are Deleuze's "powers of the false." The phrase does not mean truth and falsehood become meaningless. Instead, it describes a re-ordered mode of knowledge: the time-image no longer prioritizes judging whether events are factually true or false. Instead, fictional constructs can bring about real ethical consequences. Whether a dream "actually happened" loses importance; what matters is how it reshapes characters' and viewers' understanding of moral situations. The dream itself carries real weight. Deleuze highlights the creative potential opened up when fixed models of truth are destabilized: new narrative and ethical possibilities can emerge [12].

These three concepts form the analytical framework for reading Pema Tseden's time-image cinema. The contrast between movement-image and time-image defines his generic revision: action yields to direct temporal manifestation. The recollection-image explains how the past surfaces while characters travel. The crystal-image and the "powers of the false" account for moments in his road films where actual and virtual, dream and waking, revenge and release blur together to produce real ethical effects.

3. *The Search*: in time

Written and directed by Pema Tseden, with Sonthar Gyal as cinematographer, *The Search* (2009) was shot on 35 mm film and performed largely in Tibetan by non-professional actors. It premiered at the 12th Shanghai International Film Festival in 2009 and won the Golden Goblet Grand Jury Prize. The plot unfolds across high-altitude Qinghai–Tibet roads. Pema Tseden leads a film crew across snow-capped mountains, grasslands, and monasteries, visiting communities to cast an actor for a film adaptation of the Tibetan opera about Prince Drime Kunden. The crew moves from monastery to village, grassland to town, meeting many candidates yet never finding the perfect performer. This continuously delayed goal turns the journey itself into the film's real subject. The road is no longer only a means toward a destination; it becomes a space where memory can surface. At the level of genre, the film exhibits qualities of the time-image: narrative is not driven by goal-achievement, and time itself becomes something for audiences to perceive. This tendency is articulated through pure optical-sound situations, in which the present perceptual image also becomes the medium through which recollection surfaces.

The film's investment in such situations is clearest in its handling of landscape and duration. Wide-angle framing and long takes are used repeatedly, though not as a fixed formula. Rather than relying on close-ups to convey emotion, the film often shoots from the moving jeep, displaying the Tibetan landscape and placing viewers in the passenger's seat. A sequence after the crew leaves Nimu Village makes the point concretely. Inside the car, Duobei, their guide, recounts a past romantic relationship. The shot runs roughly one and a half minutes and is filmed from outside the vehicle. A passenger with a scarf leans against the car window; outside scenery glides past, reflected

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on the glass, while the soundtrack carries Duobei's emotional account of his former lover. At this point the film constructs what can be called a recollection-image. The past is not staged as a flashback that replaces the present image with a past one; it surfaces as a virtual layer within the present, carried by voice, reflection, and duration. Duobei's memory becomes visible without being objectified. Recollection here is not a psychological explanation inserted into the journey but an image produced at the intersection of sound, landscape, and the long take. Two contrasts are at work in the scene.

Movement and stillness are held in tension. Mountains, grassland, and sky recede continuously in the background; the landscape streams past the car window. The people sitting inside, by contrast, remain relatively stationary. Travel ordinarily implies spatial movement and change. Over this long take, however, meaningful change comes not from shifting location but from feeling stirred up by spoken memory.

Immersion and detachment are likewise set against each other. The speaker is absorbed in his own reminiscence, while the other passengers listen only partially. The surrounding landscape remains indifferent to human emotion. The vehicle's forward motion does not push the plot forward. Instead, it slows narrative pace, creating an interval where personal memory can emerge. The road functions not as an arrow pointing toward an end point, but as a container holding memory; and the recollection-image remains bound to the present perceptual situation rather than escaping into a separate past.

4. *Jinpa*: in dream

Jinpa (2018), written and directed by Pema Tseden, adapts two of his short stories: I Went to a Very Far Place and O Sole Mio. A truck-driver named *Jinpa* travels along Amdo's roads. After accidentally hitting and killing a sheep, he feels guilt and performs a small burial ritual for the animal, marking a turning point in his inner journey. The film opens with a classic road movie setup: driver *Jinpa* gives a ride to a hitchhiker who has just murdered a man to avenge his father's death. Two men share one road; the generic road movie structure remains intact. Very quickly, though, linear journey logic dissolves into dream-like ambiguity. The physical road of road movie convention stays in view, but its temporal rules have been rewritten.

Moments of mistaken identity recur through the film. The truck-driver *Jinpa* and the vengeful hitchhiker share exactly the same given name. At key moments, people they encounter confuse the two men. A restaurant waiter addresses the driver as the man who committed murder; the killer is repeatedly called by the driver's name. Identity grows uncertain as they travel. A road that should separate past and present along a linear timeline folds back on itself through this doubled naming. This is the crystal-image of the road: actual and virtual selves, who a person is and who they are mistaken for, reflect one another and become hard to distinguish [12]. Pecic [15] argues that *Jinpa* marks an aesthetic and thematic shift in Pema Tseden's work. The landscape no longer overwhelms human characters, instead providing background for intensified interpersonal exchange. At its core, Pecic reads the film as exploring a crisis in Tibetan masculinity, making visible through doubled identities along the road. This reading runs parallel to the argument here, which treats the two *Jinpa*s' ambiguous identity as a formal device transforming the highway into a crystal-image.

Dream sequences reinforce this effect. The killer Jinpa describes a dream in which he is hanged. Later, that vision unfolds on screen as if it were real. Viewers cannot firmly tell whether they witness dream or waking reality. Boundaries between dream and lived experience dissolve upon the road [12].

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Through its treatment of memory and dreaming, *Jinpa* turns the road into a crystal of time. In *The Search*, memories still connect to real people and concrete past events. In *Jinpa*, even memory and dream lose guaranteed factual status. The film activates Deleuze's "powers of the false." Fictional material no longer needs validation as factual truth; it can generate real-world ethical outcomes. The killer Jinpa is trapped within cycles of revenge and cannot escape. It is precisely the dream, a non-actual vision, that reveals his potential fate of execution. This fictional image is not mere falsehood. It becomes the catalyst for moral choice. When the killer finally abandons vengeance and hands himself in, his transformation arises not from literal events on the road, but from the blurred boundary between dream and reality [12]. The road no longer leads toward a geographical destination; it points toward an ethical decision.

In interviews, Pema Tseden repeatedly states he offers no definitive answer distinguishing what is real from what is imagined in his films. He prefers to leave audiences suspended between these two states. His collected notes and short stories *The Story Is Only Half Told* [16] make this position explicit: reality and dream, fact and fiction sit side-by-side without clear hierarchical ranking. The ending preserves this suspension rather than resolving it. Driver *Jinpa* and killer *Jinpa* go separate ways, and it remains unclear whether their encounter has fully concluded.

A progression can therefore be seen within the time-image logic across the two films. *The Search* brings the past into present-day experience through recollection. *Jinpa* goes further, rendering that dividing line itself indiscernible via the crystal-image. In both films, roads do not deliver characters to destinations. Instead, they make time visible. Pema Tseden's reworking of the road movie genre does not discard its outer form. It empties out movement-image logic and fills the form with the direct presentation of time.

5. Tibetan cinema after Pema Tseden

Pema Tseden passed away from illness on 8 May 2023, aged fifty-three. The highland roads so central to his cinema suddenly felt empty without this pioneering filmmaker. Still, the generic re-working of his films carries forward. Dajie Dingzeng, his assistant director on multiple productions, and younger director Kangdrun (Gangzhen) continue to expand the possibilities of Tibetan-language cinema in their own practices. Pema Tseden re-oriented screen representations of Tibet: moving them from "a spectacle to be watched" toward "time to be experienced." His revision reaches beyond the road movie genre itself. He reshapes how scholars and audiences approach Tibetan cinema and minority-theme film more broadly. Rather than viewing these works through an exoticizing lens, audiences encounter local people speaking through their own faces, memories, and lived temporality. When roads no longer promise arrival at a fixed endpoint, time itself becomes the measure. Pema Tseden's stories were only half-told, and the cinema of Tibet is still traveling down its own open road.

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