

## Article

# Liberation through Seeing: Screening *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

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Received: 19 June 2018; Accepted: 30 July 2018; Published: 7 August 2018



**Abstract:** The text known in English as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is arguably the principle source for popular understandings of Tibetan Buddhist conceptions of death. First translated into English in 1927, subsequent translations have read it according to a number of interpretive frameworks. This paper examines two recent films that take *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as their inspiration: Bruce Joel Rubin's *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) and Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* (2009). Neither of these films overtly claim to be depicting *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, but the directors of both have acknowledged that the text was an influence on their films, and both are undeniably about the moment of death and what follows. The analysis begins with the question of how, and to what degree, each of the films departs from the meaning and purpose of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, before moving on to examine the reasons, both practical and ideological, for these changes. Buddhist writer Bruce Joel Rubin wrote a film that sought to depict the death experience from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective, but ultimately audience expectation and studio pressure transformed the film into a story at odds with Tibetan Buddhism. Gaspar Noé wrote and directed a film that is based on a secular worldview, yet can be seen to be largely consistent with a Tibetan Buddhist reading. Finally, I consider if, and to what extent, these films function to express or cultivate an experiential engagement with Tibetan Buddhist truths and realization, concluding that *Jacob's Ladder* does not, while *Enter the Void* largely succeeds, despite the intention of its creator.

**Keywords:** *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*; Tibetan Buddhism; Death and Buddhism; Buddhism and Film; *Jacob's Ladder*; *Enter the Void*

## 1. Introduction

The Tibetan Buddhist text known in English as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is arguably the principal source for popular understandings of Tibetan Buddhist conceptions of death and afterlife. It is also probably the best-known text of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, though it has been less important in Tibetan Buddhism than has been assumed by its Western readers.<sup>1</sup> The text is a liturgical guide to negotiating the experiences that arise during and following death. The text assumes that only a spiritually advanced person, and one well-versed in the path laid out in this text, stands much of a chance of attaining liberation and avoiding rebirth. The narrative describes the stages through which the being will pass, exhorting him/her to recognize the opportunities that arise there for attaining the realization of awakening and liberation from rebirth. If this recognition is not attained, the being will be reborn into one of the six realms of existence: gods, jealous gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, or hell-beings.

<sup>1</sup> See chapter two of Lopez 1999 for a discussion of this (Lopez 1999).

At the moment of death, the being enters the Intermediate State of the Moment of Death (*'chi kha'i bar do*)<sup>2</sup> and experiences a brilliant Clear Light or Inner Radiance (*od gsal*). Through recognition of this light as one's own Buddha Nature (*rigs*, Sanskrit: *gotra* or *de gshegs snying po*, Sanskrit: *tathāgatagarbha*) and the radiant ground of reality or the Buddha Body of Reality (*chos sku*, Sanskrit: *dharmakāya*), brings liberation from rebirth and the actualization of the Buddha Body of Reality. From the perspective of the Great Perfection tradition of the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which is the philosophical and practical foundation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the Buddha Body of Reality is the primordially pure foundation of both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, "whose natural expression is inner radiance and the naturally present, unchanging, pristine cognition that spontaneously abides in oneself".<sup>3</sup> A second appearance of the Clear Light accompanies the departure of the consciousness from the body. If these opportunities are missed, the being moves to the Intermediate State of Reality (*chos nyid kyi bar do*),<sup>4</sup> in which she will experience seven days of radiant visions of beautiful, peaceful deities, followed by seven days of terrifying wrathful deities which are in reality the same as the peaceful deities. Throughout, there are opportunities for liberation, and temptations to take embodied existence. If one is able to realize the ultimate nature of these visions, and of oneself, one is freed. If not, one enters the Intermediate State of Rebirth (*srid pa'i bar do*),<sup>5</sup> which can last up to seven weeks, and at the end of which one will take birth in one of the six realms. Even here, the text exhorts the being to realize ultimate reality and be liberated, but in all likelihood, she will be drawn to birth in one of the realms, being attracted to the copulating couple who will be her new parents. At this point, the being is exhorted to choose wisely among the realms, choosing to be born as a human or above.

First translated into English and published in 1927 (and most recently in 2005), the various translations have read the text according to a number of interpretive frameworks, from that of the Theosophical Society, to psychology, to an acid-trip guidebook. Each departs at least partially, and often radically, from the meaning of the text for Tibetan Buddhists prior to the 20th century. In the last few decades, the proliferation of interpretations has extended into the medium of film. This paper examines two films that take *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as their inspiration: *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) and *Enter the Void* (2009).

## 2. The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State

The text that we are considering here is the English-language *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, in its various versions. No actual Tibetan text with this title exists, and no single text in Tibetan corresponds exactly to what W. Y. Evans-Wentz published in 1927.<sup>6</sup> The Tibetan source of Evans-Wentz's text, and the subsequent translations, is *The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State* (*Bar-do thos-grol chen-mo*), which is traditionally attributed to the legendary Tantric saint and wonder-worker Padmasambhava during his stay in Tibet in the 8th century. The text is part of a larger collection compiled in the 17th century, entitled *The Profound Doctrine of Self-Liberation [through Encountering] the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities* (*zab-chos zhi-khro dgongs-pa rang-grol*).<sup>7</sup>

Three hundred years later, it was a manuscript of this text that would come into the hands of an American Theosophist by the name of Walter Wentz, better known as W. Y. Evans-Wentz. The manuscript contained texts on the history of these teachings, liturgical texts, "Liberation Upon

<sup>2</sup> We will prefer Gyurme Dorje's recent translation throughout, but will also include references to Kazi Dawa Samdup's translation in Evans-Wentz's edition as it is the better known one. (Coleman and Jinpa 2007, pp. 227–34; Evans-Wentz [1927] 2000, pp. 89–101).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the view of the Great Perfection and its superiority to all other Buddhist vehicles, see (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 294–310).

<sup>4</sup> (Coleman and Jinpa 2007, pp. 234–72; Evans-Wentz [1927] 2000, pp. 101–52).

<sup>5</sup> (Coleman and Jinpa 2007, pp. 273–303; Evans-Wentz [1927] 2000, pp. 153–93).

<sup>6</sup> For an accessible overview of the text's history, see Lopez's discussion (Lopez 2011, pp. 1–12).

<sup>7</sup> For a traditional account, see Gyurme Dorje's account in his translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Coleman and Jinpa 2007, pp. xxviii–li). For a bibliography on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, see (Kemp 2015).



Hearing” texts, “Liberation Upon Wearing” texts (which consists of mantras to be worn on the body), advanced Tantric practice texts, and texts on the invocation of powerful protector deities. Wentz would select seven of the 17 chapters and call them *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The most recent edition is the 2005 translation by Gyurme Dorje, which translates all of the texts from the original 17th century collection. Chapter Eleven of this work corresponds to the text that is the core of Evans-Wentz and Dawa Samdup’s *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and nearly every subsequent translation. It is *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* compiled and edited by Evans-Wentz that will be considered in what follows as it is the version referenced by the writers of the two films, and is the one that appears in both films. Citations from *The Book* will be from Gyurme Dorje’s superior 2009 translation.

### 3. Evans-Wentz’s *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and Its Legacy

W. Y. Evans-Wentz was a spiritual seeker of the sort not uncommon in the early 20th century. Born to a German immigrant and an American Quaker in Trenton, New Jersey in 1878, young Walter discovered Freethinking and Spiritualism in his teens, eventually discovering the writings of Madame Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society. Evans-Wentz officially joined the Society in 1901, and encouraged by the head of the American Section of the Society, he went to Stanford and eventually matriculated at Oxford, where he received a Bachelor’s degree in Anthropology. After completing his thesis, Evans-Wentz embarked on a world tour that took him to Greece, Egypt, Sri Lanka, and finally, India.

Evans-Wentz acquired a Tibetan manuscript in Darjeeling in 1919, and shortly after bought a collection of texts from Major W. L. Campbell, who had purchased them in Gyantse, Tibet. Included in these books was the *Great Liberation upon Hearing in the Intermediate State*. He took his texts to Kazi Dawa Samdup, who was an English teacher at a high school for Tibetans in India. Samdup was a highly-skilled translator, but Evans-Wentz’s insistence on an archaic King James Version translation-style English obscures this to some degree.

From the 17 chapters of the original collection, Evans-Wentz chose three chapters of instruction and four prayers.<sup>8</sup> As Donald Lopez points out (Lopez 2011), two of those chapters are actually meditative manuals for advanced Tantric practitioners, not mortuary texts at all, and he says, “The irony, in the event that yet another was needed, is that Evans-Wentz selected two texts for the living and called them *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.”<sup>9</sup> The title of the book was chosen by Evans-Wentz because of its perceived similarities to the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (which is also not titled this in Egyptian), as ancient Egypt was in vogue among Theosophists and other occultists as the *ur*-source of esoteric wisdom.

Less than half of the pages of Evans-Wentz’s text consist of the translation of these chapters, and even these pages are often largely Evans-Wentz’s commentarial footnotes. Spiritualism and Theosophy arose as late 19th century reactions to the supposed triumph of reason and science, though rather than rejecting science, it is characteristic of these and other occult movements to attempt to make the formerly mystical understood and proven in terms of science. Evans-Wentz’s Theosophical assumptions color the text most significantly in his discussion of rebirth, which he reinterprets in light of Blavatsky’s doctrine of a kind of universal evolution of souls toward perfection, which is not at all Buddhist, Tibetan or otherwise. Evans-Wentz explains away the fact that the text explicitly says that the dying human may reincarnate as an animal, hungry ghost or hell-being by dismissing this as the exoteric understanding that needs to be interpreted through the true esoteric reading—which is explained through the doctrines of the Theosophical Society. Subsequent editions of the text were augmented with introductory essays by Sir John Woodroffe (who wrote on, and was a practitioner of, Hindu tantra under the pseudonym Arthur Avalon), Lama Anagarika Govinda (née Ernst Lothar

<sup>8</sup> Cuevas (2003) observes that Evans-Wentz does not include the most important text of the collection, which is the one most commonly read to the dying and dead in Tibet.

<sup>9</sup> (Lopez 2011, p. 117).

Hoffman), and psychologist Carl Gustav Jung. Each of these commentators added his own layer of interpretation, though Evans-Wentz gets the last word in his extensive introductory chapter and the copious notes in the translation itself.

In 1964 Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert (later known as Ram Das) published *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, thus bringing *The Book* to the attention of the Counter Culture. The Beatles' song "Tomorrow Never Knows" was inspired by this book, bringing it into popular culture.<sup>10</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s Evans-Wentz's book found a new audience as a new fascination with death swept the U.S.A. Elisabeth Kubler Ross' 1969 *On Death and Dying* was followed by many others, and in her 1975 book *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* she offered high praise to Evans-Wentz's *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In 1976 Ray Moody's *Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon—Survival of Bodily Death* birthed the "near-death experience" genre, which continues to thrive up to the present day. Since the mid-1970s, translations have been published which also reflect the ideological presuppositions of their translators, or Buddhist Modernism<sup>11</sup> more generally, and, with the exception of the most recent, 2006 translation, all consist of the same texts used by Evans-Wentz.

#### 4. The Tibetan Buddhist Meaning and Significance of the Text

Before we move to the analysis of these films and a discussion of their screen versions, it is important to establish the meaning of the subject matter and the purpose of this text for Tibetan Buddhists. The text arose and was preserved primarily by members of the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism. As such, it does not reflect Tibetan Buddhist thought generally, much less Buddhist thought more broadly. The existence of an intermediate state (*bar do*, Sanskrit: *antarābhava*) between lives was not universally accepted by early Buddhist groups. The Theravādin tradition, for instance, rejected the notion, claiming that the dying person's consciousness connected directly to the new physical body at the moment of conception. Other early Buddhist groups, most importantly the Sarvāstivādins, whose doctrines are important for Tibetan Buddhists, asserted that the deceased person was first born as a "smell eater," (*dri za*, Sanskrit: *gandharva*). According to the highly influential 5th century Sarvāstivādin text, the *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu, this being is similar to a human subject and is composed of subtle forms of the five elements, possessing senses superior to those of a limited physical being. Because of this superiority to the human condition, the being is able to see at a distance and pass without obstruction through matter. Fully possessing a subtle material body and "the divine eye", the being is transported to the place of his rebirth according to his or her karma<sup>12</sup>, seeing there her or his future mother and father having sex. If the being is to be reborn as a male, he will be gripped by lust for the mother, and hatred toward the father. If the being is to be born as a female, she will experience lust for the father and hatred toward the father. Tormented by desire and hatred, the being would be drawn to their sexual union and is blissfully absorbed in their orgasm and co-mingled uterine and seminal fluids. The intermediate being dies there and is reborn as the fetus.<sup>13</sup> This narrative is also found in some other texts, both Theravāda and Mahāyāna, but the next crucial step in the development toward the Tibetan bardo theory comes from the theory and practice of Tantric Buddhism.

Tantric Buddhism, or the "Adamantine Vehicle" (*Vajrayāna*), emerged and rose to prominence in Indian Buddhism between the 7th and 12th centuries CE, building upon and developing visionary methods found in some Mahāyāna texts, as well as incorporating Śaiva yogic practices that focused on the manipulation of energy in the subtle body.<sup>14</sup> Such practices are said to bring about ecstatic,

<sup>10</sup> (Lopez 2011, p. 8).

<sup>11</sup> Buddhist Modernism is characterized by a demythologizing and psychologizing of Buddhist doctrine, among other concessions to modernity. See McMahan (2012, pp. 159–76) for an excellent and concise discussion.

<sup>12</sup> For a concise account of early Buddhist views on the intermediate state, see Cuevas (1996).

<sup>13</sup> See Cuevas (1996, p. 285) for a translation of Vasubandhu's description of this process.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the influence of Śaiva tantric thought and practice on the Vajrayāna, see Sanderson (2009, pp. 124–43).

transformative mental states that are thought to greatly accelerate progress toward awakening. These methods sometimes also utilize sexual and mortuary imagery and practices that reflect their origins among cremation-ground dwelling yogis. Much of the antinomian imagery and practice came to be understood symbolically, which gradually made its integration into institutional monastic Buddhism possible. By the end of the 11th century, the Vajrayāna had become orthodoxy in the great monastic centers in India, understood to be a higher vehicle that completed and surpassed the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna, as the pinnacle of the Buddha's teachings.

Tantric Buddhism introduced several core meditative practices that sought to bring about and manipulate the processes of death, intermediate state, and rebirth.<sup>15</sup> Advanced practices sought to transmute the base impulses of desire and hatred in order to realize the luminous, and unbounded nature of mind. Such practices often utilize sex (either physically or in visualization) to activate states of consciousness that are intensely blissful and untainted by coarse conceptuality, which also take the yogi through the stages of death. These yogic dress-rehearsals make it possible for the person to recognize the dawning of the Clear Light mind in death. However, as Mahāyāna Buddhism holds to the Bodhisattva ideal, it is perhaps more important that this practice also gives the person lucid (and compassionate) control over the conditions of rebirth—in order to be born well and in a way that serves others.

But more than being just Buddhist, or Mahāyāna, or Tantric Buddhist, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is based in the highest teaching of the Nyingma sect: the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*).<sup>16</sup> While everything just mentioned for Tantric Buddhism holds for Great Perfection teachings, here there is the further assertion that this Clear Light Mind or Inner Radiance is fully present in every moment of ordinary consciousness and is the ultimate source of every manifest world and the beings in them. So, this precious opportunity of recognizing this light is not just in meditative practice, in death, intermediate state and rebirth, but also in ordinary awareness in life. If one is introduced to this inner light by a lama and this recognition is cultivated in meditative practice, awakening and liberation can be had in this very life. Throughout Great Perfection doctrine and practice, and in *The Great Liberation Upon Hearing in the Intermediate Stage*, it is this recognition of the primordially pure light that the practitioner is exhorted to realize, as it is the sole and sufficient cause of liberation.

## 5. Jacob's Ladder

Written by Bruce Joel Rubin (*Brainstorm*, *Ghost*) and directed by Adrian Lyne (*Flashdance*, *9 1/2 Weeks*, *Fatal Attraction*), *Jacob's Ladder* recounts the story of a soldier in Vietnam who is fatally wounded in the first seven minutes of the film (Figure 1) and until the final seven minutes the actions on the screen (with the exception of a few flashes back to Vietnam “in dreams” and medical traumas, from which he “awakens”) are entirely the inner experiences of a man dying. The bulk of the film narrative centers on Jacob's illusory post-Vietnam life with his girlfriend Jezzie, into which increasingly terrifying encounters intrude, slowly leading up to Jacob's final realization that all of this is actually a moment-of-death hallucination that ends with his death in Vietnam.

<sup>15</sup> An influential non-Nyingma Tantric teaching that deals with death and the intermediate state as potentially liberating is the Six Dharmas of Naropa. See Mullin (2006) for these practices, though these teachings are important to several sects but Mullin relies almost exclusively on the commentarial tradition of the Geluk sect.

<sup>16</sup> For a bibliography on The Great Perfection, see Sam van Schaik's bibliography on Oxford Bibliographies (van Schaik 2012).



**Figure 1.** Jacob is bayoneted in Vietnam.

Rubin acknowledged in a 1991 interview in *Tricycle* magazine that the film was inspired by the 1962 short, *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*,<sup>17</sup> which depicts the last experiences of a soldier being hanged for desertion. He further said, “I drew this journey from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* ... Jacob’s Ladder is the bardo of the journey.” Though Rubin never overtly acknowledges this in the bonus-feature “making-of” documentary *Building Jacob’s Ladder*, he makes several remarks that would tip off anyone well-informed about Tibetan Buddhism or *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. A subtle *mise-en-scene* detail in the film gives it away too—we see the back of the psychedelic cover of the 1972 Peter Pauper publication of Evans-Wentz’s book on Jacob’s nightstand. This is the same edition featured more prominently in *Enter the Void*.

## 6. Rubin’s Book of the Dead

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* does not lend itself to being a very good film. Its second-person exhortations are not well-suited to a typical narrative film, and the mind-blowing visions of the Bardo of Reality would require CGI effects on an astonishing scale.<sup>18</sup> To what degree does the narrative actually coincide with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*? As already noted, Jacob’s experiences occur before his death, and while *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* does describe the signs of impending death, the visionary experiences that are at the heart of the text all occur after respiration has ceased and there is no pulse to be found in the carotid arteries, which begins the first intermediate state, the “Intermediate State of the Moment of Death.”

Rubin said in the *Tricycle* interview that the roar and the blinding light of the oncoming subway train (Figure 2) is “the light of reality, the Clear Light that is the light of liberation.” *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* says:

“O, Child of Buddha Nature, when your mind and body separate, the pure [luminous] apparitions of reality itself, will arise: subtle and clear, radiant and dazzling, naturally bright and awesome, shimmering like a mirage on a plain in summer. Do not fear them! Do not be terrified! Do not be awed! They are the natural luminosities of your own actual reality. Therefore recognize them [as they are]!”

<sup>17</sup> (Maida 1991).

<sup>18</sup> There is a 1994 NHK/National Film Board of Canada documentary, entitled *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and narrated by Leonard Cohen, about Tibetan death practices and the use of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, that includes a partial, animated depiction of the progress through the bardos.



From within these lights, the natural sound of reality will resound, clear and thunderous, reverberating like a thousand simultaneous peals of thunder. This is the natural sound of your own actual reality. So, do not be afraid! Do not be terrified! Do not be awed!”<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 2.** The oncoming subway train.

Terrified, Jacob jumps out of the way of the train just in time. So, by eight minutes into the film Jacob passes into the second intermediate state, the “Intermediate State of Reality,” though the Vietnam “flashbacks” make this problematic. In this stage, the consciousness leaves the body and witnesses the scene of death and one’s loved ones. The person becomes lucid again, but does not know that he is dead.<sup>20</sup> Though we have only a jump cut from the Vietnam stabbing scene to the subway car to begin this stage, the arc of the narrative does depict Jacob as first unaware, and later in denial, that he is dead.

Apparent memories of past events, and “dreams within dreams” characterize the bulk of the film, with the increasingly menacing presence of “demonic” characters. The flashbacks of Jacob’s life before the war (which seem like the present), and the flashbacks of Vietnam (which actually are the present) are more consistent with the Western notion of one’s life flashing before one’s eyes at the moment of death than with anything in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Mention of memories of one’s life prior to the moments before death does not appear there. Horrific visions come only in the second half of the third intermediate state, the “Intermediate State of Reality” of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (after seven days of the appearance of the peaceful deities). The being does not maintain a foothold in his or her former life in this stage, so this too departs significantly from the text. The visions of the wrathful deities are far more horrific than what we see in the film, and are continuously experienced with no respite. Though Jacob sees unsettling visions from the moment that he “wakes up” on the subway, the appearance of them increases as the story progresses, which is partially consistent with the text’s account of the progress through the stages of the Intermediate State of Reality.

The background events against which these terrifying encounters take place, however, are primarily a fantasy life with his girlfriend Jezzie after the war, after his divorce from his first wife, and, more importantly, after the death of his son Gabe. It is intriguing that this main story line is not, we are led to believe, the actual life that Jacob had left behind. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* says that the dying person sees his loved ones immediately after his consciousness leaves

<sup>19</sup> (Coleman and Jinpa 2007, p. 236; Evans-Wentz [1927] 2000, p. 104).

<sup>20</sup> (Coleman and Jinpa 2007, p. 236; Evans-Wentz [1927] 2000, p. 105).



his body, but flashbacks to previous experiences with them are absent. The depiction of Jacob's working out of his guilt about his son's death, and perhaps for his desire for Jezzie, if she is a real person at all, is more a psychological interpretation than a Buddhist one, and this is consistent with Rubin's Buddhist Modernism as expressed in *Building Jacob's Ladder*, and that of the more recent translations/interpretations of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

The second intermediate state, the "Intermediate State of Reality," is a series of experiences of luminous mandalas of Buddhas in which the being is given further opportunities for recognizing the Clear Light, along with corresponding temptations to take birth in one of the six embodied realms. *Jacob's Ladder* depicts none of this, dissimulating its Buddhist inspiration. It is only after the appearance of these peaceful deities that the wrathful ones show up to dispense a more aggressive wake-up call to the intermediate state being. Jacob does not experience the former at all, experiencing instead a fantasy life with a troubled past (the death of a child) that becomes increasingly harrowing with the introduction of a military conspiracy and the appearance of demonic presences.

What then of the two other central characters in the film, Jezzie and Louis? Louis is the simpler character, providing something like the guiding narrative to the newly dead person. In the documentary *Building Jacob's Ladder*, Rubin says, "Louis is the voice of wisdom, he is the Guru, he is the mentor, he is the teacher. He is the person who truly comes into your life to tell what is happening." The vocabulary and imagery, however, are Christian. Seeing Louis' face against a halo-like light, Jacob says, "You know you look like an angel Louis?" and in Louis' central monologue he cites Meister Eckhart rather than Padmasambhava. His presence in Jacob's self-made hell is more evocative of the presence of Buddhas depicted in each of the six realms in the Wheel of Rebirth or the Mahayana Buddhist idea of the presence of Bodhisattvas in even the worst states of existence, offering aid to the suffering; and his dramatic rescue of Jacob from the hellish hospital evokes the Taoist and Chinese Buddhist rites of saving beings from their births in the realm of the hungry ghosts, or the Nyingma practice of "Dredging the Depths of Hell," but these are not found in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Jezzie is a more complex figure. She comforts Jacob and assures him of his sanity, but as we know, this actually helps keep him trapped in the experience. We do not know who she "really" is, and in the dream sequence after Jacob's high fever, we see him in bed with his wife Sarah, whom he tells that he dreamed he was living with another woman, so it is difficult to know what Jacob's life really had been as he was dying in Vietnam. In the "Building Jacob's Ladder," Rubin says that that scene is wish fulfillment, for Jacob, and for the audience. While Jezzie is clearly a desirable and desiring woman, it is not justified to simply say that she represents desire, which is an obstacle to liberation. There are several moments of real tenderness and concern on her part, and her throwing the photos of Gabe in the fire could plausibly be said to be contributing to Jacob letting his previous life go rather than holding him back. In the documentary, however, Rubin says that Jezzie is part of the "forces of darkness," so the issue is really not settled. In any case, neither Louis nor Jezzie can reasonably be seen as having any parallel in the intermediate state.

The most significant difference between the journey of Jacob and the journey of the dead person in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is how Jacob eventually attains realization and is freed from his nightmarish experience. In the *Tricycle* interview, Rubin says that the basic message of the film is "that man does have a spiritual being that survives his physical life and that the one thing that continues with man beyond this physical world is the love that he shared in this life. Love, and in a sense the soul, transcend the experience of material existence." In the documentary, however, Rubin talks more about Jacob's inability to let go of his life, and the imagined life that he experiences in the last moments of life are a struggle with this. This is consistent with what we read in the beginning of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as the person dying is exhorted to first recognize the Clear Light that is about to arise and rest in that experience, and then to cultivate loving kindness, compassion, and the altruistic intention to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Rubin's assertion that love transcends this life is problematic from a Buddhist perspective. If this means a selfless love for all sentient beings, which is the case in the opening exhortations to the dying person, then the narrative is consistent;

but if we are talking about Jacob's love for his family, this is, in fact, the final bond that holds him in the intermediate state.

The ending that Rubin intended (which is included as a bonus feature on the DVD and Blu-ray) would have resolved the story in a way that was thoroughly Buddhist. The original ending had Jacob return to his home (the one with Sarah and the children), but Jezzie arrives and then undergoes a terrifying transformation, of the same visual kind as we see earlier in the film at the party. At the end, she stands before Jacob, her face covered, and Jacob yells "Who are you?" He pulls the cover from her face and sees himself. She was the projection of his own desires. In "Building Jacob's Ladder," Rubin refers to Jezzie in this climactic scene as "a being who liberates." He says that this scene would have "carried us beyond the simplistic resolution that now exists in the movie" and that without it, "something is missing, and I think a lot of people watching the movie know that."

In the making-of documentary, director Adrian Lyne remarks that they showed this version to a test audience and people stumbled from the theatre, "catatonic." He said that it was just too much to do to an audience. Rubin says that the studio asked for a different ending. Whosever choice it was, Lyne claims in the documentary, that it was he who came up with the idea that Jacob had had a son who had died, and that that would give the film a more satisfying, personal ending. Satisfying and personal perhaps, but the ending moves the film's narrative far from the perspective of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or Tibetan Buddhism, or Buddhism in general.

At the end of the film as theatrically released, Jacob's liberation seems to be simply his ascent to the light, reunited with his son. When asked by the *Tricycle* interviewer if he thought everyone connects to the clear light liberation in the end, Rubin said, "Buddhist theology doesn't quite give that to every departing soul." But the fact of the matter is that traditional Tibetan Buddhist doctrine overwhelmingly asserts that only with the greatest effort does anyone stand a chance at liberation; and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* assumes that prior familiarity with the process and assiduous meditative practice is the only guarantee, or even possibility, of escape from the cycle of rebirth. This is why, of course, the final section of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* consists of one last-ditch attempt to avoid rebirth and, more realistically, to find a good rebirth when all else fails—which it inevitably does for all but the most fortunate accomplished beings. Whether because of "wish fulfillment" on the part of the filmmakers or studio concerns about financial returns, in the end, *Jacob's Ladder*, in the theatrically-released version, ends up in a place quite alien to the teachings of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or Buddhism generally.

## 7. Dissimulation and Audience Expectation

There is no need to argue for the applicability of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in interpreting the film, but to the majority of viewers, this is not at all apparent as the narrative and visual aspects do not in any obvious way suggest a Tibetan Buddhist context. Using this film in class, I find that students consistently pick up on obvious and familiar aspects of the film that seem to corroborate their assumption that the film is basically Christian in orientation.

Most obviously, the film's title itself evokes the story of the dream that the patriarch Jacob had of a ladder connecting heaven and earth, on which angels are ascending and descending (Genesis 28: 10–19). In an expository scene in the film, however, the "ladder" referred to in the film's title is a powerful hallucinogen tested on Vietnam soldiers in order to make them fiercer fighters. "A fast trip right down the ladder. Right to the primal fear, the base anger." This is very different than a ladder up to Heaven. The stairway up at the end of film could be read to invoke the Biblical image, but a cautious analysis would resist this over-interpretation.

The average viewer may notice that the majority of the names of the characters are Biblical. Jacob, Sarah, and Jezebel, of course, are not Tibetan names. Jacob even explicitly says of his son's names, Jed and Eli, whose names Jezzie says are funny, "They're Biblical. They were prophets." Gabe (Gabriel) is the name of an angel in all three Abrahamic religions, and one could perhaps argue that Gabe plays a divine guiding role here in the film, though only at the end and this is probably an over-interpretation.

The average viewer may perhaps notice that Jacob's greatest protector and helper in the film, Louis, is a major character whose name does not fit this model. It is also worth pointing out here that most viewers probably miss the fact that all these Biblical references are from the Hebrew Bible rather than New Testament. If these indeed pointed to a religious background, it would make just as much, if not more, sense to understand it as a Jewish rather than a Christian story. Rubin states in the *Tricycle* interview that "Jacob was a renegade existentialist who had been Jewish, and who now is a man of no religion."

A third seeming reference to a Christian orientation to the story is Louis' quotation from Meister Eckhart to help Jacob understand the true nature of the demons hounding him. Louis says, "The only thing that burns in Hell is the part of you that won't let go of your life; your memories, your attachments. They burn 'em all away. But they're not punishing you, he said, they're freeing your soul. If you're frightened of dying and holding on, you'll see devils tearing your life away. But if you've made your peace, then the devils are really angels freeing you from the Earth. It's just a matter of how you look at it, that's all." What Louis says is apparently not an actual quote from Eckhart, but one could speculate that the choice of this particular Catholic mystic/theologian can be attributed to remarks by earlier Buddhist Modernists (especially D. T. Suzuki) who saw Eckhart's writings as consistent with Buddhism. The passage is, however, consistent with the continuous exhortations in *The Book of the Dead* to the bardo being to realize that the terrifying deities of the second part of the Bardo of Reality are actually Buddhas and projections of one's own consciousness.

To further undermine the assumption that the story takes place within a generically Christian background is a scene showing us a tense meeting between Jacob and Paul, one of the other Vietnam vets who is being hounded by hellish figures. After telling Jacob of his visions of demons "coming out of the walls," the tearful, nearly hysterical Paul pulls a small Bible, a cross, and a Catholic saint's medal from the pocket of his field jacket and tells him "Look, I carry these around everywhere with me. But they don't help. Nothing helps." When Paul's car explodes just after their meeting, knocking Jacob to the ground, the next shot shows the cross and medal fall to the pavement, visually demonstrating their inability to save Paul.

On the other hand, in the penultimate scene, we see Jacob in a taxi on his way to his former home with his wife Sarah and his sons. Jacob has just learned about the military conspiracy behind the "ladder" and the fact that it was American soldiers responsible for the massacre of their fellows, including Jacob. The distraught Jacob notices a small crucifix on the driver's keychain, gently clanking against the dash of the taxi. This is followed by a cut to Jacob being bayoneted in Vietnam, by an American soldier. This is followed by a cut back to Jacob in the taxi, with what appears to be a look of realization on his face, and a cut back to the crucifix. What connection is being suggested by this sequence is questionable. Perhaps the sight of the crucifix is a catalyst to Jacob's realization, but his torment is only increased, so perhaps this indicates the impotence of this religious symbol as in the case of Paul's saint's medal. Whichever it is, Jacob's confusion and misery are only finally overcome with the appearance of Gabe and their ascent into the light (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Gabe takes Jacob up to the light.

Rubin's original intention was to use medieval Christian art for his hellish imagery, which would have increased the viewer's assumption that film was Christian in orientation, but Lyne convinced him to do something different, and far more visually striking. Inspired by thalidomide-caused physical deformities and other medical horror<sup>21</sup>, imagery drawn from the works of artists Francis Bacon and Joel Peter Witkin, and innovative in-camera effects that produced disturbing blurring and fleeting glances of horrors (perhaps even more awful than what one does see), the visual style of the film is very effective in instilling in the viewer the bewilderment and terror of Jacob's mental state. One can assume that studio pressures and a concern for marketability on the part of the director had a good deal to do with the dissimulation about the origin of the film's ideas, and audience assumptions kept the Buddhist subtext largely unnoticed.

### 8. Experiencing Buddhism with *Jacob's Ladder*

In the *Tricycle* interview, Rubin said, "Hollywood is the dream factory, the place that takes people into the most secretive parts of themselves. Sitting in a dark theater staring at a big screen, people are very vulnerable. In this openness you can, if you want to, give very important lessons to an audience. You can touch the deepest part of the mass mind, and that's what I wanted to do."<sup>22</sup> It is clear from this, and other remarks in the interview, that Rubin believes that film can cultivate the experience of the Tibetan Buddhist intermediate state. Had director Adrian Lyne gone with the ending originally intended by writer Bruce Joel Rubin, one could argue that the film takes the viewer through the experience of the Tibetan Buddhist description of the process of death, leading up to Jacob's liberation through his realization that all the horrors, and in fact all of the facets of his seemingly post-war life, were in fact projections of his own mind. Presented only with Jacob's perspective, and sharing his confusion and terror, the viewer would finally have experienced the Tibetan Buddhist realization that "whatever sounds, lights or rays may arise, they cannot harm you. For you are beyond death now! It is enough that you simply recognize [the sounds and luminosities] to be manifestations of your own [actual reality]. Know that this is the intermediate state!"<sup>23</sup> With the tacked-on Hollywood ending, the viewer experiences Jacob's confusion and terror, but the resolution of Jacob's torment comes in

<sup>21</sup> This might have also been inspired by *The Psychedelic Experience*, where Leary, et. al. say that a Westerner may likely experience the wrathful visions in the form of being, "manipulated by scientific, torturing control-devices and other space-fiction horrors." (Leary et al. [1964] 2000, p. 54).

<sup>22</sup> (Maida 1991).

<sup>23</sup> (Coleman and Jinpa 2007, p. 236; Evans-Wentz [1927] 2000, p. 103).

the form of Jacob's dead son consoling him and taking him up the stairs of their home, into the light. Jacob and the viewer realize that he is dead, but there is no deeper recognition of the true nature of existence or ultimate reality, making it difficult to argue that the film presents a Buddhist message or that it takes the viewer into an experience of Buddhist truths. In the making-of documentary, director Lyne recounts that he was contacted by someone from a hospice organization asking if they could use scenes from the film because they had helped some with the dying process, so the film (or parts of it) seems to have the potential to engender transformation, or at least consolation. It is worth noting here that the elite Buddhist goal of liberation/awakening was rarely considered accessible to most people in pre-modern traditional Buddhist cultures, so perhaps the film's happy afterlife message is not completely unrecognizable to all Buddhists. The scene could be interpreted to imply Jacob's ascent to a higher rebirth.

### 9. *Enter the Void* (2009)

Gaspar Noé is one of modern cinema's most innovative directors and most audacious provocateurs. His 2002 rape-revenge film *Irreversible* shocked audiences with its brutal subject matter and its graphic depiction of rape, but also won him admirers for the film's creative narrative structure and jarring visual style. *Enter the Void* was his next full length project, and the writer/director's desire to shock and his narrative and visual virtuosity are fully manifest.

*Enter the Void* is the story of Oscar, a small-time drug dealer in Tokyo, living with his exotic dancer sister Linda in a tiny apartment in a sleazy, neon-lit part of the city. We learn in flashbacks that the brother-sister bond was informed by an early life tragedy: the children witnessed the gruesome death of the parents in a car crash from the back seat. They are also seemingly bound by a borderline erotic attraction that heightens the tension. Oscar is shot and killed in a drug deal gone wrong in the first half-hour of the two hour and forty-minute film. The rest of the film depicts, in an innovative first person POV manner, Oscar's after-death experiences, culminating in his (re)birth, which ends the film.

### 10. Noé's Book of the Dead

Noé has acknowledged the influence of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* on *Enter the Void* in numerous interviews. We see the book (the same 1972 edition of Evans-Wentz's book glimpsed in Jacob's Ladder) three minutes into the film as Oscar is reading it, he recommends it to his sister, and it is discussed with his friend Alex early in the film. From the first shot, the camera assumes a radical first-person POV of Oscar. Noé has said in interviews that this POV was inspired by the 1947 film, *Lady in the Lake*, which writer/director Noé watched under the influence of mushrooms. Prior to Oscar's death, the camera inhabits his embodied perspective—down to the “blinking” of the camera's eye.<sup>24</sup>

The first dialogue in the film is between Oscar and Linda. He calls her out onto the apartment balcony to show her a plane overhead, saying, “I wonder what Tokyo looks like from up there.” She says that she doesn't, because she would be afraid. “Of what?” he asks. “I don't know . . . of dying I guess . . . falling into the Void?” Oscar replies, “They say you fly when you die.” Returning inside, he shows her the book his friend Alex gave him, “It's like, the, uh, Tibetan Bible” (which of course it is not). After the brief discussion of the book with his sister and her concern that “so you're gonna become all Buddhist on me, huh?”, Linda leaves and Oscar goes immediately to his stash of the hallucinogen DMT. He smokes it, and his vision of the apartment and the city outside the window begins to blur and flash. As he looks toward the ceiling and closes his eyes, he sees luminous-yet-organic moving shapes above him (Figure 4). For the first time, the camera changes its POV and we see Oscar from above, presaging the camera's perspective for much of the depiction of the after-death experience. The camera spins looking down on him taking another hit before switching back to Oscar's first-person perspective of the psychedelic display above him until his phone rings.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of this method and its implications, see (Gazi 2017).



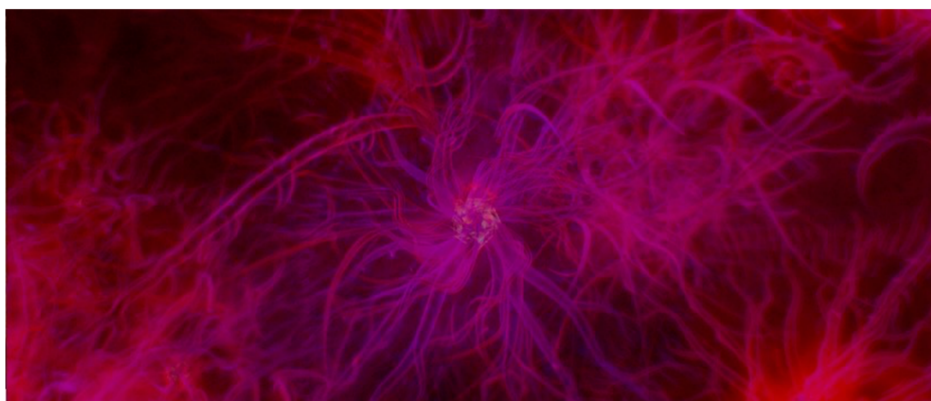


Figure 4. Oscar's DMT visions.

While Noé's remarks in interviews suggest that the DMT is the cause of the particular set of experiences that Oscar has after his shooting, Noé does not make much of a connection between psychedelics and religious experience. The linking of psychedelics and the expansion of consciousness, including the experience of death, is not, of course, new. Aldous Huxley, asserted this connection in a 1958 article, "The famous 'revival of religion' about which so many people have been talking for so long, will not come about as the result of evangelistic mass meetings or the television appearances of photogenic clergymen. It will come about as the result of biochemical discoveries that will make it possible for large numbers of men and women to achieve radical self-transcendence and a deeper understanding of the nature of things."<sup>25</sup> *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* explicitly linked acid trips with spiritual experience and the death process. Mark Strassman's book, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, examined the effects of this drug in a clinical setting (Strassman 2001). Unlike Noé, Leary and Strassman hold that psychedelic substances do not create the experience, but rather suspend the limitations of the "normal" state of consciousness, allowing for the experience of higher states that exist independent of the subject. "Of course, the drug does not produce the transcendent experience. It merely acts as a chemical key—it opens the mind, frees the nervous system of its ordinary patterns and structures."<sup>26</sup> Strassman's research revealed significant similarities between near-death experiences and the DMT trip, and he theorized that the chemical is released from the pineal gland during dreams and the death process. As David R. Church observes, psychedelics have had a significant, if overlooked, influence on the lineage of avant-garde filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger and Jordan Belson, which also includes Noé. Anger and Belson were also drawing on their religious traditions (Aleister Crowley's religion of Thelema, and Buddhism, respectively) in their films.<sup>27</sup>

After being shot by police in the toilet of a dive bar named "The Void," the camera first stays with Oscar's embodied perspective. We see his bloody hands on the dirty toilet's floor (Figure 5). The shot slowly fades to black and then the camera tilts up and moves up toward the light hanging from the ceiling, which, with its reflection on the walls and ceiling, resembles a mandala-like array (Figure 6). The camera merges into the pulsating light, and seems to move forward into a web of pulsing illumination (Figure 7). If this is the Clear Light, it is not recognized, as after about a minute and a half, the camera pulls back out of the light and looks down, slowly spinning, on Oscar's lifeless body (Figure 8). From this point on the camera shows the perspective of Oscar's disembodied subjectivity and the viewer experiences Oscar's entry into the intermediate state, and ultimately to (re)birth.

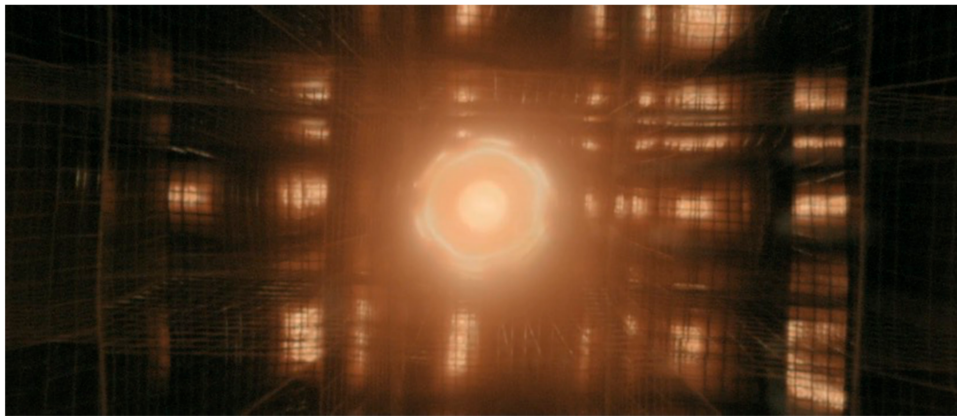
<sup>25</sup> (Huxley [1977] 1999, p. 156).

<sup>26</sup> (Leary et al. [1964] 2000, p. 3).

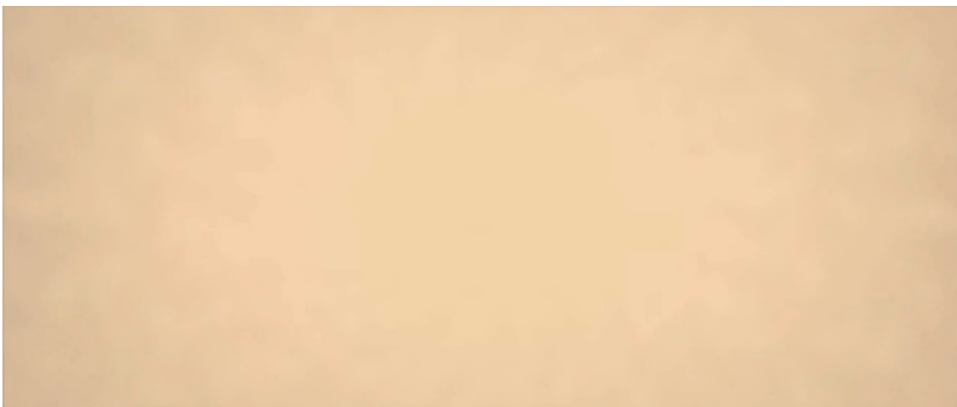
<sup>27</sup> (Church 2018).



**Figure 5.** Oscar sees his bloody hands.



**Figure 6.** The light in the ceiling and reflections.



**Figure 7.** Inside the light.



**Figure 8.** Oscar's lifeless body from above.

Despite the presence of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in the film and the fact that it follows, up to a point, the narrative arc of the work, Noé has repeatedly said that he is not trying to present that text's message. More than that, he has stated in several interviews that he does not believe in any life after death and claims that what the film is really about is "someone who read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and heard about it before being shot. It's not the story of someone who dies, flies, and is reincarnated, it's a story of someone who is stoned when he gets shot . . ." <sup>28</sup> Despite this, in significant ways, Noé's film is closer overall to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*'s narrative than that of the professed Buddhist Rubin.

William Brown and David H. Fleming have proposed useful terminology for the different POVs utilized in the film. At the beginning of the film, we are given a truly first person perspective, in which the camera and the character are one. This is signaled by our seeing what Oscar sees, right down to the blinking of his eyes. This they call first person, or subjective. After Oscar's death, we are presented with flashback to events in Oscar's life, some of which recount the events that led up to Oscar's death, mixed in with childhood scenes, all shot from slightly behind Oscar's head. Brown and Fleming call these second-person perspective, since we are seeing these events from Oscar's memory of his life rather than an objective third-person perspective. We see Oscar's perspective that takes his memories as object. Brown and Fleming see this perspective as bridging the gap between Oscar's live, first person perspective and the final perspective from which Oscar has disappeared. "Here, then, viewers see a 'first remove from Oscar, or Oscar seeing himself as a second person.'" <sup>29</sup> The perspective that, in some sense, holds the rest of the narrative together is a disembodied, free-floating perspective, that Brown and Fleming call the absent, or voided perspective. This perspective (the camera as subject) is unobstructed by time, space, and physical matter. In this perspective, "the image is less obviously associated with any person at all, and yet, because of the absence of cuts, it retains a trace of Oscar's (voided subjectivity)." <sup>30</sup> The scenes in which the camera presents Oscar's after-death, voided, perspective are overwhelmingly focused on Linda, as if perhaps Oscar is watching over her. We see her dancing at the club where she works, "Money, Sex, Power." Then we see in her dressing room at the club, getting the call that Oscar is dead, identifying the body, learning that she is pregnant, having an abortion, and eventually having sex with Alex.

The intermediate state being described and addressed in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is no longer the person who has died, but it retains at least some trace of subjectivity. As its time in the intermediate states goes on, the memories of the previous life are eclipsed by the astonishing experiences in the

<sup>28</sup> (Stephenson 2010).

<sup>29</sup> (Brown and Fleming 2015, p. 128).

<sup>30</sup> (Brown and Fleming 2015, p. 129).

intermediate state. Though it may seem that the metaphysical status of the being is somehow less than human, *The Tibetan Book of Dead* asserts that it is in fact more—the being’s physical and mental powers are greater than a human’s. This is precisely why the intermediate state offers such promise for awakening/liberation. Noé’s radical use of first person perspective (and here we mean to include all three of Brown and Fleming’s categories) pulls the viewer into Oscar’s experience. While the first and second person perspectives are engaging, it is primarily the voided perspective that provides the viewer with what could be read as a Tibetan Buddhist perspective.

The flashbacks begin immediately after the camera/Oscar watches Linda sobbing after learning that Oscar has been killed. The frame shakes and blurs, pulling back to a medium long shot in the room. The image blurs and is bathed in red light, with irregular strobing light. The camera goes into the strobing red light of a lamp on a table, which fills the screen as we hear Linda talking as a child. The talking changes to crying and the camera pulls back out of the light, showing young Linda sobbing on a bed, in a similarly red-lit room. The camera pulls back more, taking on the second person perspective, showing the back of young Oscar’s head. We now move through a series of flashbacks, mostly shot from the perspective behind Oscar’s head, but some from his first-person POV, through which we learn that the children were witness to their parents’ death in a car crash and that they were separated afterward. This signaling of distress from the voided perspective happens several times, including when it sees Oscar’s body about to be cremated, when Linda discovers that she is pregnant, and when she has an abortion. In each case, the voided perspective goes into a light, witnesses the flashing, full screen light first seen when the camera entered the light on the ceiling of the toilet stall where Oscar was shot. In each case, after a period of this flashing web of light, the camera emerges into a different scene, usually from another light.

For the rest of the film, the scenes jump back and forth from the “voided perspective” observing Linda and others after the death, to childhood memories, to second person memories of Oscar’s life in Tokyo leading up to and including his being shot, interspersed with hallucinatory displays of luminous visions similar to Oscar’s DMT trip at the beginning of the film (which could also be flashbacks).

While the scenes of Oscar watching over Linda in the aftermath of his death are consistent, to a degree, with the perspective of a the newly dead being in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the flashbacks are not, as already noted in the discussion of *Jacob’s Ladder*. As is the case with *Jacob’s Ladder*, the depiction of the mandalas of peaceful deities of the Bardo of Reality is completely absent, though the light in the toilet where Oscar dies, and the DMT-like visions do have a somewhat mandala-like, if impersonal appearance. Unlike *Jacob’s Ladder*, there are no menacing presences, but the images of the flashbacks of the death of Oscar and Linda’s parents in the car crash are horrific. It difficult to know whether Oscar, if we can even say that he is a character from the voided perspective, knows that he is dead. All we have from that point of view is a roving, usually high-perspective observer of events and a behind-the-head perspective for the flashback scenes. There is no narration, or any way at all to register Oscar’s intentions, thoughts, or reactions of the invisible protagonist. The spatial (and perhaps temporal) abilities of this perceiver seem to be unlimited, as those of the being in the Bardo of Rebirth are said to be.

Alex, the friend who gave Oscar *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, is the closest thing we have to a guide, if only prior to Oscar’s death, and we see the camera/Oscar return to Alex a number of times after Oscar’s death. He tries to convince Oscar to get a real job, encourages him to make more of himself, and is clearly interested in Linda. One could speculate that the disembodied Oscar is trying to get Alex and Linda together and when they do, the final scenes of the film begin.

Though *Enter the Void* skips the explicitly Buddhist imagery of the Intermediate State of Reality, as *Jacob’s Ladder* does, Noé’s film depicts the Bardo of Rebirth’s visions of copulating couples in textually accurate, and graphic, fashion. The film’s final sequence has the disembodied Oscar following Linda and Alex to the Love Hotel (Figure 9). They go in, and the camera passes through the walls gliding over



numerous couples (and trios, and more) having sex.<sup>31</sup> The depiction is explicit, but for our purposes the visually interesting thing is that the points of union between the lovers glow with undulating tendrils of light, evoking the quasi-biological visions that Oscar had during his DMT trip. Several times throughout the film, beginning and ending with a man having sex with Linda, we see the camera going through the back of a man's head and see the woman from his perspective, switching from the voided perspective to the first person. The camera then pulls back and continues on.



**Figure 9.** The Love Hotel.

Eventually the camera finds Linda and Alex having sex (Figure 10). After observing from above, Oscar's subjectivity moves into Alex's head and we see Linda from the latter's perspective. The camera pulls back and then moves through Linda's belly into her uterus and we have an internal perspective from which we see Alex ejaculate and then the camera moves to a microscope-view of a sperm cell penetrating an egg. The screen fades to black. The fade to black could be understood to depict *The Tibetan Book of the Dead's* statement that the intermediate state being dies and is reborn in human form. Then we see the emergence of a blurry first person view of the birthing room, the doctor and nurses, and then the mother, with the camera focusing as much on her breasts as her face. The baby is placed on its mother's chest and the shot goes black. Then we see the baby being taken from the mother, with the baby beginning to fuss. We see the cord cut and the baby cries. The baby is taken to the nursery and the screen goes black and then white, over which appears the words, "THE" and then "VOID." There are no end credits.

<sup>31</sup> This seems likely to have been drawn from *The Psychedelic Experience*. "Sexual visions are extremely common during the Third Bardo. You may see or imagine males and females copulating. This vision may be internal or it may involve people around you. You may hallucinate multi-person orgies and experience both desire and shame, attraction and disgust" (Leary et al. [1964] 2000, p. 69).





**Figure 10.** Alex and Linda in the Love Hotel.

As graphic as it is, the final sequence of the film is consistent with how *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (and the *Abhidharmakośa*) describes the process of how the intermediate state being enters its new physical form. On first viewing, many people assume that we're seeing Linda's face, but Noé points out in the AV Club interview that the face is actually Oscar's mother, who we've only seen in flashback. Several of the earlier flashbacks also suggest Oscar's Oedipal desire for his mother.<sup>32</sup> We see her nude several times; he walks in on his parents having sex; when the camera moves through the back of one of the couples in the Love hotel, the woman's face turns into his mother's; and when it enters the perspective of Alex, the first face we see is the mother's, which then changes to Linda's. This heavy handed psychoanalytic slant probably arises from Noé's desire to shock, but Buddhism beat Freud to the Oedipal scene by over a thousand years—the 5th century *Abhidharmakośa* states that the intermediate state being will have lust for the mother and jealous hatred of the father. Driven by these two emotions, which are two of the three poisons that bind beings to the cycle of rebirth, the being takes birth.

### 11. Experiencing Buddhism with *Enter the Void*

It should be clear from the discussion that Noé is not a Buddhist and sees the film as simply the depiction of a man's dying experiences. He said, "So at the end, he thinks he's finally reincarnated, but when he comes out, he sees his own mother out of focus, like if he had one final flash before he dies of his first memory ever, coming out of his mother's womb. Or he gets into a loop where he's going to grow up again and see the car crash again and go to Tokyo again, get killed again. Either he's trapped in a temporal loop, or he's just remembering, before losing his consciousness, he's remembering the first moment ever. And that's why when the title comes at the end, 'The Void,' it's like he's getting into an empty life, or then it's just a void, and that's the end."<sup>33</sup> These are two very different meanings, but neither is consistent with a Tibetan Buddhist perspective. Noé does, however, want his film to be mind-altering. "I would say it's the movie you want to play a new game in. The game for me, the goal of the movie, was to induce an altered state of consciousness as much as possible in the viewer's brain, although you consider your own self as the potential audience."<sup>34</sup> The awakened state, and the practices that lead to it, are certainly altered states of consciousness.

The visual style of *Enter the Void* corresponds well with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead's* characterization of the visions of the Intermediate State of Reality as "sounds, lights, and rays of

<sup>32</sup> (Adams 2010).

<sup>33</sup> (Adams 2010).

<sup>34</sup> (Adams 2010).

light”<sup>35</sup> and Great Perfection doctrine is pervaded by light imagery. The visionary techniques of the Great Perfection tradition are said to culminate in the arising of a dazzling mandala-like world of light for the meditator, and the fully realized practitioner is said to dissolve into a body of light, escaping physical death. The dazzling neon of after-dark Tokyo presents a beautiful, or bewildering, world of light. Even in the flashback scenes of Tokyo, the camera follows the movements of Oscar, Linda, and others against a backdrop of garishly illuminated nighttime urban scenes. This technique has the effect of immersing the viewer in a world that transcends coarse matter and physical bodies, though even in such scenes we are also presented with nudity and sex.

Though most of the Buddhist traditions identify desire, especially sexual desire, to be one of the root causes of bondage in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, the Vajrayāna, which is the tradition from which *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* comes, has a more nuanced position in regard to desire. The three poisons of ignorance, desire and hatred, purified by wisdom, become vehicles for transformation. “Whereas in other vehicles the three poisons are to be renounced, here, by having driven in the nail of the view which is beyond objectification, the three poisons are carried on the path without being renounced—desire as the essence of bliss and emptiness, hatred as the essence of radiance and emptiness, and delusion as the essence of awareness and emptiness.”<sup>36</sup> One need only read the descriptions of, or look at the paintings of, the mandalas of the peaceful and wrathful deities that are said to arise in the intermediate state, and of the Great Perfection’s primordial Buddha Samantabhadra/Samantabhadri, to realize that sexual imagery is intrinsic to the symbolism of the Buddha Body of Reality in this tradition (Figure 11). All of the Buddhas, from the supreme Buddha Body of Reality to all the Buddhas of the mandalas of the peaceful and wrathful deities, are Buddha couples locked in sexual embrace. This depiction is known in Tibetan as “mother–father” (*yab yum*).



Figure 11. Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri.

<sup>35</sup> (Coleman and Jinpa 2007, p. 234) and (Evans-Wentz [1927] 2000, p. 102).

<sup>36</sup> (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 273).

The higher yogic methods of the Vajrayāna include sexual practices as well. Initiation into, and the advanced levels of practice of, the highest tantric Buddhist practices entail sexual yoga, whether visualized or physically performed. Through controlled manipulation of the energies of sexual desire, the clear light so often referenced in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* can be cultivated and realized. Even ordinary orgasm is regarded as an occasion for the realization of the clear light, as it arises naturally here, as in death. But only those accomplished in higher tantric practice would be able to recognize this. One of the texts in the 17th century collection of texts from which Evans-Wentz drew his *Tibetan Book of Dead* (but chose not to include) is *A Prayer for Union with the Spiritual Teacher, [Embodiment of] the Three Buddha-Bodies, [entitled] Natural Liberation, without Renunciation of the Three Poisons*. The prayer aligns the three poisons (ignorance, desire, and hatred) with the three Bodies of the Buddha (dharma, perfect enjoyment, and emanation), and identifies each of the three poisons as a method for obtaining Buddhahood. The Body of Perfect Enjoyment (translated by Dorje as “Perfect Resource”) is attained by supreme bliss “without renunciation of desire and clinging.”<sup>37</sup> The sequence in the Love Hotel makes a further point—that the radiant ultimate primordial light is present even in the carnal. The undulating tendrils of light emerging from the conjoined genitals of the couples seem to suggest that the voided perspective reveals (and the viewer shares this vision) the true nature of even (or especially) sex as potentially liberating, consistent with a tantric perspective. None of this is to say that Noé intended the pervasive nudity and sex to evoke any such thing, but he does present a world in which the light of a higher reality shines in the world of the flesh.

Lights of many colors are present throughout the film, and several times we see the camera enter one, but never as a final destination. The camera flees from it, as we saw too in *Jacob's Ladder*, to wander longer in the life that is quickly slipping away. The first instance of this is immediately after Oscar's death as the camera moves into the light in the ceiling. There are subsequent instances when the voided perspective is presented with the entry into the light presaged by a strobing in the entire shot. Such sequences are accompanied by an intensification of the soundtrack, sometimes with a quaking of the camera, as if resisting, or distressed. The voided perspective and the lack of any narration prevents us from knowing for certain whether this represents the confusion and bewilderment of the newly-dead being, but *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* states that the loved ones of the dying/deceased should not cry or wail as it would bewilder the intermediate state being and keep him or her from moving to the next step. There are several other scenes which could be seen to suggest that the voided perspective is still capable of distress. This suggests that while this perspective is no longer that of the embodied subjectivity of Oscar, it is still a subjectivity that the viewer can empathize with, or more precisely, to become in watching the film. In the first such shot in the film, the voided perspective flees into a nearby light, taking him to the first flashback of young Linda crying, presumably after the death of their parents.

In the scenes in which the camera moves into the light, we are presented with an even more voided perspective, in which not only is subjectivity voided, but also any objective world. When the camera enters and merges with this light, it engulfs the entire frame. This light is a shimmering web of illumination reminiscent of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead's* description:

“O, Child of Buddha Nature listen! Pure inner radiance, reality itself, is now arising before you. Recognise it! O, Child of Buddha Nature, this radiant essence that is now your consciousness is a brilliant emptiness. It is beyond substance, beyond characteristics and beyond colour, completely empty of inherent existence in any respect whatsoever. This is the female Buddha Samantabhadri, the essential nature of reality.

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<sup>37</sup> (Coleman and Jinpa 2007, p. 28).

The essence of your own conscious awareness is emptiness. Yet, this is not a vacuous or nihilistic emptiness; this, your very own conscious awareness, is unimpededly radiant, brilliant and vibrant. This [conscious awareness] is the male Buddha Samantabhadra.

The utterly indivisible presence of these two: the essence of your own awareness, which is empty, without inherent existence with respect to any substance whatsoever, and your own conscious awareness, which is vibrant and radiantly present, is the Buddha-body of Reality. This intrinsic awareness, manifest in a great mass of light, in which radiance and emptiness are indivisible, is the Buddha [nature] of unchanging light, beyond birth or death.

Just to recognize this is enough! If you recognise this brilliant essence of your own conscious awareness to be the Buddha [nature], then to gaze into intrinsic awareness is to abide in the enlightened intention of all the buddhas.”<sup>38</sup>

The recognition that frees the being from the cycle of rebirth is the realization of the ultimate, inexpressible nature of consciousness, which is called in this translation “emptiness.” The Tibetan word used (*stong pa nyid*), and the Sanskrit word (*śūnyatā*) of which it is a translation, have both been translated by several scholars as “voidness.” This is how Evans-Wentz translates it. As the passage above makes clear, however, this voidness is not a “vacuous or nihilistic emptiness,” but rather a radiant, vibrant luminosity. The true nature of sentient beings, which is radiant conscious awareness and Buddha Nature, is ultimately the “Buddha Body of Reality: the primordial dynamic union of emptiness and radiance. In the first moments of the intermediate state, one is offered the opportunity to recognize that the transpersonal, but innate, conscious field (*rig pa*) that is beyond the limitations of ordinary mind, rather than the limited, personal conscious awareness (*sems* or *rnam shes*), is in fact one’s true nature. The primordial union of the two is depicted visually as the sexual union of Samantabhadri and Samantabhadra. This is not the abandoning of subjectivity altogether, but the recognition that the ultimate nature of conscious awareness is always united with the supreme non-dual consciousness itself, which is the Buddha Body of Reality. The scenes from *Enter the Void* where what Brown and Fleming call the voided subjectivity, which is also the viewer’s perspective, and the quivering radiance that fills the screen merge into each other could be seen as a cinematic enactment of this core teaching of the Great Perfection.

Noe’s innovative use of three subjective POVs cultivate a perspective that collapses the dichotomy of seer and seen, or at least situates the viewer as the seer of his seen, removing one degree of distance from the film and the viewer. The voided perspective brings the viewer into a perspective that is no longer human, but still a subject. The people and memories sought out by this subject illustrate that a trace of Oscar’s perspective remains, but when those visions are traumatic, the voided subjectivity flees into the light. Perhaps, however, that light is too brilliant, too voided from the perspective of a subject not yet ready to let go of embodied existence.

That the film concludes with those traces of Oscar’s subjectivity winning out, drawing him back to sensuality, should come as no surprise. In the conclusion of the section on the Intermediate State of Reality, the reader is reminded that familiarity with the text and practice of the recitation and visualization in life is imperative in order to achieve liberation in the intermediate state. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*’s final section, the Intermediate State of Rebirth, ends with methods for “Obstruction of the Womb Entrance” and “Choosing a Womb,” clearly acknowledging that most beings will have to go through this state. The final sections of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* describe the process of taking birth, and how to do it well. As the camera passes through the wall of the Love Hotel, we look down on couples having sex in the dark but neon-lit rooms, with strobing light also illuminating the scene. In each case, in addition to the neon and strobing light, the genitals of the couple glow with light,

<sup>38</sup> In Dorje’s translation, this is all one paragraph. I have divided it into several smaller paragraphs to clarify the point being made. (Coleman and Jinpa 2007, p. 231; Evans-Wentz [1927] 2000, pp. 95–96).



with tendrils of light reaching out beyond their bodies. These resemble some of Oscar's DMT visions, which were our first vision of the more-than-human outside of embodied existence.

Throughout the film, the voided perspective is drawn to Oscar's mother and his sister Linda. The way the film is shot, it is difficult to disentangle familial love from incestuous desire, but even early Buddhist sources on the process of rebirth acknowledge that one chooses one's new parents as they are having sex. That, in fact, is what draws the being. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* says, "If you are to be born as a male, you will experience the perceptions of a male. You will feel intense aversion towards the father and you will feel jealousy and attachment towards the mother. If you are to be born a female, you will experience the perceptions of a female. You will experience intense envy and jealousy toward the mother and you will feel intense attachment and affection for the father."<sup>39</sup> The camera's voyeuristic journey in the Love Hotel obviously goes farther than a 17th century Tibetan Buddhist text, but the journey of the intermediate state being concludes the same way. "This [emotional arousal] will cause you to enter a womb. Here you will experience the 'coemergent delight' in the midst of the meeting between the sperm and ovum. From that state of bliss you will faint into unconsciousness . . . you will emerge [from the womb] and open your eyes."<sup>40</sup> Again, Noé's use of the voided perspective takes the viewer through each step, as described above.

Though Noé did not intend to present a Tibetan Buddhist vision, I argue that in the end he gave us something that allows us to see from within a Buddhist perspective, in a direct, first-person way. The intermediate state experience is presented to the viewer in a way that highlights the tension and dynamic between worldly life and desire, and the ultimate perspective and the liberation it entails. In Theravādin Buddhism, and early Buddhism generally, the goal of the Buddhist path is to lead from a worldly life of ignorance, desire and hatred to one in which all this is seen to be illusory and ultimately abandoned. From the perspective of Vajrayāna Buddhism, as in the Mahāyāna more generally, we are encouraged to adopt a perspective on that illusory existence that acknowledges that awakening can only be sought and attained through and in it. The *Heart Sutra* famously proclaims that, "form is empty, and emptiness is form."<sup>41</sup> and Nāgārjuna's *Root Verses on the Middle Way* says, "the Ultimate Truth is not taught independently of customary ways of talking and thinking. Not having acquired the ultimate truth, nirvāṇa is not attained," and "There is no distinction whatsoever between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. There is no distinction whatsoever between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra."<sup>42</sup> Later Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism add that the ground of both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is the Buddha Body or Reality or Vajradhātu, and that a duality-free gnosis realizes the ultimate unity and co-presence of awakening and the phenomenal. The Great Perfection tradition further asserts that the blazing light of the Buddha Body of Reality, which is both emptiness and luminosity, is the source of both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, and pervades both. The realization of this takes place through assiduous meditative and yogic practice, but in some states in life (deep sleep and orgasm), and in death, this truth arises naturally and can be recognized by the spiritually advanced person. *Enter the Void* has the potential to give the viewer a glimpse into this experience. Though Noé's Void is either the snuffing out of consciousness, or a meaningless retread of the same life, Brown and Fleming assert that through the voided perspective, we watch Oscar's "merging with the plane of immanence—in such a way that being, matter and life are understood as being woven from the void. For, in his journey from self to/void, Oscar becomes one with being (the totality of all that exists as opposed to his subjective being), and he attains what Deleuze might call 'a cosmic and spiritual lapping,' in the sense that the personal and the whole form a single continuum, rather than existing entirely separately."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> (Coleman and Jinpa 2007, pp. 289–90; Evans-Wentz [1927] 2000, p. 179).

<sup>40</sup> (Coleman and Jinpa 2007, p. 290; Evans-Wentz [1927] 2000, p. 179). The following line, "Now you will have turned into a puppy," reiterates the point that rebirth is a risky enterprise.

<sup>41</sup> (Lopez 1998, p. xvii).

<sup>42</sup> (Siderits and Katsura 2013, pp. 273, 302).

<sup>43</sup> (Brown and Fleming 2015, p. 133).



Though Brown and Fleming are drawing on Deleuze, this description works fairly well with a Tibetan Buddhist perspective as well. For the viewer willing to go along with the experience of *Enter the Void*, as admittedly challenging as it is, it is possible to have a first-hand experience of a modern simulacrum of the intermediate state experience described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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