

Introduction

Some (Hollywood) Versions of Enlightenment

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Buddhism has been a subject of cinematic attention since film's origins, often signifying exoticism, both in flattering and unflattering ways. Film as a form of documentary practice begins in the late nineteenth century, and film as a form of public entertainment has frequently found Buddhism to be an interesting subject. Franz Osten and Himansu Rai created what might be considered the first "Buddhist film" in 1925 when they recast Sir Edwin Arnold's 1861 poetic epic of the same name into the film *Light of Asia*.¹ This is the oldest film that has been screened at International Buddhist Film Festival events. In English-language cinema, Buddhist ideals are sometimes presented in disguised forms, such as when we find a Shangri-La entrusted to ancient Caucasian caretakers in *Lost Horizons* (1937). The Asian wise man with no attachment makes occasional appearances, sometimes breaking through into television, as in the television show *Kung Fu* (1972–1975).

Buddhism in popular culture can be overt in this manner, or it can be inferred. For example, critics have argued that Buddhist bodhisattva ideals find their way into science fiction fantasies such as the Jedi Code of the *Star Wars* films. The countercultural celebration of Asian difference has been an important motivation; Orientalist fantasy can also account for the widespread dissemination of signs and symbols originating from Asian philosophical and religious writings and systems of practice.

Asian philosophy and religion has inspired American writers, mainly poets and essayists associated with Transcendentalism, and countercultural writers of the mid twentieth century, especially the Beats, engaged with Asian thought much more thoroughly. In the 1990s, film seems to have superseded literature as the vehicle for transcultural exchange, and we might want to ask why. In part the issue would seem to be the declining prestige of literature as a leading form of cultural expression. In the twenty-first century, it has become surprising to see an American poet or novelist discussed in the media in relation to a large national concern such as the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. We are much more likely to see a movie director or an actor commenting on a major event, an effect of celebrity worship that Brad Pitt ridiculed when he was asked his opinion about Tibet as a geopolitical issue: "Who cares what I think China should do [about Tibet]?" he told *Time* magazine. "I'm a fucking actor . . . I'm a grown man who puts on makeup" (Garner). That said, actors such as Richard Gere have used their fame to publicize Tibet as a human rights issue, even going so far as to get himself banned as an Academy Award presenter after he used the event to denounce the Chinese government.²

In addition to being the spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetan people in exile, the Dalai Lama arose over a ten-year period to become a kind of superstar. He was first given a visa to give religious teachings in the United States during the Carter administration in 1979.³ While images of Buddha and representations of Buddhist practices appeared sporadically in European and American cinema before World War II, increasing somewhat in the postwar period as a result of American military involvement in Asia and the countercultural enthusiasms of Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and others, cinematic representation of Buddhism increased dramatically after the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1989.⁴ The decade that followed could be described as a cinematic Buddha Boom. The most well-known cinematic representations of Buddha or Buddhism have been *Little Buddha* (1994), *Kundun* (1997), and *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), and these films have extended popular knowledge of Buddhism considerably.⁵

Whether Buddhist beliefs (about karma or reincarnation) or practices (meditation, especially) have been in the foreground or

in the background, it is uncontested that films, even as they have traded upon the exoticism of Buddhism in the American *imaginaire*, have made Buddhism far less exotic than it was previously.⁶ Buddhist film is important because it is a marker of the impact of Asian philosophy and religion on American culture. It is also important as a culture resource, a way to signify within American culture in ways that are quite distinct from what had previously been expressed. This volume brings together mostly thematic approaches to Buddhist film, and the focus is overwhelmingly on feature-length “fictional” films. Why focus only on feature-length films? This volume is the first of its sort, and the essays in it are responses to a call for original essays on the topic. There is much to be studied in the area of documentary expression. The phrase “Buddhist film” will make us think of celebrities such as Brad Pitt and Keanu Reeves. This is highly significant (and weird), but it is a first association and, hopefully, not the conclusion. These films have established the notion of “Buddhist film” in various strands of academic and nonacademic discourse, a notion that has been granted a degree of reification by the world phenomenon of the “Buddhist film festival.”⁷

Since 2003, there have been more than two dozen well-publicized, international Buddhist film festivals, which would suggest that there is such a thing as a “Buddhist film.” The films shown in those festivals are from many countries. Some are nonscripted documentaries, some are full-length feature films meant for a wider distribution, and the festivals have also presented television show episodes and other manner of evidence that Buddhist ideas and images have been making their way into American and European societies through visual media. This volume—the first book-length collection on Buddhism and film—focuses mainly on American feature-length movies intended for wide distribution.

There are two distinct kinds of Buddhist films: those that are about Buddhism and those that aren't. Some Buddhist films represent Buddhism, meaning the actual Buddha, important Buddhist figures, ordinary people who are Buddhists, and so forth. But about half of the essays discuss movies structured around themes that resonate with Buddhist concerns, even though the films do not directly treat ideas, characters, or settings that are typically associated with those concerns. Some of the films that deal directly with Buddhism as a worldview that are treated in detail include *Heaven and Earth*

(1993), *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), *Kundun* (1997), and *The Cup* (1999).⁸ These films, we note, are all about persons or populations who are understood as victims of historical processes. Ly Le Hayslip's autobiographical works about the turmoil she experienced as a result of war in Vietnam are the textual basis for the third film of Oliver Stone's Vietnam trilogy. The two Tibet films released in 1997 mark the ascent of the Dalai Lama within the American imagination. First given permission to visit America in 1979, he won a Nobel Prize for peace ten years later and a Congressional Medal in 2007. Khyentse Norbu's *The Cup* is noteworthy in *not* constructing Buddhists as victims, even though the film recognizes colonial domination by the People's Republic of China in several key scenes. The American-made films center on Buddhism as a locus of innocence and, therefore, powerlessness. Cultural interpreters become suspicious when the most direct representations of an identity directly feed into a flattering form of self-understanding, for example, the moral critic, if not the savior.

There has been much discussion of Eurocentrism and of Western (as it were) ideas and images achieving a kind of semiotic colonization within Asian societies. If one wanted to enquire as to how specifically Asian cultural practices and expressive traditions have fared at making the trip the other way, one could look at phenomena such as Asian martial arts, forms of self-cultivation such as meditation and yoga, and religious systems such as Buddhism. The list is not complete, but if one wanted to consider the cultural expressions through which Buddhism enters the American *imaginaire*, the three main avenues would appear to be the literary imagination, popular film, and of course books (and, more recently, DVDs and downloads) concerned with directly teaching methods and approaches to Buddhist meditation. Which films have been the most significant direct representations of Buddhism, for American audiences? The films treated at length in this volume are of central importance.

Groundhog Day is perhaps the best example of a "non-Buddhist Buddhist movie." All schools of Buddhism maintain that in order to be free from the cycle of suffering (samsara), beings must first give up all forms of craving or attachment. Phil Connors either learns this lesson in one day or ten thousand days, depending on how you look at it. *Groundhog Day* offers the scenario in which one character is trapped within a single day, one that repeats itself endlessly,

albeit with the possibility of change and learning. This magic-realist framework can be understood quite well in terms of a Buddhist understanding of *samsara* (the notion that beings are trapped in a cycle of repetition because of ignorance) and *karma* (the notion that our problems are caused by past actions and that we must eliminate causes if we do not want to repeat results). The notions of *samsara* and *karma*, when put together, are problems that require some form of purification, either by meditation or good works of the sort that bring beings to modify their reactive behaviors. Phil is initially arrogant and has contempt for others, but he is able to gradually modify himself until the conditions for happiness—and escape from the punishing cycle—arise.

Just as Freud ranges through an analytically comprehensive set of reactions to human suffering in the opening pages of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the film *Groundhog Day* explores Phil's range of responses to his own cycle-bound condition. Initially, he feels horrified by the discovery that he is trapped within the American holiday known as Groundhog Day, doomed to wake up to the Sonny and Cher song "I Got You, Babe" for the rest of his (endless?) existence. This horror gives way to suicidal despair, until Phil turns a corner and experiences his godlike phase, a period of the film in which he uses his general foreknowledge to advantage. Buddhism has a concept known as the Six Realms of Existence that can be considered either a literal division of existence or a set of psychological dispositions. The lower realms are the Hell, Animal, and Hungry Ghost realms. The upper realms are those of the Gods, Demigods, and Humans. It is a mistake, however, to think the God realm is the ideal position, since gods indulge to the point at which they fall into lower realms—as is the case with Phil. His indulgence leads to suicidal despair.

In the last third of the film, Phil has become bored with indulgence and sets out on a path of self-cultivation. Before the movie is over, he has saved lives, helped old ladies, repeatedly caught a child who falls from a tree (but who *never* thanks him!), and he has mastered playing the piano and speaking French. It is interesting that he attempts repeatedly to save the old man and that he catches the child who falls from the tree. We can see that learning the piano could be a stay against boredom, but his altruistic acts are less easily explained. The film never mentions that he may be purifying himself, but it is only when he is completely free of his most acquisitive urge—to

capture Rita's body and then her heart—that he escapes the cycle. He suffers because of various kinds of greed. When he overcomes the desires that cause suffering, suffering ceases.

Then there are the “Buddhist films” that do *not* represent Buddhism, either directly or figuratively. If we look, we will find them mentioned in Buddhist blogs, and they sometimes have appeared in Buddhist film festivals. Often, this is because a central thematic concern of the film resonates quite strongly with a central thematic concern of Buddhism itself, whether or not one would want to argue for a direct influence. One important theme in many strands of Buddhist belief is signified by the word that comes from the Tibetan tradition, “bardo.” A bardo is any limbo-like intermediary period, but it is used most often to refer to the state that, some Buddhists believe, occurs between an individual's death and some form of future incarnation.⁹ Another key thematic idea predominant within Buddhism and that has inspired American filmmakers is the notion that our self-understanding—and perhaps even our experience of all phenomena—is inflected at all levels by delusion. Essays in this volume focusing on delusory experience and between-life and midlife bardos include *Lost in Translation* (2003), *American Beauty* (1999), *Donnie Darko* (2001), and *Fight Club* (1999). None of these films is directly concerned with Buddhism in the manner of the previously mentioned films. On the one hand, the films can be seen as ways in which something alien is translated into more familiar terms. Also, the films can be seen as essential statements about “how we are” that are then subject to Buddhist-inspired modes of interpretation, such as when one author develops the concept of samsara by using the more familiar term “desperation” and locating it within the film *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946).

Part 1, Representation and Intention, collects essays on the most well-known American movies that have directly represented Buddhism. This section begins with “Buddhism and Authenticity in Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth*,” by Hanh Ngoc Nguyen and R. C. Lutz, an essay that takes issue with the initial negative reception met by Stone's 1993 film. In particular, Hanh and Lutz develop a response to Julia Foulkes's complaint that Stone and Le Ly Hayslip (author of the book on which the movie is based) have grossly misrepresented Buddhism and refashioned the religion to make it more palatable for a

Western audience. Hanh and Lutz argue that this is not the case, but, rather, that Stone has successfully represented a rich mixture of folk and Buddhist elements that has been expressed in Hayslip's nonfictional narratives and in other representations of Vietnamese religion.

In chapter 2 Eve Mullen's "Buddhism, Children, and the Childlike in American Buddhist Films" looks at how filmmakers in the West have appropriated Buddhism, considering films such as *Little Buddha* (1993), *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), and *Kundun* (1997) in relation to what Donald Lopez calls "New Age Orientalism," a mode of imagination in which American rescuers save helpless Asians from Asian villains. The first section contains several essays that represent Buddhism directly but always within the key of Otherness, as we see again in chapter 3. In "Consuming Tibet: Imperial Romance and the Wretched of the Holy Plateau," Jiayan Mi and Jason C. Tonic discuss idealistic visions of Tibet before the Chinese invasions of the 1950s, exploring the Orientalist predecessors to the "Buddha Boom" films of the 1990s by drawing on cultural expressions from a half-century before. James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, travel writer Sven Hedin's novels, and Frank Capra's cinematic recasting of the Hilton novel are the examples considered. Through a study of the imperialist attitudes present in these representations, and drawing on Edward Said's critique on Orientalism and W. J. T. Mitchell's ideology of the imperial landscape, Mi and Tonic show that these texts misrepresent and distort Tibet through its modes of conquest. During the Cold War and through the 1990s, American audiences have rallied around Tibet—perhaps it was the only issue about which the extremely conservative senator Jesse Helms and the entirely countercultural poet Allen Ginsberg agreed.

Chapter 4, Felicia Chan's "Politics into Aesthetics: Cultural Translation in *Kundun*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, and *The Cup*" offers a comparative analysis of films by Martin Scorsese, Jean-Jacques Annaud, and in relation to the problem of Orientalism, considering various successes and failures of these films to adequately address the problem of a dialectally reductive way of presenting the (Western) self in relation to a Buddhist (and therefore "Eastern") other. Chan hopefully considers the possibilities of Buddhist cinema in the larger sense, perhaps looking forward to a nondualist aesthetic that does not so regularly fall into exoticization.

Part 2, Allegories of Shadow and Light, concerns films that may or may not be informed by a Buddhist intention, but the author makes the case with regard to each of these films that a Buddhist-informed reading is a highly rewarding approach. In Tibetan Buddhism as popularized by books such as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* the concept of the bardo, the space between one life and the next, is a central concept. We could say that many of these films occupy a semiotic “bardo” space between the films that are intentionally Buddhist (both in terms of representation and thematic/philosophical emphasis) and films that are not about Buddhism but that can be usefully understood from a “Buddhistic” point of view.

Chapter 5 is “Momentarily Lost: Finding the Moment in *Lost in Translation*,” by Jennifer L. McMahan and B. Steve Csaki, and it provides a close reading of Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* (2003) in relation to Buddhist concepts of momentariness and selflessness. Rather than consider persons as bodies that contain impermanent selves or souls, Buddhist psychology understands “self” to be a side effect of numerous conditions that shift from moment to moment. The film concerns two characters who are momentarily lost and caught in an instance of psychological bardo. “Momentarily Lost” traces the film’s consideration of suffering and lostness in a generously nonjudgmental manner, which McMahan and Csaki compare to the suspense of judgment that is a key feature of mindfulness meditation techniques.

If Nguyen and Lutz have argued for the (artistically if not financially) successful crossing of Buddhism from Vietnamese into American culture, in chapter 6 Harper and Anderson consider the ways in which American cultural co-optation and assimilation have produced a rather unusual kind of Buddhist discourse. In “Dying to Be Free: The Emergence of ‘American Militant Buddhism’ in Popular Culture,” David A. Harper and Richard C. Anderson discuss the notion of redemptive violence as shown in American movies and popular culture that characterizes “American Militant Buddhism.” The authors explore the ways in which American popular culture has adopted and appropriated Buddhism and reworked them to fit into the American mythos—the Manifest Destiny and the American Dream in such movies as the *The Matrix* (1999), *Fight Club* (1999), and *The Last Samurai* (2003), as well as the popular rock band Rage

Against the Machine. Using the term “American Militant Buddhism,” Harper and Anderson explore the effects and consequences of reinforcing or legitimizing the right to spread liberation by employing violence.

The next “bardo film” concerns not the individual per se but the culture at a moment of transformative impasse. In “Buddhism, Our Desperation, and American Cinema,” Karsten J. Struhl uses films that are not thematically connected with Buddhism in chapter 7 to explore the relation between desires, cravings, and meaningful existence faced by the individual within a materialist and consumerist society. Through *Wall Street* (1987), *Annie Hall* (1977), *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), and *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), Struhl looks at a number of cravings from money, status, love, alcohol, and suicide through a Buddhist perspective in order to reveal how these cravings imply a deeper existential problem of the illusion of the self and contribute to growing Buddhist film criticism. Chapter 8 is “Christian Allegory, Buddhism, and Bardo in Richard Kelly’s *Donnie Darko*,” Devin Harner’s exploration of a syncretic imagination of the bardo state in Richard Kelly’s *Donnie Darko* (2001). Harner posits that the cyclical open-endedness of *Donnie Darko* is a deliberate philosophical and theological ambiguity fostered by Kelly, a form of cultural translation that brings concepts such as the bardo across cultural borders.

In the ninth chapter, “Beautiful Necessities: *American Beauty* and the Idea of Freedom,” David L. Smith analyzes *American Beauty* (1999), a film portraying the bardo between lives. Contrary to our expectation that death and the various social and psychological conditions of our lives are radically limiting factors, the film explores the ways in which the postmortem standpoint from which the film is narrated opens up a space of appreciation and a path to freedom rather than the more typical notion that the moment of death begins a process of judgment and constraint.

As Gary Gach notes in his afterword, “On Being Luminous,” film appears to be a natural allegory for Buddhism—it projects, quite unsubstantially, a series of images that connect us to a real world we believe in more if we look at it less carefully. As soon as the projector slows down, the individual frames appear, and the narrative continuity is revealed to be a working fiction. This breakdown of reality into causes and conditions—or, in the language of film, into sounds,

shadows, and wishes—can appear at times to be a tragedy, while other times it is presented as the way to freedom. In films as different as *The Cup*, *Groundhog Day*, and *The Matrix*, it can be both.

This book and the rest of the series Buddhism and American Culture would not have been possible without the work of my coeditor, Gary Storhoff, who passed away on November 7, 2011. About a year earlier, Gary wrote to a few friends to say that his recent medical check-up revealed that the pain he had been calling “an old sports injury” was in fact stage-four cancer of a sort that the doctors did not expect to beat. As always, Gary was a living lesson in graciousness. Faced with people who said things like “I’m glad I got cancer because it made me appreciate life,” Gary came back quickly with “I’m *not* happy this has happened, but I did the right things and I’ve had a good run.” I worked with Gary on this project for over ten years, and it was always a pleasure to find the balance. He is greatly missed, and this volume is dedicated to his memory. May all sentient beings have the good fortune to meet truly fine individuals like Gary.

Notes

1. In the case of the Osten and Rai film, “Buddhist film” designates a film that is in some sense a proponent, rather than one that includes Buddhism as a mere reference point. Whereas the 1925 film offered an explanation of Buddhism, an earlier mention of Buddha in American cinema, perhaps the first, occurred in the 1918 film *The Soul of Buddha* (which, according to a webpage specializing in information about silent films, is now considered lost: <http://www.silentera.com/PSFL/data/S/SoulOfBuddha1918.html>). This silent film, which featured one of cinema’s first sex symbols, actress Theda Bara, asserts in its title that Buddha had a soul and so shows little or no knowledge of actual Buddhism. Why does the film mention Buddha at all? Buddhism would appear to function in this case as a mere backdrop. A few years later another silent film would advertise Buddhism: *The Silver Buddha* (1923) was a crime drama centered on the famous Orientalist character Dr. Fu Manchu. Once again, a Buddhist object

directs the viewer's attention to things exotic and strange. In the following decade Buddha showed up in yet another crime drama, starring Lon Chaney Jr. and variously titled *The Secret of Buddha* and *A Scream in the Night* (1935). Turner Movie Classics web-page has information: <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/561646/Scream-in-the-Night/>, accessed 1 November 2012. The film, which appears to be set in the Middle East but which turns on the theft of jewels known as the "Tears of Buddha," can be seen on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGt2MD0drc0>, accessed 1 November 2012.

2. When I interviewed Mr. Penpa Tsering, the speaker of the house of the Tibetan government-in-exile's parliament, about "soft power," I asked about American celebrities who had been helpful to the Tibetan cause. He said that Richard Gere was more helpful than all the others combined. Personal communication, 20 November 2012.
3. The Dalai Lama visited the United States between September 3 and October 21, 1979. <http://www.dalailama.com/biography/travels/1959-1979>, accessed 1 November 2012. Tenzin Tethong, who is president of the Dalai Lama Foundation, helped organize the Tibetan leader's first visit to the United States in 1979, working with Congressman Charlie Rose. As the United States had recently regularized relations with the PRC, this event required extensive diplomatic negotiations. See LeFevre, 2013, n.p.
4. Before the 1990s, literature was the most important conduit of Buddhist imagery and theme from Asia into the American imagination. Jack Kerouac's roman à clef about Beat generation Buddhists, *The Dharma Bums*, Allen Ginsberg's Vajrayana-inspired poetry such as "Wichita Vortex Sutra," and Gary Snyder's entire oeuvre—especially his 1986 masterpiece *Mountains and Rivers without End*—all helped increase America's "cultural literacy" such that words like "karma" and "dharma" are no longer foreign words.
5. Martial arts films have often had a meditation component, usually occurring in the period when the broken hero (Steven Seagal, Jean-Claude Van Damme, etc.) has been recovering both physically and mentally. After meditating a long time, usually under the supervision of a mentor and while also kicking his

way through several banana trees, the hero can then proceed to kill the people who killed the hero's sister or wife or brother or girlfriend or whomever.

6. Transcendentalist flirtations with Asian religion and philosophy flavor the work of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman and modernist writers, inspired by the haiku (or *hokku*, as it was called [Higginson 1985: 20]). Three land wars in Asia and an impressive body of belletristic literature are important precursors to Hollywood's embrace of Buddhist signs and symbols. Future cultural historians will have to decide when, if ever, Buddhism ceased to be "exotic."
7. See "What Is a Buddhist Film?" *Contemporary Buddhism* (May 2014), for a full discussion of the phenomenon of the Buddhist film festival as a global event. I have borrowed some passages from that article.
8. The last film is by the Bhutanese director who mainly resides in India named Khyentse Norbu—and who is at least as well known as an internationally famous Buddhist teacher under the name Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche. Although the director is by no means American, the films just mentioned must invariably be discussed together for reasons that become clear in the essays.
9. "Reincarnation" can indicate a one-to-one correspondence between the person who died and the person who is born into a new life, but Buddhism denies that there is an immutable soul that is transferred from body to body. Often, the term "rebirth" is used to signify a continuity between lives that is not understood as the repetition of the same personality or soul within a new body.