

Book Review



Buddhism and American Cinema

Edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff.
New York: SUNY Press, 2014, xv + 257 pages, ISBN13:
978-1-4384-5349-1 (cloth), \$90.00; ISBN13:
978-1-4384-5350-7 (paperback), \$29.95; ISBN13:
978-1-4384-5351-4 (electronic), \$29.95.

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The strength of this volume is in the number of articles that (1) describe the orientalism inherent in certain representations of Buddhism and (2) critique the alarming trend to pass off violence as “Buddhism” in American cinema. The weakness of the volume is in the number of articles that (3) are possibly orientalist in their representations of Buddhism and (4) have a tendency to pass off immoral action as “Buddhism” in American cinema. The tension between these four types of articles is nothing if not curious, but may be attributable to the differing methodologies of the various authors. This review treats examples of these four types of articles. It also offers suggestions for understanding this incongruity and, at times, offers alternative interpretations to those of the authors.

I. The Book’s Critique of Orientalism

In chapter two, “Buddhism, Children, and the Childlike in American Buddhist Films,” Eve Mullen focuses on three Hollywood representations of Buddhism: *Little Buddha*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, and *Kundun*. In particular, using Edward Said and Donald Lopez, Mullen describes how these films construct innocence and childhood as “Orientalist schemas of Buddhism” (40). Mullen points out that the earlier American film *Lost Horizon* (1936) likewise romanticizes Buddhism in its representation of Shangri-La, a fictionalized version of Tibetan Shambhala. The article explains this in terms of Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s writings on “Buddhist Romanticism”: the error of using a psychology of romanticism to introduce Buddhism and see specific romanticized cultural interpretations as the message of Buddhism, a trend related to orientalism.

Mullen writes that orientalism can be defined as “exaggerations, made purposefully or not, of Asian traditions and culture, exaggerations that can be patronizing and damaging

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to the studied peoples” (41). She uses Lopez’s four principles of “new age Orientalism” to analyze the films. New age orientalism creates an image of utopian homelands of Buddhism; those living in such utopias are portrayed as “perfect citizens under perfect leadership” (42). Americans are represented as savior heroes of voiceless Asians. Americans are liberators who gain righteous control of the utopian country, including its arts and culture. Finally, that authority is attempted to be justified (43).

Mullen points out that examples of new age orientalism are pervasive in both academe and entertainment, including American films. The author then has a rather easy task of demonstrating how the three films fit the four-point pattern. In *Little Buddha*, Tibet is sometimes just a backdrop for the American’s coming of age story cast in appropriated Buddhist terms such as loss of arrogance and acceptance of suffering. Likewise, the orientalist discourse is a simple play of opposites, with a flaw: “they overlook the real diversity within groups in order to favor an unrealistic, homogenized depiction of subjects” (47). Mullen mentions, echoing one of Said’s main points, that such binary divisions are not just made by critics and filmmakers but by colonialists justifying their oppression. Mullen shows how in *Kundun* “Scorsese has succumbed to the fantasy of a utopian Tibet and a perfect leader” (48). Scorsese does this in part with the rhetoric of cinema, for example by showing repeated panoramic views of the landscape with accompanying music by Philip Glass. Mullen notes “...the characters quote Buddhist texts, often incomprehensible to American, non-Buddhist audiences” (48), furthering the utopian allure.

Mullen closes by suggesting Hollywood’s portrayals of Asia serve to take focus off racism and problems arising from social stratification at home, focusing instead on an imagined, easily identifiable oppressor abroad. She proposes that we instead reexamine our self-centered cultural assumptions to avoid the potential harm filmic orientalism does both to viewers and depicted cultures.

It is obvious that I love this article, if nothing else from the fact that I am adopting it as the measuring rod for the rest of the book. Nevertheless, I would like to add an observation meant as more of a point for future discussion than a criticism. When describing the opinion of Thanissaro Bhikkhu, the author writes, “Appropriations of Buddhist teachings that do not include the Buddha’s radical prescription for realizing no-self fail the American or other practitioner and can only offer a lesser path without meaningful, nonegoistic transformation” (41). She underscores this point by returning to it at the end of the essay (51). While this is a valid and persuasive criticism of the strong individualist mentality so often represented in Hollywood films, there may be a slippery slope danger in employing it. It might imply that the no-self doctrine of Indian Buddhism is “more pure” than later developments, including continuing American developments, thus itself qualifying as an example of orientalism.

II. The Book’s Critique of the Tendency to Pass Off Violence as Buddhism

Chapter six, “Dying to be Free. The Emergence of “American Militant Buddhism” in Popular Culture,” is written by Richard C. Anderson and David A. Harper, both of whom

have taught at the United States Military Academy at West Point. The authors write, “For better or worse, American popular culture has appropriated an enlightenment ideology that is primarily identified as ‘Buddhist’ and reworked it in a way consistent with an American mythos that often attempts to alleviate suffering and provide liberation through violence” (133–4). They term this development “American Militant Buddhism,” which they abbreviate as “AMB.” The authors briefly review the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path as teachings of Buddhism that reveal individual attainment to be Buddhism’s primary goal. They observe that Buddhism also posits karmic retribution for killing. Accordingly, they argue that the violent aspect of American cinematic representations of Buddhism is “a paradoxical and potentially virulent misinterpretation of the Dharma within popular culture” (134). They say that the pop culture appropriation grows out of preexisting ideas of Manifest Destiny, millennialism, and Puritanism (134). As a result, violence is presented as a legitimate, indeed the only, path to liberation. They suggest that the expanding representation of this idea in films may be a subversion of Buddhist ideas that were introduced to promote peace during the Vietnam War era. It should be noted that Buddhism was introduced and popularized in America long before that time, but the authors may be referring to the promotion of specific tenets related to peace.

Anderson and Harper distinguish this trend from trends in Kung Fu movies, *Kill Bill*, and *Anger Management*, wherein Asian philosophy is a backdrop for the story and not its philosophical grounding. However, I think this might sometimes be a fine distinction and that such films may also need to answer to the authors’ charges. Their primary exemplar of AMB is *The Matrix*. They also speak in some depth about *Star Wars: Episode III* and *Fight Club*. They quote the *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra* on the world being like a dream to support their interpretation of *The Matrix* as having a Buddhist message. The authors do not mention that Judeo-Christian notions seem much more pervasive in the film and in American culture, that there are abundant references to *Alice in Wonderland* in the film, and that many articles have been written citing this as a more likely source of the film’s religious and dreamlike qualities.

The authors claim, “American popular culture has thus produced texts uniquely fusing an enlightenment ideology and violence, a fusion seemingly contradictory to the primary tenets of Buddhism itself” (146). They argue that although Buddhism has been very adaptable to new cultures, “the primary tenets of Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, have remained relatively unchanged, as has the prime tenet forbidding harm to other beings” (149). They thus see AMB’s violence as a uniquely distinguishing feature differentiating AMB from the marriage of militarism and Buddhism in other countries such as Japan, as described in *Zen at War* by Brian Victoria. I do not think this part of their argument can be easily defended, considering the overwhelming number of time periods and regions of the world where Buddhist violence has occurred. Likewise, presenting these tenets as the “unchanged” basis of Buddhism, regardless of history, may be seen as orientalism as described by Mullen.

It must also be pointed out that even if we can distinguish a line separating movies in which Asian philosophy is a backdrop for the story from those where it is the philosophical grounding, cinema has produced numerous films wherein Buddhism is the

clear philosophical grounding and violence remains the means to liberation. Hong Kong seems particularly apt at this (for example, *Running On Karma* [2003] directed by Johnnie To and Ka-Fai Wai). So wide is the connection of Buddhism and violence that it could equally be argued that the authors' refusal to recognize violence as legitimate could itself be viewed as a new Buddhist view, one not uniquely American, but, as an American, one in which I share.

My favorite part of this chapter may be the most tenuous and opinionated. In the conclusion the authors write, "While AMB may be a natural result of Buddhism's assimilation into American culture, it is a disturbing development that might result in some dangerous consequences" (154). The danger is that Buddhism may be stripped of its "essential character of compassion" and liberation be spread at gunpoint (154). While I agree, I do not think we can defend this point on the grounds of American exceptionalism. Nevertheless, I hope we can expand the authors' critique to the potentially alarming tendency in cinema to pass off other forms of immoral action as Buddhism, as further described in section IV of this review.

III. Possible Orientalism in the Book

Chapter one, "Buddhism and Authenticity in Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth*," provides us with useful insights into the relationship of Buddhism and Vietnamese folk beliefs, including those about ancestor veneration that are important in the movie. The authors, Hanh Ngoc Nguyen and R. C. Lutz, also analyze Ly Ly, the main character, in her transplantation to America. They refute the negative assessments of other critics who claim she succumbs to consumerism, arguing that the depictions are a part of a larger picture of her difficulties in America. They also make interesting points about the use of Christian and Buddhist images in the film, both of which emphasize human suffering (31). They contest critics' charges of orientalism in the film by arguing that some of the depictions are accurate in terms of Vietnamese agricultural society, but also that Stone based the film on two books by Phung Thi Le Ly Haayslip and so "the focus is by degrees subjective and unapologetically idyllic" (19). Is this giving Stone too much credit? *Heaven and Earth* seems to be a perfect instance of new age orientalism's utopian image of Buddhist homelands. The film depicts a naively innocent agrarian Vietnam, apparently with perfect village leadership before the war, and attempts to use the psychology of romanticism to introduce Buddhism. It also relies on simple plays of opposites, overlooking real diversity in Vietnam. As Mullen says about *Kundun*, the orientalist ambiance is furthered when the characters "quote Buddhist texts, often incomprehensible to American, non-Buddhist audiences" (48).

Since this film seems to have most of the elements Mullen describes as orientalist, how far should we be willing to allow Stone, a professed Buddhist, artistic license in this regard? Would we have more issues with a director's unapologetic depictions of blackened faces, for example, or is my analogy false? One reason for my suspicion of Stone is that the first two films in his Vietnam trilogy, *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), may be even more obviously orientalist in that they also conform to Mullen's description of the American coming of age story: going to Asia, learning to

accept suffering, and returning home, a changed person.

Chapter eight, “Christian Allegory, Buddhism, and Bardo in Richard Kelly’s *Donnie Darko*,” by Devin Harner, begins with a discussion of American cinematic treatments of life after death over the last twenty-five years. The 1980s television show *Highway to Heaven* is mentioned alongside *City of Angels* and other films. Harner observes that Hollywood “turned angels into pop culture commodities” by repositioning theology and incorporating Asian ideas of reincarnation for American tastes (180). He cautions that these versions of reincarnation appear to come more from pop yoga teachers than doctrinal sources.

According to Harner, “American filmmakers have also begun to explore the Buddhist idea of the transitional state between death and the next incarnation, in which the dharmic tally is settled” (181). This is the heart of his analysis. Harner explains that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* differentiates between the *chos nyid bar do*, which is experienced between death and next rebirth, and *rang bzhin bar do*, which is experienced between rebirth and death, that is, in our so-called waking life. The ghost-like *bardo* state between death and rebirth is what Hollywood has latched onto. From this point on, the author refers to numerous films with such elements as “*bardo* films.” These include *Siesta* (1987), *Final Approach* (1991), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990), *Ghost* (1990), and *Donnie Darko* (2001). These films reflect the fact that one out of four Americans today believes in reincarnation. However, broadly referring to this range of depictions as “*bardo* films” is highly problematic on various levels including the abovementioned lumping of all Asian ideas into the single category represented by that of one country or group of people. Let’s also not forget that Catholicism includes the notion of purgatory. This is likely more influential on American cinematic depictions of the in-between state, as in *Ghost* and *Donnie Darko*, than is the notion of *bardo*. Equally influential in this regard is the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Raymond Moody, and other psychologists who have documented NDEs. NDE stories are widely known and have been incorporated in many Americans’ understandings of Christianity. Other plausible explanations for these movies include Hindu views of reincarnation and disembodied spirits, some versions of which are championed by the aforementioned American yoga teachers. In East Asian Buddhism there are influential non-*bardo* notions of intermediary states after death, such as Sukhavati, Amida’s Pure Land. Most of the films Harner mentions have more in common with one of these concepts than with the idea of *bardo* (with the exception of *Jacob’s Ladder*, which really is based on the *chos nyid bar do*).

Despite the fact that Christianity (Galatians 6:7) and other religions also teach that you reap what you sow, Harner argues that *Donnie Darko* “makes more sense in Buddhist terms because *bardo* represents reprieve from Donnie’s illness, despite the hallucinations, in that he has entered into a state of causality where his choices have clear karmic result” (193). Perhaps this is what the author means when four pages earlier he refers to but does not explain director Kelly’s “more nuanced Buddhist theological heavy-lifting” (189). Even if *Donnie Darko* makes most sense in Buddhist terms—which I feel it does not—to look at it as a “*bardo* film” creates more problems than it solves as we can see from author’s analysis. For example, we know that the onscreen action is not simply a dream or Donnie’s *bardo* experience. For one thing, the book, *The Philosophy of*

Time Travel, which is featured in the movie (more prominently in the director's cut) and explains everything that happens, tells us that when time is restored, survivors will have dreams about what happened during the time rift, as the movie's characters indeed do. If the bulk of the movie depicts Donnie's *bardo* state, why do others vaguely remember it? It is surprising that Harner did not mention the book. If he had, he could have made a convincing argument that it serves as a religious text in the film, explaining people's lives, the nature of reality, and the path to salvation, much as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Indeed, it describes characters as "The Manipulated Dead" and "The Manipulated Living" in a similar manner to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Though treating the book within the film would have made Harner's analysis more convincing, that analysis still would have problems. Though *Donnie Darko* is a fun cult classic that remains highly rated, the lesser known *Jacob's Ladder* would have been better for describing *bardo* and creating a "*bardo* films" genre, despite the Christian reference in the title, which could preserve the "Christian allegory" element of the article. *Enter the Void* (2009) directed by Gaspar Noé could be placed in the category of "*bardo* films," although it is not American made. It would be interesting to see what other films the category might truly represent. Despite my critique, Harner's article is quite good and I hope he will view the critique amicably. He makes us aware of the trend in American culture to depict in-between states and opens a conversation about the concept of *bardo* in Tibetan Buddhism and the appropriation of Buddhist ideas in American pop culture.

IV. The Book's Potentially Alarming Tendency to Pass Off Immoral Action as Buddhism

The movie *Lost in Translation*, described by Jennifer L McMahon and B. Steve Csaki in chapter five, potentially answers the question posed above: How far should we be willing to allow a director artistic license in indulging orientalism? Perhaps more than any other film described in the book, *Lost in Translation* has been the subject of both critical denunciation and actual protests. While it might be argued, with a questionable degree of success, that Stone's personal view is not clear in *Heaven and Earth*, it is more certain that director Sofia Coppola is making a firm statement in this film. That is, to a more than middle-aged man from America, many Japanese customs and elements of culture may well appear clownish. The opposite situation is also likely true. It is somewhat unfortunate that the bulk of the film sets out to prove this point by making fun of pachinko, Japanese television and commercials, karaoke, food, and the like. In short, as critics have said, the film focuses on particular elements of Japan that Americans find silly while ignoring everything they may find to be better than in America, including the transportation system, healthcare, the education system, the relative lack of crime, and for me, Buddhological research. While the authors argue that impermanence and other Zen sensibilities are central elements at work in the film, if so, they are difficult to see. What is clear is that there is a positive portrayal of a possible romantic affair between Bill Murray's character, Bob Harris, and that of the much younger Scarlett Johansson's character, Charlotte, both of whom are married. The basis of this affair appears to be their mutual hatred of Japan, even if it is based on their biases. Even so, it is difficult to

like Bob Harris. Maybe the only thing convincing audiences to do so is their fondness of Bill Murray. Likewise, almost all we know about Charlotte comes to us from slow pans of her partially revealed body and brooding attempts to sabotage her husband's work schedule. If this is a "Buddhist film" in any sense, its main characters do not support this.

Along these lines, even more objectionable in terms of what is presented as both good and "Buddhist" is *American Beauty*, discussed in chapter nine by David L. Smith. Is it strange that out of the nine chapters of this book, two are devoted to showing Buddhism in films about middle-aged men considering affairs with much younger women/girls? Someone might get the wrong idea. The central motif in *American Beauty* is the midlife crisis of Lester, the main character, including his ephedophilia (in this case, an attraction to mid-late teen girls). Director Sam Mendes seems to be intent on sharing his and writer Alan Ball's own attraction as witnessed by a number of slow motion scenes of a high school cheerleader, Angela, as well as an in-bed nude scene near the end of the movie. In explanation, Smith says, "A mix of sensational elements is thrown in to up the commercial ante (masturbation! recreational drugs! borderline pedophilia!), but nothing here is particularly surprising" (199), although he does give these elements exclamation points. In my viewing, these elements are not thrown in but are the substance of the film. It should also be mentioned that Lester, who is married, gives Angela a beer before taking her to bed, both of which acts are certainly illegal and arguably immoral. Smith describes how the film depicts Buddhist ideas such as *mushotoku* (nonattainment), particularly as an answer to a quest for meaning in life (200). To back this up, Smith makes some interesting comparisons between *American Beauty* and *Six Feet Under*, another Alan Ball creation. In both, after running into limiting and defining obstacles, characters experience a kind of liberation. But, "What is 'attained' in such freedom is certainly paradoxical, because it brings nothing that one did not previously have" (212). While Smith finds this to be related to Buddhism, it might share more in common with absurdism.

Let's return to Anderson and Harper's criticism: "While AMB may be a natural result of Buddhism's assimilation into American culture, it is a disturbing development that might result in some dangerous consequences" (154). If this is the case, shouldn't we say the same about the non-surprising elements of recreational drugs, borderline pedophilia, and orientalism? As James Shields has suggested in *Critical Buddhism*, it should be possible to critique morally objectionable elements in literature and film being passed off as Buddhism without being ahistorical.

Conclusions

This book is a welcome and useful contribution to the growing area we may call representations of Buddhism in film. The articles are engaging and the authors demonstrate an understanding of American pop culture and film criticism. Those interested in these topics will find the book quite valuable. However, students and specialists in Asian Studies, Religious Studies, and Buddhist Studies may be surprised to find so many of the articles working with different sets of methodological principles than theirs. As students, we read Said and our advisors and dissertation committee

members routinely underlined for deletion sentences that divided the world into East and West, attributed an unchanging essence to Buddhism, or represented Asia in terms of childlike innocence. Now we teach this to our own students. We teach that our writings cannot be racist, sexist, or orientalist. In the unlikely event that we do positively evaluate racist or other discriminatory paradigms, we must acknowledge it and provide a strong argument for so doing. By extension, we must demand such explanations from this book. Likewise, if we critique representations of violence, sexism, pedophilia, and other morally objectionable activity, we should do so on philosophical, ethical grounds, not by proof-texting allegedly pure sources, unsullied by history. I hope this book can remind us why we do so.

There are also a few philological problems that Asianists will notice. For example, note 1 on pages 123–4 says, “The Japanese characters, the Pali, and the English equivalents for these three Buddhist terms are as follows: impermanence, 無情 *mujo* (Japanese), *anitya*; relational origination, codependent arising, dependent origination, and so on, *pratītya-samutpāda* (we offer only the Pali for this term as the Japanese equivalent is not succinct); and nothingness or emptiness, 無 *mu*, sometimes 無地 *muji*, *sunyata*.” There are more things wrong with this note than can be addressed here but a few should be mentioned. First, the Japanese, Pali, and English do not appear in the order stated. Diacritical marks appear in some places but not others. The Indian equivalents are not Pali but Sanskrit: *pratītya-samutpāda* should be *paṭiccasamuppāda*, *sunyata* (i.e., *sūnyatā*) should be *suññatā*. *Mujo* (i.e., *mujō*) is not 無情 (ruthless) but 無常 (impermanence). Most disturbing about this for me was the comment on *pratītya-samutpāda*: “we offer only the Pali for this term as the Japanese equivalent is not succinct.” Unlike some other Chinese-derived Japanese equivalents from Sanskrit terms, *engi* (縁起) is entirely precise and even more succinct than the Pali term *paṭiccasamuppāda*. To my knowledge *engi* has never been challenged in this way by philologists or anyone else.

It is not surprising that the authors of this chapter, specialists in English and Philosophy, and the editor, also an English specialist, were not aware of these errors. Even those in Asia-related fields have trouble with some of these issues. Because there are such differences in disciplinary styles and understandings, it is hoped that more Buddhologists will work on Buddhism in American cinema and collaborate with those from other fields and continue the work this book begins.