

Jacob's Ladder: Dreams and Consciousness, Hollywood-Style

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The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is considered one of the most profound works ever written on the mysteries of consciousness, dreams, lucidity, spirituality, and the subtle relations between life and death. This ancient Buddhist treatise has fascinated people for centuries, prompting the meditations of monks the speculations of philosophers, the verses of poets -- and now, a big-budget movie from Hollywood.

That the venerable *Tibetan Book of the Dead* could be one of the main inspirations for the 1990 release of Hollywood's "Jacob's Ladder" may sound unlikely, if not absurd. Hollywood films are not renowned for sensitive portrayals of metaphysical anxiety and spiritual struggles with the ultimate questions of human existence. But the brilliant, bewitching movie "Jacob's Ladder" shows that popular films can in fact effectively explore the strange realms of dream, fantasy, vision, and memory.

For those who haven't seen it, the film begins with Jacob Singer in Vietnam (played with likable earnestness by Tim Robbins), enjoying a moment's rest with other soldiers of his platoon. Suddenly, a burst of furious violence explodes upon them; amidst all the frenzied machine-gunning, agonized screaming, and chaotic savagery, Jacob is bayoneted in the gut and left lying in the jungle, holding in his own intestines. Then, just as suddenly, he seems to wake up: he's in a New York subway car, in his postal service uniform, having dozed off on his way home from work. He shakes his head, puzzled by the nightmare. But now he begins to wonder if he has entered a new nightmare -- for he cannot find his way out of the eerily abandoned subway station, and he narrowly avoids being run over by a train filled with haunting, spectral faces.

Jacob finally makes it back to the apartment he shares with his girlfriend Jezebel (Elizabeth Pena), and tells her of his perplexity over these weird flashbacks and visions. Jezzie's warm, sensual tenderness helps to comfort him, but when Jacob looks at some photos of his ex-wife and their tragically killed son Gabriel, he falls into yet another vivid, disorienting reverie: he is once again with his son, playing and laughing, and once again must suffer the wrenching sorrow of losing him.

The movie shifts restlessly from the stark brutality of Vietnam to happy memories of playing with Gabriel, from terrifying, surrealistic glimpses of horror to ordinary, day-to-day life with Jezebel in New York. Sometimes the shifts are almost imperceptibly gradual; sometimes they are shockingly abrupt. Jacob is continuously forced to ask himself, was that a dream? Am I awake now? What is real, and what is imagination? "Jacob's Ladder" is like a classic mystery tale -- but rather than "whodunit?", the question is, "Am I alive, or am I dying?" Director Adrian Lyne (whose other film credits include

"Fatal Attraction" and "9 1/2 Weeks") uses awkward camera angles, excessively dark or bright lighting, and unsettling changes of mood to build up a tense, thoroughly ominous atmosphere.

Themes and images from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* run throughout "Jacob's Ladder". The Buddhist classic is primarily intended as a guide for the dying person, to help him or her navigate the transition from one existence to another. The most important message of the book is that the dying person must learn how to distinguish between the different fears, dangers, trials, and temptations he or she will experience in making that transition. This is exactly what Jacob Singer struggles with -- the nearly impossible task of understanding the true nature of the various dreams and visions he is experiencing. He gets caught up in many of the nightmarish situations described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*: for example, calling out and not being heard; being paralyzed; suffering extremes of heat and cold; being chased by unknown assailants; and enduring bodily mutilation and disintegration. One of the most harrowing scenes of the film has Jacob being wheeled on a stretcher from an ordinary hospital room down increasingly dark, deserted hallways that are first dirty, then spattered with blood, and then grotesquely littered with body parts and shreds of flesh.

As with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the heart of "Jacob's Ladder" is a quest for release -- release from worldly entanglements, from persistent memories, from terrifying fears, even from comforting pleasures (Jacob must ultimately leave Jezebel, too). Jacob does not understand what is happening to him, and so he fights against his experiences, against the endless shifts of reality, against the transformation he is undergoing. He tries to hold on to some aspects of his world and push away from other aspects. Only when he realizes the true nature of his condition -- when he realizes he is desperately clinging to a state of existence that must pass away -- does Jacob finally achieve release.

As the title suggests, the film also makes abundant use of Judeo-Christian symbolism. Jezebel is the woman in 1 Kings 16-18 who marries the Israelite king Ahab and leads the people into the blasphemy of worshipping Baal rather than the Lord Jehovah; Gabriel is the archangel who announces to Mary in Luke 1 that she is to bear the son of God; and Jacob is the Hebrew patriarch who has the astounding dream in Genesis 28 of a ladder spanning heaven and earth. The film weaves these biblical references into an essentially Buddhist story of enlightenment, suggesting that the Judeo-Christian yearning for salvation and the Buddhist quest for release are ultimately one.

A credit at movie's conclusion states that during the Vietnam war the U.S. Army reportedly experimented with a hallucinogenic drug called BZ, although the Pentagon denies it. The suggestion is that Jacob's experiences could have a factual basis -- what Jacob suffered might "really" have happened. This marvelously confounding statement draws the audience directly into the mystery of "Jacob's Ladder": was the film "real" or not? what is real? what does it mean to us if the film included the "real" experiences of a

real person.

This sort of concluding statement is a literary device that Hindu and Buddhist myths frequently use to blur the lines between the story and the audience, and thus to force the members of the audience to ask themselves whether they are actually in the story. The ending of "Jacob's Ladder" has this exact effect. After seeing the movie, we cannot help but wonder about our own perceptions, our own abilities to distinguish clearly between dreams, wishes, memories, and reality. Jacob Singer's awful predicament is really ours, too: Vietnam certainly has been a nightmare experience for American society, a painful encounter with suffering, violence, and death. "Jacob's Ladder" suggests that perhaps we, like Jacob, have not woken up from that nightmare; perhaps we are still in some sense trapped in that existence, without fully realizing it; perhaps some of the horrors of our present reality (or is this, too, a dream?) are due to the fact that we have not yet sorted out the desires, fears, fantasies, and wounds that we as a society experienced in Vietnam.

"Jacob's Ladder", despite its Hollywood pedigree, succeeds in recreating that sense of awe and mystery that has made *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* one of the world's enduring spiritual classics. Even more remarkably, the film makes a powerful statement about how the metaphysical exploration of dreams, consciousness, and memory is terribly relevant to contemporary Americans and their society. Many of the people at the theater where I saw it seemed deeply perplexed by the film -- "What ever did that mean?" I heard a number of them ask. Exactly.