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Enter the Void

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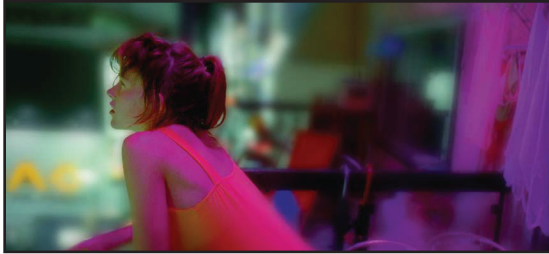
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Enter the Void

DIRECTOR GASPAR NOÉ. FIDÉLITÉ, WILD BUNCH, AND BUF. 2009. 154 MIN.

“I become a transparent eyeball—I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me—I am part or particle of God.” - RALPH WALDO EMERSON (“NATURE”)



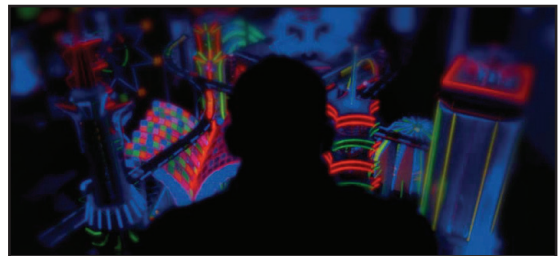
Linda (Paz de la Huerta) looks out over the nocturnal glow of Tokyo.

Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* (2009) is a kaleidoscopic journey into unseen realms. A virtuosic merger of *mise-en-scène* and cutting edge technology, the film follows the life, death and afterlife of Oscar (Nathaniel Brown), a hedonistic, hallucinogen-dealing expat living in Tokyo. After the loss of his parents, Oscar's self-imposed charge in life is to protect his twin sister, Linda (Paz de la Huerta), telling her, "I will always watch you. I will watch you from the sky."

His promise is self-fulfilling. Killed by police during a bust, Oscar's spirit enters the transition from life into death, into what is referred to as "bardo" time, or "liminality," in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Stylistically, the movie follows the lead of the 1947 noir *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery), which is told through the first-person POV of private eye Philip Marlowe. An interesting if untenable experiment, the technique is improved on by director Noé, who follows Oscar as his "soul-as-lens" roams the city, like Emerson's drifting eyeball, keeping watch over Linda.

Tokyo is neon-wired for the adventure. Its amped up colors and lights are explored like an amusement park for grown-ups. Illusions of privacy in the modern world dismay us, but in the spirit realm there is truly nothing hidden. Lives lived and unlived linger before us for the viewing. In the end, Oscar can only observe as his sister Linda goes through the dark passages of her own being, and it is she who ultimately becomes the heroine in the film.

Played by Paz de la Huerta, Linda's face is that of the new Tokyo: of ancient Edo marrying the *gaijin* traveler, come to meld into its masses. Born María de la Paz Elizabeth Sofía Adriana de la Huerta to an American mother and Spanish father, Paz's is a Latin-American life lived in cinema. In an age where very few *mezcla* performers can open movies, Paz is a bright star on the horizon. She started acting in children's theater at an early age, and as part of a series of adolescent roles, brought her precocious chops to the role of Mary Agnes in *The Cider House Rules* (Lasse Hallström, 1999). Her career then took a long jump to screen goddess, playing Jim Jarmusch's bespectacled nude siren in *Limits of Control* (2009), and the sweetly sinful Lucy Danzinger for Martin Scorsese in HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–2011).



Ever under the influence, Oscar (Nathaniel Brown) enjoys the luminescent creations of his artist friends in Edo.

Paz has both enjoyed and suffered the trappings of celebrity culture. As an actress, she is a cross between Julie Christie and Rita Hayworth. Fiery yet sweet. Completely present. Transcendent and unforgettable. As a persona, her face and curves grace magazine covers around the world. Her name is bantered about in gossip rags and savored as a nocturnal reward on NBC's *30 Rock*, when Jenna (Jane Krakowski) recalls a dream where she was making out with Paz at a children's museum. She has worked with some of the best in the business, and if

her notoriety does not overshadow her talent, she will continue to do so for a long time.

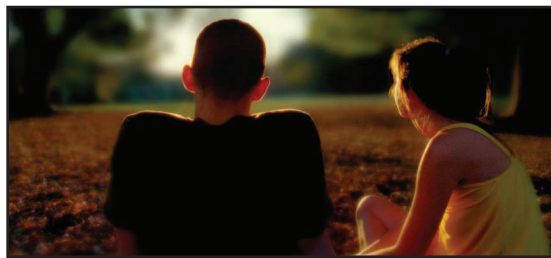
For this film, Paz describes working with director Noé as an opportunity to explore freedom in her performance. Noé was apparently less concerned with dialogue and acting notes than with visual design, spending a lot of time on his camera rig: a kind of rotating crane which creates his floating world of geisha poetry. The style is one he explored extensively in *Irréversible* (2002), a film told in reverse that inspired audiences to walk out of the theater at Cannes during a racy sequence with Monica Bellucci. As in that movie, Noé's ever-roving lens in *Enter the Void* drifts in and out of streets, alleys, apartments and businesses, and into the secrets and soundscapes of urban lives and moments. Like a spirit, he is unbound.

There's a short list of directors who get to screen in competition in Cannes, and an even shorter one for those showing unfinished films. *Enter the Void* played without credits in 2009, which in some ways is astonishing, because it is one of the most arresting things about the movie. A veritable catalog of graphic styles and bold choices, the film's titles are (sadly) better than most other people's entire films. I saw evidence of their insider influence while watching Oscar coverage the year the movie opened, when a cheesy network magazine show ripped off the style and sizzle for its bumpers.

Noé is a provocateur and emotional detective, who makes films that filmmakers and media mavens follow because he brashly shoots what he feels and writes the script as he goes (*Irréversible* supposedly had a three page script; this one was around 20 pages, according to Paz). But what results is a kinetic, cinematic energy that is hard to rival in terms of fluidity of camera, yet still tracks a moral compass. Noé seems to be a kind of filmic Kurtz, following the rivers into the heart of man, exploring the deeper recesses of sin, folly and human desire.

Teamed with producer Pierre Buffin, the effects guru whose work undergirds blockbusters like *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), Noé has turned his powers of imagination to the netherworld. He has discussed the influence of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968 on *Enter the Void*. Kubrick's journey to the stars has been extended, but also sublimated; the gates of travel are turned inward. We now see the Star Child as addict, the pleasure seeker as a kind of god, whose energy always lives on, though he himself may not.

Visually and aurally arresting, the movie soars in and out of practical locations, models and computer-generated imagery with an assured use of long takes and seamless edits. Flowing through the brachial secrets of Oscar's biological and soulish being, the viewer is taken on a roller coaster of saturated dreamscapes, of neurons, DNA channels and cells firing synaptic charges, into the flesh and beauty of Japan, from blinking concrete canyons to anxious private homes to love hotels. It is a gorgeous if unsettling vision of what perhaps might be next for all of us.



In happier times, brother and sister Oscar (Nathaniel Brown) and Linda (Paz de la Huerta) promise to always look out for each other.

Enter the Void is difficult at times to watch, but it is also sensual and beats with an existential heart. To me, the biggest question it inadvertently asks is, "Is this a portrait of modern man?" The film speaks to the glossy immediacy of the present day, where fighting for your "right to party" has become a weakness. The jet set that bob and bounce in and out of Tokyo, London, New York, Hong Kong, Singapore, beaches outside Bangkok—are they all waiting to expire?

We fill every moment with activity, with phones, meetings, messages, lights, din, endless desires. All impositions on the peace of nature and the mystery of existence. Still, we push ahead. Like the Symbolists, the Lost Generation and the Beats discovered before us, the traveler can only engage decadence when spirituality is removed. Perhaps nothing else tastes as good, when we are facing the void.

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