

## A Second Rung on the Ladder: Appraising the *Jacob's Ladder* 2019 Remake

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This paper compares the original 1990 cult film, *Jacob's Ladder*, directed by Adrian Lyne, to the 2019 remake, directed by David Rosenthal. In 2015 we published an article using *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a mechanism for interpreting the original 1990 film. We believed then and do now that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* provides the most comprehensive and interesting interpretation of the original film. We were anxious, then, to see how the 2019 remake dealt with concepts like enlightenment, attachment, the bardo, and other ideas from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In the end, we decided that while the remake has many similarities with the original, the 2019 version of the film does not lend itself to interpretation using *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

**Keywords:** the ladder, drug addiction, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Bardo, death, liberation, Nirvana, and Samsara

### *Jacob's Ladder*

In 2015 we published an article in *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* in which we offered an interpretation of the Adrian Lyne (director) and Bruce Joel Rubin (script) 1990 cult film, *Jacob's Ladder*, using *The Great Book of Natural Liberation through Understanding in the Between*, or what is more commonly referred to as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Coleman & Jinpa, 2005, pp. 234, 228-283; Robert, 1994, pp. 178-179). While there are a number of possible interpretations of the film (Biblical story, Gnosticism, Tibetan Buddhism, Vietnam war, PTSD, drugs, government corruption), we thought that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* provides the most comprehensive and interesting interpretation of the original film.<sup>1</sup>

In the process of writing our first article, we learned that a remake of *Jacob's Ladder* was under consideration and we noted this in our introduction and conclusion. We looked forward to the opportunity to

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<sup>1</sup> For an examination of *Jacob's Ladder* through the lens of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, see Brady DeSanti and William L. Blizek, "Understanding *Jacob's Ladder* through the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*," *The Journal of Religion Popular Culture* (Volume 27, Number 1, Spring 2015), pp. 45-56. Since the movie is about soldiers from the Vietnam war, the movie could be interpreted as a description of the Vietnam war. Since the soldiers have so many odd experiences, the film might be interpreted as an account of the effects of PTSD. Also, since the drug BZ plays a role in the film, the film is open to an interpretation in terms of drug use and the effects of drug use. Finally, since the U. S. Government is giving the soldiers a drug that makes them more aggressive without telling them what the drug does, and since the government hides that fact that the drug had terrible side effects, the film might be interpreted as a film about government corruption.

compare the two films. Due to numerous delays which saw the director change from James Foley to David Rosenthal and Jeff Buhler's script undergo changes by Sarah Thorpe and Jake Wade Wall we were only recently able to see the remake.<sup>2</sup> Our purpose in comparing the two versions of *Jacob's Ladder* was to see how the religious, spiritual, even existential elements of the 1990 film are dealt with in the 2019 version. Will we find the same elements in both films? Will the 2019 film present those elements in the same way or will it give a different twist to these elements? Before we examine the remake, however, a brief recounting of the original film's primary themes and concepts will be helpful.

### *Jacob's Ladder* (1990)

In the beginning of the 1990 movie, we meet Jacob Singer (Tim Robbins), an American soldier fighting in Vietnam. When Jacob's unit is attacked, he escapes and hides from the enemy. But he cannot hide for long. Soon he is discovered and stabbed in the abdomen by someone with a bayonet. We later realize that Jacob has been attacked by a fellow American soldier. In the final scene of the movie we find Jacob on the operating table of a military field hospital in Vietnam. At this moment he is pronounced dead. One of the doctors says: "Looks kinda peaceful, the guy." And the other doctor says: "Put up a hell of a fight though."

The fact that the movie starts in Vietnam and ends in Vietnam strongly suggests that Jacob has never left the country. This means that most of the movie is not about the external world but is about a part of Jacob's inner struggle to find liberation from *Samsara*, the endless wandering through the cycles of birth, life, and death in Buddhism. Most of the movie, then, focuses on the period between the time Jacob is stabbed and the moment when Jacob is pronounced dead. According to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* this is a major *bardo* stage (in-between gap), the infinitesimally short period between death and the transition into a new state of being. The objective is to circumvent rebirth by understanding that the true nature of one's self is identical to the totality of existence, thereby achieving enlightenment.

The scene just before Jacob is pronounced dead finds him in his old home. He hears a noise and finds his deceased son, Gabe, sitting on the stairs. Gabe takes Jacob by the hand and leads him up the stairs into a blinding white light. This scene suggests that Jacob has found enlightenment ("Looks kinda peaceful, the guy"). That Jacob has reached enlightenment just before he is pronounced dead, suggests that Jacob has let go of his ego and his attachments to the people and memories of his previous life. Letting go, however, has been a difficult struggle for Jacob ("Put up a hell of a fight though").

Since the bulk of the movie focuses on journey in "the in-between" (*bardo* stages) and to achieve release from attachments to his old life, here are some examples from the movie that can be interpreted in accordance with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. After the bayonet stabbing, we next see Jacob on the subway. As he leaves the train, he notices that all of the exits are barricaded, forcing him to walk across the tracks to the other side. The blinding lights of another train shines ominously down the tunnel as it speeds toward Jacob, freezing him in terror.

According to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, immediately upon one's death he or she is confronted by the "clear light," which represents the totality of existence. The person has a very short period of time in which to

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<sup>2</sup> The remake was released twenty-nine years after the original.

recognize this light as his or her own inner being and to merge with it, ending *Samsara*. The light of the train represents this “clear light.” Jacob, however, conditioned by ego and viewing himself as separate from the whole of existence, leaps away from the train and misses the chance to experience enlightenment. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* tells us that failure to recognize the nature of the clear light as synonymous with one’s own nature inaugurates a harrowing and confusing journey through various bardo stages of both a heavenly and hellish nature.

These subsequent confusing and frightening experiences are really a product of the deceased person’s inability to wipe the slate clean of the person’s previous life and to cease clinging to their attachments. Jacob, indeed, desperately seeks to hold onto his former life, which results in him seeking to create a new life out of the memories and attachments from his former life. He is given opportunities throughout these visions and experiences to recognize the truth—that he is dead and must let go. To the extent that he fails to do so, he experiences various Buddhist Hells. He does this with both his former wife, Sarah, and his children, Jed, Gabe, and Eli. Sometimes through dreams and sometimes through photographs we see Jacob connecting to his life before Vietnam.

Throughout this process, Jacob is given advice by his chiropractor, Louis (Danny Aiello). Louis is a kind of angel who dispenses advice to Jacob about the true nature of his visions and strange experiences. Louis also can be understood as a peaceful Tibetan deity, as well as the part of Jacob that already knows the true nature of his visions. Toward the end of the movie, Louis gives a major clue to the mystery, paraphrasing the German mystic-theologian, Meister Eckhart: “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 them all away. But they’re not punishing you. They’re freeing your soul” (Politella, 1965, pp. 117-133). Louis then adds his own take: “If you’re frightened of dying ... and you’re 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.”<sup>3</sup>

Jacob experiences a similar, but opposite, relationship with his girlfriend, Jezebel (“Jezzie”) (Elizabeth Pena). Jezzie at times attempts to seduce Jacob into holding onto his previous life, encouraging him to ignore all of the clues about the truth of his circumstances. Like Louis, Jezzie can be interpreted as a Tibetan deity, although a wrathful one, as well as the part of Jacob that does in fact seek to cling to his old life at all costs. Louis, the angel, and Jezzie, the demon, are not external realities, but represent the inner nature of Jacob, who must reconcile these two aspects of himself before attaining enlightenment and achieving *Nirvana* (the Buddhist understanding of the “blowing out” the flames of desire and ending all attachments to the ego).

### ***Jacob’s Ladder* (2019)**

Although the description above is short, it includes what we need to compare the 1990 Adrian Lyne film to the 2019 film, directed by David M Rosenthal and starring Michael Ealy as Jacob Singer, Jesse Williams as Isaac Singer (Jacob’s brother), Nicole Baharie as Samantha Singer (Jacob’s wife), and Ritchie Coster as Louis. The 2019 *Jacob’s Ladder* is a very different story than the 1990 film. The question we want to answer here is whether

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<sup>3</sup> Politella, Joseph, 1965. *Meister Eckhart and Eastern Wisdom, Philosophy East and West* (vol.15, no.2), pp. 117-133. The phrase, “It’s just a matter of how you look at it,” brings an existential dimension to the story. Consider Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Also, when we see Jacob reading on the train (1990), he is reading Camus’ *The Stranger*.

or not the 2019 film exemplifies significant elements of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in the way that we believe the 1990 film did. Does the 2019 film express ideas from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*? That is, can Tibetan Buddhism be used to reasonably interpret the 2019 film?

In the first scene of the 2019 film, we see a veteran wearing dog tags in an alley. He seems to be hearing the sounds of war. He is clearly afraid and so he sits on some steps and drinks some kind of liquid from a vial. We learn later that this is something veterans are taking to deal with the effects of the war on their mental stability and to treat PTSD. It's called HDA. But after taking the drug the veteran thinks he is being choked to death. He begins foaming at the mouth just before he dies. This suggests that the 2019 film will focus on the psychological trauma of war, drug use and addiction, and it does.

When we first meet Jacob Singer, like the Jacob Singer at the beginning of the original film, he is sitting around commiserating with fellow soldiers. In the remake Jacob is in Afghanistan. He goes to make a call to his wife, Samantha, where he learns that she is pregnant. Next we see Jacob performing surgery in a field hospital in Afghanistan. It turns out that Jacob Singer is performing surgery on his brother, Isaac, who he recognizes from a snail shell like tattoo and his dog tags.<sup>4</sup> It appears that Jacob's surgery is unsuccessful and his brother has died.

Next we see Jacob at his home in Atlanta, after his tour in Afghanistan is complete, with his wife and his infant son, Gabriel. He seems happy and contented. In the 1990 film, Jacob is divorced from Sarah with whom he had a son named, Gabe, who was killed in a car accident while riding his bike before Jacob went to Vietnam. This is a huge loss for Jacob. Also, in the 1990 film, Jacob is living with his girlfriend, Jezzie, throughout most of the movie. In the 2019 film, after Jacob has a nightmare he wakes and gets dressed. Before he puts his watch on, we see the inscription on the back: "To Jacob. My heart belongs to you." It is signed, "Samantha." Both movie versions portray Jacob early on as emotionally wounded from his wartime experiences and seeking comfort from his wife/girlfriend after awakening from a nightmare.

In the next scene, we find Jacob visiting an Atlanta hospital pharmacist named Hoffman. Jacob also works in this hospital as a trauma surgeon. After some banter back and forth, Hoffman gives Jacob a bag of "medicine." Hoffman tells Jacob that if Jacob finds more veterans in need of help, he can help. This suggests that Hoffman is responsible for making HDA available to veterans. As Jacob leaves, he encounters a veteran in the waiting room who is having a seizure and foaming at the mouth. Jacob attends to the veteran who drops a small vial, suggesting that the veteran has taken HDA. As they wheel the gurney away, the veteran calls to Jacob by name. Jacob is puzzled because he does not know this veteran. As Jacob walks home, he is confronted by Paul Rutiger. Rutiger claims to have been a part of Isaac's team in Afghanistan. He also tells Jacob that Isaac is alive and living in Atlanta.

After this strange encounter, Jacob takes the subway home and sees a sign on the wall of the subway car. The sign says: "All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream." This suggests that Jacob's experiences are a dream within a dream, that there is something amiss with his perception of reality. When Jacob leaves the subway car, he sees an old man lying on the seats. The man's feet are bloody and seem to be rotting. Jacob quickly steps back into the car to be sure he has seen the old man, but there is no one there.

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<sup>4</sup> There is no brother in the 1990 version of the film.

As Jacob returns home he feels as though he is being followed. When he gets to the door, he finds it open and suspects that someone has broken in. He takes a baseball bat upstairs and is attacked by two men. One of the men escapes and runs away. Jacob knocks the other man unconscious and takes him downstairs and puts him in the trunk of his car. He speeds off to drop the body off at a hospital, but when he opens the trunk the body is gone. At this moment Paul Rutiger appears again. He tells Jacob that he is being followed. Paul repeats what the attacker had previously said: "You better keep your mouth shut." Jacob wants to know how Paul knows what the attacker had said back at the house. Paul also says that the "ladder" (HDA) is the only thing that helps. The HDA is supposed to help with PTSD, but it only makes veterans become extremely unstable.

Paul tells Jacob that Isaac is in trouble and that he lives in a tunnel below the subway tracks, so Jacob follows Paul down into the cavernous tunnels. At this moment Paul is pushed onto the tracks in front of an oncoming train by a demonic old lady (The lady appears several times in the movie). After reporting the incident to the police, who seem entirely uninterested, Jacob goes down into the tunnels by himself and finds an entire community of homeless people. Here he finds his brother living in a tent.

When Jacob and Isaac get home, Samantha is shocked to see Isaac. Immediately after this reunion, Isaac gets a deadly fever and Jacob and Samantha plunge him into a bathtub filled with ice. Although it is Isaac who is put in the bathtub, it is Jacob's face we see when he last emerges from the tub. We next see Jacob and Isaac walking through a wheat field, carrying fishing poles. It is an idyllic time and a heavenly setting. As Isaac recovers, he and Jacob talk about the time in their lives when they used to go fishing at their grandfather's home in the country. As Jacob goes to put Isaac's clothes in the wash, he finds a vial of what is most likely HDA. Worried about Isaac, Jacob goes to the hospital to find his psychiatrist, Louis. Jacob tells Louis the Isaac is alive, but that Isaac thinks he is going to Hell. Louis paraphrases the famous Meister Eckhart quote from the first film here before rushing off to another meeting.

After his encounter with Louis, Jacob is then confronted by a homeless veteran. He tries to find a nurse but cannot find one. He returns to the room where he left the veteran, but the veteran is no longer there. Then the man, now seemingly demonically possessed, falls from the ceiling and attacks Jacob and then disappears. Jacob then rushes off to see Hoffman and demands to know what is in the vial he found in the pocket of Isaac's pants. By this time Jacob is experiencing a good deal of paranoia. Hoffman tells Jacob he'll look into it, but that Jacob should be careful with whom he talks about the HDA, fueling Jacob's paranoia.

Upon leaving Hoffman's laboratory, Jacob is chased down an alley by people in a car. When Jacob falls the car stops and a hooded man exits the passenger side. He points a gun at Jacob and says: "You just couldn't keep your mouth shut". Before he can shoot Jacob, the hooded man and the car are chased away by someone entering the alley from the back of a store.

When Jacob gets home, he demands to know from Isaac what is going on. Jacob tells Samantha to take Gabriel to a hotel where they can be safe. As Samantha leaves, Jacob chases Isaac as he runs away. Jacob finds his brother in the tunnels and prevents Isaac from shooting up. They discuss a traumatic ambush they experienced in Afghanistan and Isaac tells Jacob that the only thing that helps him is the HDA. Jake and Isaac then decide to both go to see Hoffman and demand answers once and for all. But as they reach Hoffman's lab, someone starts shooting at them and they flee the scene.

Sometime afterwards, Jacob finds Samantha and Isaac together in the hotel room talking closely. He suspects them of having an affair. After a brief confrontation between the two brothers, Jacob storms out and goes to Hoffman's old laboratory at the hospital, but only finds an old man mopping the floor. The mop is bloody. The old man frightens Jacob and Jacob fall down and hits his head and begins to imagine himself at a wedding reception. He is dressed in his military uniform. Isaac is giving a drunken, angry toast, saying that he loves his brother and that he loves Samantha and cannot believe that his brother, Jacob, would take Samantha away from him. He whispers to Jacob that he had Samantha first. Then Isaac knocks Jacob down and Jacob finds himself back in the hallway with the old man mopping the floor.

When Jacob returns home, he tells a sullen Samantha that he will do better. That he will be a better husband. That he will go to therapy. She just needs to tell Jacob what she wants him to do. When Isaac asks Jake what he is doing, Jacob says that he is trying to save his marriage. He says: "She's my wife." Then Isaac tells Jacob that he is not married to Samantha. He was never married to Samantha. And, in fact, it is Isaac who is married to Samantha. Jacob runs into the bedroom where he finds some wedding pictures of Isaac and Samantha. Then Isaac shows Jacob his watch. It is inscribed on the back. It says: "To Isaac. With all my heart. Samantha." Jacob now realizes that he is not who he thinks he is.

Somewhat jarringly Jacob then finds himself with a prostitute in a sleazy, rundown room where she shoots him up with what we believe is HDA. The woman tells Jacob that he always says this is his last time, but he always comes back anyhow. Jacob then has an out of body experience where he watches himself having sex with the prostitute, who now has morphed into a demonic entity with wings. When Isaac arrives, he tells Jacob: "It's not you, it's the drug. It's not Jacob." But Jacob says that he cannot make it stop and he runs off to find Hoffman, whom he now thinks is the source of the HDA, the culprit behind his confusion and terrifying visions.

After arriving at this revelation, Jacob arrives at Hoffman's new lab in an undisclosed building. He asks Hoffman: "What, are you trying to kill me?" Hoffman responds that he is improving the drug and that Jacob, out of desperation, begged him for the drug. Isaac's arrival temporarily interrupts the confrontation and Isaac threatens to call the police and to shut down Hoffman's lab once and for all. Hoffman insists that he can still help Jacob and all of the other veterans who are experiencing problems. Jacob cries out that the drug does not erase traumatic memories, it replaces them with something worse. By now Hoffman has pulled a gun and is threatening Isaac, telling him not to call the police. Just as Hoffman pulls the trigger to shoot Isaac, Jacob umps in front of Isaac and rushes Hoffman. Jacob is shot in the chest as he and Hoffman crash through a large window and plunge to the parking lot below. Jacob is dead and we see Isaac cradling his head.

We then see a gurney with Jacob's body on it being pushed by the little old lady who appears again. Now her face changes from demonic to that of a normal compassionate caregiver. She is pushing Jacob toward a white light. When all we can see is the white light, we then see a field of wheat and Jacob walking through it as he used to do with his brother when they would go fishing. An idyllic time and a heavenly setting, indicating that Jacob has found peace.

### Similarities

Although these two versions of *Jacob's Ladder* seem to us to be two quite different stories, there are a number of similarities. But, then, you would expect a number of similarities between the original version and the

remake. Both Jacobs have nightmares and experience a great deal of confusion. Both Jacobs are physically attacked, and they experience very strange people. In the 1990 film Jacob is plunged into an icy bath while experiencing a high fever. In the 2019 film it is Isaac that has the high fever and is plunged into the icy bath. But in the 2019 version the last time Isaac comes up for air, it is Jacob's face that we see. Furthermore, both Jacobs are influenced by a veteran named Paul Rutiger. In the original film, Rutiger is a friend of Jacob who served in Jacob's platoon in Vietnam. He asks Jacob for help after the war because he is suffering the same nightmarish visions that Jacob does. This encounter helps Jacob to grasp that something is wrong, that there may be a larger conspiracy at play. Rutiger dies in a car explosion a few minutes later. In the 2019 remake, Paul Rutiger serves a similar function, telling Jacob that Isaac and other American veterans are part of a sinister conspiracy involving a drug. This version of Rutiger also dies violently (he is pushed in front of an oncoming train by the demonic old lady) after disclosing key information to Jacob.

In the 2019 film Jacob has an infant son named Gabriel. In the 1990 film Jacob has three sons. In the 1990 version Gabe plays a more important role than the infant Gabriel does in the 2019 film. Gabriel's death in the 1990 film is a major factor in Jacob's struggle to let go and accept death. In the 1990 film, Jacob sees an old man lying on the seats of the subway. The old man appears to have a lizard-like tail, as does Jezzie later in the film. In the 2019 film, the old man on the subway appears to have rotting feet.

Another similarity is that both Jacobs see signs overhead on the subway. In the 2019 film, the sign says: "All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream." In the 1990 film the sign reads: "Hell: That's what life can be, doing drugs. But it doesn't have to be that way. Help is available, day or night." Both versions of the film use subway signs to signal to both Jacob and the viewer that something ominous is taking place. In the 1990 version, we believe that the sign forecasts Jacob's imminent decent through the various Buddhist Hells after Jacob will miss the opportunity to merge with the "clear light." In the remake we interpret the subway sign as indicating that Jacob's psyche has been interfered with in some way. As with the original, the sign marks a period in the movie where Jacob begins to experience vivid and horrifying imagery.

In both films we see people with violently shaking heads and in both films, Jacob goes toward a white light at the end of the film, suggesting either heaven or enlightenment. And in both films Jacob is chased by a car down an alley. In the 1990 film, the car fails to run Jacob down and speeds away. In the 2019 film, the car stops, and a hooded man gets out and prepares to shoot Jacob before the man is chased away. Both Jacobs are kidnapped. Finally, in the 1990 film Louis, Jacob's chiropractor and mentor, paraphrases Meister Eckhart on dying. In the 2019 version of the film, it is Jacob's psychiatrist who paraphrases Meister Eckhart on dying.

### Differences

Here we identify some of the key differences between the two films that influence our overall interpretation of each film. In the 2019 film, the very first scene is one in which a veteran has died after using HDA. This puts the drug front and center for the remake. When we first meet Jacob in the 2019 film, he is sunning himself in Afghanistan and he goes to call his wife. We have no indication here that Jacob is dead. In the next scenes we see Jacob performing surgery on his brother. At this point there is no reason to believe that Jacob has died. Both the call to Samantha and the surgery are disconnected with what we come to discover is reality, but this disconnection has an easy explanation in the 2019 film—Jacob has been using HDA and the drug is what causes

his disconnection from reality. We also see Jacob die in Atlanta as he falls out of the window trying to save Isaac in the 2019 film. There are no other indications that Jacob has already died earlier in the movie. Without a reason to believe that Jacob is dead early in the film, we have no reason to believe that Jacob is in the “in between” space between death and rebirth.

At the end of the 1990 film, we learn that Jacob has been dead throughout the movie, or as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* would suggest, in the period between death and rebirth. This is the interesting twist at the end of the 1990 film that opens the film up to an interpretation using *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Being stabbed in Vietnam at the beginning of the movie and being pronounced dead in Vietnam is a strong indicator that Jacob has been in the bardo stages throughout the movie.

Being in the bardo stages explains the experiences Jacob has in the original film, since Jacob dies early in the film. But, since Jacob does not die until the end of the remake, being in the “in between” does not explain Jacob’s experiences and behavior. And, since the first scene of the remake puts drug use up front, we are inclined to interpret the use of HDA as the explanation of Jacob’s behavior. To be sure, the original movie makes it clear that Jacob and his platoon have been drugged with something called BZ, which was designed to increase aggression in American soldiers during combat. We argued in our first article, however, that this drug only seems to compound the difficulty of Jacob’s journey through the bardo stages between death and enlightenment. The drug does not explain why Jacob is on the journey.

In both films, Louis paraphrases the same Meister Eckhart comments on dying. In the 1990 film this phrase seems appropriate. It is spoken to Jacob by his adviser, his inner self, even his angel. Louis is giving Jacob advice about how to deal with letting go and this fits with the theme of the movie—how to die. In the 2019 film Jacob tells Louis that Isaac feels like he is going to Hell and Louis’ phrase is a response to Isaac’s specific concern. It is not a response to Jacob. This means that the very important message of the 1990 film is a throwaway line in the 2019 film, without the emotional power it carried in the 1990 version. Louis’ message about how to die is a crucial theme of the 1990 film, but only an awkward response to Jacob’s concern for Isaac in the 2019 film. This means that the theme of the 2019 film is not about how to die, leaving the focus of the film on the dangers of the drug, HDA.

While both films have characters plunged into an icy bath (Jacob in the original film and Isaac in the remake) in response to a high fever, the biggest difference between the two scenes is that in the original film Jacob’s high fever can be understood as experiencing a Buddhist version of a hot Hell, followed by an icy Hell when he is plunged into the icy water. His experience of these Hells follows from his failure to recognize that he is dead and must let go. This directly ties to imagery from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The 2019 version of the film makes no allusion to this larger connection and makes no mention of why Isaac experiences a fever in the first place.

In both movies Jacob struggles with the need to see things as they are—to accept the true nature of their circumstances and to move on. In the original film, Jacob is dead and must accept his hellish visions as the product of his own inability to let go of his old life. Once he recognizes this, he is able to achieve enlightenment and to give up his attachments to his old life. In the remake Jacob is addicted to HDA, but very much still alive throughout the film. His addiction has caused him to confuse the nature of reality. He has confused his own life with that of his brother, Isaac, constructing an entire life that is a painful drug-induced hallucination. His own



liberation comes from breaking his addiction long enough to accept reality, to save his brother's life, and to die having broken the shackles of his addiction.

### Conclusion

Our excitement about seeing the 2019 remake of *Jacob's Ladder* was due to the opportunity to see how the elements of the original film would be treated in the remake. Would the elements we attributed to the between in the original film be the same or different? Would those elements be as obviously the between or would they give us a different or even expanded look at the between? How would Jacob die in the remake? In other words, what picture of death, rebirth and the between would the remake give the viewer? Would that picture be more powerful than the original, or would it be a weak imitation?

There are many, many elements of the original film to be found in the remake. In this sense, one might call the 2019 version of the film a remake. If our analysis of the films is correct, however, the use of similar elements in the remake create an entirely different film from the original. This means that the remake does not lend itself to interpretation in terms of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The most comprehensive and interesting interpretation of the remake is that the drugs that soldiers used in Afghanistan to cope with the horrors of war only made things worse for those soldiers. This specific message can be expanded to say that the use of and addiction to drugs as a way of eliminating the pains of being a combatant in war, whatever that war might be, create more problems than they are worth. At best, the drugs provide only a temporary respite. At worst, the drugs disconnect you from the real world in such a way that a soldier (indeed, anyone) becomes unable to seek the kind of help that might in fact ease the pain of war. The remake is a movie that condemns drug use and warns about the consequences of drug addiction.

In the remake, Jacob dies at the end of the film. There is nothing in Jacob's death, however, to suggest that most of the movie is about the between, what is between death and rebirth. The fact that Jacob is stabbed at the beginning of the original film and then pronounced dead at the end does suggest that in the 1990 original most of the film is about the process of dying.<sup>5</sup> How we are to die is explained in the quote from Meister Eckhart spoken by Louis in the original film. But that very same quote in the 2019 film does not tell Jacob how he should die. Instead the quote is a message to Jacob's brother, Isaac. This means that it is a secondary feature of the film, while the quote is an essential part of the original movie's message. That the person to receive the Eckhart message is different from one film to the next changes dramatically the significance of the message and changes the meaning of the film.

Furthermore, Jacob has a brother, Isaac, in the remake, but not in the original. Isaac is a mechanism for the suffering and confusion that Jacob experiences throughout the remake. But it is clear that drugs are the cause of Jacob's suffering and confusion. This suggests that Jacob's suffering and confusion in the original film are the result of his not letting go of his life, his hanging on to memories and attachments. Finally, it is possible to interpret Jacob's fever and ice bath in the original film as his participation in the fire and ice Hells. But in the remake this possibility is not clear because it is Isaac who suffers the fever and gets the ice bath and it is Jacob's

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<sup>5</sup> Some commentators thought that the end of the original film, where Jacob was pronounced dead, is strange and surprising. We would agree if we thought that the movie was about drug use and addiction. But if you interpret the original film from the perspective of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the ending is just right.

face that comes out of the water the last time Isaac/Jacob comes up for air. If this scene is not about the fire and ice Hells, then what do they represent, except more drug induced suffering and confusion. This is a scene similar to the scene in the original, but it does not clearly lend itself to interpretation through *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

We were disappointed, of course that the two films, which have so many similarities, are quite different films, one about drug use and abuse, the other about how to die. Also, we were disappointed that the remake does not answer the questions that we were most interested in having answered.

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