

Dollar-Book Void

Enter The Void. A bold, unabashedly philosophical title from a filmmaker always eager to announce his own boldness. One suspects that Gaspar Noé, who alluded Nietzsche in his controversial previous film *Irreversible*, imagines himself as a filmmaker who philosophizes with a hammer. However, for Noé this seems to mean taking a few vague ideas and smashing the audience in the face with them repeatedly and mercilessly. If this approach makes Noé's Nietzschean posturing somewhat embarrassing, it can nonetheless be bluntly effective. *Irreversible* took a few banal 'ideas' ("The desire for vengeance is a natural impulse", "Time destroys all things") and managed to make them powerful and affecting, if excessively unpleasant. This was due in large part to the effectiveness of Noé's two simple structural and formal conceits: the scenes are ordered in reverse chronology, and each scene is (or appears to be) filmed in a single unbroken take, which are often breathtaking technical achievements. These combined with the simplistically brutal events and emotions – rape, murder, jealousy, rage, horniness (which Noé seems to consider an emotion) – to make for a viscerally, if not intellectually, stimulating experience, which, to my mind, was not entirely without merit. Though Noé employs even more novel formal and structural conceits in *Enter the Void* and displays even more impressive technical inventiveness, here these fail to inject the vague 'ideas' explored with any interest; in fact, the overwrought aesthetic only highlights the emptiness of the whole exercise.



'Dollar-book Freud' was how Orson Welles characterized his use of psychology in relation to the search for 'Rosebud' as *Citizen Kane's* structuring gimmick. In *Enter The Void*, Noé's gimmick is dollar-book Buddhism. The structure of the film is foretold in an early scene when a character crudely summarizes the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*: when you die, first your whole life flashes before your eyes, then your spirit drifts around trying out different consciousnesses in order to decide how you want to be reborn, then once you've decided you are reincarnated. And this is how the film unfolds. The protagonist is Oscar, a young American living in Tokyo, selling and experimenting with drugs while negotiating a near-incestuous relationship with his stripper sister, Linda. The opening section of the film is shot entirely from Oscar's 'first-person' perspective: we see and hear only what he sees and hears (including flashes of



black when he blinks, and 'trippy' colors and shapes when does drugs). His thoughts, such as they are, are articulated in sotto-voiceover (after he takes drugs he thinks "Whoa, it's starting to kick in"). This section continues for 15 minutes or so until Oscar is shot dead in a drug deal gone wrong (he thinks, "They shot me, I'm dying"), at which point the camera pulls out of Oscar's consciousness and assumes a floating bird's eye perspective. The rest of the film alternates between this overhead drifting-spirit mode, in which Oscar's consciousness floats around watching over his sister while occasionally trying out different consciousnesses, and a memory-mode, in which we observe flashbacks from Oscar's life from a camera positioned directed behind his head.

Give credit where it is due, Noé manages to construct an entire of the film switching back and forth between these two unconventional perspectives (floating-spirit-mode and memory-mode). That this works at all is due to Noé's technical brilliance and bravado. Years in the making, *Enter The Void* looks and sounds like no other film ever made. Noé's camera shows us angles we've never seen before, performs moves we never thought possible, and forces us to inhabit points of view we've never imagined (including not only moment-of-death-POV and floating-Buddhist-spirit-POV, but also vaginal-canal-being-filled-with-semen-POV, sperm-in-search-of-an-egg-POV, and newborn-emerging-into-the-world-then-burrowing-into-an-ample-breast-POV). This is all as absurdly impressive as it sounds. However, Noé's virtuosic technique and inventiveness become tedious when offering only new variations of the same tricks. For instance, scenes repeatedly end with the camera descending into some kind 'void' (a sink drain, a lampshade, anything circular really). This motif, not exactly subtle to begin with, becomes laughably predictable the more it is repeated. Even when trying his hardest to provoke and shock, such as forcing us to watch a graphic abortion, the contrivances of Noé's aesthetic render his images dead on arrival. His camera hovers insistently over the disposed fetus, but we are already looking around for the next hole.

Perhaps in a more unassuming context, such as a low-budget horror film, the tedium and absurdity of Noé's trick shots could potentially be forgiven and enjoyed, novel as they are. However, the pomposity of their presentation combined with the inept narrative and the shallow philosophical pretensions, both of which Noé seems to want us to take seriously,

suck all joy from the proceedings. Welles' dollar-book Freud was a gimmick used to tie together the complexities of his fragmentary narrative, his aphoristic insights, his diverse cinematic experimentations, and his inventive showmanship. Noé's gimmick functions more as an attempt to make inanity seem profound. If the structure is dollar-book Buddhism, the basic narrative turns out to be sub-dollar-book Freud. In the flashback scenes we learn that as young children Oscar and Linda witnessed the violent deaths their parents in a car crash. Though Oscar promises Linda that they will always be together, they are soon separated and sent to different foster homes. As a young adult Oscar moves to Tokyo, and earns enough money selling drugs to bring Linda over to live with him. However, her yearning for him has turned dangerously incestuous over the years, and the joy of finally reuniting with him manifests itself in a variety of inappropriately expressed affections, enacted in various states of partial undress. The basic plot of the film becomes Linda's struggle to cope with Oscar's death as he (and the viewer) watches over her as a floating spirit. For Noé, coping means mostly deciding whom to sleep with. (He uses Paz De La Huerta's enticing nudity as an antidote to her poor readings of his bad dialogue by alternating embarrassing scenes of Linda emoting with pallet-cleansing scenes of her pole dancing or getting fucked.)

With unintentionally comical bluntness, the film presents all desire as the blatantly disturbed Freudian variety, a doomed search the lost bliss of the maternal connection, which was still powerfully sensed in the innocence of happy early childhood, though not as powerfully as when sucking on a nipple as an infant, nor of course, as when inhabiting the womb. The temporary satisfactions of sex and drugs owe their appeal to their approximation of the numb bliss of pre-natal nothingness – which in Noé's cheap Buddhism represents the true void of being (or something). The schematically Freudian narrative gets resolved when an appropriate substitution is found for Linda's incestuous desire (Oscar's big-brother-like friend Victor). This resolution is signaled by the fantasy sequence that occurs when Victor and Linda finally couple. As they enter the aptly named 'Love Hotel', Noé's camera (in its spirit-Oscar-mode) leaves Linda and Victor for a while to shows us various characters from throughout the film fucking happily in hotel rooms – the first time in the film sex is presented as unproblematically joyful (we know it's

joyful because glowing translucent swirls of light flow from everyone's orifices). The sequence culminates in a scene of Linda and Victor making glorious love, which climaxes, literally (Noé's idea of wit), with the aforementioned vaginal-canal-POV shot and ends in a white-out as Victor's spurting cum blissfully blinds us all. This, in turn, resolves the schematic *Tibetan Book of the Dead* structure: Oscar chooses to be reborn as Victor and Linda's love child, which then leads to the aforementioned birthing-POV shot.

This is the sum of the film's philosophical posturing, Noé's hollow notion that the void of desire and the void of being

are more or less one and the same. Whether this is meant as New-Age consolation (the troubling void of desire need not be so troubling since it accords to the void of being), or nihilistic provocation (the comfort of accepting the void of being should not be so comforting since it only condemns us to endlessly re-experiencing the void of desire) is unclear, and the vacuousness of both options does not compel one to spend much time reflecting upon either. Indeed, it is slightly embarrassing even to expel the energy necessary to articulate film's the awkward, pseudo-ideas. It's tempting to simply take the film as an empty exercise in style – the title beckoning us to abandon our

minds and give in to the film as we might to a new drug. However, such a generous approach would require the aid of further stimulants, since the tedious contrivances of the film's aesthetic are an insufficient distraction from its underlying inanities. With *Enter The Void*, Noé not only wields his over-confident hammer in the service of dubious purposes, but the hammer itself turns out to be ineffectual, unable even to conjure the blunt force required to stun us into temporary acquiescence with his sham-philosophizing.

-Mike Vass