Martin Scorsese’s *Kundun* is one of his most cinematically ambitious films to date. *Kundun* was clearly intended only to be a piece of cinematic art, with no concern for being a successful movie. Martin Scorsese chose Tibetan actors to remain culturally accurate, disregarding the decreased quality of acting by actors that were largely non-professional. These actors struggle to deliver their lines well in what is clearly not their native tongue. The plot of the film is slow and lacks a real climax. There is no romantic plot in place to please the crowd. There are no side characters or subplots, no twists, and no happy ending. *Kundun* was never intended to be a blockbuster, and it never will be. It was intended to be an intensely spiritual and artful biopic, and that is exactly what it is. Scorsese’s expert direction creates an incredibly stunning and spiritual atmosphere throughout the entire film. The director of violent and bloody films such as *Raging Bull* and *Goodfellas* shows that he can create serenity just as well as savagery, he even combines the two in a few poignant moments in *Kundun*. Roger Deakins shows a mastery of composition, lighting, transitions, and much more in an Oscar-nominated performance. Lastly, where the acting falls short the incredibly evocative musical score by Philip Glass helps to elevate the film and create a spiritual tone. *Kundun* was not very successful in the monetary sense, but it seems that it achieved exactly what it set out to achieve.

The acting in *Kundun* is less than stellar. This film does not have a star-studded cast and it shows. The actors used in *Kundun* were all Tibetan, and some of them weren’t even professional actors. Scorsese made this decision in order to keep the film authentic in an ethnic sense, but this decision clearly had tradeoffs. A more experienced cast could have brought more life to the characters and made the film more interesting, but the purpose of the film was to be a cinematic window into the experiences of the Dalai Lama, not a blockbuster movie. Scorsese took a much more artistic approach to the film that he must have known would not lead to as much financial success. The characters in *Kundun* are distant at times, largely due to the inexperienced acting of the cast. Fortunately for Scorsese, this film did not need incredible acting to make it work. The side characters were not critical to the plot in any way and the Dalai Lama’s character was not an overly emotional one. Some critics have claimed that the Dalai Lama was played poorly in *Kundun*, arguing that he is much more animated in real life. This may be true, but in the context of the events of the film he most likely wouldn’t have been as upbeat and blithe as he is in more media appearances. In addition, the portrayal of the young Dalai Lama in *Kundun* was quite good. Considering the age of the younger actors they managed to achieve a fairly believable portrayal of the young Dalai Lama. Tenzin Thuthob Tsarong was tasked with playing the adult Dalai Lama, which would have been a hard task for even an incredible actor. Given his inexperience Tenzin managed to play a Dalai Lama that was believable, although emotionally distant. Scorsese made a sacrifice to keep the film culturally authentic, but it seems that this was the right move. There are a very limited number of Tibetan male actors, and it would’ve been very challenging for someone to play the Dalai Lama well enough to overcome the very apparent ethnic inaccuracy.

There is almost no subplot in *Kundun*. The side characters are very expendable and lack any emotional pull. There is no background scandal or romance to draw in more viewers or appeal to a different audience. Scorsese intended to keep this film pure. He focused solely on the tumultuous journey of the Dalai Lama, highlighting his political and spiritual journey. Subplots would have made the movie more accessible to the average viewer, but they also would have distracted from the main theme of the film. This lack of subplot is another reason that the film does not require seasoned actors. If the film had more subplot there would have been more demand placed on the supporting cast, which most likely would have gone poorly. The clear lack of subplot in the film makes it harder to be drawn into the film. But this is made up for with stunning cinematography and an equally impressive musical score.

Scorsese’s direction of *Kundun* portrays a very peaceful, spiritual tone. There is a noticeable lack of dialogue in the film which gives the film a very monastic feel. *Kundun* doesn’t have any intense action-heavy scenes, quick cuts or pans. Scorsese keeps the film simple and calm, allowing the characters, cinematography, and film score to provide the intensity in the few scenes that require it. This hands-off sort of approach allows the visually striking cinematography to shine, and adds to the spiritual tone of the film. As in Scorsese’s other notable films he proves that he is adept at capturing a culture. His depiction of Tibet and its monastic culture may not be overly emotional, intense, or even enjoyable to watch, but there’s an authenticity to it. Tibetan monasteries might night be as interesting as Long Island nightclubs, but Scorsese seems to capture the atmosphere just as efficiently. Just when you find the serenity of the film starts to bore you Scorsese cuts to an awe-inspiring view of the Himalayas, a politically intense exchange, or a spiritually stirring dream sequence.

Throughout the entire film Roger Deakins showcases his incredible cinematic talent. He draws attention to the beauty of the Tibetan culture through his extensive use of their vibrant reds and golds. The visual feel of *Kundun* contributes to its spiritual tone. Although there are definitely some incredible shots in *Kundun* the majority of the film feels more authentic than cinematically striking. This authenticity is one of the only facets of the film that draws in the viewer emotionally. The simple beauty of the film is so stylistically different from other films and so earnest that it makes it hard to remain unattached, despite the relatively unemotional portrayal of the characters and the lack of dialogue and backstory. When the film calls for more attention grabbing cinematography Deakins delivers, most notably with the help of Scorsese’s direction in an incredible shot of the Dalai Lama standing in the middle of a vast field of dead monks. The vibrant red robes of the monks are a clear allusion to bloodshed, signifying the impending violence brought upon the Tibetan people by the imminent Chinese invasion. Another notable sequence is the slow construction of the delicately beautiful sand mandalas near the end of the film. The vibrant colors in these shots create a beautiful shot, right up until they are easily dismantled, literally brushed aside. This seems to be symbolic of the beauty of Tibetan culture, and the ease with which it is harmed by the invading “brush” of the Chinese.

*Kundun*’s last strongpoint is its film score. Phillip Glass’s decision to use more traditional Tibetan instruments and vocals adds authenticity and emotionality to the film. Glass used vocals from Gyuto monks along with his simple and elegant traditional instrumentals to capture the peaceful nature of the Tibetan people. The music in the film perfectly matches Scorsese’s elegant direction and Deakins’ tasteful cinematography. Glass’s film score strikes a fine balance between being overbearing and unnoticed. His music accentuates the visuals, but does not draw attention away from them.

*Kundun* strays far from the classic Hollywood movie formula. There is no climactic culmination of multiple plot lines. There is no car chase, no fight scenes, and certainly no airport love scene. There are no big name actors or actresses, no love interests, and no bromances. There are no archetypical characters or casually walking towards the camera despite nearby explosions. *Kundun* boldly deviates from all of this. As experienced as Scorsese is, he must have known that this wouldn’t work well in terms of financial gain or popularity. *Kundun* was wildly unsuccessful in the box offices. With a budget of twenty-eight million dollars and a total lifetime gross of $5.7 million, *Kundun* was a financial bust. But Scorsese must have known that this would happen. None of the decisions he made seemed to have money in mind, he was dead set on making an artistically driven piece of cinema.

In some circles there is discussion about the nuance of the meaning of the word ‘film’ in contrast to the word ‘movie’. It is typically said that a movie is something that is intended to draw in the attention of the viewer, to thrill, surprise, and amaze the viewer. Movies are meant to be fun to watch, they typically try very hard to keep the attention of the viewer, even if they don’t require much attention to follow. Movies lack subtlety in exchange for predictably heroic but enjoyable characters and romantic subplots. Movies are not works of art, they are simply meant for our viewing pleasure, for filling time. Films on the other hand are quite the opposite, they are simultaneously artistic and authentic. Films do not add, or remove anything in order to satisfy the audience. They are works of art, they comment on social and political issues subtly and don’t care whether or not the viewer enjoys their commentary. They do not rely on cheap ploys or Hollywood tropes. Films are meticulously crafted and attentive to detail. They are rich with symbolism, metaphors, and allusion. To put it simply: *Transformers* is an exemplary movie, and *Kundun* is an exemplary film.

*Kundun* is far from flawless, but it is a well-crafted expression of the life and troubles of the Dalai Lama. It may not be as enjoyable to watch or as thrilling as a Marvel movie, but it makes up for it with artfulness, symbolism, and attention to detail. *Kundun’s* beauty is in its subtlety, its hidden symbolism and authenticity. *Kundun* is an incredible film, and a mediocre movie.