Kundun

Great cinematography

Composition of shots.

Slow pans convey a peaceful but still dramatic tone.

‘hallucination’/dream shots to show the internal struggles of the Dalai Lama

*Low camera in early parts of the film to present things from the eyes of the young dalai lama*

Mediocre/Bad acting

Use of Tibetan actors for accuracy caused the quality of acting performances to drop

Broken English made it hard to connect with characters

Dalai Lama comes across serious and calculated rather than playful and light-hearted

Chairman Mao was overplayed/exaggerated (also the script’s fault)

Great film score

Enhances the emotionality of scenes where the acting fails to do so.

Doesn’t follow classic Hollywood formula

Only antagonist is the Chinese, but their threat feels ‘distant’ to the actual characters.

No side characters to bond with

No romantic plot

No happy or neat ending

Dialogue

Not a lot of dialogue in the film.

Not a lot of BAD dialogue, but not much good either.

Good:

**Indian Soldier:** Are you the Lord Buddha? Indian Soldier: Are you the Lord Buddha?

Dalai Lama (adult): I believe I am a reflection, like the moon on water. When you see me, and I try to be a good man, you see yourself.

**Dalai Lama (adult):** I believe I am a reflection, like the moon on water. When you see me, and I try to be a good mIndian Soldier: Are you the Lord Buddha?

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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. It used Tibetan actors to remain culturally accurate, with no regard for the decrease quality of acting put forth by these actors. 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.