

Dark Journey

Gaspar Noe's cinematic endurance test

ENTER THE VOID: Written, filmed, edited and directed by Gaspar Noe. Director of photography, Benoît Debie. Editors, Marc Boucrot and Jérôme Pesnel. IFC Films, 2010. 137 minutes. Not rated. ★★☆☆☆

Though far less of a challenge than his 2002 film *Irreversible* — the story of the aftermath of a brutal rape, told backwards — Gaspar Noe's latest, *Enter the Void*, is still something of a cinematic endurance test. More than two hours long and prone to repeating images and scenes, *Enter the Void* is a disconcerting experience, by turns sweet, creepy, off-putting, trippy and predictable. But Noe isn't looking to surprise you with the film's flimsy narrative, which is essentially spelled out by a character who, early on, summarizes *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* for a friend to whom he's lent a copy. What happens after you die? Oscar (Nathaniel Brown), an American living in Tokyo and making a living dealing drugs, is about to find out.

The first half-hour of *Enter the Void* rolls out as if Oscar is the camera; we're inside his head, complete with distracting blinks, as he talks to his sister, Linda (Paz de la Huerta), and indulges in some of his stash. The psychedelic jellyfish he sees hover in the space between beautiful and horrifying, cliché and cleverness, but just

as I started to fear that I was in for two hours of the trippier parts of MTV's mid-'90s program *Liquid Television*, everything changed.

As in *Irreversible*, Noe sends his camera spinning and looping, on long shots that are as languid as they are uncomfortable; with it, we dip into the heads of men, fly over buildings and swirl down wells of strangeness that only grow stranger as the film progresses. Light strobes and perspectives shift after the camera is freed from Oscar's head. Most of the film is a nonlinear look at Oscar's past, which rears up in fits and starts, tracing his complex relationship with Linda, his drug-focused existence in Tokyo and the choices that defined his life — and had indelible effects on the lives of those around him. In the film's second part, it's not just the camera that's cut loose from Oscar's immediate perspective; Oscar himself becomes detached from his body, viewing his past and his friends' present from a dreamlike, omniscient viewpoint. Maybe Oscar is helpless, in thrall to his subconscious, or maybe he's still making choices: what to see, where to go, how often to relive the moments of violence, of indulgence, that now look like signposts along a dangerous road.



Though for long stretches it's as dreamy and absorbing as it can get — and I can only imagine it's all the more so in a dark, distraction-free theater — *Enter the Void* isn't without Noe's penchant for jarring, peculiar and surreal imagery and perspectives. As Oscar's long, strange journey goes on, it darkens and tangles; a horrifying accident in the siblings' childhood recurs without warning, a blaring surprise every time, and a young woman's pregnancy test results bring a very different (and somewhat too arty) result than they did in *Irreversible*. When Oscar starts seeing the doors of light his

friend described to him hours before, they look nothing like you'd expect, and Noe has one more camera trick up his sleeve — one that tips the scales on his long final sequence. *Enter the Void*'s ideas float through the film as weightlessly as Oscar's spirit; there's a shred of devotion, of childhood trauma, of the way connections define us and shape our choices, but in the end, it all feels like a twisty odyssey of cause and effect. You pick this path, you reap these results — until you're brave, or stupid, or lucky enough to leave it all behind. **EW**

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