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FOLLOWING JENNIFER FOX THROUGH MY REINCARNATION

Jennifer Fox, director of *My Reincarnation*

Documentarian Jennifer Fox's latest feature, *My Reincarnation*, was filmed over the course of 20 years and went on to raise a six-figure sum on Kickstarter to complete the project. Jennifer set out to show a wide audience a film about Tibetan Buddhism but realized that "a person sitting cross legged and chanting "OM" doesn't look like anything on film!" Instead we follow the story of a Tibetan spiritual master, Chogyal Namkhai Norbu, and his Italian born son Yeshe who spends his adulthood coming to terms with his father's place within the Buddhist culture, and his own. While researching her project through other films, Jennifer looked for films about Tibetan Buddhism (of which there are few) as well as other films from around the world with similar themes. Here Jennifer gives us a view into what films helped shape her own and why:



***The Reincarnation of Khensur Rinpoche* (Dir. Ritu Sarin, Tenzing Sonam)**

This film, by the wonderful filmmaking couple Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam made in 1992, was simply for many years the best and only film about Tibetan Buddhism that followed a real narrative. What I was looking for in my work was how to show spirituality in action. This film successfully followed the Attendant of a recently deceased Buddhist Master, as he searches for his Teacher's reincarnation. He finds a young boy in Tibet and brings him back to H. H. the Dalai Lama to approve through a ritual with the Tibetan Oracle. What I love in this film is that the words "devotion" and "faith" actually show on the Attendant's face and in his journey. The saying in fiction films that "Character is action" is true of human life, and this film really portrays the character of the monk through his action.

***Family* (Dir. Phie Ambo, Sami Saif)**

This 2001 Danish documentary by Sami Saif and Phie Ambo simply changed my life. It is a film about Sami (the director) looking for his father. So thematically it was a father son story like the one I was working on. But what impressed me was something more elusive. I have always been working with how you achieve "screen presence" in documentary film. Interestingly we don't have a word for what I am talking about in documentary language. In fiction, you would call it an actor's "performance", but since we are dealing with real people we cannot use the word performance at all. So how do you describe the difference in documentaries when real people "show up on screen" verses when they are "performative". In fact, it is very difficult to get real people to "show up" in front of the camera; instead, they tend to disappear when the camera is pulled out and begin to act and perform for us. Nothing is worse than bad acting by real people, but docs are littered with this. In *Family*, the characters show up in such a real and dazzling way, I was mesmerized. I wanted to know how they did the film and it led me on an exploration of the Danish working practices in documentary, which helped me articulate and develop better skills in working with my subjects in *My Reincarnation*.

[Family](#) from [Danish Documentary](#) on [Vimeo](#).

***Little Buddha* (Dir. Bernardo Bertolucci)**

This fiction film by Bernardo Bertolucci is flawed in many ways, but what I love about it is its attempt to grapple with the concept of East meets West and the possibility of cultural and spiritual exchange. A Tibetan Lama (played by the real teacher Sogyal Rinpoche) comes to a California family because he believes their son is the reincarnation of his Master. What ensues is a conflict of cultures. For me, this story grapples with many themes that *My Reincarnation* deals with in its story of an Italian son, who just wants to be normal, and his Tibetan father, who sees the son as a reincarnation of his Uncle. In *Little Buddha*, I love seeing this visual clash even in the architecture of a modern California home and these old traditional monks who then convince the family to allow them to take their son back to the traditional monastic world in Tibet. These visual opposites are shown in *My Reincarnation* as well. The father, Choegyal
<http://www.filminddependent.org/news-and-blog/following-jennifer-fox-through-my-reincarnation-3/>

Namkhai Norbu, also a very famous master is living a “normal” Italian life in Italy but teaching a very traditional spiritual path. The film is filled, not with Tibetan music, but with playful Italian music such as Paolo Conti “Via Con Me” as well as Tibetan chanting to show the character’s integrating cultural worlds, both traditional and modern.

***Iris* (Dir. Richard Eyre)**

This wonderful bio-pic about the writer Iris Murdoch, was an essential film reference for me in developing the theme of water in *My Reincarnation*. To give you some history, the main character of the father, Choegyal Namkhai Norbu, in *My Reincarnation*, loves swimming, which interestingly is something that high teachers never did in Tibet. He often uses swimming and water as a metaphor in his spiritual teachings, and also teaches his students practices to do integrating in water. I had footage of Namkhai Norbu swimming over 20 years and I felt it was an integral theme. For a long time I even called the film, *Learning to Swim*, but eventually changed the title to the current one because it was clearer. Once in the editing I wanted to use water as a reoccurring visual cue and looked at *Iris* as a reference. In *Iris*, the protagonist loves the water and you follow her relationship with swimming and the water from youth till old age. Looking at *Iris*, also due to its longitudinal study of a person’s life similar to *My Reincarnation*, helped me figure out how to use the reoccurring theme of water in our film.

***Avatar* (Dir. James Cameron)**

As funny as it might sound, seeing *Avatar* had a deep affect on me. Through it’s animation sequences it was able to enter the world of spirit and magic. I felt that it captured the inner feeling of meditation and the child-like wonder that you gain in these meditative states. While *My Reincarnation* was nearly finished when I saw this film, it confirmed for me the way one might create the inner world of spirituality through fiction and animation. In *My Reincarnation* both the father and son have strong and meaningful dreams and visions that influence their daily life. Because it is a documentary we struggled with how to show these states in visual form, and found ways through natural images and sound, but someday I would love to be able to make a fiction film that enters their inner worlds as vividly as Cameron does in *Avatar*. While *Avatar* was an extremely commercial film, it touched upon deep human states of wonder, joy, and the possibility of different dimensions that Choegyal Namkhai Norbu and his son Yeshe, talk about in their lives and their Teachings in *My Reincarnation*. I would love to experiment with this mixed form to retell this father son story in fiction in the future.

My Reincarnation opens in Los Angeles this Friday, October 28. For showtimes and to buy tickets click [here](#).