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New Review

*Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy*

Dir. Graham Coleman. 1979. N/R. 134mins. In Tibetan, with subtitles. Documentary.



BLOW OUT Tibetan monks make some noise.

Thanks to celebs like Richard Gere and Beastie Boy Adam Yauch, the variegated system of spiritual teachings known as Tibetan Buddhism has a glitzy cachet in the West, though its most devoted practitioners—led by the exiled Dalai Lama—reside in the decidedly unfashionable Himalayan region. Even Teutonic extremist Werner Herzog trained a fascinated eye on the cyclical practice of monastic mandala-making in last year’s reverential *Wheel of Time*. So the rerelease of Graham Coleman’s three-part homage to the Ti-Bud way of life 27 years after its initial theatrical showing should delight enthusiasts, as well as cinephiles with a fondness for the direct cinema of Richard Leacock and Frederick Wiseman, whose work it richly evokes.

Observing the Dalai Lama’s ministrations to locals in Dharamsala, India, or eavesdropping on abbots loudly debating in the halls of the ancient Sera Monastery, Coleman explores a living, thriving culture that remains both esoteric and endemic to village life. The Tibetan head of state’s commanding, compassionate presence—glimpsed in a speech on the anniversary of the Chinese invasion—guarantees a built-in audience for this beautifully edited doc. But the centerpiece, screened alone in 1979 and now recut, is a nearly 50-minute ritual invocation to a female deity, Tara, through mystical orisons and the construction of an elaborate, ornamental “cosmogram.” While such unblinking exposition could be slow-going for some, the open-minded will leave in an enraptured fugue state. (Opens Fri; Quad.)—*Damon Smith*