VIRTUAL TIBET

Where the mountains rise from the sea of our yearning

By Orville Schell

When I first journeyed to Hollywood to begin working on a book about the West's long-standing fascination with Tibet, I encountered hardly anyone who didn't have something to say on the subject. National infatuation had risen to such a level that almost a dozen feature and documentary films were in various stages of production. Everywhere one turned there were strange cultural collisions happening. Stars, producers, agents, and directors were discovering the spiritual message of Lord Buddha. Scripts about Tibet were circulating around the city like particles in an atomic accelerator. The office walls of the city's movers and shakers bloomed with Tibetan thangkas (iconic scroll paintings) and photographs of the Himalayas and the Potala, the Dalai Lama's winter palace. One producer even erected an altar in his Santa Monica office. A casting director who was hiring for both Seven Years in Tibet and The People vs. Larry Flynt found her office besieged by robed Buddhist monks at one moment and then hookers and topless dancers the next. And the whole town began to buzz when it was announced that Penor Rinpoche, the supreme head of the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, had formally recognized the action-pic superstar Steven Seagal as a tulku, a modern-day reincarnation of the seventeenth-century treasure-revealer credited with discovering sacred texts hidden by Padmasambhava, the founder of Buddhism in Tibet. As to how this new tulku might align the notions of nonviolence and compassion with hsi love of Uzis and hurling villains through plate-glass windows, answers were few. Genuine or not, Hollywood's most recent spasm of infatuation seemed to say as much about us as about Tibet. Hollywood, of course, reinvents itself on a regular basis, often re-nouncing what is commonplace and at-hand for something that is outré and remote and thus all the more vulnerable to becoming the


Illustrations by Russell O. Jones
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$65 million film directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud and starring Brad Pitt that was to recount the hegra of Austrian mountain climber Heinrich Harrer from British prisoner-of-war camp to Lhasa in the late 1940s. What I encountered was a fabulous world where old Tibet came to life before my eyes, and the past and the present, Hollywood and the Himalayas, ancient wisdom and the superstar Kultur, all collided in a jarring spectacle awash in cognitive dissonance.

Flying into the Kingdom

Since there are no nonstop flights from San Francisco, where I live, to Argentina, I am routed through Miami, whose fringed shores are hardly preparation for what is to come. Over Cuba, my seatmate begins to play solitaire on his laptop while on the screen in front of us Tom Cruise plays his way through Mission: Impossible. I try to ignore it all, poring steadfastly through old accounts of explorers who were so taken by the mythology of Tibet that they risked life and limb to battle their way to its capital, Lhasa—by yak caravan through hostile nomad tribes, over snowy mountain passes, and across some of the most inhospitable, remote terrain on the face of the earth.

Because Tibet has always been so inaccessible, it has existed in the Western mind more as a dream than a reality—a land onto which we have often projected our postmodern yearnings for a place that we can believe has somehow managed to remain apart from the fallen state of our own preindustrial world and lives. Even a century ago, Tibet’s aloofness was its most seductive power, because it allowed us to make of it what we would.

“Tibet is so isolated, so lofty, so insensitive to outside influences,” wrote Thomas Holdich instalments of truth surrounded by wide embroideries of decorative fancy.”

Precisely because our perceptions of Tibet have always derived as much from our fantasies as from reality, it is the perfect subject for Hollywood’s dream machine. The film world’s first flirtation with this unique land came in 1937, when Frank Capra directed James Hilton’s classic Lost Horizon, thereby enshrining forever the idea of Shangri-La in the Western imagination.

“The floor of the valley, hazily distant, welcomed the eye with greenness; sheltered from winds, and surveyed rather than dominated by the lamasery, it looked to Conway a delightfully favored place,” wrote Hilton of his imaginary Tibetan utopia. Conway characterizes the valley as “nothing less than an enclosed paradise,” a place where, as one of his hosts tells him, “we inculcate the virtue of avoiding excess of all kinds—even including, if you will pardon the paradox, excess of virtue itself.”

When as a teenager I first read Seven Years in Tibet, my own adolescent imagination was entranced by the idea of a Westerner being granted entrance into this forbidden and exotic land. Not realizing then that ancient Tibet was almost the size of Western Europe, I thought of it as a small Buddhist kingdom tucked behind the Himalayas. But when in the early 1980s I first managed to actually get to Tibet on a mountain-climbing expedition to the remote region around Amnyemachen, one of Tibet’s famed holy mountains, the country’s vastness, strangeness, and haunting open beauty did, indeed, leave me feeling as if our band of intrepid Westerners had, in the words of poet John Gillespie Magee, “slipped the surly bonds of Earth.”

I felt much the same when the powers that be at TriStar sent word that permission had finally been granted for me to make this pilgrimage. It had taken months of wrangling, I was sternly forewarned, however, not to expect an
interview with Brad Pitt. But Pitt's inaccessibility has only heightened my sense of anticipation, as if the old Lhasa to which I have been invited to return boasts its own sort of post-modern Dalai Lama, one so exalted that he must be shrouded from the view of commoners.

Snug in my Boeing 767, flying headlong toward my ersatz Andean Lhasa, I feel as expectant as when I first approached the real city. Even though I was then in a dusty jeep grinding up over the spectacular range of mountains that separates the Holy City from sacred Yamdrok Lake and am now shooting through the utter blackness over the Caribbean, I have the sense of being on my way to a place that is as distant from everyday life as the real Tibet.

**In the Realm of Brad**

As morning dawns and the wing outside my window turns silver, I watch the sun rise over a seemingly endless spine of familiarly arid, jagged, snow-streaked peaks. Then a piece of ocean coastline appears, ruining the effect and reminding me of where I really am: the Peruvian Andes.

When I finally arrive in Mendoza, Argentina, at the eastern foot of the mountains—where the indoor scenes of Seven Years in Tibet will be shot in studios that were once garlic warehouses—I find a European-looking city of leafy boulevards and stucco town houses. Normally a placid, provincial outpost centering around mining and vineyards, the whole town is now aflutter over "Bread Peet." His movie Seven has just been showing here, and when "Bread" himself arrived in the country several weeks ago, it was indeed as if the Dalai Lama had unexpectedly reappeared on Tibetan soil. At the Buenos Aires airport, he and British co-star David Thewlis were chased across the tarmac by a crowd of teenage girls. He landed here in Mendoza aboard a private jet used by the president of Argentina. "The whole place ees going crosseye!" a leggy young woman waiting on tables in a downtown café tells me when I inquire about the "Bread Peet" phenomenon.

And what are her views on Tibet?

"Teebet! What ees theeese Teebet? I don't know theeese Teebet!"

When Pitt is not on the set, some 70 miles away in the mountain town of Uspallata, he returns to the relative civilization of Mendoza to rest in a Spanish-style hacienda called El Cortijo on the outskirts of the city. Here, he whiles away his weekends with his girlfriend, Gwyneth Paltrow, his soon-to-be fiancée, then ex-fiancée (two epic decisions that inflame the world's tabloids for months). It didn't take long for thousands of Argentine fans to mass outside, where they took photos and chanted over and over, "¡Olé! ¡Olé! ¡Olé! ¡Bread Peet!" at all hours of the day and night. There were so many of them that ultimately the production company had to erect a $30,000 wall.

By the time I get out to Pitt's weekend retreat, El Cortijo looks more like a place of house arrest than a luxury mansion. All the way around the top of the garden's stucco wall, a second tier of corrugated metal fortification has been bootlegged together, making
the once elegant estate look something like a giant solar collector. Despite the wrought-iron bars over all the doors and windows, one fan has managed to scrawl, “We love you, Brad!” with chalk on a side door. Even here in provincial Argentina, one feels the brute power of the American entertainment industry as it radiates out across the world from Hollywood’s ground zero like shock waves from a blast site. From Lhasa to Lagos and Minsk to Mendoza, Brad Pitt is infinitely more fascinating and visible to ordinary people than any head of state, his global reach arguably as wide as that of the U.S. government and military combined.

Lost in the Hair Room

The next day, I leave Mendoza in my Avis rental car and head up into the Andes toward Uspallata, where the outdoor sets have been built. The arid and desolate terrain of rocky, snow-capped peaks punctuated by occasional oases of green poplars along the rivers is eerily reminiscent of Tibet. The air has the same extreme dryness and the wind its mythic power. Without him, Lhasa’s aura no longer burned with the same power. Near its outskirts I felt as if I were approaching nothing more than a city that had long since been turned into a museum.

I remember Heinrich Harrer, whom Pitt plays in the movie, telling me how, approaching Lhasa in 1946, he had been filled with awe just knowing that the Dalai Lama was there. After seeing “gleaming in the distance, the golden roofs of the Potala,” he later wrote, “we felt inclined to go down on our knees like the pilgrims and touch the ground with our foreheads.”

Uspallata is an isolated, spring-fed mountain town that serves as a truck stop on the road over the Andes between Mendoza and Santiago, Chile. In the packed parking lot of the once grand Hotel Uspallata, every truck, car, jeep, bus, van, and RV bears a windshield sign announcing its connection to the project. Inside the hotel’s cavernous, gloomy lobby the film’s makeup, hairdressing, and costume departments are located, and scores of extras dressed in a dizzying array of costumes wander about. As if part of some impossible truce, Tibetan nomads, monks, and noblemen mingle, drink Coke, and chat with People’s Liberation Army soldiers. A group of Tibetan herdsmen clad in ragged sheepskin chakus are asleep in a corner. They turn out to be Bolivians and Mataco Indians who, because of their swarthy features, have been imported from Jujuy in northern Argentina to serve as Tibetan extras. The gaggle of young men dressed as P.L.A. soldiers turn out to be Argentine Koreans with such mind-warping names as Leonardo Yoshida and Marcelo Fujikura; eating breakfast, they discuss a soccer game in Spanish, with a group of yellow-robbed, practicing Tibetan Buddhist monks.

At the next table a berobed crew-cut little boy who will play (along with two others) the young Dalai Lama is sitting with his mother and working on a Game Boy. In the bar by the pinball-bowling alley a complement of potbellied Caucasian crew members sip coffee and eat croissants as a TV hanging from the ceiling blares out a Spanish-language variety show featuring a Charo-like chanteuse in tight toreador pants doing a coochie-coochie routine to cha-cha music. The music is briefly interrupted as a phalanx of Lao-tians cast as Buddhist pilgrims suddenly troops through the lobby, chattering in Lao on their way to the set. Many other extras, of course,
As if part of some impossible truce, Tibetan nomads, monks, and noblemen mingle, drink Coke, and chat with soldiers of the People's Liberation Army of China

In the Hair Room, which occupies the hotel's reception area, hundreds of different styles of Tibetan headdresses are mounted on mannequins heads arrayed around the walls like Buddha statues festooning a temple. Inside, an Italian stylist is working on an elaborate traditional hair-do for a young exile who tells me that his father is a yak herder still living in northern Tibet. He has not seen his parents, he tells me, since fleeing the country in 1989 after getting into trouble with the Chinese police. “I can’t call them,” he says, “because they are nomads living in a tent and only stay in one place for a month at a time. Of course, I do write, but the Chinese always open the letters.” When I ask him how he has found acting in a movie about his homeland, he says, “It’s so odd for us... sometimes I am not sure where I am.”

The Sound of Yak Dung

What I want to do most, of course, is to see the sets of this Tibet español. But I am under the thumb of Unit Publicist Susan d’Arcy, a short, blonde, no-nonsense veteran of many productions who lets me know that I will be able to do so only during certain approved days, lest I “disturb Brad and the shoot.” Her warning does not seem to include visiting the set after hours, however. So late in the afternoon I head off down a poorly paved road that aims like an arrow off into the vastness of the alpine desert surrounding the town. The hills are the same dun color, the sky is the same deep cobalt blue, and the clouds overhead have the same cumulus puffiness as the ones in Tibet. Turning off the road at a sentry shack, where a guard stands watch during the daytime hours to keep “Bread Feet” enthusiasts from intruding, I follow two tire tracks that lance off across the sand through the tumbleweed and thornbushes. Towering snow-capped peaks in the far distance are beginning to cast their shadows across the plain. With a plume of dust billowing behind me like a jet trail, I have the humbling sensation of being at the very edge of nowhere.

Then, up against the crest of a low-lying, shale-strewn hill, I spot a moving flash of bright color: prayer flags fluttering in the wind. Then eight white Tibetan chörten (traditional tiered monuments built to contain sacred relics) unexpectedly appear on the barren landscape like oversized chess pieces. Beyond them, rising up like an apparition, stands the old West Gate, itself a chörten with a portal through the middle, which during Harrer’s time sat beneath the Potala, guarding the road into Lhasa. For all those adventurers and questers over the past two centuries who so longed to reach the Forbidden City, the West Gate was the cathartic endpoint of their journeys. Now the real West Gate is no more, razed by the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution to make way for a modern avenue.

But standing amid what looks like yak manure, the chörten silhouetted perfectly against the evening sky as prayer flags ripple in the wind, I feel as if I am actually about to enter a Lhasa older than the one I knew. Disappointingly, the Potala is not up above the gate as it should be, and at the base of this revered landmark a piece of chicken wire reveals itself. Nearby, someone has left a Pepsi can on a wall. When I yank at a willow sapling, it proves to be nothing more than a branch stuck into a tub of gravel. Kicked, a piece of yak dung makes a clinking sound when it hits a pebble. This surprises me. Is it possible that these are ceramic replicas—Hollywood coprolites? In any case, no fewer than twelve actual yaks, with passports, have been imported from Montana for the film.

As soon as I step inside the gate, I exit the illusion. Suddenly I am standing amid an industrial jungle of electric cables and metal scaffolding supporting a rampart of cheap plywood anchored against the wind by means of huge plastic vats filled with water. Beyond this, a
vast parking area—delineated by the kind of yellow plastic tape police use to mark off urban crime scenes—is filled with a florilla of trailers, mobile cranes, generators, equipment trucks, cars, buses, and banks of gaily colored chemical toilets. The whole scene is guarded by a lone Argentine soldier asleep in an aluminum deck chair in front of a khaki-colored pup tent, the pages of the gritty magazine perched on his chest riffing in the breeze.

Walking around to the other side of the hill, I find the Potala. Instead of reconstructing the entire magnificent structure that has towered over Lhasa since the seventeenth century, the production company has built only the portion of the roof terrace that sits on its very top, adjacent to the Dalai Lama's personal quarters. It was from here that the young “God King” looked down longingly on ordinary people in Lhasa through a telescope. When the film goes into postproduction, the scenes that have been filmed on this slice of the Potala will be superimposed by computer onto an image of the real one that is being shot in Lhasa surreptitiously by an underground camera crew, a maneuver made necessary by China's effective boycotting of any Hollywood projects that might cause “misunderstanding.”

In the fading light, I walk up the long stairway to the terrace. This Potala has outlived its usefulness now, the shots completed, and already the set is beginning to fall apart. A giant drum (with a plastic skin) lies cracked and abandoned outside His Holiness's sleeping quarters amidst a cluster of discarded plastic mineral-water bottles and Styrofoam cups. Soiled prayer flags lie strewn in a corner. Gazing down onto the valley floor, I see the set for the Jokhang, where it should be. The Jokhang is the ornate cathedral-like edifice founded by King Songtsen Gampo, who introduced Buddhism to the country in the seventh century. It is situated at the heart of Lhasa and, because it contains Tibet's most revered statue of Sakyamuni, the religion's founder (given to Songtsen Gampo by the Chinese princess Wencheng as a marriage gift), it is the most holy shrine in the land. Like the Great Mosque of Mecca or St. Peter's in Rome, it is the place to which every devout Tibetan Buddhist hopes to make at least one pilgrimage in his or her lifetime. Even today, pilgrims laboriously make their way across Tibet to the Jokhang, prostrating themselves inch-worm fashion while reciting the prayer, “Om mani padme hum” (“the jewel in the lotus”). Did not the Buddha grow to a pure state from the depravity of ordinary existence just as the white blossom of the lotus springs forth from mud?

All I can see of this Jokhang is the back of it: another plywood and steel bulwark surrounded by a fleet of trailers, mobile homes, and fire equipment, beyond which stand two huge white catering tents, making the whole site look as if it were being prepared for some misplaced Brentwood celebrity ball.

The Art of Melting

Early in the morning, beneath a large imposing sign that reads “Gruppo de Artilleria de Montaña,” a sentry outfitted in combat fatigues, a beret, and an M-16 stands at attention beside two old howitzers on the outskirts of Uspallata. Although much of this army compound has been taken over by the production company, its inexplicable regular schedule seems still in force, and a lackluster military marching band is just beginning to play while a complement of swarthy young Argentine soldiers marches in formation around the bust of a certain Colonel Placido Obligado, who boasts ramrod-strait posture, a very Latin moustache, and a be-medaled uniform with epaulets. The scene makes it impossible not to think of “the generals” (and probably a few colonels as well) who during the 1970s and '80s successfully “disappeared” hundreds of Argentine dissidents—even pushing some out of airborne planes—and attacked the Falkland Islands.

As I continue to watch this military scene unfold, it begins to morph. Suddenly a robed Tibetan monk wanders up and pauses to watch the oompah band at work. Then a whole crowd of Tibetan women in bright nomadic dress stream across the parking area and disappear into large adjacent buildings. Entering, I find the production's canteen, at mealtime a veritable Tower of Babel. To provision and feed seven hundred cast and crew members from twenty-two countries, the producers have hired both an Argentine and an Indian catering service.
In an adjacent building, I stumble across a team of real monks who have been working away for weeks on a series of huge, intricate, and gloriously colored butter sculptures that will be placed at the entrance of the Jokhang for one of the film’s most important shots. Traditionally, such religious sculptures have been made at monasteries during the winter Monlam festival, when the weather is cold. Still, I remember them emitting a rancid signature odor that I don’t notice here. To accommodate the hot Andean sun, and the many days of shooting, it turns out, these offerings have been made partly of wax.

“If they melt, that’s okay, because it will prove that they are real,” one of the monks tells me philosophically. “Anyway, the ritual of making these sculptures is actually meant as a reminder of the impermanence of all things.” He chuckles with Buddhist satisfaction over the notion that something he has been working on for weeks is soon destined to vanish.

**PLAYING STRANGERS OF THEIR PARENTS’ AND GRANDPARENTS’ GENERATIONS HERE IN THIS VIRTUAL LHASA IS AS CLOSE AS MANY OF THE YOUNG EXTRAS MAY EVER COME TO THEIR ACTUAL HOMELAND**

On Sunday, the film takes a day of rest. Most of the Tibetans are housed in a ski lodge at a mountain resort called Los Penitentes (“The Penitent Ones”) that is perched close to the Argentine-Chile border about an hour from the set. Inside, undaunted by its chalet ambience, two elderly Tibetan rinpoches (revered lamas) sit together quietly in the lobby in full habit, surrounded by large stone fireplaces and ski-boot-rental ads in Spanish. In the lounge area, a clutch of middle-aged Tibetans wearing jeans, madras shorts, Birkenstocks, baseball caps, and free Tibet T-shirts sit around a table chatting while several small Tibetan children chase a balloon through the dining room beneath the feet of Argentine waiters serving steaming bowls of spaghetti. Over it all, a Tchaikovsky piano concerto cascades from the PA system like a mismatched movie soundtrack.

For many of the Tibetan extras, this film production is not only the first time they have left their homes-in-exile but also the first time they have had a chance to meet such a wide cross-section of the Tibetan diaspora. For an hour I chat with a group of extras in their twenties and thirties, dressed, for the most part, like American Gen-Xers. I am surprised by how few have ever been to Tibet, even though it is now possi-

**Trashin' Lama Chic**

ble for them to go as tourists. The gap between the real Tibet and the Tibet in their minds is often as wide as it is for Westerners. Playing strangers of their parents’ and grandparents’ generations here in this virtual Lhasa is as close as they have come, or perhaps ever will, to their actual homeland. Indeed, were it not for their dark skin, brown eyes, and the occasional piece of turquoise-and-silver Tibetan jewelry with which they dutifully adorn themselves, one might mistake these youths for South American Indians or Polynesians. Ensnared in this ski-resort lounge listening to them talk about Hollywood films in English, it is easy to almost entirely forget both the land outside the windows and the one being resurrected down the road.

Still, as remote as they are from the actual place, after listening to them talk about their views on all the Tibetan movies being made, on being Tibetan, and especially about the West’s fascination with it all, I get the sense that in some indelible cultural way, they are still very much Tibetan. What is equally evident is that they feel even more disoriented than I do. After all, most have never been to their homeland, so the reincarnation of Lhasa here at Usplallata has no reality against which it can be measured. “Then there is that scene where Tibetan officials signed the Seventeen-Point Agreement that gave Tibet to the Chinese,” chimes in a young man in his thirties with his hair done up like a Khampa tribesman. “When we rehearsed it, it felt so real we all cried. Although it never really actually happened quite that way, still, for us it felt real.”

In reality, no such scene ever took place in Lhasa. The real agreement was signed in Beijing on May 23, 1951, by a Tibetan delegation that had journeyed there. Nor did it involve the sorts of dramatic confrontations between Chinese and ordinary Tibetans that are depicted in the film. But almost everyone in the cast and crew agrees that these scenes were for them the most poignant. Many of the younger Tibetans are not sure now whether this is ac-
usually the way history happened or not. After all, were they not "there" to witness it, and did they not feel its emotional power firsthand? The point is that the real tears people have, and will, shed seem to have a sanctifying effect that makes fantasy and fictionalized detail even more real than historical reality. "I see and feel, therefore history is" will perhaps become the maxim of the day. This new kind of "It's a contradiction," says another. "They want us to be authentic funky Tibetans, but then they want to bring His Holiness to Hollywood, where nothing is real!"

But for all the skepticism of these young Tibetans, and many others, about the way Hollywood has become enamored of Tibet and many other Westerners have become interested in Buddhism, it must be noted that by and large these infatuations have been largely harmless ones. Buddhism has produced no significant religious wars or mass persecutions, has largely avoided fundamentalist terrorism, and has produced few loony cult leaders. America, it seems, could do a lot worse than to absorb a dose of Buddhist nonviolence and compassion toward all sentient creatures.

When I return from Los Penitentes, I learn that Pitt and Paltrow have just returned from Mendoza and immediately repaired to his weekday bungalow inside yet another Argentine military base. Only his two bodyguards and his faithful makeup assistant, Jean Black, show up at the Hotel Valle Andino, where other cast and crew members are staying. They report that Pitt's weekend at El Cortijo was one of irritating confinement and that the major activities were barbecuing and running remote-control cars around the floors. Even in absentia his superstar presence hangs heavily over uspalata. The talk of the town is still about the restaurant that enshrined one whole section of its floor-to-ceiling windows with curtains and a partition after Pitt was driven away from dinner there one night by local rubbernecker outside. But, alas, Pitt never returned, leaving the curtains with no utility to the restaurateur except perhaps as the town's equivalent of the Shroud of Turin.

**Zero Hour in the Barkhor**

Although I have been in Uspallata several days now, there are still no actual physical manifestations of Brad Pitt. Everywhere, however, I ran into evidence of his imminence and his eminence. I have seen his abode (through the...
fence of the military base, to be sure); met the woman who does his makeup: had dinner with his two bodyguards; and heard endless, and mostly very complimentary, stories about working with him from other cast and crew members. Indeed, from all everyone says, he seems to have been touched by the experience of working with so many Tibetans. He is reported to have decorated his trailer with Tibetan cushions and butter lamps, and to have even insisted on trying some Tibetan tea that is made—to the horror of most Westerners—with salt and (often rancid) yak butter.

But He himself has remained as aloof and elusive as the young Dalai Lama whose yearly processions by sedan chair between the Potala and his summer residence, the Norbu Lingka, were among the few chances he was given to be out among ordinary people.

Though such visitations ended long ago, today I am visited with an announcement of sorts. Unit Publicist Sue d'Arcy appears as I walk through the Hotel Uspallata to proclaim that today "Brad" will finally be revealed to me. This revelation is to take place, she announces with a mixture of solemnity and triumph, before the set of the Jokhang in the Barkhor, Lhasa's central marketplace. It is here that Harrer and Aufschmaier first appear in the film upon entering Lhasa. But like the Dalai Lama's mother, who, according to the script, cautioned Harrer never to stand higher than the Dalai Lama, never to look him directly in the eye, and never to turn his back on him while in His Holiness's presence, d'Arcy archly reminds me of the ground rules of being permitted to get within visual sighting distance of Brad. No unauthorized approaches of any kind will be countenanced. It is acceptable to gaze upon Brad from afar (though not necessary to aver or lower the gaze or bow) but out of the question to address him. And, of course, photographing him is even more unthinkable. All private cameras (except his own) are verboten on the set. In short, I am put on notice to completely abandon any hopes that I may still harbor of actually encountering this modern-day God King face to face and speaking with him. As d'Arcy puts it, "He is such a nice guy that if he meets you he might then feel obligated to talk with you, and we can't have that now."

At this long-heralded moment, I am admonished to consider myself fortunate to have been let into this hallucination of Tibet at all. It is not so much a question of lese majesty, I am told, but simply that "Brad" does not want to be disturbed, something that happens each time he is forced to enter the world of mortals unprotected. In spite of myself, I am filled with a sense of expectation.

When I arrive at the set, I find a conflagration of construction. The sandy ground is veined with fat electrical cables and littered with building materials. Everywhere men wearing short pants, T-shirts, baseball caps, and tool belts are at work, the sounds of their hammers, nail guns, gas-powered generators, and Skill Saws shattering the desert silence. A crew member with a grizzled beard is trimming two-by-fours while another is antiquing a giant prayer wheel. A woman in the back of a truck is taking inventory of a stack of fake snow-leopard and fox skins.

Over at one of the white catering tents, I find a group of monks, nobles, and nomads eating Kellogg's Zucaritas and Coca-Cola Krispies followed by scrambled eggs with sausage and bacon, a far cry from the yak meat, salted tea, and tampa (roasted barley flour kneaded with tea into raw dough) that is the real cuisine of Tibet.

Heading back to the fortress of steel scaffolding that supports the set, I round a corner and find myself magically in the alleys of the Barkhor. The scene is perfect down to the last detail. Although made out of mesh and plaster backed with plywood, the stone walls of the blocky Tibetan houses are completely convincing in their stolid, crumbling disrepair. Prayer flags flutter with conviction against the azure sky. Running down the middle of the alley, there is even a carefully contrived rivulet of dirty water covered with a thin skin of fake ice, all garnished with more yak turds.

Emerging from a winding alley, I suddenly find myself facing the Jokhang. There, gleaming in the sunlight over its sacred double-door entranceway, are two golden deer holding the Wheel of Dharma and flanked by two huge gold bells. On either side of this hallowed portal are the two butter sculptures that I had seen being made at the military base. Standing just to the left of it all is a weeping willow, called the Hair of the Buddha by Ti-
betans, the original of which was believed to have been planted by Princess Wencheng over a millennium ago.

As I watch, the square before the Jokhang fills with extras who will play street peddlers selling food, incense, and religious trinkets; monks chanting sutras; pilgrims spinning their prayer wheels; ragamuffin children skipping through the crowds; nomads making their reverent circumambulations; mendicants proffering their begging bowls; and nobles sporting their absurdly marvelous hats and furry finery. Everywhere there are set dressers, cameramen, equipment handlers, directors, workmen, producers, hydraulic cranes, and piles of Halliburton carrying cases. Hundreds of extras have to be blocked in place for today’s scene, the moment when Pitt and Thewlis first arrive in Lhasa looking so filthy, sunburned, and ragged that other pilgrims do not even realize they are foreigners.

As the assemblage of extras waits patiently, baking under the hot sun, a group of monks begins chanting. An elderly Tibetan woman sits under the Hair of the Buddha willow in a fur cap and robe, working her prayer beads as if she were actually in Lhasa. Strings of prayer flags snap in the brisk wind, and plumes of incense bathe the set in a mystical blur. For the moment I am transported.

Then, suddenly, in the middle of this densely authentic Tibetan crowd scene, two robed monks break spontaneously into a Spanish-language pop song. As the crowd starts laughing, they hike up their robes and, like a pair of nightclub performers, start to dance the macarena right in front of the Jokhang. A crew member in a Chicago Bulls cap and faded Levi’s appears with an aluminum ladder and a backpack sprayer and spritzes the butter sculptures. Still, Brad is nowhere to be seen.

It is late morning before the first assistant director places all the extras in the crowd and the first walk-through can begin. Then a commotion coming from one of the alleys makes everyone turn to look. I stand on tiptoe and see a young blond man in a T-shirt and sunglasses appear from one of the alleys and stride toward the square. It’s him! It’s Brad rehearsing his entrance into the Barkhor!

But no, wait! He’s not quite tall enough. Moreover, he has a slightly slumped bearing and no suggestion of the renowned Pitt musculature. It’s a false alarm: only Pitt’s stand-in, who must walk through each of the scenes scores of times before the actual take so that the cameramen can get the proper angles. But I am assured by d’Arcy, who is ever on patrol and has, in fact, just materialized beside me, that Brad’s coming will be today.

Ennui descends over the set once more as hundreds of extras keep getting rearranged and a horse carrying a noblewoman is marched repeatedly through its paces. The sun blazes down. The butter sculptures are spritzed again. The yak dung is rearranged. The extras are gulping bottled water. “Give me five more nomads and two monks,” someone calls over a walkie-talkie.

“No. We’re not using yaks,” someone else barks. “And let’s get those chickens ready to go.”

“Ready on the set! Cameras! Action!”

The cameramen hunch over their equipment like gunnery crews over their weapons.
Then, like a mechanical window display at a Fifth Avenue department store, the whole stationary scene in front of the Jokhang is set in motion, and out of an alleyway, with chickens and dogs scattering underfoot, two bearded bedraggled men hobbled in rags into a medieval tableau of Tibetans. For an instant, it is hard to tell which one of them is Brad.

Even ringed with cameras and equipment, and crew members in T-shirts emblazoned with commercial logos, the scene is still somehow convincing. I am left feeling that, at last, I have come near to attaining the goal of my quest: the quintessential Hollywood illusion of Tibet.

As he takes me on an ecclesiastical tour of the shrine he knew so well as a youth, we pass a clutch of smiling Bolivians dressed as monks practicing on their hand-held prayer wheels like a group of teenagers learning how to spin hula-hoops. One is chewing bubble gum.

"Inside the Jokhang is the Jowo Sakyamuni, a statue that was made during Buddha's time and blessed by the Buddha himself," explains Professor Jipa rhapsodically, as if he were actually standing in front of the venerable statute. "The statue has a jewel that is said to move around inside its body. You can place your forehead against its knee, say a prayer, and make a wish, then if the jewel comes into the knee, your wish will come true." He gives a little smirk. "When I last was in the Jokhang, I prayed that I would not have to stay under Chinese rule. Of course, I had no idea then that I would be coming to India. But, see! Here I am!" he chirps, as if he were in India not Argentina.

When Professor Jipa must take his place in the scene, I turn around and am stunned to see that Brad and Gwyneth Paltrow have silently materialized and are standing only a few yards away near a street stall. Looking at Pitt out of costume, I cannot help thinking of someone's comment that next to Brad Pitt, everyone else looks like an onion. Indeed, he does have a kind of indelibly American, boyish good looks. With his dazzling white teeth topped off by dyed blond hair (to make him conform to the Teutonic, Aryan-god image revered by Austrians and Germans during the Nazi era), Pitt seems almost too perfectly beautiful for the part. He wears a collarless tunic and khaki trousers, and is busy with a camera taking snaps of the rehearsal.

In shorts and sandals, Paltrow is an exaggerated version of the kind of tall, leggy, fey aestheticism that has recently swept Hollywood and fashion-modeling circles. With her straight blonde hair in a French roll and without makeup, she looks far plainer and more
mortal than one ever imagined possible. In fact, next to Brad, her beauty seems almost mundane.

With the exception of me, nobody seems to pay much attention to the couple. Of course, they are with them every day, whereas I, an auslander, am seeing Brad for the first time out of character. I continue to watch as he smokes a cigarette. With each moment of propinquity, the occasion becomes more anticlimactic. Only when he flashes one of his million-dollar smiles—slightly craggier and more fraught with crow’s-feet than I expected—does a flicker of his star power seem to rekindle around him.

As Pitt lights up another cigarette, I almost wish that I had not seen him out of costume—that he had remained an unrevealed presence whose proportions were still elastic to the yearnings of my imagination, just like the Tibet of old when it was still geographically inviolate and shrouded in mystery. Even though I know that it would be foolish to approach him, now that I have laid eyes on this unapproachable being, it feels necessary to talk with him, perhaps even interview him. But the risk of disillusionment holds me back.

"Stand by for rehearsal." Echoing everywhere, the command is immediately translated into Tibetan and Spanish.

"Let’s get a shot through the monks’ hats," suggests the director, who is wandering around, beaming broadly from under a halo of unruly gray curls at all that he has caused to be wrought. "Are we short of hats?" he inquires, spotting a group of hatless monks. "More hats, please. More hats," he orders, just as a factotum appears with a pile of huge bonnets each bearing a wild Mohawk of yellow fringe up the back of the neck and over the scalp, the hallmark of the Tibetan Buddhists’ Gelugpa, or Yellow Hat sect.

As gongs start ringing and robed monks commence chanting, dancers in skeleton masks begin a slow-motion danse macabre. Two long copper vang-ling horns, stretching out to the ground like elephants’ trunks, blare out a crepitating welcome to the delegation of P.L.A. generals in Mao suits who have arrived in Lhasa from Beijing to finalize Tibet’s “return to the motherland.”

Squiring them toward the Jokhang with unctuous cheerfulness is actor B. D. Wong of M. Butterfly fame, cast as the traitorous Tibetan nobleman Ngawang Jigme in a bright minimalist hat that sits on top of his braided coiffure like a popover.

In the scene, the script calls for the Chinese generals to march into the Jokhang to “negotiate” Tibet’s surrender, and for them to trample contumuously through a sand mandala that the monks have been laboriously preparing on the floor in their honor. It is a Hollywood moment that will most certainly end up being enshrined in popular culture as emblematic of China’s treatment of Tibet—as evil incarnate. And because it never actually happened, it will certainly disturb Chinese leaders when they eventually see it.

Butter lamps flicker over the shining heads of a sea of red-robed monks as the generals enter the Jokhang. The murky air hums with their guttural chanting as three Mao-suited generals are led through their ranks to the temple’s center, where a half dozen monks are still bent over the huge shining disk of the mandala, adding finishing touches. When the first general steps onto it, then pauses to grind it underfoot with the toe of his boot, the monks sit up to gaze at him, the chanting stops, and the only sound is the dusty scraping of the other generals following suit.

Before the high platform from which the young Dalai Lama watches, one of the generals folds his arms across his chest and declares: "We do not sit lower than he does."

The boy cheerfully replies, "I can sit down there."

All across the room, eyes dart uneasily. The boy, draped in saffron, seats himself on a cushion on the floor before the somber generals, who are ranged across a low, yellow silk bench, canted forward, arms on knees, all business. He tells them gently that he will not be in charge of Tibet until he attains majority and directs them to the regent. The generals eye him with suspicion and disdain. The boy reminds them that Tibetans reject violence on principle, quoting the Buddha: "All beings tremble before danger and death. Life is dear to all. When a man considers this, he does not kill or cause to kill." He smiles at them. "I pray you will see this is our great strength," he says, "not our weakness."

In parting, he takes up a ceremonial pinch of roast barley meal and scatters it into the air—"an offering to the Enlightened Ones." Instead of reciprocating, one of the generals contemptuously casts his pinch of meat onto the floor.

This virtual Tibet is so lovely to look at and seamlessly reconstructed. It is also unambiguous and historically flawed. We are left with a lavish Hollywood hologram extracted from a dwindling essence that, as it always has, obscures as much as it reveals. Wishing to believe in the myth of Tibet, we dress it up with our own projections, extravagant costumes, chicken wire and plaster landmarks, Spanish-speaking Tibetans, and Beverly Hills god-kings.