

# An Enlightened Life in Text and Image: G. I. Gurdjieff's *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (1963) and Peter Brook's *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (1979)

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## **Introduction**

This article considers the 'autobiographical' memoir by George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1866[?] – 29 October 1949), *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (hereafter *Meetings*), which was published posthumously in 1963 under the aegis of Jeanne de Salzmans, Gurdjieff's designated successor. Almost all known about the Greek-Armenian Gurdjieff is open to question, from his birth date (variously given as 1866, 1872 and 1877), to the 'Work', as his teaching is called. The Work has been jealously guarded as a modern initiatory tradition by first – and second – generation disciples, and is controversial in terms of its sources, meaning and interpretation.<sup>1</sup> The 1979 film, *Meetings With Remarkable Men*, with a script co-authored by Madame de Salzmans, directed by Gurdjieffian theatre and film *auteur*, Peter Brook (b. 1925), depicts the young Gurdjieff's spiritual quest reverentially. This article investigates a number of issues including: what models underlie the self-understanding expressed in Gurdjieff's memoir; what role Jeanne de Salzmans and other prominent disciples in the Work played in the dissemination of Gurdjieff's model of the 'enlightened life'; the ways that Peter Brook has modelled his own life on that of Gurdjieff; what the constituent elements of an 'enlightened life' in the contemporary, deregulated spiritual marketplace might be; and the aesthetics of the film's presentation of the quest for enlightenment. It is speculated that the film adaptation of *Meetings With Remarkable Men* potentially won for Gurdjieff a new audience of spiritual seekers who did not wish to join the secretive and authoritarian Work, but admired the portrayal of Gurdjieff as a spiritual seeker who achieved enlightened status.

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<sup>1</sup> Sophia Wellbeloved, 'Gurdjieff, "Old" or "New Age"; Aristotle or Astrology?', *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies*, vol. 1 (2005), pp. 75-88.

### **Gurdjieff as Enlightened Esoteric Teacher**

George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff was probably born 1866 “in Alexandropol (now Gyumri, Armenia), on the Russian side of the Russo-Turkish frontier, his father a Cappadocian Greek carpenter and bardic poet [*ashokh*], and his mother an illiterate Armenian.”<sup>2</sup> His family was Orthodox Christian. When Gurdjieff was a boy the family moved to Kars, a nearby city, where he became a chorister at the Kars Military Cathedral school, under the tutelage of Dean Borsh.<sup>3</sup> From approximately 1887 to 1911 nothing verifiable is known of his life. He emerged as a spiritual teacher in 1912 in Moscow, married Julia Ostrowska in St Petersburg in the same year, and attracted group of early pupils, the most significant of whom was the philosopher and writer Pyotr Demianovitch Ouspensky (1878-1947). The group also included Sophia Ouspensky, the composer (and close friend of Wassily Kandinsky), Thomas de Hartmann, and his wife Olga, a talented singer.<sup>4</sup> In 1917 the Russian Revolution caused Gurdjieff to leave St Petersburg and return to Alexandropol. During 1917-1922 he was based progressively at Essentuki, Tblisi (formerly Tiflis), Constantinople and Berlin.

In Tblisi he met the artist Alexandre von Salzmann (later de Salzmann) and his wife Jeanne (who were friends of the de Hartmanns and Kandinsky) and they became his staunch followers. In 1919 the first public demonstration of the sacred dances (first called ‘exercises’, but later known as ‘Movements’) took place in Tblisi, and the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man was founded.<sup>5</sup> Gurdjieff and Thomas de Hartmann worked intensively on the never-performed ballet, *The Struggle of the Magicians*. The group resided in Constantinople for about a year (where Gurdjieff and Ouspensky met John G. Bennett, later a significant, though heterodox, teacher in the Work), then to Berlin, finally settling in Paris in 1922. Gurdjieff then established the second Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at a chateau called the

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<sup>2</sup> James Moore, ‘Katherine Mansfield and Gurdjieff’s Sacred Dance’, in *Katherine Mansfield: In From The Margin*, ed. Roger Robinson (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Storr, *Feet of Clay: A Study of Gurus* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas and Olga de Hartmann, *Our Life With Mr. Gurdjieff* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), pp. 4, 49.

<sup>5</sup> John Mangan, ‘Thomas de Hartmann: A Composer’s Life’, *Notes*, vol. 53, no. 1 (September 1996), p. 25.

Prieure, in Fontainebleau, to the south of Paris.<sup>6</sup> This was his headquarters for two years only, as in 1924 he had a near-fatal car crash and disbanded the Institute shortly after, moving to a flat in Paris. Although the Prieure continued to have “a small, though fluctuating, population for several more years... he ceased to have any formal pupils,”<sup>7</sup> instead, Gurdjieff concentrated on his writing, assisted by Olga de Hartmann and Alfred R. Orage. For the last twenty-seven years of his life (1922-1949), apart from nine visits to America, some quite lengthy, and an unaccounted-for period in 1935, Gurdjieff remained in France.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to understand that until P. D. Ouspensky met Gurdjieff and began to document his system there was no virtually external testimony concerning Gurdjieff’s life at all. Ouspensky separated from Gurdjieff in 1924, although the two men met several times in between 1924 and Ouspensky’s death in 1947. Ouspensky is significant in that he continued to teach the Gurdjieff system after breaking with him, and published the earliest and most systematic version of the teaching, *In Search of the Miraculous*, which appeared posthumously. Ouspensky was a prolific and well-regarded author of scientific and esoteric works, including *The Fourth Dimension* (1909), *Tertium Organum* (1912), *A New Model of the Universe* (1931) and a novel, *The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin* (1915), which explored the Nietzschean notion of eternal recurrence. Ouspensky recollected meeting Gurdjieff, whom he described as;

a man of oriental type, no longer young, with a black mustache [*sic*] and piercing eyes, who astonished me first of all, because he seemed to be disguised... I was still full of impressions of the East. And this man [had] the face of an Indian raja or an Arab sheikh whom I at once seemed to see in a white burnoose or gilded turban.<sup>9</sup>

In their early conversations Gurdjieff told Ouspensky of the plans for his ballet, *The Struggle of the Magicians*, which would feature some of the sacred dances that he had witnessed during his travels in the East. In explaining these dances to Ouspensky he drew attention to their cosmological significance: “In the

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<sup>6</sup> George Baker and Walter Driscoll, ‘Gurdjieff in America: An Overview’, in *America’s Alternative Religions*, ed. Timothy Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 259.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Gurdjieff’, in Andrew Rawlinson, *The Book of the Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1997), p. 284.

<sup>8</sup> Rawlinson, ‘Gurdjieff’, p. 283.

<sup>9</sup> P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: The Teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff* (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Inc, 2001), p. 7.

strictly defined movements and combinations of the dancers, certain laws are visually reproduced which are intelligible to those who know them... I have many times witnessed such dances being performed during sacred services in various ancient temples.”<sup>10</sup> The purpose of these dances was to bring into alignment the human ‘centres’, and to align human beings with the cosmos.

In Gurdjieff’s system, humans are ‘three-brained beings’, who need to align their intellectual, emotional and sensory selves into a single self through the development of a soul (which people, who effectively do not exist, do not have unless they work to grow one). This is known as the development of a finer, (or *kesdjan*), body. Gurdjieff’s teachings are often called ‘The Fourth Way’ because of his illustration of the three ways that are connected to the three centres of being. The way of the *fakir* (Sufi ascetic) Gurdjieff connects to the body and the sensory centre; the way of the monk (Christian renunciant) he connects to the emotional centre; and the way of the *yogi* (Hindu ascetic) he connects with the intellectual centre. But all these paths are inadequate, as they “are all imbalanced because each centre is only aware of part of what we are... So in effect, there are two kinds of imbalance... individual neurosis (derived from the fact that centres try to do the work that is proper to one of the others) and ‘spiritual lopsidedness’ (derived from the fact that no centre can reveal the whole nature of man).”<sup>11</sup>

Gurdjieff’s system is forbiddingly difficult to penetrate, not least because he used a formidable vocabulary of neologisms. There are two fundamental laws, the Law of Three (*Triamazikamno*) and the Law of Seven (*Heptaparaparshinokh*). The first of these rejects dualistic understandings, through positing three forces, positive, negative and reconciling, or neutralising (rather than just positive and negative), “[t]he higher blends with the lower to actualize the middle, which becomes higher or the preceding lower and lower for the succeeding higher.”<sup>12</sup> These three forces, in Gurdjieffian language, are called the affirming, denying, and reconciling. The Law of Seven applies to multiple aspects of the teaching: there are seven levels of energy, seven different cosmoses, and the Ray of Creation diagramme has seven emanations. James Moore concisely explains the Law of Seven as follows;

[e]very completing process must without exception have seven discrete phases: construing these as an ascending or descending series of seven notes or pitches, the frequency of vibrations must develop *irregularly*, with two predictable deviations (just where

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<sup>10</sup> Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Rawlinson, ‘Gurdjieff’, p. 288.

<sup>12</sup> G.I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1999 [1950]), p. 751.

semi-tones are missing between Mi-Fa and Si-Do in the untempered modern major scale EDCBAGFE).<sup>13</sup>

These two laws are synthesised and expressed symbolically in the Enneagram, a nine-sided figure.<sup>14</sup>

In the Gurdjieffian universe everything is alive and seeks to feed itself to achieve higher levels of being. Thus the moon is trying to develop into a new Earth and the Earth to develop into a new sun. Garrett Thomson summarises the role of organic life in this system as follows:

Organic life is a huge accumulator of energy gathered from the sun and the rest of the solar system by the earth to feed itself and the development of the moon. At death, everything that lives releases energy, *askokin*, to the moon... In other words, the choice between Heaven and Hell is the choice between feeding the sun or the moon... Our spiritual development consists a struggle to become free from the mechanical influences of the moon.<sup>15</sup>

Gurdjieff therefore defines the purpose of life as the development of a soul or *kesdjan* body through work and ‘conscious suffering’, which he calls the *Fulasnitamnian* principle. Its opposite, the *Itoklanoz* principle, awaits most people whose wills are fragmented and dominated by trivial likes and dislikes. This process is related to Gurdjieff’s emanative cosmology, with “different manifestations, and concentrations of energy, which flow from the Absolute and which are all interconnected.”<sup>16</sup>

Humans, in Gurdjieff’s system, are essentially machines who pass through life asleep. There are four states of consciousness; sleep, waking consciousness (which is nearly the same as sleep), self-remembering, and objective consciousness, the attainment of which is connected with the development of the *kesdjan* body. The Movements are central to Gurdjieff’s teaching, in that they are the most important physical activity undertaken within the Gurdjieff Work. This is, despite the complex cosmological mythology developed in *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (hereafter *Tales*), primarily an applied spiritual training, through actual physical labour, in addition to body-based exercises (the Movements). The Gurdjieff-de Hartmann music has an important sub-division of music for the Movements, which has become known through recordings by significant pianists including Wim van

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<sup>13</sup> James Moore, *Gurdjieff The Anatomy of a Myth: A Biography* (Shaftesbury and Rockport: Element, 1991), p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> Moore, *Gurdjieff The Anatomy of a Myth*, pp. 344-345.

<sup>15</sup> Thomson, *On Gurdjieff*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>16</sup> Garrett Thomson, *On Gurdjieff* (London: Wadsworth, 2003), p. 29.

Dullemen and Helen Adie.<sup>17</sup>

In 1923, shortly after arriving in Paris, Gurdjieff staged a public performance of these ‘sacred gymnastics’. In 1924 he and a group of pupils went to the United States where Gurdjieff “presented public demonstrations of his movements in New York and laid the groundwork for the opening of the first branch of his institute.”<sup>18</sup> A. R. Orage, a former student of Ouspensky, was put in charge of the New York branch. Several of the Movements teachers in the Work had been trained in other body-based disciplines. For example, Jessmin Howarth and Rose Mary Nott (nee Lillard), whom Gurdjieff met in Paris in 1922, were instructors of the eurhythmics system used to teach music developed by Gurdjieff’s Swiss contemporary, Emile-Jacques Dalcroze (1865-1950), and Jeanne de Salzmann had also studied with Dalcroze. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), the founder of Anthroposophy, similarly developed a system called Eurythmy, which he began teaching in 1912, which contained the essence of his spiritual teachings, and which was fully developed by 1919 (when he took Eurythmy practitioners on tour in post-war Europe).<sup>19</sup>

Gurdjieff’s avowed intention was to wake people up, and consciousness is crucial to his teachings. He was adamant that spiritually undeveloped human beings are machines, passive and lacking consciousness. He taught that they had to develop essence and bypass personality. The majority of his teachings are contained in *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (1950) the ‘First Series’ of his collected writings, known as *All and Everything*, which is a sprawling science fiction epic of more than twelve hundred pages, in which the reformed Beelzebub tells tales of his adventures, chiefly among three-brained beings on Earth, to his grandson Hassein as the two travel in a spaceship, the Karnak, from Beelzebub’s home planet, Karatas. Gurdjieff wrote in Armenian, his native language, and pupils translated the works into different languages. The English translation first published was mainly the work of Orage, who worked closely with Gurdjieff to produce it.<sup>20</sup> When immersed in Gurdjieff’s writings

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<sup>17</sup> Fiona Richards, ‘Changing Identities: The Pianist and Composer Helen Perkin [Adie]’, *Australasian Music Research*, vol. 7 (2002), pp. 15-30.

<sup>18</sup> Anon, ‘Gurdjieff Foundation’, in *Odd Gods*, ed. James R. Lewis (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), p. 202.

<sup>19</sup> Beth Usher, ‘Introduction’, in Rudolf Steiner, *Eurythmy: An Introductory Reader* (Forest Row: Rudolf Steiner Books, 2006), pp. 1-9. There are myriad suggestive similarities between the teachings of Gurdjieff and Steiner which are worthy of investigation, but are beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Seymour-Smith, *The 100 Most Influential Books Ever Written: A History of Thought From Ancient Times to Today* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1998), p. 449.

the reader is often disconcerted by the lightness of style and the apparent frivolity of certain passages. Gurdjieff often used humour and shocks to teach, as well as pushing followers to the limit physically and emotionally. He was often vulgar, sexually explicit, and appreciated good food and wine, and boisterous company.

Apart from Gurdjieff's own writings, the most important sources of information about him are the memoirs of his pupils; significant accounts were published by the de Hartmanns, Fritz Peters, J. G. Bennett, and others. It is undeniable that Gurdjieff's followers viewed him as an authentic spiritual teacher; an enlightened being. A sketch published in *Practical Psychology Monthly* in 1937 by a pseudonymous pupil stated that "[m]any people attributed impartial objective knowledge to Gurdjieff... He could read character at a glance. He had powers of clairvoyance, thought-reading and the like. In short, it was claimed for him by some people that he was a veritable God-man."<sup>21</sup> John Bennett concurred, saying that although Gurdjieff tended to make ambiguous statements about himself, "[s]ometimes he came very near to claiming he was an *avatar*, a Cosmic individual incarnated to help mankind."<sup>22</sup>

### **Gurdjieff as Spiritual Seeker: *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (1963)**

During his life, Gurdjieff published only *The Herald of Coming Good* (hereafter *Herald*), which was released privately in Paris in 1933. The popular writer on esoteric traditions, Romuald (Rom) Landau, discussed *Herald* in *God is My Adventure* (1935). Landau, who also interviewed Gurdjieff twice in 1934, concluded that *Herald* was "the work of a man who was no longer sane," and dismissed the grandiose assertion that Gurdjieff would publish three series of works, ten volumes in all, that revealed significant esoteric knowledge. The autobiographical *Herald* was franker than Gurdjieff would ever be subsequently; Landau covers Gurdjieff's claim to have been in a certain 'dervish' monastery of the 'Mohammedan religion' in Central Asia and the claim that Gurdjieff had "arrived at unprecedented practical results without equal in our day."<sup>23</sup> Landau's low opinion of *Herald* was shared by P. D. Ouspensky who burned the copies that were sent to him. After a few months,

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<sup>21</sup> Armagnac (pseudonym), 'The Strange Cult of Gurdjieff: An Insider's Story of the Most Mysterious Religious Movement in the World', reprinted in *Gurdjieff International Review*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2000), p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> J.G. Bennett, *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 82.

<sup>23</sup> Rom Landau, *God Is My Adventure: A Book on Modern Mystics, Masters, and Teachers* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson Ltd, 1935), pp. 196-197.

Gurdjieff recalled the book and destroyed the remaining copies.<sup>24</sup>

Gurdjieff's three major works, *Tales* (1950), *Meetings* (1963), and *Life is Only Real When 'I Am'* (1974) were published posthumously. In the 'autobiographical' *Meetings* Gurdjieff presents himself as a seeker after truth, one who is fundamentally concerned with the reconciliation of religious, esoteric and scientific knowledge. Additionally, his birth and upbringing in Transcaucasia positions him as a reconciler of East and West; in 1923, he told Professor Denis Saurat, the Director of the French Institute in London,

I want to add the mystical spirit of the East to the scientific spirit of the West. The Oriental spirit is right, but only in its trends and general ideas. The Western spirit is right in its methods and techniques. Western methods alone are effective in history. I want to create a type of sage who will unite the spirit of the East with Western techniques.<sup>25</sup>

To date, Gurdjieff has received comparatively little academic attention, despite his clear significance within the esoteric milieu. Arguably, the three most influential teachers of alternative spirituality and esoteric systems in the modern West are: Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), who co-founded the Theosophical Society in 1875 with the American Civil War veteran Colonel Henry Steel Olcott; Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), a philosopher and scientist who broke with Theosophy in 1912 to form the Anthroposophical Society; and Gurdjieff.<sup>26</sup>

Compared to *Tales*, which is a demanding text in terms of its vast length, vocabulary of neologisms, and exposition of complex cosmology, *Meetings* appears to be a relatively brief and 'simple' book in which Gurdjieff recounts his early life. However, the "Introduction" resolutely refuses to permit the reader to enter the text without effort, with its seemingly random anecdotes about grammar, Persian folktales, and musings on the differences between 'European' and 'Asiatic' literatures, presented as the findings of an "elderly, intelligent Persian."<sup>27</sup> The convoluted prose style of all Gurdjieff's writings is itself an important teaching technique, and not merely the product of his own polyglot status and the complex processes of translation. Joshua Gunn has argued persuasively that esotericists usually employ one of three standard

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<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Rauve, 'An Intersection of Interests: Gurdjieff's Rope Group as a Site of Literary Production', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, vol. 49, no. 1 (2003), p. 60.

<sup>25</sup> Seymour-Smith, *The 100 Most Influential Books Ever Written*, p. 451.

<sup>26</sup> See Johanna Petsche, 'Gurdjieff and Blavatsky: Western Esoteric Teachers in Parallel' in this volume for Gurdjieff's interactions with Theosophy.

<sup>27</sup> G.I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (London and New York: Penguin Arkana, 1985 [1963]), p. 28.



strategies with regard to language, which as a human attribute cannot reliably express ineffable truths: first, the recommendation to keep silent; second, the use of “language itself in order to ascend to higher states of awareness;”<sup>28</sup> and third, a quest for a pure language (possibly from a divine source) that is able to express the ineffable. Gurdjieff’s writings are excellent examples of the second strategy; his followers assert that his neologisms and difficult prose are designed to reveal higher levels of reality. Further, he developed (with Alexandre de Salzmann) a new script, which read vertically from top to bottom, in which to write the forty aphorisms that featured on the walls of the Prieure.<sup>29</sup> Mohammad H. Tamdgidi argues that Gurdjieff learned from his *ashokh* father to hide “serious ideas under the cloak of apparently trivial, absurd and nonsensical ones.”<sup>30</sup>

In *Meetings*, Gurdjieff recounts pivotal moments in his young life, and the ‘remarkable men’ in whose company these occurred. The first such man is his father, the bard (whom he claimed could recite the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a text which was not translated until much later), and he is followed by Gurdjieff’s teacher at Kars, Dean Borsh, and the priest Bogachevsky, also known as Father Evlissi. In the chapter dedicated to Bogachevsky, Gurdjieff introduces the motif of the Yezidi boy trapped within a chalk circle. The adolescent Gurdjieff saw a small boy weeping and struggling to escape, and being mocked by the other children:

I was puzzled and asked what it was all about. I learned that the boy in the middle was a Yezidi and the circle had been drawn round him and that he could not get out of it until it was rubbed away. The child was indeed trying with all his might to leave this magic circle, but he struggled in vain. I ran up to him and quickly rubbed out part of the circle, and immediately he dashed out and ran away as fast as he could.<sup>31</sup>

This anecdote presents Gurdjieff as a benevolent liberator from superstitious irrational constraints, a role that he assumed as an esoteric teacher many years later in pre-revolutionary Russia. Other early experiences, such as the mysterious resurrection of a Tartar corpse (or accidental burial of a live man, depending on how the incident is interpreted), and the duel involving cannons fought with his friend Piotr Karpenko over “the Riaouzov girl,” with whom he

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<sup>28</sup> Joshua Gunn, ‘An Occult Poetics, or, The Secret Rhetoric of Religion’, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 2, Spring 2004, p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> James Moore, *Gurdjieff Anatomy of a Myth*, pp. 341-342.

<sup>30</sup> Mohammad H. Tamdgidi, *Gurdjieff and Hypnosis: A Hermeneutic Study* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> G.I. Gurdjieff *Meetings With Remarkable Men*, p. 65.

was passionately, though briefly, in love, are vividly portrayed.

The core of the book details the search by the adult Gurdjieff and his friends, known as the 'Seekers of Truth'. These included Abram Yelov, the Aisor (Assyrian Christian), trainee priest Sarkis Pogossian, who became an engineer and later the owner of a steamship company, the pasha's son Ekim Bey, Professor Skridlov, an archaeologist, and the Prince Yuri Lubovedsky, who is presented as the principal spiritual guide in Gurdjieff's memoir. Embedded in the chapter about Prince Lubovedsky are the stories of the alcoholic Soloviev and Vitvitskaia, the one 'remarkable woman' acknowledged by Gurdjieff. Intriguingly, she is Polish and has a dubious reputation, having been a 'kept woman'. This invites the speculation that she is modelled on Gurdjieff's wife, Julia Ostrowska, who was Polish and retained her own name, possibly because Gurdjieff already had a wife and children.<sup>32</sup> It is undeniable that Gurdjieff loved Madame Ostrowska, and that she was a person of rare spiritual qualities is testified to by many of his pupils.<sup>33</sup> However, she was only twenty-two when they married in 1912, too young to have belonged to the Seekers of Truth, if they really existed.

The Seekers of Truth sought ancient wisdom and allegedly journeyed far and wide in the 1880s and 1890s to attain it. Gurdjieff stated that:

[t]hirty years ago twelve of us spent many years in central Asia, and we reconstructed the Doctrine by oral traditions, the study of ancient costumes, popular songs, and certain books. The Doctrine has always existed, but the tradition has been interrupted. In antiquity some groups and castes knew it, but it was incomplete. The ancients put too much stress on metaphysics, their doctrine was too abstract.<sup>34</sup>

Their quest involves archaeological expeditions in the Gobi Desert, examination of the antiquities of Egypt after discovering a "map of pre-sand Egypt" (which Gurdjieff connects to Atlantis),<sup>35</sup> experiments with music and vibrations, discussions with the wandering holy men of Central Asia, and finally, for Gurdjieff, arrival at the fabled monastery of the esoteric Sarmoung Brotherhood, where he is reunited with Prince Lubovedsky and learns the sacred dances, or Movements (referred to above).

There has been much speculation about the sources of Gurdjieff's teachings, which raises the issue of how reliable the account of his early years

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<sup>32</sup> James Webb, *The Harmonious Circle: An Exploration of the Lives and Work of G. I. Gurdjieff and P. D. Ouspensky and Others* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> De Hartmann and de Hartmann, *Our Life With Mr. Gurdjieff*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Seymour-Smith, *The 100 Most Influential Books Ever Written*, p. 447.

<sup>35</sup> Moore, *Gurdjieff Anatomy of a Myth*, p. 29.

given in *Meetings* is? The teachings have variously been described as an amalgam of esoteric Christianity, Sufism, Tibetan Buddhism, Western occult traditions, and Hindu ideas. Some of his disciples, like J. G. Bennett, believed that sources for the Work could be identified and that Gurdjieff's travels were to some extent verifiable. Bennett accepted that Gurdjieff had spent time with Essenes and at the famed Christian monastery of Mount Athos, and had visited Ethiopia where he became familiar with Coptic Christianity. He further accepted that Gurdjieff spent time in Egypt, Babylon, Afghanistan and Tibet, and was initiated into a Sufi order. Also, Bennett claims that Gurdjieff was a Russian spy:

[h]is almost uniformly hostile references to England, and especially his attack on the Younghusband Expedition into Tibet in 1903, suggests that he was in conflict with the authorities of British India. I can personally confirm that he had an unfavourable dossier in New Delhi because, as an intelligence officer in Constantinople in 1920, I first heard of Gurdjieff in a dispatch from New Delhi warning us of a "very dangerous Russian agent, George Gurdjieff, who was in Georgia and had applied for a permit to come to Constantinople" ... I was invited to dinner by my friend Prince Sabaheddin to meet an old friend of his whom he regarded as a most exceptional man in the field of occultism and spirituality. This was Gurdjieff... Anyone who knew the Caucasus at that time would suspect that a man who could get permits and move freely through the Bolshevik and Social Democrat areas must have a secret pull with the authorities.<sup>36</sup>

The truth of these fascinating assertions has not been definitely established. They are mentioned for two reasons: first, there is a resemblance between the roles of spy and esoterist, in that both deal with multiple realities, fragmented identities and secrets; and second, because one very obvious model of the enlightened life that Gurdjieff drew upon was that of Madame Blavatsky.

Prior to the establishment of the Theosophical Society, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky had led a daring and unconventional life for a well-born Russian woman of the nineteenth century. The daughter of Colonel Peter von Hahn and the novelist Helena de Fadeyev, she ran away from a marriage of convenience to the middle-aged Nikifor Vassilievich Blavatsky after a matter of weeks in 1848, aged seventeen. She travelled in Turkey, Egypt, Greece, Western Europe, the Americas, the Caribbean, India, and Tibet, where she allegedly spent at least seven years studying with a spiritual master. Richard Hutch argued that she became an American citizen in 1878 to "stop British charges

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<sup>36</sup> Bennett, *Gurdjieff: Making a New World*, p. 84.

that she was on a mission to India as a Russian spy.”<sup>37</sup> Further, Blavatsky had made her living in an unconventional fashion, which included working as a medium in Cairo in the 1870s, and Gurdjieff in *Meetings* details sundry ways that he earned money through deception and fringe pursuits, most notably hypnotism. Further connections are apparent when Hutch discussed the sources of Madame Blavatsky’s occult teachings and concluded that:

Blavatsky drew from the more esoteric, though ubiquitous traditions of Russian pre-Christian and Orthodox Christian spirituality. The former involved an unconscious identification with so-called “paganism”, or shamanistic religion which... is characteristic of Russian tribal societies... [the] latter associate[d] the essence of Christian liturgical history and continuity with the tradition of “holy men” or “pilgrims” of the church.<sup>38</sup>

Gurdjieff’s *Meetings* abounds in Christian references (for example, Jesus Christ is referred to as “Our Divine Teacher,” the ecclesiastical seasons of Lent and Easter are observed, and when Gurdjieff speaks of his deceased friends he asks God to look with favour on them), and he did describe his system as ‘esoteric Christianity’ to pupils on occasion. Gurdjieff followed Blavatsky in recounting tales of the lost civilization Atlantis and crediting the Atlanteans with an advanced technology and great wisdom. Gurdjieff was clearly familiar with Theosophy and referred it in conversation.<sup>39</sup> Blavatsky’s death in 1891 is at the beginning of the decade when Gurdjieff’s quest with the Seekers of Truth began.

Andrew Rawlinson assesses Helena Petrovna Blavatsky’s claim to have been initiated into Eastern traditions as truthful, stating that “we would have to say that we know of no other Westerner of the time who was doing the same... Blavatsky has a unique place in the great process by which Eastern teachings – and by extension, spiritual psychology as a worldview – have come to the West.”<sup>40</sup> The debt of Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy to Theosophy is well-documented; there is much more to do in detailing the debt that Gurdjieff owes his greatest nineteenth century role-model of the enlightened life, Madame Blavatsky, and the debt the Work owes to Theosophy.

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Hutch, ‘Helena Blavatsky Unveiled’, *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1980), p. 320.

<sup>38</sup> Hutch, ‘Helena Blavatsky Unveiled’, p. 323.

<sup>39</sup> For example, in the early account, ‘Glimpses of the Truth’, in G.I. Gurdjieff, *Views From the Real World* (London and New York: Penguin Arkana, 1984 [1975]), p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Madame Blavatsky’, in Andrew Rawlinson, *The Book of the Enlightened Masters*, p. 196.

### **Gurdjieff, Jeanne de Salzman and Peter Brook**

Having considered Gurdjieff's textual rendering of his enlightened life, attention is now turned to Peter Brook, and the film he directed of Gurdjieff's memoir. Renowned theatre and film director Peter Brook was born in England to Russian parents in 1925. Tuberculosis in his mid-teens resulted in him spending two years in Switzerland, and at seventeen he became a student of Magdalen College, Oxford. In his first year of study he directed an amateur production of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* at the Torch Theatre in London, and in 1946 he directed *Love's Labours Lost* for the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon. In 1948 he became Director of Productions at Covent Garden Opera House. Brook read Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* in 1950, and in 1951 he married the Russian-English actress Natasha Parry. They joined the London Gurdjieff group under the direction of American writer Jane Heap (1883-1964), and after her death gravitated to the Paris Work group led by Jeanne de Salzman.<sup>41</sup> The couple moved to Paris in 1972 and Brook now heads the Paris Gurdjieff group. Brook's theatrical practice has been deeply influenced by his spiritual explorations, and the model of Gurdjieff as both spiritual seeker and esoteric master arguably underpins his understanding of his artistic vision.

During his time studying Gurdjieff's system with Jane Heap, Brook experimented with radical theatrical practice. The Theatre of Cruelty workshops, inspired by the work of Antonin Artaud (1886-1948), in which Brook collaborated with Charles Marowitz, led to the publication of *The Empty Space* (1968), his theatrical manifesto. Brook distinguished four types of theatre: Deadly (which was commercial and bad); Holy (which was akin to ritual, and showed the influence of Artaud); Rough (which was popular and incited laughter); and Immediate (which used improvisation and experimentation).<sup>42</sup> Brook's own directorial practice sought to combine Holy and Rough theatre, in what Maria Shevtsova calls a "universal theatre which, in cutting across ethnic, linguistic and value differences, will traverse cultural boundaries, closing the gaps that divide race from race, class from class, and whatever else sets divisions in motion."<sup>43</sup> This has led him to combine stories and performance modes from widely divergent cultures, with often spectacular, though controversial, results.

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<sup>41</sup> Peter Brook, *Threads of Time: Recollections* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1999 [1998]), *passim*.

<sup>42</sup> Sally Mackey and Simon Cooper, *Drama and Theatre Studies* (Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes, 2000), p. 381.

<sup>43</sup> Maria Shevtsova, *Theatre and Cultural Interaction* (Sydney: Sydney Studies in Society and Culture, 2006), p. 14.

Tracing Brook's conscious modelling of his own life on that of his spiritual master, and of his theatrical output on Gurdjieff's teaching, is a complex and difficult task, but one that repays effort. Sally Mackey and Simon Cooper note the parallels between the two in passing: "Gurdjieff originated from a Near Eastern background from which Brook would draw inspiration... Gurdjieff's concept of a journey as a means of learning and discovery was taken up by Brook, particularly in his African travels... Gurdjieff was a teacher and mystic. Although Brook denies his own guru status there is no doubt that he is regarded as such by some contemporary practitioners."<sup>44</sup> Gurdjieff himself was sternly critical of much that passed for art, literary and otherwise. In *Tales*, he has Beelzebub tell his grandson Hassein that before art became degraded, artists were known as *Orpheists*, a term that meant "that he rightly sensed the essence." The term 'artist', by contrast, simply means "he-who-is-occupied-with-art." Literary and artistic fashions, Beelzebub maintains, are simply alternations to "the external form of what is called 'the-covering-of-their-nullity'."<sup>45</sup> However, it is undeniable that he attracted many artists, particularly writers and musicians, as pupils, and the Work continues to be attractive to creative people.<sup>46</sup>

Brook is recognised as somewhat self-dramatising and highly conscious of his stature as an *auteur*, moved in the 1960s to increasingly grandiose productions that claimed significance beyond mere entertainment and performance. *Orghast at Persepolis*, in 1971, involved the development of a script that combined disparate theatrical texts. The basis was Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, to which were added extracts of "text from the Spanish playwright Calderon, a chorus from an Armenian play... Seneca, and an exploration of Avestan, the ceremonial language of Iran," which were blended with writings from the poet Ted Hughes.<sup>47</sup> Brook used members of his company and local Iranians, and language and technical preparation was done very swiftly, with much reliance on improvisation. The Persian archaeological site of Persepolis (which is redolent of antiquity in general and Alexander the Great in particular) provided a huge and impressive stage set. Performances began at dusk, with the sunset and the sunrise the following morning being important contributions to lighting effects. The flaming torches illuminating

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<sup>44</sup> Mackey and Cooper, *Drama and Theatre Studies*, p. 393.

<sup>45</sup> Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, pp. 495-496, 501.

<sup>46</sup> A list of artists (of various kinds) influenced by or attracted to the teachings of Gurdjieff includes Thomas de Hartmann, Katherine Mansfield, Jane Heap, Margaret Anderson, Jean Toomer, Sun Ra, Keith Jarrett, Bill Murray, and many more.

<sup>47</sup> Mackey and Cooper, *Drama and Theatre Studies*, p. 385.

the site reinforced the reception of *Orghast at Persepolis* as a type of esoteric ritual, or temple spectacle, very far removed from theatre, as the West understands it. Brook has made extravagant claims regarding what his theatrical productions can achieve; “holy theatre not only presents the invisible but offers conditions that make its perception possible.”<sup>48</sup>

The other great international marathon theatrical event that Peter Brook is associated with is the nine-hour production of *The Mahabharata* that he conceived and delivered in the 1980s, after he had made the film of “Meetings With Remarkable Men.” Where *Orghast* was an original script, Brook has been praised and vilified for his adaptation of the vast Indian epic, which was composed between approximately 400 B.C.E. and 200 C.E., although it is traditionally attributed to the sage Vyasa.<sup>49</sup> Core to criticism of Brook’s *Mahabharata* was the claim that it was an orientalising appropriation of Indian theatre and culture. This elucidates another parallel between Gurdjieff and Brook; both were ‘Orientalists’ who presented an exoticised version of the Orient to the Occident.<sup>50</sup> The East, as Edward Said argued, “was not allowed to represent itself, but had to be represented by the Occident. In other words, it had to be re-presented in a manner so as to align itself within the prevailing hierarchy, with the imperial powers on top, the Orient at the bottom, of the political, social, and cultural scale”<sup>51</sup> It has been objected that Brook reduced the action of the *Mahabharata* to a tragic tale of two flawed heroes, Karna and Duryodhana, rendering it Shakespearean, rather than a traditionally Indian religious cultural event.<sup>52</sup> More serious charges against Brook included that he made promises to certain Indians, particularly a young male dancer named Dohonda, regarding participation in the production and later reneged on them, and that he had failed to bring the *Mahabharata* back to the villagers whose traditions he appropriated, which some critics viewed as an act of “cultural piracy.”<sup>53</sup>

This failure to appreciate the authentic Indian qualities of the *Mahabharata* on the part of Brook reveals another way in which he models his

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<sup>48</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Touchstone, 1996 [1968]), p. 56.

<sup>49</sup> Gautam DasGupta, ‘The *Mahabharata*: Peter Brook’s “Orientalism”’, *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1987), p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> See Harry Oldmeadow, ‘*Ex Oriente Lux*: Eastern Religions, Western Writers’ in this volume.

<sup>51</sup> DasGupta, ‘The *Mahabharata*: Peter Brook’s “Orientalism”’, p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Alf Hildebeitel, ‘Transmitting *Mahabharatas*: Another Look at Peter Brook’, *The Drama Review*, vol. 36, no. 3 (Autumn, 1992), p. 150.

<sup>53</sup> Phillip Zarrilli, ‘The Aftermath: When Peter Brook Came to India’, *The Drama Review*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Spring 1986), p. 98.

life and activities on Gurdjieff. Esoteric teachings posit that there is a universally applicable strand of ancient wisdom (the *philosophia perennis*, the *prisca theologica*) that is available to enlightened souls in all historical eras and across all geographies and cultures. This perspective is thus anti-modern and anti-progress, as the ancient Atlanteans (or which ever group is valorised) possessed perfect wisdom, to which nothing further could be added.<sup>54</sup> It also tends to erase differences between cultures and to propose universally applicable solutions for human dilemmas. Nevertheless, Brook's *Mahabharata* is considered a masterpiece by many, particularly by those who operate within a 'Traditionalist' framework. Basarab Nicolescu argues that there is a close relationship between theatre and "spiritual work," because of the fact that both involve oral transmission, and asserts that Brook's troupe of actors "can communicate just as well with African villagers, Australian aborigines or the inhabitants of Brooklyn."<sup>55</sup> He suggests that the art of theatre as practiced by Brook is a universal language, and cites Gurdjieff:

[t]he fundamental property of this new language is that *all* ideas are concentrated around *one single* idea: in other words, they are all considered, in terms of their mutual relationships, from the point of view of a single idea. And this idea is that of *evolution*. Not at all in the sense of a *mechanical* evolution, naturally, because that does not exist, but in the sense of a conscious and voluntary evolution. It is the only possible kind... The language which permits understanding is based on the knowledge of its place in the evolutionary ladder.<sup>56</sup>

Nicolescu concludes that any activity that facilitates the evolution of consciousness (which is a spiritual process), in this case the theatre of Brook, should be considered as sacred.

In his autobiography Brook presents himself as a spiritual seeker not unlike Gurdjieff. As an imaginative young child, he "learned that what we call living is an attempt to read the shadows, betrayed at every time by what we so easily assume to be real."<sup>57</sup> When recuperating from tuberculosis in Europe he has a similar emotional awakening to women as that Gurdjieff experienced with "the Riaouzov girl," which he calls "the wild sickness of love born of one glimpse of a dark-haired Italian schoolgirl, looking down at me from the top of

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<sup>54</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998 [1996]), pp. 327-330.

<sup>55</sup> Basarab Nicolescu, trans. David Williams, 'Peter Brook and Traditional Thought', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1997), pp. 13-14.

<sup>56</sup> Nicolescu, 'Peter Brook and Traditional Thought', p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> Brook, *Threads of Time: Recollections*, p. 7.



a flight of steps.”<sup>58</sup> He admits to an interest in the occult and describes meeting Aleister Crowley (who also met Gurdjieff) as a teenager. He praises Jane Heap as a teacher of rare insight:

[t]hrough her, I began to discover that “tradition” had another meaning from the sterile old-fashionedness I so detested in the theater. I learned to understand the oriental way of hiding knowledge like a precious stone, of concealing its sources, of making it hard to discover, so that its value can be truly appreciated by the searcher who has been willing to pay the price. She showed how every religion rapidly destroyed the purity of its origins by offering too readily to others what one has not made one’s own by hard practical work.<sup>59</sup>

After Heap’s death he and his wife Natasha developed a deep bond with Jeanne de Salzmann, who was described to him as “like a fan, which gradually opens until more and more is revealed.”<sup>60</sup> While in New York in the mid-1970s de Salzmann suggested to Brook “very lightly, ‘Why don’t we make a film of *Meetings With Remarkable Men*?’”<sup>61</sup> Brook responded to this proposal with enthusiasm, but his initial desire to make a “dynamic, colorful film” was thwarted by Madame de Salzmann, who desired to “give to the spectator a direct taste of that ‘something else’ she had experienced with Gurdjieff over the years.”<sup>62</sup> This anecdote demonstrates that viewing the film of Gurdjieff’s autobiography was intended as a kind of substitute for an encounter with Gurdjieff himself, and thus can be understood as a type of evangelism, of spreading the word about the Work.

### ***Meetings With Remarkable Men* (1979)**

*Meetings With Remarkable Men*, which is dedicated to Gurdjieff, was filmed in Afghanistan, which doubles for a variety of Central Asian locations and Egypt. Jeanne de Salzmann, then well over eighty, played a part in the casting of roles, particularly of the Montenegrin actor Dragan Maksimovic as the adult Gurdjieff, and in the supervision of filming. The issue of casting clearly was of spiritual significance. Brook stated in his autobiography that while waiting to meet Madame de Salzmann, Maksimovic;

sat patiently on a stool. Then, at one moment, he crossed his legs, and learning forward, he clasped his hands together on a stick he had picked up off the ground, his body relaxed yet poised and alert.

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<sup>58</sup> Brook, *Threads of Time: Recollections*, p. 18.

<sup>59</sup> Brook, *Threads of Time: Recollections*, p. 61.

<sup>60</sup> Brook, *Threads of Time: Recollections*, p. 108.

<sup>61</sup> Brook, *Threads of Time: Recollections*, p. 173.

<sup>62</sup> Brook, *Threads of Time: Recollections*, p. 174.

Madame de Salzmann was delighted, recognizing a characteristic attitude of Gurdjieff that Dragan had unwittingly assumed, simply through the power of essential roots and type.<sup>63</sup>

Due to Brook's theatrical contacts, the distinguished cast included the South African playwright Athol Fugard as Professor Skridlov, and the English actors Terence Stamp as Prince Lubovedsky and Warren Mitchell as Gurdjieff's father. The film is episodic and has been praised for its cinematic beauty. It opens with the young Gurdjieff and his father climbing a barren, rocky mountain. They are going to the meeting of the *ashokhs*. As the singer sings, the camera pans slowly over the faces. The significance of music is underlined; Gurdjieff asks his father "Where do the *ashokhs* learn?" and receives the answer "From their fathers," which is then regressed back to God. His father suggests that young Gurdjieff should "Become yourself. Then God and the Devil don't matter." The evocative, faintly melancholy, soundtrack consists of music based on compositions by Gurdjieff and Thomas de Hartmann, with additional music by Gurdjieffian musician and composer Laurence Rosenthal.<sup>64</sup>

The key episodes of Gurdjieff's youth, including the Yezidi boy trapped in the circle, the brief experience of love for the Riaousov girl, and the resulting duel with Piotr Karpenko, are picturesquely presented, as are his adult acquaintances with Pogossian, Yelov, Vitvitskaia (whose importance is downplayed in the film through her being nameless), and the other Seekers of Truth. The action is slow-moving, with minimal dialogue, resulting in a sometimes ponderous silence. The 'spiritual' nature of the film is underscored throughout, and the music has a hypnotic effect. Film Studies scholar Paul Coates argues that if Rudolf Otto's notion that the core of religion is:

the experience of a *mysterium tremendum*... [this]... can be aligned with the experience of cinema. For a start, Otto's statement of the need for "metaphor and symbolic expressions, to make the states of mind we are investigating ring out" privileges aesthetic categories as conduits to religiosity. He describes the *mysterium* as an "overpowering might" with "a character which cannot be expressed verbally." The pattern of a feeling that precedes and even resists verbal rationalization may seem peculiarly apt to cinema, the most widespread forms of which pressure-cook emotions within the confines of a two-hour period.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Brook, *Threads of Time: Recollections*, p. 177.

<sup>64</sup> Laurence Rosenthal, 'Music for the Film Meetings With Remarkable Men', *Gurdjieff International Review*, vol. II, no. 4 (1999).

<sup>65</sup> Paul Coates, *Cinema, Religion and the Romantic Legacy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 55.

Religion plays a part in the film, as it does in the book, but it is largely emptied of doctrinal and institutional significance. Pogossian and Gurdjieff acquire the map of “Egypt before the sands” from the abbot of an Orthodox monastery and journey to Egypt where Gurdjieff meets Prince Lubovedsky; Gurdjieff has several encounters with the dervish Bogga Eddin, but the fact he is Muslim (or a Sufi) is never mentioned. After the failure of Professor Skridlov’s archaeological expedition in the Gobi Desert, Bogga Eddin tells Gurdjieff to find the Sarmoung Brotherhood; “I have found nothing. I don’t know how to search. Alone a man can do very little. He needs to find the place where knowledge has been kept alive.”<sup>66</sup>

The quest to find the monastery of the Sarmoung Brotherhood (which is described as having been founded in 2,500 B.C.E. and having disappeared after the sixth century C.E.) becomes the primary narrative to propel the film forward. Gurdjieff and Skridlov sing and beg as they travel; they meet a former Christian missionary, Father Giovanni, who explains that he has abandoned exclusive adherence to Christianity to become a member of the World Brotherhood (which is a nod to the deregulated spirituality characteristic of the West post-Theosophy). When Skridlov decides to stay with Father Giovanni, Gurdjieff presses on to the Sarmoung monastery, and after crossing a perilous rope bridge he is welcomed by the monastery’s superior, who greets him warmly; “[y]ou have found your place my son. You have come here like a lamb but you have a wolf in side of you.” Here he is reunited with Prince Lubovedsky, who is close to the end of his life. Gurdjieff’s followers have argued for various locations for this monastery (assuming that it did exist). Gurdjieff claimed to have spent time in Tibet as a lama, and to have had a Tibetan wife and children. It has been suggested that he was the Lama Dorjjeff, the tutor of the Dalai Lama (though this has been effectively refuted by Moore), and Anna Durco, who knew Gurdjieff when she was a child, remembered asking why his head was shaved. He told her “‘Where I was, all were like that.’ He added that they had red garments with a bare shoulder exposed, a wooden staff – land barren in the background.”<sup>67</sup> As there is a group of nine or ten Nyingma Buddhist monasteries collectively called ‘Surmang’ in the Nangchen region of Tibet, some have speculated that this is the site of Gurdjieff’s initiation into wisdom, and the place of origin of the Movements.<sup>68</sup>

However, both Gurdjieff’s own memoir and Brook’s film present the

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<sup>66</sup> Peter Brook, *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (Sandpoint, ID: Morning Light Press, 1997 [1979]).

<sup>67</sup> Bennett, *Gurdjieff: Making a New World*, p. 96.

<sup>68</sup> P.T. Mistelberger, *Three Dangerous Magi: Gurdjieff, Osho, Crowley* (Ropley, Hants: O Books, 2010), p. 568.

monastery more as a Sufi institution. The final fifteen minutes of the film make it clear that the Movements are the central revelation of the Gurdjieff Work. Prince Lubovedsky says to Gurdjieff, "Everyone in the monastery learns the alphabet of these movements. They are exactly like books, we can read in them truths placed there a thousand years ago." Gurdjieff replies, "I understand." The Prince continues, "They tell us of two qualities of energy, moving without interruption through the body. As long as the dancer can keep in balance these two energies, he has a force that nothing else can give." The two walk through the courtyards of the monastery, viewing six different Movements. These are performed by men and women, and are accompanied by the hypnotic recitation of the Law of Three, "affirming, denying, reconciling." Prince Lubovedsky departs to a monastery in the Himalayas to live out his last three years. He counsels Gurdjieff to remain with the Sarmoung Brotherhood;

[y]ou have now found the conditions in which the desire of your heart can become the reality of your being. Stay here, until you acquire a force in you that nothing can destroy. Then you will need to go back into life, and there you will measure yourself constantly with forces which will show you your place.<sup>69</sup>

The final Movement shown is a Sufi dervish dance. The credits roll over an image of Gurdjieff standing in the barren rocky landscape, as he watches the Prince retreat into the distance, until he is no longer visible.

When released, *Meetings With Remarkable Men* received a mixed reaction from both cinema critics and those in the Work. It was both panned as pompous, pseudo-profound and obscurantist, and celebrated as lyrically beautiful and conveying an authentic sense of the spiritual quest. Janet Maslin's review in the *New York Times* is revealing, in that she apprehended the film's hagiographical intent, but felt that Brook had failed to convey the sense of Gurdjieff's search. She wrote that:

Mr Brook's presentation of this is so solemn, so evidently lacking the joyful guiding spirit of such a search, that his film feels flat. Watching this handsome, affectless effort feels a little like receiving a series of puzzling picture postcards in the mail, each one beautiful but missing a message on the back. The effect is perhaps more mysterious than it means to be.<sup>70</sup>

However, more than thirty years since its release, the film ranking website Flixster records an 89% favourable rating from viewers, suggesting that the

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<sup>69</sup> Brook, *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (1997 [1979]).

<sup>70</sup> Janet Maslin, 'Meetings With Remarkable Men: Peter Brook on Russian Mystic', *New York Times* (5 August 1979), at <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9F04EED71F30E631A25756C0A96E9C946890D6CF>. Accessed 25/04/2011.

film has stood the test of time.<sup>71</sup> The late 1970s is an interesting period with regard to religion and spirituality in the West. The boom in alternative religions of the countercultural 1960s had abated, and the New Age of the 1980s had not yet begun. The positive reception of Brook's film was greatly boosted as the New Age gained traction among Westerners and in 1980 the renowned jazz and classical virtuoso pianist, Keith Jarrett, released a popular recording of a selection of the Gurdjieff-de Hartmann music, *Sacred Hymns*. Jarrett identified the process of musical improvisation as spiritual inspiration, and *Sacred Hymns* was immensely successful, winning a substantial audience for the Gurdjieff-de Hartmann music, though more without than within the Work.<sup>72</sup>

Within Gurdjieff groups, these negative reactions to popular media presentations of the master's teachings were in part motivated by the belief that knowledge of the Work could only be gained through direct teacher-pupil contact and the fear that the teachings would be misunderstood by an unprepared and ignorant public. Jeanne de Salzman had decided that to "give to the spectator a direct taste of that 'something else' she had experienced with Gurdjieff over the years" was a valid step.<sup>73</sup> However, her actions as Gurdjieff's successor, though respected by many, were not universally accepted, and there were groups who believed that her control of the Work (which as an organised system she, not Gurdjieff, had instituted) was overly-controlling and lacked spiritual authenticity. David Kherdian, an Armenian-American who belonged, with his wife Nonny Hogrogian, to a group led by Annie-Lou Stavely, has published a complex reflection on *Meetings With Remarkable Men* that repays study. He says,

[w]e had rented five mini-buses, complete with an intercom system, and we set off for San Francisco. I gave the buses the names Farm Barn 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, and the assistant drivers of each Farm Barn set up their communication system to prevent any of the buses getting lost. The trip was exciting and eventful, and proved to be the catalyst for two marriages. But the movie itself was a disappointment. Halting and stilted as well as pretentious, I felt that it had made a travesty of the book, with the only believable people on the screen – apart from Warren Mitchell, who played Gurdjieff's father – being the natives, who were not acting but simply being themselves, men

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<sup>71</sup> Flixster, 'Meetings With Remarkable Men (1979)', at <http://www.flixster.com/movie/meetings-with-remarkable-men>. Accessed 25/04/2011.

<sup>72</sup> Johanna Petsche, 'Channelling the Creative: Keith Jarrett's Spiritual Beliefs Through a Gurdjieffian Lens', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2009), pp. 138-158.

<sup>73</sup> Brook, *Threads of Time: Recollections*, p. 174.

and women with real being, unlike the hired actors who, for all their polish, were ineffective and empty. Except for the movements, it was clearly an unfortunate misappropriation of a great, objective work of art. And yet, in spite of myself, there were moments during the film when I was moved – for somehow, in spite of everything, something of Gurdjieff’s great spirit and teaching had come through.<sup>74</sup>

Kherdian was puzzled as to whether the film was intended for people in the Work, or for people ‘in life’? He and his fellow-students of Gurdjieff were convinced that those ‘in life’ would not understand the film. He also concluded that Dragan Maksimovic was unconvincing as Gurdjieff, and the film failed as a rendering of Gurdjieff’s book. However, he was not able to sustain his first, negative reaction, as “the people in the Work... [became] identified with the film,” and Mrs Stavely purchased a copy and instituted screenings at the farm community she headed.<sup>75</sup>

### **Conclusion: Models of the Enlightened Life**

Kherdian’s reflections are interesting because by the 1970s there were clear tensions in the Work. Whereas many, including Peter Brook, accepted the authority of Jeanne de Salzmann, others were concerned that under the ‘Great Helmswoman’ the teaching had diverged from Gurdjieff’s own. James Moore’s study of the tradition between the death of Gurdjieff in 1949 and the death of Madame de Salzmann in 1990 argues that she deliberately engineered the dismantling of “Gurdjieff’s canon of effort, striving, and self-reliance” and replaced it with a grace paradigm.<sup>76</sup> Moore claims Gurdjieff and his ideas were effectively abandoned:

discarded with both the “heroic” and the historical Gurdjieff was the entire apparatus of his *Systema Universi*: the Ray of Creation, the Table of Hydrogens, the Step Diagram, the Food Diagram, the Enneagram etc. They and their unwelcome implications simply vanished from politically correct discourse. With this final solution to the Work’s effort-saturated cosmological matrix... the pupil’s presumed new experience of “being worked upon” and “being remembered” was posited in a mystical illuminism, which hinted encouragingly at a supernal “look of love” – albeit not specifying its presumably divine, demiurgic, or angelic provenance. In a doctrinal corollary of seismic implications, fusion with this supernal source

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<sup>74</sup> David Kherdian, *On a Spaceship With Beelzebub: By a Grandson of Gurdjieff* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1998 [1991]), pp. 191-192.

<sup>75</sup> Kherdian, *On a Spaceship With Beelzebub*, p. 192.

<sup>76</sup> James Moore, ‘Moveable Feasts: The Gurdjieff Work’, *Religion Today*, vol. 9, no. 2 (19), p. 12.

replaced individuation as the pupil's goal.<sup>77</sup> Accompanying these doctrinal changes was the introduction of yoga practice (which Gurdjieff explicitly rejected), and the re-translation and publication of a bowdlerized version of *Tales* in 1992, against which Annie-Lou Stavely protested fervently. Thus, the Movements were the last remaining unchanged esoteric exercise developed by Gurdjieff. Moore indicates that respect for and awe of Madame de Salzmann stifled dissent; David Kherdian accuses her of sanitising both Gurdjieff's lectures, published as *Views From the Real World* (1975), and Gurdjieff's *Meetings* in Brook's film of "Meetings With Remarkable Men."<sup>78</sup> Brook, however, maintains that the film is authentic and that "the unique and unknown dances themselves are what matter. They have never been shown before, and these movements are authentic, re-created from the complex principles that Gurdjieff discovered during his journeys and had transmitted directly to Madame de Salzmann, who in turn had taught them to her pupils."<sup>79</sup> This is in fact inaccurate; many performances of the Movements occurred during Gurdjieff's lifetime, and in fact some argue that there are deliberate mistakes in the filmed Movements, to prevent reproduction of them outside of the Work.<sup>80</sup>

It could be argued that the changes introduced by Jeanne de Salzmann, and the film of "Meetings With Remarkable Men," were a response to a changed spiritual climate at the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, which is generally called the "New Age." Gurdjieff's teachings were delivered to his pupils before the spiritual revolution of the counter-cultural 1960s and the Work was an authoritarian, initiatory teaching. Gurdjieff himself was arbitrary, sexist and given to terrifying rages; outsiders accused of hypnotising his followers and negatively characterised him as a 'magician'. The second half of the twentieth century saw the opening up of esoteric traditions; and despite the secretive nature of the Work, Gurdjieff's pupils produced a constant stream of books about him, and autobiographical accounts of their spiritual struggle. The emergence of the New Age 'spiritual seeker', now viewed as a major factor in the West's shift from institutional religion to free-floating, individual 'spirituality',<sup>81</sup> created a new audience for Gurdjieff's ideas and validated his

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<sup>77</sup> Moore, 'Moveable Feasts', p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> Kherdian, *On a Spaceship With Beelzebub*, p. 192.

<sup>79</sup> Brook, *Threads of Time: Recollections*, p. 180.

<sup>80</sup> Joseph Azize, 'Gurdjieff's Sacred Dances and Movements', in *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, eds Carole M. Cusack and Alex Norman (Leiden: Brill, 2012) [forthcoming].

<sup>81</sup> Colin Campbell, 'The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization', *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, vol. 5 (1972), pp. 119-136.

self-presentation as a questing seeker after wisdom in *Meetings* as an authentic model of the enlightened life. Coupled with this was a rise in eclectic, personal religio-spiritual *bricolage*, and the gradual retreat of traditional Western religious notions (monotheism, divine transcendence, one earthly life, and so on) with broadly Eastern ones (monism, reincarnation, *karma*, subtle body energies, and so on).<sup>82</sup>

The deliberate downplaying of specific religions (Yezidi, Orthodox Christian, Sufi, Muslim, and so on) in establishing the identities of Gurdjieff's 'Seekers of Truth' and other characters contributes to the generically 'spiritual' tone of the film, as does Father Giovanni's World Brotherhood, which is compatible with the *philosophia perennis* of Western esoteric traditions. The aesthetics of *Meetings With Remarkable Men* presents the quest for wisdom and enlightenment in a serious and weighty fashion that is in conformity with Paul Schrader's notion of "transcendent style." This is a filmic form that features "austerity and asceticism" rather than "exuberance and expressivism," utilises "sparse means" and rejects realism, and depends on silence and stasis in the depiction of the holy.<sup>83</sup> Nicolescu notes the centrality of silence in Brook's *oeuvre*;

[s]ilence plays an integral part in Brook's work, beginning with the research into the inter-relationship of silence and duration with his Theatre of Cruelty group in 1964, and culminating in the rhythm punctuated with silences that is indefinably present at the core of his film *Meetings with Remarkable Men*: "In silence there are many potentialities: chaos or order, muddle or pattern, all lie fallow - the invisible-made-visible is of sacred nature." Silence is all-embracing, and it contains countless "layers."<sup>84</sup>

In certain respects, *Meetings With Remarkable Men* recalls a later Hollywood film, Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997), a biographical treatment of Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. In fact, there are profound similarities between these two works, in that *Kundun* is also a film of stunning beauty, featuring a rugged and barren landscape, with a profoundly emotive soundtrack by Philip Glass, which presents the spiritual maturation of the Dalai Lama against the backdrop of the struggle of the Tibetan people against Maoist

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<sup>82</sup> Colin Campbell, 'The Easternisation of the West', in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, ed. Bryan Wilson and Jamie Cresswell (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 35-49.

<sup>83</sup> Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 151-169.

<sup>84</sup> Nicolescu, 'Peter Brook and Traditional Thought', pp. 21-22.



China.<sup>85</sup> The power of Tibet's passive resistance to the military might of China is dramatised by Scorsese in a myriad ways, but most poignantly through the silence of the Dalai Lama in a meeting with Mao Zedong, who dismisses religion in Tibet as 'poison'. Monasteries feature as sites where ancient wisdom is protected and passed on, and both films conclude with the promise of the spiritually enlightened young male protagonist going into the wider world, as the Dalai Lama is exiled from Tibet, and Prince Lubovedsky tells Gurdjieff, "[s]tay here, until you acquire a force in you that nothing can destroy. Then you will need to go back into life [where] you will measure yourself constantly with forces which will show you your place."<sup>86</sup> Both films are slow-paced, stately and aestheticised, and are powerful, affective examples of transcendental style in cinema. It is also worth noting that both are exercises in Orientalism, in which Western viewers are invited to appreciate the spiritual value of the 'mysterious East'. That this was Brook's intention in directing the film is corroborated by his reflection on Afghanistan as "a country where there were no ruins to admire but which was organically linked to traces of a living whole," and where "theatre, like a bazaar, could both stay in the everyday world and yet touch a monastery wall."<sup>87</sup>

In conclusion, *Meetings With Remarkable Men* as a foray into making the Work public, and as the first (and possibly the only) narrative feature film about the life of a new religious movement leader, won for Gurdjieff a new audience of spiritual seekers who did not wish to join the initiatory and authoritarian Work, but who admired the portrayal of Gurdjieff as a spiritual seeker who achieved enlightened status, and were enabled to utilise elements of his system in the construction of their own personal spiritualities. Brook has acknowledged that not all viewers found his portrayal of Gurdjieff authentic and persuasive, but defends the film as ultimately effective. In his autobiography *Threads of Time: Recollections*, he notes that

some people were disappointed, finding it too simplistic as cinema, too exotic in its imagery, too naïve in its narrative. Certainly, when at last the distant monastery is reached, the dancers assembled there in white are unmistakably European, and this is hard to swallow from the point of view of normal storytelling logic... It is interesting to see that when the film is shown, most spectators are deeply touched by these dances and exercises and are totally unconcerned

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<sup>85</sup> Eve L. Mullen, 'Orientalist Commercializations: Tibetan Buddhism in American Popular Film', *Journal of Religion and Film*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1998): at <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/OrientalMullen.htm>. Accessed 22/10/2010.

<sup>86</sup> Brook, *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (1997 [1979]).

<sup>87</sup> Brook, *Threads of Time: Recollections*, pp. 99, 104.

by their lack of verisimilitude in the story.<sup>88</sup>

In the twenty-first century, ready access to inexpensive editions of Gurdjieff's writings in the original translations, and to Brook's *Meetings With Remarkable Men* on DVD and online via YouTube, as well as through screenings at art-house cinemas, means that information about the Work teachings is more widely available than ever before. The New Age has given way to the Next Age, eclectic spiritualities have become the default mode for contemporary Westerners, and conflicts within the Gurdjieff tradition, particularly over issues of leadership as Michel de Salzmann (who is Gurdjieff's biological son) succeeded his mother Jeanne, have resulted in freelance Movements instructors and acephalous Work groups that are more liberal and open to seekers.

Finally, the centrality of the self to contemporary spiritual quests, and the diminished importance of doctrinal and other boundary markers between religions for seekers, means that G. I. Gurdjieff's enlightened life, expressed through text in *Meetings With Remarkable Men*, and through image in Peter Brook's *Meetings With Remarkable Men*, with its central motif of the young Gurdjieff's quest for and attainment of perennial, universally applicable, esoteric wisdom, has been authenticated as a valid and powerful model of seekership and self-realisation. The text's teasing play with truth and historicity, and the film's beauty and transcendent style, combine effectively to win for Gurdjieff a constantly replenished new audience of spiritual seekers.

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<sup>88</sup> Brook, *Threads of Time: Recollections*, p. 180.