



4-1-2006

Dopamine

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Recommended Citation

Roncace, Mark (2006) "Dopamine," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.10.01.04>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol10/iss1/4>

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Dopamine

Abstract

This is a review of *Dopamine* (2003).

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Dopamine is a chemical in the brain that is responsible for feelings associated with physical pleasure, confidence, and euphoria. More dopamine means a better mood, higher alertness, and a greater sex drive. The film *Dopamine* explores the question: Is love "real" or just a chemical reaction? Put differently, is love a neurobiological process activated by dopamine or an ultimately indescribable spiritual connection? Through its consideration of the science of love, the film opens up opportunities for reflection on the physiology of religious experience, the relation between science/technology and religion, and the relation between mind, body, and spirit. After all, if love can be explained scientifically, can all human experience, including religious experience, be reduced to chemical, biological, and mathematical equations?

The film is part drama and part romantic comedy. Rand (John Livingston) and his two colleagues Winston (Bruno Campos) and Johnson (Reuben Grundy) are designing a computer animated bird named Koy Koy who (or that?) is designed to interact with children. When the financial backers of the project decide to test Koy Koy in a local elementary school, Rand encounters Sarah (Sabrina Lloyd) who sparks a romantic interest. Each understands love very differently. Rand prefers to see it as the result of biological reactions in the brain. This philosophy is supported by his mother's descent into dementia. Her previous passion and devotion to his father are gone - the neurochemistry responsible for her love has been expunged by

Alzheimer's disease. Sarah is also struggling with the loss of love - the baby she gave up for adoption when she was 17 - yet she thinks that love is something more than firing neurons. For her, the hormones are "signals to communicate with these bodies that we live in" - we are more than physical beings - but "true love is incredible, all consuming." After the funding is pulled from Rand's project, he and Sarah, predictably, iron out their differences and pursue a relationship.

Although *Dopamine* won the Sloan Feature Film Prize at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival, the film has some vexing features, such as repeated shots of the Golden Gate Bridge and frequent computer-generated images of chemicals being activated in the brain when the characters are romantically stimulated. The plot is slightly disjointed in places and the characters fit gender stereotypes: men are cerebral engineers, and women are artsy pre-school teachers. But aside from the problems that might be expected from an independent film with a novice director, the film succeeds because it grounds philosophical and religious discussion in authentic settings with believable characters.

The film is punctuated with thought-provoking dialogue. For example Rand invites reflection on reductionism and the physiology of religious experience when he notes that "spirituality has been linked to the frontal lobe of the brain. Scientists have stimulated frontal brain lobes of sedated people, and they wake up claiming to have had spiritual experiences." He also notes the theory (?) that Joan of Arc was

an epileptic prone to frontal lobe seizures. Other topics which the film explores include whether drugs can cure any emotional problem, if monogamy is biologically unnatural, and how the concept of love relates to evolutionary biology. Johnson points out that rain was once understood to be sent from the gods, but we now know that it is the result of a low pressure system. If we chuckle at the notion of a rain god, why not also jettison any number of other religious ideas for which we have a scientific explanation?

The design of Koy Koy serves as an apposite foil for the main plot line. Is Koy Koy's "artificial life" fundamentally any different from human life - hence the indecision (noted above) about which is grammatically correct for Koy Koy: "who" or "that." Is Koy Koy somehow as "real" as the rabbit that Sarah thinks her class should have instead of the computer bird? Is all life "artificial"? Are humans and Koy Koy essentially programmed beings with little or no free will? And if so, what kind of relationship could the creation have with the creator (cf. Artificial Intelligence and Blade Runner)? Rand's role as the creator is underscored by his decision to make a female companion for Koy Koy (cf. the Garden of Eden). Is the relationship between Koy Koy and Ki Ki any different from the relationship between Rand and Sarah? The film does not resolve these questions.

The dialogue between religion and science is very old; what is relatively new is our understanding of the human brain. *Dopamine* invites us to consider how

these scientific advances influence our understanding of love, and by extension, of religious experience. Note: This review improved as a result of conversation with Jessica Haynes.