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I ♥ Huckabees

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I ♥ Huckabees

Abstract

This is a review of *I ♥ Huckabees* (2004).

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What is the ultimate nature of reality? Are we all alone in the universe? What is the significance of coincidences, if any? What are we doing here? What is the role of God and organized religion? These are some of the intriguing questions raised, but not definitively answered, by this film. Thus, *I ♥ Huckabees* is ultimately grappling with the question of existential angst. The three main characters are on an existential search for meaning in their lives, and are aided in this quest by existential detectives, who try to answer their questions as their detective work takes on the nature of a police investigation. The film interweaves three interlocking stories focused on three different individuals, and the connections in their lives.

Albert Markovski (Jason Schwartzman) is the main protagonist. We first encounter him staging an environmental protest against the Huckabees corporation, which is seeking to expand through the elimination of local marsh land. Albert is concerned primarily with preserving open spaces and fighting suburban sprawl. He is also in love with Dawn Campbell (Naomi Watts) who eventually becomes a spokesperson for Huckabees. Albert is asking himself questions about the meaning of life, and seeks the assistance of a married couple, Bernard (Dustin Hoffman) and Vivian (Lily Tomlin), who have an existential detective agency. As they take him on as a client, his "therapeutic" work brings him into contact with the other two main characters in the story, Tommy Corn (Mark Wahlberg) and Brad Stand (Jude Law). Tommy is a firefighter who seems committed to a philosophy of nihilism.

His wife leaving him precipitates his crisis of meaning, in which he asks two questions: "Why do people only ask themselves deep questions when something really bad happens?" and "Why are people so self-destructive?" Brad is an executive at Huckabees, who co-opts Albert's environmental organization (and the girl he loves) for his own purposes, and ultimately receives karmic justice. Albert and Tommy, on the other hand, pursue their existential crisis as a team, and ultimately realize that the interconnection among humans is something real, which grows out from human freedom.

While dealing only tangentially with the place of God and the role of religion, this film is quite "religious" in terms of the questions it asks. First, it raises the question of the problem of evil. The point that Tommy makes that people only ask the hard questions when bad things happen is illustrative of how most people operate in the world. We are often content to go along when things are fine, but a crisis causes us to ask the deeper questions. Second, the film is primarily addressing the philosophy of existentialism, and the issue of how much freedom humans have is an important one. The subsequent issue is then how responsible we are for our actions, but the terrifying reality of being alone and free in a universe seemingly bereft of answers has certainly led many existential philosophers to a grim outlook. However, this film presents a more positive view, primarily focusing on the fact that we are connected to other seekers and sufferers. Finally, *I ♥ Huckabees* deals

with a very practical ethical issue, which while not exclusively religious, certainly is a major issue in religious ethics today, and that is protection of the environment. Albert and his colleagues are fighting to protect the environment from the ever-burgeoning corporate structure which seeks to maximize profits at the expense of protecting the planet which we all inhabit and which is crucial to the survival of all of us. The film reminds us that each of us can make a difference.

This film is very intriguing and well worth seeing for those concerned with philosophical and religious existential questions about the meaning of life and the nature of reality. While it does not provide any specific answers or guidelines, it is suggestive towards a view that life does have meaning, coincidences are not accidental, human freedom is both liberating and frightening, and human connections are inevitable and a good thing. I would also highly recommend watching this film in conjunction with another film made around the same time and addressing some of the same issues, *What the Bleep Do We Know?* As the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, watching these two films together will present a more nuanced as well as expansive approach to the question of our place in this world, and the question of how best to navigate it.