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Kumiko, The Treasure Hunter

Abstract

This is a film review of *Kumiko, The Treasure Hunter* (2014), directed by David Zellner.

Author Notes

Rubina (Ruby) Ramji is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. After serving as a Chair of the Religion, Film and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion and then the steering committee, Rubina continues to serve on the Executive Committee for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion as President and is the Film Editor of the *Journal of Religion and Film*. Her research activities focus on the areas of religion, media and identity, religion in Canada, and religion and immigration.

Kumiko, The Treasure Hunter

(2014)

Directed by David Zellner



Kumiko is an unhappy woman, living a sad life in Japan. She has a domineering boss who thinks she should already be married with a family

- she is 29. Her closest companion is her bunny rabbit Bunzo. Kumiko is a treasure hunter - out on a windy beach, holding a treasure map, she finds a cave and in it, buried under a rock, is a VHS tape. Kumiko takes it home and as soon as she begins watching the video, she is told that this is a "true story." She spends hours scouring the movie and finds a scene where money is buried. This movie takes place in Minnesota, in a town called Fargo. Yes, the VHS tape is a poor recording of *Fargo*. Kumiko plays the tape so often that it eventually gets eaten by her VHS machine and she has to buy a DVD player and a new version of *Fargo*. Watching the film multiple times, Kumiko maps out exactly where the buried cash can be found in Fargo. She makes a map, and tries to figure out how to follow her destiny to find this treasure.

One day, Kumiko is given the company credit card so that she can buy her boss an anniversary gift for his wife. This can also be considered an act of fate, as it allows Kumiko to fulfill her destiny of finding this treasure in America. She buys a ticket to Minnesota, boards a plane and ends up in Minnesota in the dead of winter. Her goal becomes clear - she must get to

Fargo. Although she encounters two religious "missionaries" at the airport, Kumiko has no interest in them - she has her own faith to follow. Everything that can go wrong for Kumiko does go wrong. She has no luggage, and no gear required for a cold winter. Her bus breaks down before getting to Fargo, so she begins walking down a snow covered highway. Eventually she encounters an elderly woman who tries to help her, but she does not want to help Kumiko with her pilgrimage. Kumiko escapes, much as she escaped her life in Japan. With no money, she soon finds herself in Fargo walking through the snow looking for the treasure.

After days walking through the woods and over frozen lakes, she sees something under the ice. She breaks the ice, making her hands bleed, but what she finds is just a piece of driftwood. She continues wandering, and by the next morning we see a snow covered heap lying near a stream. The heap sits up and we see Kumiko, ready to continue her holy quest. In the end, Kumiko finds the landmarks as shown in the film *Fargo* and she digs up the area under the landmark left there. She finds the briefcase filled with money. And standing beside her is the rabbit that she abandoned in Japan. The viewer is pretty much aware that Kumiko is dead - she fulfilled her destiny in death. And Bunzo the bunny rabbit is there to celebrate her find.

Although *Kumiko* may seem like a slow and depressing movie, it makes us ponder the idea of "religion as obsession." Kumiko knows she has a destiny to fulfill, and it does not involve marriage, children or job promotions. She is a treasure hunter. She fulfills her destiny, completing the goal she set

her life to find. It's a haunting film that helps us appreciate the idea of the addictive nature of religious faith. Kumiko's addiction keeps her from being intimate with those around her - an old high-school friend and her mother both try to understand her, but she cannot truly express her destiny. She lets her addiction overtake basic necessities - she is not prepared to deal with snow and cold winds. She does not have a winter coat or boots, she has her boss' credit card, but once it's cancelled she has no other money to support herself while trying to find Fargo. Her addictive faith about there being a treasure makes her depressed. Her life in Japan is about maintaining a particular type of life, but Kumiko knows she is destined for more. Her boss gives her "friendly" advice - get married and move on. Her mother wants her to come home and save money for her future (marriage and children).

But Kumiko lives her addiction, fulfilling her destiny to the very end where she dies finding the treasure. Given how many Japanese films end, I think the ending was changed, allowing North American audiences a feeling of fulfillment; even in death, Kumiko finds her treasure, fulfills her destiny, and gets back the one friend she had, and had abandoned.

— Ruby Ramji