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The Erlprince

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Abstract

This is a film review of *The Erlprince* (2016), directed by Kuba Czekaj.

Keywords

Goethe, Erl-King, Erlikonig, Adolescence, Alternate Reality

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



The Erlprince (2016), dir. Kuba Czekaj

Goethe's poem, *The Erl-King*, tells the story of a father frantically riding with his son who sees and hears a spectral figure, the Erl-King, threatening to take him away. While the father tries to reassure his son that it is only his imagination, by the end of the ride the child is dead. Czekaj has taken this evocative story and recast it in modern mode, as the tale of a 15 year old boy who has his own visions of death and alternate realities.

The boy is a genius at physics, and his mother is pushing him to win a prestigious competition that will give them a great deal of money. He doubts whether she wants this for him or for herself, and his anger at her comes out repeatedly. She does not seem mature enough to be a proper mother to him; she gets drunk in a bar and is arrested, and when he tries to intervene, he is arrested as well. He hates the elite school to which she sends him, acting out by drawing obscene

cartoons of his attractive female teacher. There also seems to be a sexual attraction between mother and son that makes their relationship problematic and inappropriate, adding to the anger and frustrations each feels with the other.

In response, the boy works on a theory of parallel universes, the alleged subject of the presentation he must give to win the competition. His mentor in his research gives him the analogy of a fish who cannot imagine a world outside the water, even though it exists; the boy tries to create a link to the other worlds he cannot see, through an experiment with light that fails. He has a new challenge when his father returns to his life, to his mother's consternation, bringing with him a dog as a gift for the boy. The boy's reality fragments further as he imagines his father killing a deer and eating its heart alongside fierce wolves with whom he shares his prey; the father takes him from the light he seeks into dark woods, much like the father in Goethe's poem. It is not clear whether the father or mother are like the threatening Erl-King, taking him further from the light he seeks—although in one of his visions, he swims beneath the water with his father to discover a world of light, although they cannot break through to it. Back in the everyday world, he has a birthday party with no friends, illustrating his alienation from almost everyone but his parents.

Events come to a head with the physics competition, ominously occurring on the same day that an internet prophet has predicted the end of the world. The boy gives his presentation, but it has nothing to do with physics; instead, he suggests the link to other worlds is death, much like the vision of Goethe's poem. At this point it seems that the boy will kill himself; but the film takes an interesting turn as he drives into the water and enters an alternate reality that looks at first glance like his personal utopia, in which he is rescued by his parents, wins the competition, is popular, and his parents have a happy marriage. But he then drives into the water once more, seemingly returning to the mundane world, where his parents *also* rescue him. Does this indicate that his

own self-destructive tendencies cannot be pinned on others, but are within himself? Does this indicate he does choose to live life in the end, in all its imperfection? That he accepts that his parents do love him, even with all their imperfections? That he can accept his own complicated adolescent sexual feelings, and begin to grow up? The film asks more questions than it answers, which may be deliberate, but its ambiguity to some extent thwarts its effectiveness. Goethe's poem is about the inevitability and fearfulness of death, but this film is unclear whether the alternate reality the boy seeks fulfills his hopes or his fears. His return to a normal world, in the end, seems to some extent to dismiss the concerns the film raises—but maybe that just shows the price of adulthood.