



January 2017

Automatic at Sea

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Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2017) "Automatic at Sea," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.21.01.18>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol21/iss1/18>

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Automatic at Sea* (2017) directed by Matthew Lessner.

Keywords

Surrealism

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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* (NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (2015). He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



Automatic at Sea (2017), dir. Matthew Lessner

Eve is a 22 year old Swedish woman who meets Peter, a 27 year old rich American who invites her to his island home. Although she barely knows him, she accepts; once there, they await other guests who never arrive, and Eve and Peter hardly interact at all. There is no sexual relationship between them, and Eve is left to her own devices for most of the time. She begins to have hallucinatory visions so that she is unsure of what is real and what is not. Her voiceovers suggest she is “hungry for food I have never tasted,” searching for something that she cannot state.

Eve meets one other person on the island, Peter’s neighbor Grace. She has some sort of intimate connection with Peter, although she also warns Eve against him. The film takes on a surrealistic and dreamlike quality as the characters behave increasingly strangely and bizarre events take place. They all seem terribly bored and without any sense of purpose; is this an indictment of the indolent rich? Are they retreating from the world to a realm of no consequence? Peter says, “All this freedom—it’s stifling,” as he finds no meaning in anything he does. And yet,

he seems to hold Eve to the island, and she finds herself unable to leave. Does she actually want to, or not? We see several of her attempts, all thwarted in magical ways, such as when her rowboat is transported into a tree, or she returns to the same moment over and over. She may even have attempted suicide, or imagined it, through scenes that suggest her hanging herself, or drowning; but she always returns to existence on the island.

Director Matthew Lessner, at the Q&A, said that he was trying to evoke a feeling of psychological terror in the experience of not knowing what is real, and being trapped in one place. The actors improvised much of the film, utilizing their own dreams as material, so that there is not necessarily a consciously intended “meaning” to every part of it. This is surrealist cinema in the vein of *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), resisting interpretations but questioning its own reality at every turn. It is visually arresting but somewhat incoherent, as it never defines the point it wishes to make about all this confusion of reality.