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Aerotropolis

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Aerotropolis* (2017), directed by Jheng-Neng Li.

Keywords

Globalization, Alienation, Technology, Taiwan

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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.



Aerotropolis (2017), directed by Jheng-Neng Li

Allen has invested all his money into real estate in the area of a proposed “aerotropolis” in Taoyuan, Taiwan, an urban development project to be built around the airport. He spends his time taking pictures of possible development sites and trying to sell them to buyers, with little success. He barely communicates with his girlfriend, as they interact more through smartphones and computer games than in personal contact. His problems with intimacy are shown as he prefers looking at other women on his computer to having sex with her, and takes pictures of unsuspecting women he spies upon from rooftops or on the street.

The world we are presented with in this film is highly technologized and alienated, mediated through devices rather than anything natural. There is little dialogue in the film, and director Li makes his point without it. We see Allen’s girlfriend as a flight attendant wandering in the airport surrounded by giant screens, just as aimless and disconnected from true reality as Allen is. At one point, Allen’s frustration with his business breaks into anger when he smashes a

car window; he then walks a dog through the less technologized ruins of the area, showing how this development has neglected the land for an artificially created world. Allen sometimes listens to Christian pop music with lyrics about praying to God together for healing, but this message does not seem to have any real effect on his life, as he has no community in which to develop such a faith.

Li noted at the Q&A that his point was to indicate how this controversial urban development has hurt the city and dehumanized the people, destroying the landscape to create overpriced and underpopulated housing. The project has in fact been controversial and mired in allegations of political corruption, as indicated by a 2014 radio broadcast with the mayor of Taoyuan at the end of the film.

This film was made on a shoestring budget with a skeleton crew and cast, but it shows that a film can make a significant point without elaborate sets or special effects. The dehumanizing effects of technology, globalization, and chasing indiscriminately after profits are clearly shown in spite of (or perhaps because of) the sparseness and simplicity of the film. Li has shown himself to be a talented director with something to say and the ability to say it.