



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 22
Issue 1 April 2018

Article 14

1-21-2018

Butterflies

John C. Lyden

Grand View University, Des Moines, Iowa, johnclyden@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2018) "Butterflies," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol22/iss1/14>

This Sundance Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Omaha

Butterflies

Abstract

This is a film review of *Butterflies* (2018), directed by Tolga Karacelik.

Keywords

Turkey, Islam, Faith, Doubt, Death, Suicide, Comedy

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.



Butterflies (2017), dir. Tolga Karacelik

Cemal, Kenan, and Suzan are siblings who have not seen each other for years. Each of them has a certain amount of absurdity in their life: Cemal is an astronaut who has never been to space, who leads his fellow astronauts in a strike, even to the point of lighting his suit on fire on television; Kenan is a frustrated actor who does voiceovers for children's films and leads a dissipated and purposeless existence; Suzan has a husband who never listens to her but only complains about his job, even when she is trying to tell him that she wants a separation. Their stories are told in a slapstick comedy style that might become grating if the film never escaped that, or if ended with a turn to maudlin melodrama as a way to rescue a heart-warming message. But somehow director Karacelik has found a way to set up the paradox between comedy and tragedy right through to the end of the film, and in so doing provides insight into how we deal with death, doubt, anger and regret. Life is mysterious and complex enough that no single set of emotions can properly express its depth, and no easy answers are provided.

The story begins when Cemal receives a call from their father for the first time in 30 years, asking them all to return to his small town. Cemal contacts Suzan and Kenan and unites them on this quest, for even though they are unenthusiastic about seeing their father again, they each need the escape from their own lives. The road trip provides the usual comedic collisions of their personalities, and the beginnings of reconnection. But when they reach their father's town, they find that he has died.

It is revealed that the family disintegrated when their mother hung herself, 30 years ago, which resulted in their father's abandonment and the separation of the children. All three of them still carry grief and anger for their mother's death, as well as unresolved feelings that are gradually revealed: Suzan cannot even remember her mother; Kenan believes Cemal did not protect him; Cemal waited a week before calling his siblings to begin this trip. They have all been led there reluctantly and their personal baggage is real. But they must now bury their father.

Religion plays an interesting role in film. The quirky townspeople include an Imam who has lost his faith and cannot even pray for rain when the people ask him, much less perform a funeral. He says that God does not care; there will be no resurrection. When he leaves the graveside, the three children must finish the job—but it is done with no joy or sense of peace. The father left a request to be buried “when the butterflies come,” which happens every year when thousands of them come there to die. The children remember their mother's fairy tale of a man who gathered up the dead butterflies into himself, and they sprouted wings for him to fly to heaven. The butterflies do come at an apt moment, but no one visibly flies to heaven.

Perhaps the film is suggesting that as traditional religion ceases to be meaningful, we invent our own rituals. Once again, though, the film resists easy answers: the reconciliation of the siblings is fragmentary although real, and the final hilltop meeting with a blind shepherd provides no

illuminating answers but only a final joke. There is tremendous use of repetition in the dialogue, as characters repeat lines over and over, and Cemal even holds this is a way to convince people to do things. This repetition begins to have a liturgical function, as it does function to move the characters to action. Perhaps mere repetition is powerful. Islam, of course, relies on multiple cycles (*rakat*) of the daily prayers of *salat* that are said a minimum of five times daily, and the memorization and repetition of Quranic verses also plays a large role in the religion. The imam finds his rituals meaningless and so refuses to do them, but the siblings find their own way to bury their father. The fairy tale is told but not believed; and yet, it is not forgotten.

The use of humor throughout the film is also thought-provoking. At first, I thought this was just a device to engage the audience, but by the end it is clear that the film is suggesting that this is one of the ways the characters deal with their losses and death—and perhaps we all do the same. The siblings all find the ability to laugh at a joke that Cemal tells about suicide, even though their mother took her own life. We see them sing and dance together, but this scene is intercut with shots of each them later, suffering silently, as if to remind us that the pain and the laughter are never apart.

I very much appreciated this film's refusal to be pigeon holed or follow genre stereotypes. It asks religious questions but gives no clear answers, as even its unconventionality refuses to fall into simplistic ideas about religion's replacement by secularity. Even a Muslim who has lost faith is still a Muslim, and so religion continues to have a paradoxical influence—for as long as we suffer and die, we will look for the butterflies.