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Human Affairs

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Human Affairs

Abstract

This is a film review of *Human Affairs* (2018), directed by Charlie Birns.

Keywords

Surrogacy, Parenthood, Infidelity

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.



Human Affairs (2018), dir. Charlie Birns

This film begins with the narration of Geneviève, describing how her father inexplicably deserted the family when she was young. Since then, she has had an abusive boyfriend, and now is somewhat without focus or purpose in her life. This is all told with photos rather than film, adding to the documentary style. The story then commences *in media res* as she is staying with Lucinda and Sidney, who have engaged Geneviève as the surrogate mother for their child.

We immediately sense that there is an attraction between Sidney and Geneviève. It is neither a story of the older man seducing the young woman nor the young siren seeking to manipulate the man. Rather, they genuinely like each other, and Geneviève is drawn to older men as she attempts to compensate for the loss of her father. She is needy, and Sidney responds, but he draws back from fully exploiting this. He is not a bad person; he wants to raise the child with Lucinda. But he is torn, as he thinks he may be in love with Geneviève.

The issues are complicated as Sidney has written a play in which Lucinda is starring. They are attached personally and professionally. He knows he cannot sustain a relationship with

Geneviève and tells her as much. She is angry and threatens to abort the child. As things come to a head, it appears that Geneviève will tell Lucinda that she and Sidney are in love, but somehow this does not happen. She holds to the contract and lets the couple have the child.

What might have been a tawdry drama of lust and adultery is elevated by the sympathetic character of all the participants. This is a very believable story, made more real by the ending of the film: the last four minutes catalogs the lives of the three major characters as the decades pass, told by the same style of amateur photos that begin the film but now with no narration, only music. Even the red eye is left in for the photos, and some of the photos look like the sort of posed pictures one only takes at events such as graduations. Still, other photos capture important emotional moments that would have had no witness, and they do not seem to be enacted for an amateur photographer; this adds a curious quality to these photos which appear real while they are obviously only staged for the narrative. As in Chris Marker's classic short film *La Jetée*, the static images signal a fixed quality to the events, as if they are predetermined. And yet the story that unfolds in these last few minutes is the most poignant part of the film: it shows how the choices we make affect what happens to us, with loves lost and found, imperfect in fulfillment and yet with some happiness. Not everything works out as we would wish, and we wonder how it might have been otherwise—but it is enough. For a short and simple film, it generates a surprising amount of empathy in this realistic, truthful narrative.