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Puzzle

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Puzzle

Abstract

This is a film review of *Puzzle* (2018), directed by Marc Turtletaub.

Keywords

Female Independence, Gender Roles

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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* (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.



Puzzle (2018), dir. Marc Turtletaub

Agnes leads a carefully controlled existence that is entirely predictable and has no surprises in it. She serves the men in her life—her husband and two sons—without question or complaint. Even at her own birthday party, she is waiting on everyone, and doesn't seem to interact with anyone except as a servant. She does not seem unhappy so much as not awake.

Her life changes when she does a 1000 piece jigsaw puzzle given to her as a birthday present—twice in one day!—and finds the urge to do more. She goes to New York City from her home in Bridgeport, Connecticut for the first time in years, just to find more puzzles. By chance, she finds someone looking for a puzzle partner for the national jigsaw championship, and begins to train with him at his New York home twice weekly.

Agnes comes alive as a result of her newfound hobby and her relationship with her partner Robert. She lies to her family about where she is going, believing that her husband would not understand or allow her to go. Her husband Louie is not physically abusive but seems to control everything she does; even when he consents to her wishes he has to make it appear that it was his

decision. He is a “traditional man” who believes his wife’s role is to be a wife and mother, and he doesn’t understand why she would want more. Perhaps Agnes didn’t even realize that she wanted more. But she is awakening to a new world.

Her sons realize why she would want more. One feels trapped into working with his father as a mechanic when he really wants to be a chef, which his father regards as too “unmanly” a profession. The other son asks his mother why she didn’t divorce him years ago. They understand her need for identity and self-determination. And although there is a sexual element to Agnes’s relationship with Robert, she doesn’t simply need a different lover or husband. This story is not about that: it is about Agnes finding herself and her independence.

Religion runs through the film. Agnes is a good Roman Catholic who first shows up to Robert’s door with a cross marked on her forehead, as it is Ash Wednesday, plus the cross she always wears around her neck. She hears a man singing *Ave Maria* on the subway, and that music runs through the film. The first puzzle she buys for herself is a Madonna and child. Robert has no religion: he views the world as a place of chaos and coincidence with no one in charge, and he does jigsaw puzzles as a way to create order in one small piece of it. He correctly diagnoses Agnes’s need as similar to his, for although she is a woman of faith she also needs to create some order over something she can control herself. Events climax at Easter, the time of rebirth, as Agnes is reborn with her own identity—and not only due to the competition or her relationship with Robert. Her ability to lead her own life frees her for the first time, and this is her own personal regeneration. She has not rejected her faith in life but discovered it. This is a touching and poignant film about a woman who wakes up to the world for the first time—and all through doing jigsaw puzzles.