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Divine Love

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Divine Love

Abstract

This is a film review of *Divine Love* (2019) directed by Gabriel Mascaro.

Keywords

Brazil, Religion, Dystopia, Sexuality

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), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film 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.



Divine Love (2019), dir. Gabriel Mascaro

As a voiceover at the beginning of the film sets it in Brazil in the year 2027, we assume that we are about to watch a dystopian fable that forecasts a future close to our own, filled with cautionary messages about certain political, religious, or social trends. Director Mascaro may have intended this as a parable about the current state of Brazil, which recently elected a right-wing government with a religious leader. Unfortunately, the message is lost in the confused narrative which does not clearly enough outline the dark future it sketches so abstractly.

Joana is a member of a Christian Group called “Divine Love” which is a support system for Christian couples to persist in their marriages, understanding them as a mirror of God’s love for humanity. In her job as a notary who registers pregnancies, marriages, and divorces, she counsels those considering divorce to give their marriage one more chance by coming to “Divine Love.” Although this is not encouraged by her job, neither is it exactly prohibited. She credits

herself with having saved eleven marriages through her interventions, and she has the photos of the happy couples to prove it. It is then revealed to the film audience that this religious couples' therapy includes not only prayer and bible study, but also temporary sexual partner swapping which is depicted explicitly. It appears that the only reason anyone would consider divorce in this society is sexual boredom, and this approach seems to save every marriage: no one seems to have any other reason to get divorced, which implies a rather reductive physical view of marriage for a group that purports to advance a "spiritual" perspective on marriage. It never becomes clear in the film narrative whether the somewhat contradictory approach of the group creates any problems for them, or what the larger society makes of this practice; in this way, the film loses an opportunity to comment on the intersections of religion and sexuality which exist in our own world.

The main narrative of the film, however, concerns the fact that Joana and her husband crave a child but cannot conceive. Prayer and various physical treatments have no effect. Joana is told to have faith in God, which she finds difficult, although she obediently persists. Finally she conceives, but (spoiler alert) it appears that the child has no father as the DNA matches none of the several men with which she has had sex. Her faith that God has "touched her womb," just like the Virgin Mary, is obviously met with skepticism by everyone from her husband to the religious leaders.

This film might have been something like *A Handmaid's Tale* that suggests a repressive theocratic state that turns women into baby carriers without rights over their bodies. It might have suggested the contradictions present in conservative religion about sexuality. But it does neither of these things. The government is said to be secular, and divorce is allowed; we don't even know the legal status of homosexuality, birth control, or abortion, as these do not play a part in the story. Aside from the fact that scanning equipment registers identity and pregnancy upon entering public

places, we don't see any oppressive government strategies engineering patriarchal hegemony or mandating births. If not of theocracy, is this film then a critique of conservative religion? Is Joana's faith a sham, a bizarre mixture of promiscuity and piety? Is she deluded? Or is she actually carrying an immaculately conceived fetus? We do not receive any answers to these questions. If this is the return of the Messiah, why does he need to be born as a baby once again, which has never been the mainstream Christian view of how Jesus will return? Is this film for or against religion? Any message the film might have had is drowned out by these ambiguities.

Mascaro's visual style is striking, which is commendable, but the preponderance of style over substance causes the film to finally only confuse. Religion is used as a stylistic device, but the lack of a coherent approach to its topic prevents the film from offering either a relevant critique of religion or a clear appreciation of faith.