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Dirty God

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Dirty God

Abstract

This is a film review of *Dirty God* (2019) directed by Sacha Polak.

Author Notes

Rubina (Ruby) Ramji is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. After serving as a Chair of the Religion, Film and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion and then on the steering committee, Rubina continues to serve on the Executive Committee for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion as President and is the Film Editor of the *Journal of Religion and Film*. Her research activities focus on the areas of religion, media and identity, religion in Canada, and religion and immigration.



Dirty God (2019), dir. Sacha Polak

Dirty God, the first film by a Dutch Director (Sacha Polak) to be screened at Sundance in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition, is about a young woman who has to come to terms with being disfigured. Vicky Knight, in her debut role, is Jade. She doesn't just portray a burn victim, she is in fact covered with scar tissue from an accident when she was burned as a child – on her face, shoulders, chest and arms. Film imitating life, *Dirty God* follows Jade as she returns home from a long stay in the hospital, enduring multiple surgeries, and tries to figure out what she is going to do with her life as a person who is permanently disfigured.

Jade returns home to the estates, a poor area of London, where she lives with her mother and young daughter. From the very first scene of the film, we come face to face with Jade's scars—the way she sees herself, the way her daughter Rae cries in fear from her mother, the way others blatantly stare at her. She lives with a trauma that can never be hidden. Jade tries to return to her

old life of clubbing and drinking and music, but her greatest asset in this world, her beauty, is now gone. Jade has been burnt by acid, thrown onto her face and body by her ex-boyfriend. He could not have her beauty, so no one else could either, including Jade. This act is also reflective of life in England, as there have been over 400 cases of acid attacks reported in London in the past year (2017).

In a world where beauty is prized, via selfies and videos posted online, Jade struggles to find her place in it. Growing up poor, lacking an education and struggling as a young single mother (as it seems her mother did as well), Jade's beauty was prized. Now she is burdened by her face. The only time she feels liberated is when she dons a niqab – she freely dances outside, caressing a young man as she glides past, knowing he will not reject her for her scars as they are hidden. Paradoxically, Jade is reviled in her own skin, but not in the niqab.

Desperate for human interaction, Jade turns to the Internet, knowing the men she encounters there are not interested in her face but in her sex. But even there, she is labeled “ugly.” Her desperation leads her to false hope, thinking surgery can bring back her beauty. The only person who can see past the scars on her body is her best friend's boyfriend, Naz. He touches her burnt skin and notes how soft it is. He truly likes her for who she is, but Jade knows he is not for her. Jade tells Naz that her God is a Dirty God for allowing/causing such a horrible fate to befall her, but Naz tells her what happened to her has nothing to do with God. Jade has to realize she is not being punished by God, but instead has a second chance to pull herself out of a superficial life of drinking and clubbing. Her salvation lies in motherhood: a chance to redeem herself to her child, who called her mother a monster when she first saw the acid burns. Just as Naz could see beyond the scars, so can Jade and her daughter Rae. As her friend Flavia aptly states: “You can look like a right old monster, a Quasimodo, but what a kid sees is a knockout. That's what a mom is!”

Side Note: a book entitled *Dirty God: Jesus in the Trenches*, written by Johnnie Moore, examines the notion of Jesus, willing to get dirty with his followers. As a humble and more human God, Jesus shows us how we can be our best selves, through grace. It's unknown if writers Sacha Polak and Susanne Farrell of the film *Dirty God* have read this book or used this notion in their title, but Jade does truly pull herself out of the filth and dirt of her life, in order to be a better mother to her daughter.