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Strawberry Mansion

John C. Lyden

University of Nebraska-Omaha, johnclyden@gmail.com

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Strawberry Mansion

Abstract

This is a film review of *Strawberry Mansion* (2021), directed by Albert Birney and Kentucker Audley.

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Author Notes

John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska-Omaha. He was been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. 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 also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Strawberry Mansion (2021), dir. Albert Birney and Kentucker Audley

James Preble (Kentucker Audley) is a dream auditor who ensures that people pay the proper tax on their dreams in this futuristic fable. Bella Isadora (Penny Fuller) has not paid tax on her dreams for decades, so Preble visits her Strawberry-colored house in its isolated location to audit her dream recordings. They are on over two thousand VHS tapes, providing a bit of retro nostalgia for our own age; appropriately, this film was shot on video and transferred to 16 mm, purposefully showcasing a low-tech appearance that mirrors the old-fashioned aesthetic of its costuming and sets.

Preble rather quickly realizes that something is amiss in this world, as he finds himself in her dreams, and begins to see things when he is supposedly awake that mirror those in the dreams—such as men covered with grass, or videotape. It becomes hard for him, or us, to tell whether he is awake or not, or if indeed the whole film is his dream, having as it does a surreal

quality throughout. A fly speaks to him from where it is trapped by a spider, warning him that his life is in danger. There does seem to be an actual plot against him, as he stumbles upon the depths to which dreams have been monetized in this society. This is a nod to the fact that ads already permeate our online existence through the bots that endlessly scour our viewing history, but here advertising has literally infiltrated our dreams. Stranger still, however, is the suggestion that Preble and Bella have a linked romantic past, in spite of their age difference: is that an illusion? Or is that imagined past more real than their current reality? In pursuit of Bella, Preble falls into full-out nightmares and fantasies in which characters take on animal heads, he travels across seas and deserts for years, and they live a paradisiacal existence on an island in this alternate reality. Time has no real meaning in dreams, and yet they can seem more real than our lives when they give us what we want: Preble is seeking love in a loveless society, much like the hero of Terry Gilliam's similar film *Brazil*, but here he just might get it.

“Nothing ever dies,” as one character states in one of Bella's dreams, and maybe that is the film's message. In our dreams, we are eternal and outside of time, and can find what is valuable apart from the consumerization of modern society, apart even from our lives as we know them. Unlike Hamlet, who feared the dreams that might come in death, Preble is willing to brave the undiscovered country, as long as she can share the dream with someone he loves.