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Where Is Anne Frank

Abstract

This is a film review of *Where Is Anne Frank* (2021) directed by Ari Folman.

Keywords

Holocaust Studies, Refugees, Imaginary Friends

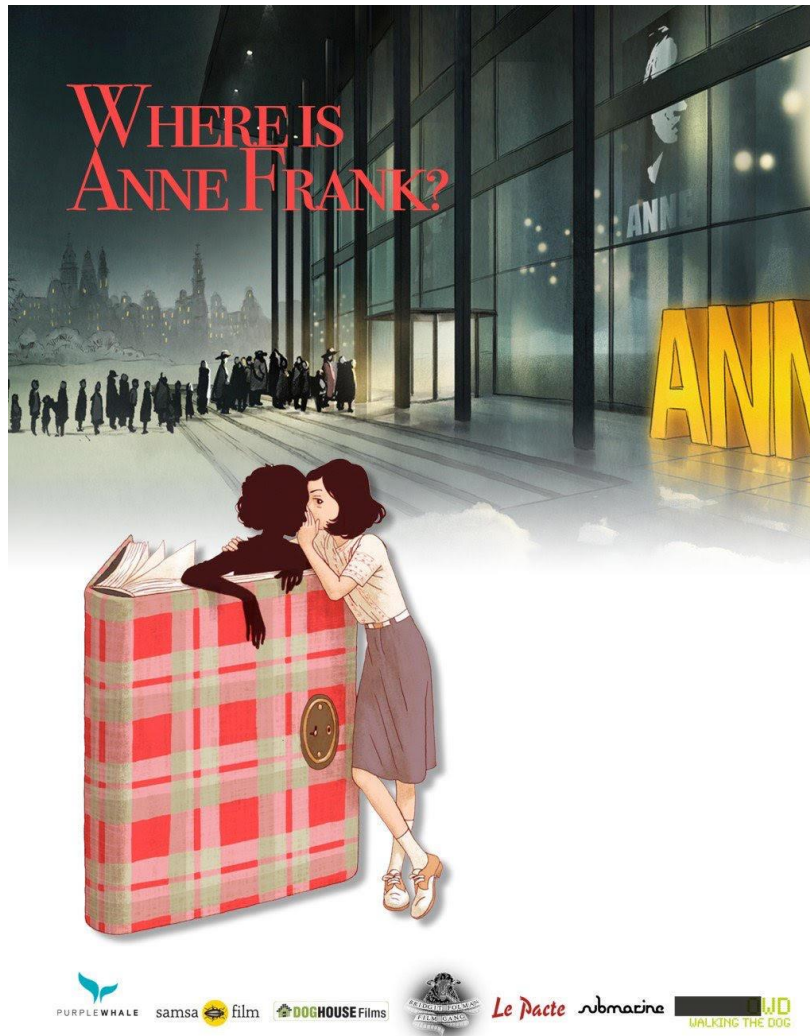
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Author Notes

Ken Derry is Associate Professor, Teaching Stream, in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). Since 2011 he has been a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, and from 2012 to 2018 he was the Co-chair of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion. Together with John Lyden he co-edited *The Myth Awakens* (2018), the first book on the Star Wars franchise by scholars of religion. Aside from religion and film his teaching and research interests include considerations of religion in relation to literature, violence, popular culture, pedagogy, and Indigenous traditions. He is the recipient of the 2013 UTM Teaching Excellence Award.



Where Is Anne Frank (2021), dir. Ari Folman

Trailer: <https://youtu.be/8ZS-DUSzFd8>

Where is Anne Frank is the most recent animated work by Ari Folman, director of the acclaimed 2008 war documentary *Waltz with Bashir*. Folman's new film is beautifully rendered, but as might be guessed from the title's reference it depicts a good deal of ugliness. Any account of Anne Frank must grapple, to some extent, with the worst of humanity. This oppositional tension is at the heart of the film in many ways. Much of the

story is magical and otherworldly, but also grimly realistic. We see romance but also hate. Friendship but also persecution. Childish innocence but also the mature awakening to evil in the world, particularly evil that is mundane, and which too many of us enable on a daily basis.

This last point is made very directly. The film is in fact quite didactic, and in this respect it is not at all subtle. It is also thoughtful and funny and touching and heart-wrenchingly sad. In parts it is also, surprisingly, exciting in a kind of action-movie way (there are modern-day *car chases* that involve *ice skating!*). One of the many impressive features of *Where Is Anne Frank* is that its title contains multitudes, which open up the film's meanings and its connections to many understandings of "religion."

1. Where is Anne Frank?

Anne Frank's most famous possession – featured prominently in the film – is a red plaid diary she was given in 1942 for her thirteenth birthday, a month before she and her family went into hiding. Anne eventually wrote entries in many different books, often in the form of letters addressed to various imaginary friends. The one she wrote to most often was Kitty, and we see this in the scenes of the film set in the past, during the Nazi occupation of Holland. Those scenes follow Anne and her family from their home to the secret living space in an Amsterdam apartment where they hid for two years. The search for Anne and her family by the authorities is perhaps the most obvious meaning of the film's title.

The basic outline of Anne's story is one that millions know well: evil men look for and ultimately find an innocent Jewish family. As we see in the film, Anne and her sister

Margot died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, and her mother Edith died in Auschwitz. Only her father Otto survived the war. In 1947 he published Anne's writings as *Het Achterhuis [The Secret Annex]*; the first English edition of the book was titled *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Anne has become memorialized in film and literature, and in the many institutions named for her. These include most prominently the Anne Frank House, a museum dedicated to Anne's life and work in the building where she and her family sought refuge.

The religious dimension of this aspect of the film is obvious to a certain extent: Anne and her family are hunted because they are Jewish. And although many Nazi leaders, including Hitler and Eichmann, were avowedly non-religious, their murderous hatred of Jewish people was rooted in many, many centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. The film does not go into this particular point, but it does raise another: what does it mean to be Jewish? We are told that the Franks were not observant Jews, and that Anne in fact believed in the ancient Greek version of the afterlife. So this question of identity transcends religion in a way that is difficult to define, and yet also is of life-and-death importance.

When Kitty asks if she too is Jewish, like Anne, her creator emphatically answers "No!" Anne explains that when she made Kitty she didn't want her to be Jewish. The implication is that Anne wants her friend to be safe, and not to suffer as she does. But Kitty declares that she *is* Jewish. Her instinct to choose the side of the marginalized and oppressed turns out to be central to the story we're watching; it is, arguably, the real "religion" of the film.

2. Where is Anne Frank?

The film opens on a very stormy night in Amsterdam in the near future, “a year from now.” A wind shatters the front window of the Anne Frank House and the glass case holding the famous checkered diary. Ink from the pages coalesces in the air into a young red-haired teenager: Kitty. She knows only what Anne has written — this means, among other things, that Kitty thinks it is early 1945, and that Anne is still alive. She is confused and frightened, and eventually heads out into the city with the diary searching for Anne. After many conversations that leave her more confused than ever, Kitty eventually learns the tragic end of the story.

In Kitty’s search, the film reverses their relationship. Anne now, in a sense, becomes *Kitty’s* imaginary friend. This connection with Anne plays a key role in the development of Kitty’s identity, values, curiosity about the world, and sense of meaning and purpose. We see Kitty play a similar role for Anne in the sections of the film set in the past. This relationship forms perhaps the most abstract sense of “religion” in the film: imaginary companions. Kenneth MacKendrick has insightfully discussed the overlaps between the collaborative supernatural beliefs of formal religions, and the common tendency of children to create friends from their own minds.¹ As he writes, “The ability to play is the power to create counterfactual realities and it is through this creative power that the religious imagination finds much of its energy.”² Both religious and childhood creative production, MacKendrick argues, are about imagining new and different aspects of our lived reality – and it is through this imagining that various kinds of growth are possible.³

Through her conversations with Kitty, Anne gains insight into herself and comes to terms with the reality of her world. She also gains strength to manage her ordeal, as when

she imagines floating away to safety in her suitcase, or fighting alongside Clark Gable and the Greek gods against the Nazis. As Kitty develops her own understanding of Anne's story, she too can see a better world than the one in front of her, and this vision enables her to relieve the suffering of others at the end of the film. The potential of the imagination to heal is explicitly mentioned by Anne's father, in fact, who says that sometimes fantasies can help more than medicine.

3. Where is Anne Frank?

When Kitty leaves the Anne Frank House, she immediately becomes the object of a massive search. The city is *desperate* to get the diary back. And, the film tells us, this is a problem: the diary is too important, for the wrong reasons. One of the answers that Kitty finds early on in her search for Anne leads us to this point. When she asks a police officer where her friend is, he replies that Anne Frank is all around her – the Anne Frank bridge, Anne Frank school, Anne Frank hospital, Anne Frank theatre, Anne Frank statue.

Kitty is confused but says this reminds her of what Anne's mom used to say about God: "he's everywhere." The officer agrees that Anne *is* everywhere in Amsterdam, and is also "a bit like God in some ways" because she gives hope to people. Later, when the authorities realize that Kitty has taken the diary, she's declared a danger to "the greatest spiritual treasure this country has produced since Rembrandt."

But at the same time that the police are searching for Kitty and the diary, they are also searching for refugees who have fled from unspeakable dangers and who are desperate to find a safe place to call home. If found they will be sent back, and likely killed. The parallels with Anne herself are obvious, if not exact.

Kitty comes to realize that, in their veneration of Anne and her “sacred diary,” we have lost sight of what her story *means*. This is the key teaching of the film. As Kitty says, Anne didn’t write her diary so people would worship her. It’s the age-old issue of idolatry. People line up to see fictional, curated versions of Anne in the museum, or the theatre, and ignore the real Anne Franks right in front of them. In doing so they ignore Anne’s own message: “do everything you can to save one single soul from harm.”

4. Where is Anne Frank?

The final meaning of this question, then, is: where are the modern-day Anne Franks? And the implied follow-up is: what will we do when we find them? Will we ignore them? Or persecute them even further? Kitty ultimately sacrifices herself to ensure the safety of the refugee families she comes to know. The scene unavoidably raises the spectre of the white savior. Even still, it is undeniable that the actions of those with privilege contribute to making the world safer, or much less safe, for those who are vulnerable and pushed to the edges.

In raising these issues in the ways it does, the film evokes Hannah Arendt’s famous conception of the “banality of evil.” In her reflections on Nazi atrocities, Arendt saw that evil was not radical or dramatic or special, but fundamentally mundane: “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.”⁴

Martin Luther King, Jr., made a similar point in the same year about the evil of the passive majority: “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the

Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”⁵

Where Is Anne Frank ends with a dedication to the filmmaker’s parents, Wanda and Mordechai Folman, “who arrived at the gates of Auschwitz on the same week as the Frank family.” We then learn that, in 2020, 17 million children fled war zones. Who among them, the film implicitly asks, is *not* Anne Frank?

¹ MacKendrick thus writes with tongue at least somewhat in cheek: “If relations with the supernatural are rooted in fantasy (how can they not be?) we might readily ask, paraphrasing a well-known hymn, what kind of imaginary friend do we have in Jesus?” (“We Have,” 62).

² MacKendrick, “We Have,” 62.

³ MacKendrick, “We Have,” 67.

⁴ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 276.

⁵ King, “Letter.”

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