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Be Right Back

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Be Right Back

Abstract

This is a film review of *Be Right Back* (2022), directed by Frauke Havemann.

Keywords

Pandemic, Social Isolation

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John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has 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).



Be Right Back (2022), dir. Frauke Havemann

Five years ago, Frauke Havemann premiered her first feature film, *Weather House*, at the Slamdance Film Festival. In my review of that film, I noted that it was an absurdist and surrealistic parable about climate change and the human failure to respond to it appropriately, as the characters engage in bizarre detached rituals in the face of random weather and death, seemingly without empathy or concern for others.¹ *Be Right Back* is Havemann's second feature film, and this time she turns her surrealistic vision to the experience of lockdown during the pandemic and how it creates isolation and perhaps madness.

Five people live in a few homes in the woods, going through their daily routines largely by themselves with occasional ineffective interactions. One man stares out his windows at the trees, continually bothered that one seems out of place. A woman plays scrabble with herself, and a man

plays charades without an audience. They seem to exist in their own “little parallel running universes,” as Havemann puts it, as the characters seek to preserve normality in abnormal conditions. They grow suspicious of the forest, troubled by the strange circles they find and ominous sounds; they are seeking to find some structure and meaning in things that have no meaning, trying to impose some sense of order on their world. They are running out of food, as the freezers are inexplicably empty, and it isn’t clear where they will get food. They seem to have no contact with the outside world, as there is no evidence of cell phones, internet, or even a radio. They debate what they should eat, as one woman advocates eating insects and others are vegetarians, vegans, or meateaters. It is not clear how they will survive, and they seem to have no strategy for doing so.

As a metaphor for the isolation and dysfunction of lockdown, this works—and, given the strangeness of pandemic life, parts of it even appear plausible as representations of current human behavior. Reality is increasingly in the eye of the beholder these days, unfortunately, as people construct their own visions of the world without consulting others, and they risk losing any common sense of reality. When one character tells another he loves her, she cannot even respond to this attempt at intimacy, their isolation is so great. There is an unfulfilled longing for meaning and human connection in this film, which is sometimes mirrored in our world when we become isolated from one another. I ended my review five years ago of Havemann’s first film by calling on us to learn from this cautionary tale: we haven’t learned much yet, and the pandemic has made it harder to remember our lessons, but I remain hopeful that as long as there are voices of challenge and critique like hers, we may yet pull together to work on our common problems.

¹ John C. Lyden, "Weather House," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 21, Iss. 1 (2017). Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol21/iss1/>