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To Live and Die and Live

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Abstract

This is a film review of *To Live and Die and Live* (2023), directed by Qasim Basir.

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Author Notes

Chris Deacy is Reader in Theology and Religious Studies and former Head of Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. His PhD (University of Wales, 1999) was in the area of redemption and film, and Chris has published monographs which include *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred* (Oxford University Press, 2016); *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film* (Routledge, 2012); and *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (University of Wales Press, 2001). Chris also writes regular film reviews, is writing a book about nostalgia and religion and has been hosting a podcast since 2018 called *Nostalgia Interviews with Chris Deacy* - <https://audioboom.com/channels/4956567>



To Live and Die and Live (2023), dir. Qasim Basir

To Live and Die and Live comprises a microcosm of the vagaries and unknowns of life, with the imminent threat posed by literal and metaphorical death, with the city of Detroit no less a character than the two leads: Muhammad (Amin Joseph), a film director struggling both to make ends meet financially and to be a pillar for his family following the death of his stepfather, and Asia, with whom he appears to be on the precipice of a romantic relationship. But Mohammad's own battles with addiction and a potential health concern which Asia (Skye P. Marshall) is not keen to get diagnosed somewhat mirrors Muhammad's own failure to come clean and seek help for his own demons.

Muhammad returns for a funeral, which exposes the many cracks in the edifice of his fragile family's sense of security, as his stepdad, a building contractor, had clearly not paid his debts. His own Muslim faith supplies another source of tension as Muhammad's battles with

alcoholism cannot be disclosed as it would alienate him from the Muslim community and his own extended family. But the money he procures to help pay the funeral expenses is offset by the betrayal by his sister, who knows about his battle with drink, who steals the money for herself and threatens to blackmail him unless he backs off.

On every level, therefore, Muhammad is screwed: but, like the not dissimilar *It's a Wonderful Life*, a man on the brink, who has run out of luck and money, finds that the bonds of community are stronger and more resilient—not to mention invisible—than he had ever countenanced, and their disclosure to him provides the film's grace note at the end when a man who is broken, at an impasse and unable to move forward on any level, is afforded an out-of-nowhere glimpse of redemption in a world from which he is increasingly alienated.

There is a liminal, after hours dimension to the cityscape that Muhammad traverses betwixt night and day, and his inability to sleep, and the lack of boundaries that exist between the various roles and assignments that fall into his domain all conjure up a fractured and hopeless milieu in which the glistening cityscape just adds to the sense of failure and despondency into which Muhammad appears to have irreversibly fallen. We don't know too much about his ostensibly lucrative Hollywood career, in relation to which he is invited to speak to a class of local students about the allure of filmmaking, and which causes him to turn inward and to disabuse the students of any dreams they may have about making it big in Tinseltown.

Asia is mainly a peripheral character, as she only appears when Muhammad cannot cope with the pressures of his family, and without exposing his demons she provides a sanctuary of sorts, facilitating and not judging him as he descends even further into drugs and alcohol. We learn that her own need to party is perhaps borne from the fear that her own life and health is precarious, and she chooses living in the moment over the risk of finding out she is potentially at death's door.

The hinterland of death pervades this intoxicating picture, offering characters a glimpse into a realm of finality and closure, but they mostly—perhaps because they are ultimately afraid or even pusillanimous about stepping into the abyss—appear to choose life. Religion is another peripheral element to the film. As with his relationship with Asia, Muhammad is unable to make more than an ephemeral commitment to faith, although this is not so much because he doesn't want to commit as that he has too much going on in the background to make it possible for him to lead a life with integrity without succumbing to shame and dishonor.

These are flawed, broken people, where the prescriptive nature of institutional religion fails to fill the hollowness at their core, and which fuels the addiction to which they cling. The film itself is stylish to look at, with an impressive cinematography and visual sheen, but the material itself feels quite hackneyed and underdeveloped at times, though this is also the film's chief strength for this is not ultimately a thriller or indeed a typical Hollywood production. If the film feels like it is stuck in the same groove this is because it doesn't try to elevate the protagonist's character arc beyond where it needs to be. *To Live and Die and Live* has an integrity and sense of proportion which grounds this at times ersatz and hypnotic film within the world of the quotidian.