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Bad Behaviour

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Bad Behaviour* (2023), directed by Alice Englert.

Keywords

Enlightenment, Spiritual Retreat

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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>



Bad Behaviour (2023), dir. Alice Englert

Set on a spiritual retreat, ostensibly in Oregon but filmed in New Zealand, *Bad Behaviour* raises insightful questions about the path to Enlightenment, the integrity and authenticity of those who promote the “seeker” experience and what benefits anyone could possibly gain from cultivating practices which require them to disconnect from society with a view to channeling or accomplishing Enlightenment. The characters on the retreat in this film include an “A” list model and DJ who seems to have her own self-promotional reasons for embarking on the path, really for the benefit of her fans on Instagram who can follow just how “tuned into” herself she is.

Jennifer Connelly plays the lead in this film as someone who is at best ambivalent about her reasons for going off grid while her daughter is at the same time working as a stuntwoman in New Zealand. Intercutting between representations of their respective life situations and goals allows us to see how one is the instigator of violence at the same moment the other is on the receiving end. Connelly’s character suffers some trauma of her own stemming from her

combustible relationship with her late mother, and rather than bringing peace, the retreat is for her a cauldron which forces her to confront challenging questions which she has not dredged up for a while. She is ostensibly looking for peace and serenity, but—perhaps because the retreat is potentially being run by a charlatan—her reaction to the supposedly tranquil location is one that sees a lot of pain and rancor resurface.

Connelly and her daughter have different memories regarding the events from their past, and we can start to see how a rekindling between them might be possible: but it is an oddity that the film examines all of this through the lens of the Buddhist notion of Enlightenment, which is more about an ultimate absorption into the universe rather than the coming together of a fractured family unit. Within Buddhism, it is hoped that there will eventually come salvation or release from the round of births and deaths into the timeless bliss of Nirvana, and this is very different from the entirely this-worldly grasp of Enlightenment on display here. That said, the Buddha did allow for the possibility that Nirvana might comprise a psychological state of release that can be achieved in this life, but he then went on to enter Pari-nirvana, a complete emancipation from births.

In *Bad Behaviour*, however, Ben Whishaw plays a guru who gets by on aphorisms and, despite claiming to be Enlightened, he literally makes a run for it when the police are called following Connelly's assault on the "A" list celebrity who represents the antithesis of all she values and holds dear—or maybe, she recognizes too much of herself in the vapid publicity-seeker. This indeed comprises the twist that we might not be expecting, as the film's focus hitherto on the quest for peace and Enlightenment is offset by a shift in tone and focus to behavior which the retreat is supposed to placate.

This is a never less than absorbing drama, much of it played for comedy, as it allows us to see the lives of those on the retreat—all of whom are looking for something which they may or

may not find from Whishaw's self-help guru. He claims to be Enlightened but when the chips are down is utterly out of his depth, lacking wisdom or any profound understanding of the human condition involving a mature apprehension of truth, which is part and parcel of the Buddhist framework. Indeed, within Buddhism, Nirvana in this life is a transformed state of personality where there is no greed, hatred, or delusion, and negative mental states and emotions are absent: which rather represents, comically so, the antithesis of the direction of travel that this insightful and unexpected cinematic journey takes us.