



January 2023

Smoke Sauna Sisterhood

Dereck Daschke

Truman State University, ddaschke@truman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Daschke, Dereck (2023) "Smoke Sauna Sisterhood," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1, Article 25.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol27/iss1/25>

This Sundance Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Smoke Sauna Sisterhood

Abstract

This is a film review of *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood* (2023), directed by Anna Hints.

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Author Notes

Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches “Religion and Film” at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.



Smoke Sauna Sisterhood (2023), dir. Anna Hints

Documentarian Anna Hints and their team have captured the remarkable, transformative experiences of women participating in the Estonian ritual of the smoke sauna, which is culturally understood explicitly as a “sacred space” not just for bodily, emotional, and spiritual cleansing, but where her fellow Estonians could immediately make unguarded connections with each other over the course of the four-hour ceremony. Highlighting the range of activities and stories of fifty women throughout the seasons over a period of seven years, Hints’s film is perhaps as intimate an experience with a set of strangers from another country as one could get through the cinematic medium. These women are literally and, most importantly, figuratively naked, and yet no shame, embarrassment, or even unwelcome eroticism taints their interactions with each other, or the viewers’ with the film, even—or perhaps especially—when these women are sharing the most personal aspects of their lives. They reveal family traumas and abuse, sexual awakenings, romance, marriages, and horrific assaults. They compare views of dating, sex, childbirth, and child rearing

with the assumptions and advice received from their own mothers (for example, the onset of menstruation being called “your illness”). Fascinatingly, more often than not, the film does not keep the camera on the speaker as she tells her story, but rather stays on the facial reaction of another woman as she hears it, or on parts of the women’s bodies glowing in the sauna’s fire, or even on the smoke and steam itself. The effect is to make the specifics of these stories paradoxically keenly personal and part of an ephemeral shared experience; at once, quite literally embodied and at the same time part of a cultural heritage whose streams flow backward and forward in time. The stories and experiences appear to belong to the women individually and collectively, and exist only in that moment and yet are stored eternally in the sacred space and cyclic time of the sauna.

In the Q&A session after the screening, Hints and the “sauna keeper,” Kadi Kivilo, the one more or less constant among the women through the film, reflected on the tangible healing power of the ritual. Hints located origins of this power in the community, whom they were instrumental in bringing together over the years for the film, while Kivilo compared the sauna to a mother’s womb, calling it a “place just warm enough to feel protected and connected.” Both women reflected on how quickly total strangers would drop any barriers between them within minutes of beginning the ceremony (reflecting, to be sure, Victor Turner’s concept of the egalitarian bonding in ritual known as *communitas*), and with this open connection, we “really have to face our pain, our traumas, or we hurt others,” Kivilo says. Hints also noted that while the film depicts a “sisterhood,” the ritual traditionally involves men and whole families together, and in fact, as Hints identifies themselves as non-binary, the term and the film are meant to go beyond gender. Hints’s cinematic choices seem to reflect this view as well, as the high contrast between the darkness of the sauna and the light of the fire, combined with the focus within the sauna not on individuals but

on parts of the collective, gives the impression of identities grounded in bodies but transcending them at the same time.

The film opens with the chant, “Become, become might; become, become powerful,” and closes with “We sweat out this pain, we sweat out this pain.” *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood* beautifully captures just how Estonians, especially those who share certain traumas around a lifetime of expectations for the female body, find release and strength in this simple but empowering ritual.