




March 2023

Natalia

Dereck Daschke
Truman State University, ddaschke@truman.edu

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Recommended Citation

Daschke, Dereck (2023) "Natalia," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1, Article 50.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.27.01.50>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol27/iss1/50>

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Natalia

Abstract

This is a film review of *Natalia* (2023), directed by Elizabeth Mirzaei.

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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.



***Natalia* (2023), dir. Elizabeth Mirzaei**

Elizabeth Mirzaei presents an incisive portrait of a Sr. Natalia, who feels called to renounce the world she lived as brilliant, successful, Star Trek- and man-loving young woman named Victoria Olsen and take up the cloistered life of a nun at Christ the Bridegroom Monastery in Burton, Ohio. But the subject of the film might better be understood to be “discernment,” the novitiate’s process of refining her attention to her own motivations to understand what is truly inspiring her decision. In the words of her mentor Father Michael, she must be certain that she’s not running from something, but rather running to Jesus Christ. Father Michael very clearly expresses his doubts about Natalia’s chances for success in her choice—the measure of which is lifelong adherence to her ascetic vows—stating in a voice message that he believes that she can have a greater impact on the world by pursuing her engineering career, and that he does not think that she

will be able to sacrifice her sexuality and what she herself calls her “ache” for babies and motherhood. Anyone can live this life for three to five years, he opines, but can she really see herself making this sacrifice for her whole life? Notably, early in the film, Natalia gives her backstory to a lay crowd, stating that she “*looooves*” men, but wanted to try a three-month dating fast—which she broke after the first month after meeting a man named Kirk. Despite the chemistry and the Star Trek connection, Natalia (then Victoria) ended things, telling him that she knew what a good husband and father to their children he would be, and what a beautiful thing they could bring into the world together—but it’s not enough.

Whatever it is that Victoria did not find in the secular world, as successful and talented as she was, Sr. Natalia is determined to find in the monastery. The implications of the choice she is making, as well as the two halves of her life at that point, are brought together in back-to-back scenes. First, Natalia and her fellow novitiates discuss the symbolism of the garments they will wear during the ceremony of their Life Profession, when they formally and officially end their old life and are reborn with a new identity and a new path. The vestments are explicitly patterned after baptismal garments, but upon death a nun will also be buried in hers. The scene immediately following shows Natalia and her fellow Sisters watching the opening minutes of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, where Admiral Kirk and Lt. Saavik debate the fairness of the Kobayashi Maru no-win scenario simulation. “How one handles death is just as important as how one handles life, don’t you think?” asks Kirk—a question clearly on Natalia’s mind as the date of her Life Profession, the ritual commitment to the order, nears. Yet there is also the imagery of the nun as the Bridegroom of Christ layered on top of the Life Profession ceremony, so the vestments are also a wedding dress. The undercurrent of the erotic divine is periodically emphasized by quotes from

the Bible's Song of Songs, a verse of which Natalia plans to have inscribed on the wedding ring she will receive at the ceremony.

Mirzaei expertly captures the internal conflicts that even a woman as self-assured as Natalia goes through in deciding to give herself over to something seen by many today as irrational and even "archaic," as stated in one email she receives. In perhaps the most wrenching scene of the film, Natalia attends a family reunion that has been organized in her honor prior to her taking the renunciate's vows. The camera lingers on long shots of the babies, mothers, children in her family, and then cuts to Natalia silently watching them, clearly struggling with being confronted with a life she will never lead if she continues down the path of this spiritual vocation. The film's evocative black and white cinematography reinforces the way that Sister—now Mother--Natalia is choosing to live a black and white life in a world of full of grays.