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Thelma

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Thelma

Abstract

This is a film review of *Thelma* (2024), directed by Josh Margolin.

Keywords

Comedy, Old Age, Action

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Author Notes

John Lyden is the Department Chair and Blizek Professor of Religious Studies 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 Conservativism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Thelma (2024), dir. Josh Margolin

Thelma (June Squibb) is a 93 year old widow still living in her own home, trying to navigate the modern world. Her grandson Daniel (Fred Hechinger) teaches her how to use a computer so she can access email and use the internet; she finds this frustrating, as many an elderly person does, but manages to find some uses for it, mastering basic skills—like pressing the “X” to get rid of a pop-up ad. But when she is scammed through a phone call out of \$10,000, Thelma finds the ability not only to use technology but also her wits—as well as a considerable degree of moxie—to hunt down those who stole her money. When she realizes that Tom Cruise still does his own stunts in his films, she decides that she shouldn’t let age stop her, either.

The result is a hilarious comedy that deliberately parodies the *Mission Impossible* films with its music and editing style, as Thelma and reluctant co-conspirator Ben (*Shaft* veteran Richard Roundtree, in his final role) head across the city on his electric wheelchair in search of the culprits. Thelma’s middle-aged daughter (Parker Posey) and son-in-law (Clark Gregg) panic when she

disappears, and the hapless Daniel blames himself for not watching her more closely. The family, of course, grows closer through the trial, as both Thelma and Daniel realize their competence and demonstrate this to everyone. It's not a very realistic story, but it is a touching fantasy in that it empowers those who often have little agency in the real world. Thelma and Daniel believe in and support each other, and director Josh Margolin claims that his own grandmother (who appears in the credits) inspired the story.

Along the way, some genuine poignance appears as Thelma reflects on how many of her friends have died, and how much she misses her late husband. It is a familiar and all too normal situation for the elderly. Her life is not empty, but she has grown to feel helpless in the face of the challenges of age. Her children consider putting her in a home after she is scammed, but her adventure shows them that she has a lot more on the ball than they realize. After a lifetime of fabulous supporting roles, this is Squibb's first time as the star, and as always, she does a perfect job of balancing naturalistic comedy with a highly believable characterization.

While I would not recommend that 93 year olds actually do any of the things that Thelma and Ben do in this film, we see so many impossible things done in action films, anyway, that it is probably about time that a 93 year old woman could do them as well. This is a fun romp, but it is also a loving portrait of the elderly, and a reminder to not take them for granted.