Exhibiting Forgiveness

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Abstract
This is a film review of *Exhibiting Forgiveness* (2024), directed by Titus Kaphar.

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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).
Exhibiting Forgiveness (2024), dir. Titus Kaphar

This is the first feature film directed by painter Titus Kaphar, who also wrote and produced it. While he has made short films previously, this creation launches him solidly as a sensitive and talented film storyteller. He has indicated that the story is a fictionalized version of his own life, but that the details are close enough to his personal story that he first considered making it as a documentary. The results are visible on the screen, as this is a beautiful and raw portrait of the complex realities involved in facing the past, forgiveness, and healing.

André Holland plays Tarrell Rodin, a successful painter who is married to singer-songwriter Aisha (Andra Day), with whom he has a young son, Jermaine (Daniel Berrier). They live a comfortable life far from the poverty in which Tarrell grew up, but his childhood haunts his paintings. It becomes clear that he attempts to control his memories of the violent past through his art, as he tries to capture moments on canvas that have been seared into his brain—but this does not defuse the power those memories have over him. The story unfolds when his father, La’Ron
(John Earl Jelks) reappears in his life as a recovering crack addict, and his mother presents him as a Christian who is seeking forgiveness from his son; but Tarrell cannot easily give this.

The basis for the anger that Tarrell has for his father is gradually revealed throughout the film as we see scenes from his past recreated cinematically: this is linked to Tarrell’s paintings in an extraordinary way, as the film depicts the young Tarrell pushing the paintings of his life events into the actual spaces where they occurred, as Tarrell recalls them. His father’s neglect and violence against Tarrell and his mother Joyce are painful to watch, and we can understand why Tarrell cannot simply forgive his father. And yet as Joyce (Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor) reminds him, the Bible teaches that those who wish to be forgiven must first forgive—and Tarrell has not reckoned with the violence he carries within himself, that he fears he will enact on his own son as his father did to him. In order to be the loving father and husband he wishes to be, he must move on from the past that still controls his emotions. His painting has not liberated him from that, so he must find a way to “exhibit forgiveness” in his work (the title of the showing of his paintings he finally accomplishes) as well as in his life.

The film does not present a cliché Christian version of repentance and forgiveness, as if healing is simple or painful memories simply disappear. Jelks brilliantly conveys the pain La’Ron feels for his past actions, and his performance is matched by Holland’s. Indeed, the entire cast deepens this story so that its truth is palpable, assisted by Kaphar’s own paintings and brilliant direction. The music is also highly effective at evoking the pathos and depth of the story, including a song sung by Andra Day in the film, and the score by Jherek Bischoff. This extraordinary feature film debut from Kaphar should be celebrated for its beautiful expression of a difficult and important subject: how to face a painful past while seeking a hopeful future, for ourselves as well as others. It was one of my favorite films from this year’s Sundance Film Festival.