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A Thousand and One

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A Thousand and One

Abstract

This is a film review of *A Thousand and One* (2023), directed by A.V. Rockwell.

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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>



A Thousand and One (2023), dir. A.V. Rockwell

A Thousand and One is a tense, character-driven drama about a mother and child relationship spanning more than a decade, set on the streets of Harlem against a backdrop of prison, foster homes, illegality, poverty and death—but where love and resilience triumph in the most unexpected of places. It's a largely misleading film insofar as we imagine we know how it might play out, with young Terry (played by three different actors) born into foster care and given the first semblance of a stable home when his mother, newly released from jail, effectively 'adopts' him and takes him under her wing, even though she does not have the financial resources to care for herself let alone a six year old. But her determination to fight for him and give him the life she didn't have for herself is both gritty and overwhelmingly moving. There is then a twist revealed in the final twenty minutes which caused audiences at the Sundance premier where I watched this to gasp. Life lived on the margins is always going to be a tough project to sell to mainstream audiences, but *A Thousand and One* is a highly impressive film, almost documentary-like in its

rendering, which works precisely because it has an assuredness of pacing and a focus on the lives of characters who are drawn from the cloth of real-life urban deprivation.

Without giving away the film's twist, the film works because it demonstrates so earnestly that motherhood and resilience know no bounds and that everyone deserves to have somebody look out for them, to give them a leg up, and to fight their corner when no one else is likely to look out for their interests. The film is especially powerful in the way it queries just how secrets and lies may not be ideal, but that it is the way a family rises to the challenge that matters more than the question of whether the rule of law has been followed to the letter. The first shot of the film is an aerial view of New York in 1993, and the city is very much a character here, even to the point that by the time we reach the mid-2000s we witness a change in ambience, policy, political leadership (from Giuliani through to Bloomberg) and gentrification. There is one especially haunting scene when a new landlord takes over and it looks as though Inez (Teyana Taylor) is being given the gift of an upgraded apartment, all 'on the house' as it were. But behind the new landlord's smile is a pretty naked attempt to move Inez and Terry out and replace them with new, paying white tenants in a lucrative attempt to change the demographic of the neighborhood. There is a deficit of father-figures in this film, but there is little judgement at work where a marginalized family does what it can to make ends meet, and there is a demonstrable effort through education to bring harmony and ambition into a home characterized by failure, indeed where Terry's mother and stepfather have both spent time in prison. We know that Terry is himself liable to fall into crime—but his path is an albeit circuitous and progressive one which gives *A Thousand and One* a real sense of uplift.