

Crippling fantasies

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [November 27, 2013](#) issue



DAZZLING IMAGES: Porn addict Jon (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) meets Barbara (Scarlett Johansson), who tries to shape him into her Prince Charming. PHOTO BY DANIEL MCFADDEN. © 2013 RELATIVITY MEDIA, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Joseph Gordon-Levitt wrote, directed and plays the title role in *Don Jon*, a film about a young man who earned his nickname through his polished routine of bedding beautiful women. But Jon also spends hours online looking at pornography, and he admits that he prefers pornography to sex with actual women.

Jon's routine is predictably interrupted when he meets Barbara, played by Scarlett Johansson. Barbara is not about to fall into bed with Jon. She withholds sex and uses it as a tool to shape Jon into her perfect boyfriend.

But the film veers away from being a romantic comedy: *Don Jon* is not about a pornography addict saved by a good woman. It's about the unhealthy collision of two people who are ready only for severely broken relationships. Jon's addiction to pornography crashes into the ideals of a pampered princess; Barbara, like Jon, seems unable to grapple with reality.

Pitch-perfect performances by Gordon-Levitt and Johansson keep the film off the soapbox. Jon is enraptured by Barbara until she finally gets into his bed, after which he is immediately drawn back to pornography. Barbara likewise cannot love the actual Jon; instead, she loves an image of him that coincides with an image of herself.

The film portrays a world drenched in digital escapes from reality. As Jon searches for just the right clip, where he can sort his escapist preferences by hair color and cup size, his grip on reality and his capacity for love diminishes.

The film offers insight into the bleakness of a fantasy world that is present not only in pornography but also in manifold other areas of life, including the romance movies Barbara adores—movies that Jon disdains because they are not real. “Everyone knows it’s fake, but they watch it like it’s real life,” he says, unaware of how this insight applies to his own life.

The emptiness of a fake world is present in the over-the-top princess birthday party that Barbara’s family throws for a little girl and in Jon’s routine at the gym, where he grits his teeth, reciting lines of the Lord’s Prayer as he seeks to make his body into something women will desire.

Jon’s isolation is present even in his friendships, which revolve around alcohol and pickups. Jon loves his family but scarcely communicates with them: his sister sits mute, bound to her cell phone, and Sunday dinners at his parents’ house after church involve watching football games on the big screen TV instead of family connections.

This isolation extends to Jon’s connection to church, portrayed here as ethnic, working-class Catholic. Jon never fails to show up at church to sit next to his family, but church never connects to his humanity and his need.

Redemption comes when Jon discovers a way of being in relationship that does not flinch from reciprocity and vulnerability. Other areas of his life are redeemed as well. He goes to the gym and skips the weight room in favor of a basketball game. He spends time with his friends at a pizza place instead of a bar. His sister finally puts down her cell phone to affirm the changes in Jon’s life. His parents speak a bit of truth, too, and the television gets turned off.

The one area of life that seems untouched by Jon’s redemption is church. When Jon goes to confession and does not provide his usual report on using pornography but instead reveals with some enthusiasm that he has changed, he is assigned the same penance as always. Jon’s plea for the priest to explain how he comes up with the number of Hail Marys and Our Fathers to recite goes unanswered.

Don Jon diagnoses the epidemic of pornography as a symptom of diseased relationships in a world that privileges polished images over human truths, a world

in which human bodies are sacrificed on the altar of consumer capitalism. Though Jon's church has nothing to say to this world, the church of Jesus Christ has a lot to say to it—and it has an alternative vision of bodies as a “living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1) to God that brings healing, life and relationship.