

'The Circle' review: Cool young tech firm, creepy world in Hanks movie from Eggers novel

 sfchronicle.com/movies/article/The-Circle-a-tale-of-technology-run-amok-11100627.php

April 27, 2017

So the future may be shaping up to be just as horrible as the pessimists have been predicting, but with a few unexpected twists. Yes, people will become enslaved, but not to governments, but to social media and search-engine companies. And yes, people will be watched and monitored, but not against their will, but with their permission. They'll just give it all away, freely.

"The Circle," based on Dave Eggers' novel, is as chilling as the most frightening horror movie. Yet the world it depicts is practically our world, just a tiny leap into the near future. Here's a proposal: Let's put together a time capsule and make guesses as to how people 50 years from now will see this movie. My guess is they'll consider it a quaint throwback to when people were still fighting it, before they realized that love is hate, and two plus two equals five, and that the computer in the sky loves us all very much.

Directed by James Ponsoldt and adapted by Ponsoldt and Eggers, the movie tells the story of a young woman who goes to work at the Circle, a company that's like a hellish cross between Facebook, Apple and Google. Young Mae (Emma Watson) is thrilled to be welcomed onto the Circle's campus. Everyone is so cool. Everyone is so friendly, and everything is so weird. The place is run by its two founders, who, in an inspired bit of casting, are played by the inherently likable Tom Hanks and Patton Oswalt. What harm could those guys do?

In an early scene, the more extroverted of the two, Eamon (Hanks), does a presentation in an auditorium full of employees. He is wearing egalitarian jeans and a T-shirt, and he introduces the company's new product, as the employees cheer as though at a Pyongyang pep rally. The company will soon be marketing a new camera. It costs next to nothing, and you can wear it. It will record every moment of your life, follow every step and log facial recognition data for everyone you see. Sounds great, right?

The story of “The Circle” is basically about all the events that spring from Mae’s agreeing to becoming the first person ever to go “transparent.” Aside from a few timed bathroom breaks, her life is out there, being broadcast and commented upon, all day and every day. And the world is following her.

What makes “The Circle” so valuable is not only that it’s showing us a ghastly possible path that the world may take, but also that it articulates the mentality that could create and sustain it. According to Eamon, complete transparency strengthens democracy – nothing untoward can happen behind closed doors. It enforces morality – people tend to be at their worst when they’re sure no one can see them. And anyway, privacy is a form of theft, isn’t it? After all, if you have a great experience offline, you’re essentially robbing others of the possibility of vicarious participation.

This is demented thinking, but it has a certain logic to it, and a shred of truth. Privacy may not be immoral, but it is most definitely subversive, and thus it would have to be classed as immoral by the people in power. It’s in privacy that people decide how they really feel and what they really want. The privacy of the masses is the greatest threat to totalitarian control.

Outside the enclosure of privacy waits the online goon squad, always ready to reinforce the stupid consensus through an idiotic stream of commentary. The online comments shown here are dead-on and maddening. They are offensive even when they’re friendly, in that they contain the built-in presumption that people have the right to comment on the private lives of strangers.

“The Circle” is very much a plea for the preservation and sanctification of privacy, but it’s nicely constructed in that no one character expresses the film’s distinct point of view. Mae remains more technology-friendly than the filmmakers. Meanwhile, her boyfriend (Ellar Coltrane from “Boyhood”) is an antitechnology absolutist, not at home in the modern world. And Mae’s parents (Glenn Headly and the late Bill Paxton) seem amiable and lost, trying to mind their own business and create their own safe space. Alas, older people are so naive.

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