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The Circle (Movie Review)

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The Circle (Movie Review)

Abstract

"The prevailing point in *The Circle* is that privacy-eliminating technology exemplifies a growing, heinous class division in American society."

Posting about the movie *The Circle* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/the-circle/>

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Comments

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The Circle

 [inallthings.org /the-circle/](http://allthings.org/the-circle/)

May 12, 2017

Josh Matthews

Movie Title: *The Circle*

Release date: April 28, 2017 (USA)

Director: James Ponsoldt

Adapted from: *The Circle*

Story by: Dave Eggers

Producers: Tom Hanks, James Ponsoldt, Gary Goetzman, Anthony Bregman

When *In All Things* asked me to review *The Circle*, I worried. The movie has a 16% rating on rottentomatoes.com and a 5.2/10 rating at imdb.com. Although a 5.2 out of 10 should be average, a “5.2” signals that a movie is absolutely terrible. Why should my editors send me to a terrible movie? Were they feeling sadistic?

But *The Circle* says that my snap judgment about it, based only on two numbers, might be a problem. Also, my smartphone might be a problem, as well as the cameras that tracked me in the theater, the credit card database that tracked my movie-ticket purchase, the apps on my phone that tracked my travel to and from the theater, and the operating system that tracks my use of the word-processing program in which I write this review.

This is a movie of potent ideas about our use of technology. It points out how prevalent cameras are and how much we depend on algorithms that tell us what’s good and what’s not. It really wrestles hard with the loss of privacy in a time where everything can be recorded, stored forever, and potentially accessed by anybody.

I don’t really care about the movie’s plot and character problems, which are insignificant compared to its ideas. The more we notice and ponder what *The Circle* is trying to show us, the better off we will be. Although it’s not quite at the level of its complex predecessors—more artful movies about modern technology such as *The Social Network*, *Her*, and the documentary *Steve Jobs: The Man in the Machine*—the movie is worth the time of anyone who uses Facebook and smartphones. Which is almost everybody reading this review.

The Circle focuses on Mae (Emma Watson), a young single female who gets a dream job at what is supposedly the greatest company on Earth. That company is “The Circle,” which is a massive tech company somewhere near San Francisco. The Circle is headed by Eamon Bailey (Tom Hanks), whose dress and P.R. manner are, not surprisingly, modeled on Steve Jobs and other gurus. You can’t miss that *The Circle* is talking directly to Google, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft, which are among the most powerful commercial organizations in the history of the world.

At the Circle, Mae works customer service at a station with seven monitors, though I might have under-counted. Her social life seems fabulous; she’s around thousands of smart hipsters at a diverse campus that has all the amenities a tech worker could dream of—saunas, pottery classes, rock concerts, libraries, and whatever other vanities a 20-something could desire.

The Circle produces revolutionary apps of power and wonder: TrueU, SeeChange, SoulSearch. The SeeChange program, announced at one of the company’s tech rally, places marble-sized cameras around the world, records and stores everything, and then processes data so that it knows everything about every place and everyone. This fact is wildly applauded by the Circle employees, whose herd-animal behavior would embarrass cows, sheep, and even lemmings.

The Circle plays as subtle social satire in its depiction of these employees, quietly making fun of American hipsters who love their technology too much. This satire is embodied in the Circle employees, whom we see again and again at the company’s many rallies: they all cheer, laugh, and cry as one. They are easily manipulated by Bailey’s 1/2

showmanship, then (later in the movie) by Mae's on-stage charm. Sad to think that these scenes are based in part on Apple and Microsoft rallies, but—so says *The Circle*—high-IQ types are just as susceptible to delusions and herd behavior as anyone else, maybe even more so.

These hipsters have their darker side. Mae has to maintain a high employee rating, near or at a perfect score of 100, to appear to be great at her job. She also has to participate in the company's popularity ranking, which sorts out which employees are liked more by all the other employees. Such ranking systems encourage superficial social lives on the Circle's campus, which entail pathetic passive-aggressive behavior. There's a funny scene in which Mae is politely shamed by two fellow employees for leaving the Circle's campus one weekend. "Oh, don't worry, you can do whatever you want," they say to Mae, which means that she better do what everyone else is doing, or else.

Flanking Mae, who's badly tempted to be a good Circle employee, are two young men who reject what the Circle stands for. One is Mae's long-time friend, Mercer, who fixes cars and lives a quiet country lifestyle; he'd rather have Mae talk to him in person than text him. The other is Ty LaFitte (John Boyega), a founder of the Circle but also a loner who rejects the company's spying projects. Both LaFitte and Mercer are the good angels on Mae's right shoulder, while Bailey is the devil on her left.

What worked really well for me is *The Circle*'s depiction of a multinational corporation that wants to know everything about everybody. Bailey believes that humans are perfectible and that access to all knowledge will lead to that perfection. The Circle threatens to eliminate all privacy everywhere, the loss of which no one but Mercer and LaFitte seem to care about. The movie explores this idea in its second act. Mae agrees to wear cameras all the time, allowing her to be watched by anybody. She becomes the first person ever without a private life, which is the major warning of *1984*, and yet Bailey and the Circle employees could not be more thrilled for her.

The Circle says that corporations produce feel-good delusions that make users want and even love to be watched. While the Circle corporation tries to record everyone's words and movements, it does so in the name of "human rights," openness, community, and democracy. While the movie shows that the prevalence of cameras in public has benefits, including thwarting crime and preventing tragedies, it also argues that "human rights" and "community" can be bubbly terms that mask corporate control of human lives and the elimination of privacy.

The prevailing point in *The Circle* is that privacy-eliminating technology exemplifies a growing, heinous class division in American society. Most of the suckers—the Circle employees and pretty much every other peon in the world—happily accept the conditions of their own servitude. They use the Circle's apps, which broadens the Circle's power, which allows for the creation of more apps that broaden its power further. Meanwhile, Bailey and powerful people like him are not subject to the elimination of their own privacy, unlike users of the Circle's software. Through showmanship and sleek technology that appears to enrich us all, elite people like Bailey are really a class of puppet-masters. They make us all feel happy that we are watched and controlled, including the liberal hipsters who (the movie says) should be defending privacy rights and opposing the expansion of corporate power.

Those are ideas that *The Circle* plays with, but it ends up asking complex questions that result in apparent artistic incoherence. How do we use technology that benefits us without being enslaved by it or by those who control it? By the end of the movie, which features a shot of Mae and a couple of drones, I wasn't sure what the movie's answer to that question is. Should I view the ending as happy, progressive, biting, or as more depressing than the end of *Dr. Strangelove*? I couldn't tell if the ambiguity was deliberate or if I mis-watched the movie.

Yet one thing was clear: *The Circle* is concerned with our need for truly private lives. As well, it doesn't like centralized power. Perhaps the movie's best scene displays these preferences when Bailey unveils its latest app, SoulSearch, which results in a disturbing manhunt that is cheered on by the lemming-like Circle employees.

Maybe to rectify its low imdb.com rating, I should give *The Circle* a "10" out of 10. But no, movies aren't numbers. Better to observe, consider, and think for oneself ... if that is still possible.