

How our desires can pull us

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 17, 2009 NCR Today

I am not cut out for the role of publicist, but you really must get to the movie theater and see the two flicks I watched this weekend. Hollywood has always been more of an industry than an art school, and so many movies of late simply play to humanity's baser passions in an effort to chalk up a quick profit, even while the art form is cheapened. So it was a bit surprising that both movies were thoughtful, engaging critiques of contemporary culture.

"District 9" is a disturbing tale about humans interacting with aliens, the kind of storyline that does not attract me in the least. (Dealing with the religious right fills my quotient for the bizarre.) But, the movie slowly develops into a commentary on what it means to be humane and how our prejudices and our desires can pull us away from our own humanity. Although the movie was conceived before the economic crisis, its critique of greed and the power of greed to break apart our most basic human affiliations is spot-on.

"Julie & Julia" is not disturbing, except when you are waiting to get away from the story of the self-absorbed, oh, so modern Julie and back to the joie de vivre of Julia. I can watch Meryl Streep in anything but watching her in her sixties play a woman in her thirties, and doing so convincingly, her performance is as delicious as any of the recipes from Childs' classic *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. The contrast between the two women is a generational contrast: In Childs' day, people did not ask "Am I happy?" the way Julie's generation does ad nauseum. It should not surprise that Julia finds joy and Julie finds, at best, an escape from her reality. But, be prepared -- you will leave the theater hungry.

It is funny, isn't it, that America's self-satisfied conservatives produce no art that merits the name. They boast a few intellectuals whose critiques of modern culture are interesting and worth a read. But, art? Zilch. Blessings, literally, on the producers of these two movies that show in different ways how democratic capitalism may be a type of triumph, but it is not an unmitigated one, and it is not one that stirs only noble human passions.

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