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Plato comes to life in DreamWorks film 'The Croods'

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In "The Croods," the prehistoric caveman Grug (voice of Nicolas Cage) is the head of the Crood family. These beings believe they are the only creatures of their kind in existence. They live somewhere on the earth in a dark cave and only go out during the day if necessary. Grug tells the younger members of the family -- Eep (voice of Emma Stone), Thunk (voice of Clark Duke) and Sandy (Randy Thom) -- the same bedtime story every night: Obey the rules of the cave that are marked on the walls and they will survive. Ugga (voice of Catherine Keener) is not as fearful as Grug, and Grug has no patience with his mother-in-law Gran (voice of Cloris Leachman), whom he finds an inconvenience. Eep is adventurous and dismisses her father's fears.

But their world is changing, and an earthquake starts them on a journey to find safety. One day, Eep, who believes she is alone, runs into a young nomad named Guy (voice of Ryan Reynolds), who has a talking belt -- a pet sloth named, well, Belt (voice of co-writer Chris Sanders) -- that keeps his garment in place. Guy meets the parents and Grug is not impressed; indeed, he just wants to head for the nearest cave. Then as the earth keeps changing, Guy demonstrates fire and how it can bring light to the darkness of the cave. Guy encourages the Croods to move toward the light, the sun, in order to survive.

But Grug disagrees, though he does not know why. Guy speaks about ideas and inventions to solve problems and meet their needs for survival. Guy is self-aware; he and the females in the story have consciousness. Grug continues to move slowly until Guy says, in the movie's funniest line, "Come on, if you have a speed faster than wander."

"The Croods" is a 3-D animated feature from DreamWorks, and the premise and dialogue are quite sophisticated. On the one hand, the writers, Sanders and Kirk De Micco, seem to have adapted for mass consumption the Greek philosopher Plato's Allegory (or Analogy) of the Cave and the metaphor of the cave, the sun and the line in his "Republic." On the other hand, they could be telling the story of the evolution of mankind from animal to human. Perhaps it is both.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave is about people imprisoned in their own bodies, shackled in place, who think reality is what appears to them on the walls of cave through shadows. (It's really Plato's attempt to entice people to embrace philosophy so they can grow as citizens through enlightenment. But "The Croods" doesn't go beyond nomads; perhaps the sequel will take us to the next stage.)

Actually, Guy could well be Plato (424?-347 B.C.), the teacher who enlightens through philosophy, as far as the Croods are concerned.

Anyone who knows the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis will recognize Eep and Guy in the role of humanity's first parents. Guy is fully self-aware, and Eep is about a rib's worth behind in development. Is this the moment God infused a soul? The film does not account for this change in these beings, but a look at Plato's metaphor of the line -- his metaphysical way to account for increasing levels of human awareness from illusion to belief, then reasoning and understanding -- is interesting. This power that allows them to reflect upon themselves reflecting is what believers would call being fully human and fully alive because they now possess

souls. The film is more evolutionary than creationist, but parents and catechists would be able to explain, even if the film doesn't, that God had something to do with Eep and Guy getting together.

Finally, as in Plato's analogy, for Grug and his family, the sun is "the soul's journey to an intelligible place."

It was a relief to see that "The Croods" pre-date Fred Flintstone and are just unenlightened and unsophisticated and not as crude as the title suggests. The film seemed a little long to me and somewhat preachy on the topic of getting rid of old rules and making room for a new reality, an appealing argument to teens in the audience. (This may well be all they get out of it.)

I got the impression that the script started off one way then got tinkered with to make it accessible, on some level, to a broad audience. The kids at the screening liked Belt a lot; I think most of the narrative went over their heads. The one thing I didn't care for is how badly Grug treats his mother-in-law, especially when elder abuse in real life is so rampant. No, it will not cause kids to mistreat their parents and grandparents, but this does contribute to how kids are socialized to relate to family members. Last summer's "Ice Age: Continental Drift" treated Grandma the same way. For a film with some new ideas, it's too bad most of the laughs in "The Croods" are at the expense of an elderly woman.

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