

Tom, Thanks for A Hologram for the King

October 9, 2019

A HOLOGRAM FOR THE KING (2016)

Directed by Tom Tykwer

Written by Tom Tykwer & Dave Eggers

Starring Tom Hanks as Alan Clay

There are two schools of thought on regret: 1. "I have none," and 2. "I have many, but hopefully I've grown and learned from them." There's also a secret third, which is: "Ugh, that was surely the worst thing anyone's ever said/done, maybe I'll just get cozy in this pit and hope they pour the cement soon." Our personality types play a role in how we deal with regret or lack thereof, but I wonder if a larger part of it is nurture over nature. What if our on-going relationships to the decisions we've made were bred into us generationally?

Choices are often guided by what we believe is expected of us, per some rule book they handed out years ago, with obscenities drawn on the inside cover. Generationally, we've become more empowered to take the book's guidance lightly. We know these rules and expectations are hogwash, but at the same time, hey, I've gotta wash this hog. There's a lot to be said for a life spent sticking to the plan, even if it's a plan of someone else's authorship; it ensures security. My generation's less concerned with security and more with authorship; the previous one stayed on-track more-so than mine, and less than the one before. But the big problem with Generation Dream Big is it's also Generation Go Get It. It's insufficient to fantasize about happiness - we feel it's a right. That's a risky little cocktail, and I drank it, but maybe I shouldn't have.

Regrets... I've had a few.

With any luck, we look back and decide if, given the chance at a do-over, we'd do most of it over. Alan Clay isn't convinced. After a naive business gaffe involving the propriety of Schwinn bicycle engineering, he's been forced to enter a new line of work in his middle age: hawking an advanced IT platform that would allow the King of Saudi Arabia to conference via hologram. The problem is, he's come all this way and can't manage to get facetime with anyone important. He does FaceTime with his daughter Kit, who's noncommittal attitude toward college is a deep source of worry for her father - or so he projects. What's clear is that he wants the best for his daughter, and he doesn't want the indirection of his own life to plague hers more than it already has.

Elephant in the room: Never heard of this movie. Every legendary actor has their low-budget passion projects, but I'm confounded that this one could have come out so recently without my noticing. A Hologram For the King is adapted from the Dave Eggers novel of the same name. TH loved the book so much he went on to star in two films based on works by its author (reviews would indicate he might have been wise to stop at one, but we'll get to that later). Coincidentally, this film has a great deal in common with Cast Away (reviewed last week); it's an intimate character study about a career-focused man with a big heart and jumbled priorities who, while lonely overseas, performs both emotional and literal surgery on himself.

Alan's state of health is a recurring theme in AHFTK. Early on, we see him pull off his shirt to reveal a troubling protrusion on his shoulder blade. It's immediately concerning, and when we learn the lump is benign, we're left feeling as catastrophistic as Alan. This is what anxiety does to us; it brings on this random confinement to body-chaos, and a terror of eminent death at the hands of practically nothing. Or, if you're Alan, you over-indulge in the illegal booze you've procured, and talk yourself into slicing the lump off all by yourself. Then you pass out in a cave and leave your flashlight battery to die-- wait, wrong movie.

I hesitate to spoil the film because there's a real chance you haven't seen it (\$1.1m opening weekend, it was the lowest grossing TH movie in exactly three decades). But I hope you do see it! What it offers is a realistic depiction of how regret can isolate a person to the point that they won't reach out for the only thing they need to feel less

alone. I think this lesson is harder learned by older generations. Granted, members of an older generation have more regrets to enrich them - simple math.

The other value of the movie is companionship. On three separate occasions, Alan is alienated by chairs. Again and again, he takes a seat, and the seat just gives out beneath him. In the most fundamental sense, he can't seem to take a load off, he has no basic support - or so he feels. In fact, Kit puts no pressure on her father to finance her schooling. Alan's also genuinely affable; upon arriving in Saudi Arabia, he's quickly befriended by his driver, Yousef, who remains dependable throughout. And then there's Zahra, the doctor treating his hack-job, who (oh, look at this) is also enduring a difficult transitional time, and can see Alan for who he is. The tender climax invokes Alan's memory of having gone winter camping with his father as a boy, and the resolution is that all we really need is each other. This is a diversion from the theme of regret, but it shows that, look, people love you - not in spite of anything, but *because* of everything that is you. So, give yourself a break. You're not a projection of light and shadows fit for a king, you're a messy person.

We're all just trying our best. Whether you follow your own plan or someone else's, you will surely lose track at some point along the way. The fear of death and life and the imperfections in between is not generation-specific. You'll always find things within that you know need to change, but don't try to slice them off by yourself. After all, you're getting older, and you probably can't still bend that way.

Thx!