

# Tom, Thanks for The Circle

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THE CIRCLE (2017)

Directed by James Ponsoldt

Written by James Ponsoldt & Dave Eggers

Starring Emma Watson, John Boyega, & Tom Hanks as Eamon Bailey

I was fifteen when Facebook reached our city. At first, it seemed like nothing more than the next in a long line of similar platforms allowing young people to feel not only connected but substantial, on a frontier that had previously been little more than a lawless grand experiment of information transfer. Suddenly, every kid in high school had their own front door on the Internet, and it was always unlocked. Facebook proved immediately addictive for its simple observance of everyone's social relevance. This was further distilled with the normalization of selfie-sharing and the advent of Instagram, when suddenly a young person's very worth was precisely quantifiable and on display for all to see and weaponize. Before long, these platforms had become fundamental, as had general participation in a culture that discouraged privacy and championed immodesty. And we have since constantly witnessed how it impacts all aspects of life, from mental health to politics, and yet it's never been enough to say so. The greatest evil of all was their successful goal to convince us to engage willingly. So, we shrug our shoulders, click refresh, and point fingers.

2017's *The Circle* aims to evaluate a system in which technology and surveillance overthrow a voluntary society, and the one depicted in the film is hardly allegorical. The bells and whistles they fictionalize are in fact quite grounded and realistic, and the story isn't so much cautionary as it is contemporary. For all these reasons, it should be an entirely relatable movie, and yet I spent its full run-time with my eyebrows bouncing about. To be fair, I remember hearing it was flawed, and maybe that influenced my expectations, but I was fully willing to enjoy *The Circle*, for the cast alone. Emma Watson plays Mae, who's just secured a job at the headquarters of a flashy tech company. After an initial culture shock, she comes to embrace the unconventional pace of her new workplace, owed in part to their full medical coverage of her and her parents (played by Bill Paxton and Glenna Headly, both of whom died within three months of the film's release). Mae is even deeper consumed by *The Circle*'s philosophies on surveillance when a near-death experience finds her in the company of Eamon Bailey (TH), the smooth-talkin' denim-wearin' regular ol' billionaire face of the organization. Mae submits to a pilot test, wherein she allows herself to be watched at all times from around the world. In this process, she becomes something of a social media celebrity.

We've already delved into TH's previous Dave Eggers vehicle, *A Hologram for the King*, a story that also used modern devices like technology and global relations to tell of humanity, ethics, and family. I haven't read either novel, but having now seen both movies, I struggle to imagine how they came from the same imagination. *The Circle*, while mechanically relevant, is void of soul; we could forever chicken-egg the discussion of how the poor writing begot the poor acting begot the poor dialogue and so on. Let's get to it: this circle is egg-shaped, or it was before it splatted everywhere. Admittedly, it's mostly watchable, save maybe Ellar Coltrane's "death threats," confrontation, but the dude's not really... an actor... can I say that? I'm trying to let him off the hook. The cast is otherwise so crammed with likable people (Patton Oswalt, John Boyega, Karen Gillan), that the film manages to float without life-jackets, but if it's dead in the water, the underdevelopment of the plot can be blamed. Oh, and Emma can't do an American accent. She couldn't then, she can't now, and there are greater sins one can commit.

The film does not explicitly discuss the way technology impacts different generations disproportionately, but it's clear by the optics, it's a decisive condemnation of millennials. As a member of that bracket, I (like most of us) can recognize the dangers of cyber immersion and can appreciate a criticism of our carelessness among those dangers. But this self-awareness is exactly what *The Circle* gets wrong about millennials. The only people shown engaging in toxic, self-obsessed group-think are from the generation that, in real life, is dubious of it. Maybe what we do best is uphold skepticism, and this film's ignorance of that not only insults its audience, it discredits its thesis. I think anyway - I'm not positive there even was a thesis, besides that tech companies can't be trusted (which is true) and that we're too selfish to do anything about it (which is also true, but isn't exclusive to any one demographic).

Our dear TH is so seemingly incapable of turning in a bad performance that if he ever did, that in and of itself would seem like a great performance. He's believable as the charismatic, manipulative priest of a movement, even without a whole lot of experience playing the villain. The problem is, you don't care enough about the heroes to hate their enemies. The real shame is the on-going failure to properly vilify one of these mysterious tech gurus in film; my buddy Aaron Sorkin's written two bio-pics about this kind of person and both of them, while good, are pretty gentle on their subjects. Still, it's not TH's character's flick, though the unrivaled highlight is when Mae exposes his evils and he whispers to Patton Oswalt's character, "We are so fucked."

So! How to show gratitude for this largely bad movie... How to... show... Okay, how about this? It's never a bad time to be reminded to check on our own attachment to any product or service that claims to unite us but in fact keeps us separate. It isn't productive to suspect wickedness in all worldly changes, but it isn't safe to assume altruism either. Just be smart! The other gift The Circle offers is the opportunity to watch other *better* films with similar themes, like Ex Machina or the Nosedive episode of Black Mirror. Or just watch The Circle - beats going on Facebook.

Thx!