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On the Devil Wears Prada Movies

While watching the "Devil Wears Prada 2", I asked myself: when did I stop running? Now that I am a septuagenarian, I find myself more and more looking back on my life. I thought about this because the new movie joins the main characters twenty years after the first movie. Then, Andrea "Andy" Sachs, as a recent graduate from Northwestern University, is running from here to there in order to please her impossible boss, Miranda Priestly, editor-in-chief of the fictional Runway magazine. I can understand this. Twenty years later, Andy is still running. Was I still running in my 40s? Now? Please. I do not run anywhere now because so much of life is a game of hurry up and wait.

It occurred to me as I was watching the first movie before I went to see the second movie that neither of these movies is about the fashion industry. Fashion is the background, the context, but we really do not learn very much about the industry itself. When I was a girl, growing up in the late fifties and the sixties, the way my mother bought clothes for us is very different from the way I buy clothes today. Then, we shopped at department stores that were downtown, or we bought patterns and fabric from Sears and our dressmaker, Mrs. Mary Giles, made the clothes. She had worked in clothes manufacturing when clothes were still mainly made locally. She taught me to sew, but her standards were such that I spent a good deal of my time ripping seams that were not properly sewn.

In the first movie, Miranda explains to Andy that the decisions made by her and people at fashion magazines influence what store buyers buy. Our choices are made for us before we make them. What Miranda did not say was that fashion designers are often influenced by what people on the street are wearing. Thus, fashion is both a top-down and a bottom-up enterprise. In neither of the movies do we see the mountains of waste clothes that end up on beaches in West Africa.

Today, I buy clothes in a very different way. It has been years since I bought clothes in a department store. Now, I shop mainly on-line, and the fashion houses know this. I bought the May issue of "Vogue". As usual, when I buy this magazine, I am first taken with the smell of it because of a perfume ad, and I also think that the publishers of the magazine ought to pay me for reading it because the book is mostly ads. Now the ads have their websites included, so we can shop directly from them. The Vogue price point is too much for me, but there are other websites where I can go, see hundreds of choices, order what I want and have it delivered to my house as soon as the next day. These days, I am clear about my personal style and shop accordingly. Sears no longer exists and stores that sell dress patterns and fabric are closing.

The fashion industry is different than it was twenty years ago, and very different than it was when I was a girl. Like the first movie, the second movie is also not about fashion. It is about journalism at the current moment and about the influence of billionaires on who decides the

information we will get.

I say the first movie was a morality tale about setting boundaries and about how we make decisions regarding our freedom as moral actors. The second movie is about machinations to get a proximity to a billionaire who will give one power. For me, the end of the second movie was less satisfying because none of the characters escaped the trap.

In defense of Nate. I was very surprised to see comments about the first movie that were critical of Nate, Andy's boyfriend. The negative comments seemed to think that Nate was not a supportive boyfriend. I disagree. Nate was the moral core of the movie. He wanted Andy to be true to herself, to guard her own integrity. He told her that he would not care what the job was as long as it was honestly what she wanted to do, but the job as Miranda's assistant was not.

Whenever Andy made a morally questionable choice, she would say that she did not have a choice. This is a moral dodge. Every human moral actor has a choice, even enslaved people. Enslaved Africans sang: "Before I be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free." The enslaved met the realities of their situation in various ways. Some ran away. Some pretended they did not understand what was asked of them. Some broke tools. Some worked hard for the sake of their own self-respect looking forward to the day when future generations would be free. The question is: are we willing to pay the price for our freedom?

Thinking about Miranda, I understand her. She was focused on the magazine and on the industry. She was clear about her vision of what the book should be and what it should do. I did not see her as a boss who demanded more of her staff than she herself was willing to give. We see her own personal life implode. She did not care about the feelings of her subordinates. The difference between Miranda and Andy was more than age and power. The difference was that Miranda was working in an industry that she cared about. Andy used the job as a means to an end and not an end in itself.

The second movie was disappointing to me because I did not recognize this Miranda. The logic of the movie is that after 20 years, there would be human resources changes that would not allow Miranda to throw her coat and purse on an assistant's desk and expect the assistant to hang them up. All right, this is plausible, but it is not believable that a grown woman would have difficulty hanging up her coat. It is also not believable that she would not have recognized Andy. Miranda would keep up with the latest in publishing, including journalism. If Andy was now an award-winning journalist, Miranda would have known it. It stretches the limits of credulity to think that Miranda would not have known where the clothes of the fashion designers that she features in her magazine were manufactured. It is also doubtful that Miranda would not have known about body positivity. She would be well aware of the push in the fashion industry to make clothes for plus-sized women and to feature them in stories and ads.

On the other hand, the influence of billionaires was believable, but it was disappointing that none of the billionaires were women who had earned their own fortunes. The women,

including Emily, had power because they were either engaged to or divorced from a man who had made his fortune. In the real world, there are female billionaires who have made their own money in a variety of industries, including manufacturing and technology as well as entertainment and the fashion industry itself. It would have been far more interesting had Miranda, Emily, and Andy worked together to bring a consortium of billionaire women together to buy the magazine or several magazines.

Nevertheless, both of the Devil Wears Prada movies are entertaining. It is fun to see the original characters back, even if one has to suspend disbelief in far too many scenes. Beyond their entertainment value, these movies can be a way for us to think about the moral goals of living, sustenance and joy. Clothes are a basic necessity of life for human beings, the animal with no fur or shell to protect our fragile bodies. The clothes we choose to wear, the statements that we make about ourselves with the clothes that we wear can be a source of joy. The moral work is to find the right balance in our lives, to live with poise and equilibrium so that life is worth living.