Written by Mike Schulz
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IN TIME

Set in either the distant future or some Bizarro World version of the present, Andrew Niccol’s sci-fi thriller *In Time* imagines an Earth in which time is literally our universal currency; an eight-hour work shift can add a few days to your life span, but a trip to the grocery store will cost you two weeks. (A slowly ticking, neon-green clock embedded in your forearm tells you just how much time you have left to spend.) It’s also an Earth in which humans have been genetically engineered to stop aging at 25, and are then allowed one year more before their bodies shut down completely ... unless, of course, they have the proper means, or the proper lack of morals, to buy or steal as much extra time as they want.

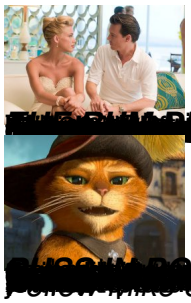
Clever and promising though this premise is, I’ll admit to a slight foreboding when we learned that the majority of the world’s time was owned by roughly 1 percent of its population, with the other 99 percent at the mercy of those greedy “time-shareholders”; clearly, writer/director/producer Niccol wasn’t fashioning an escapist lark so much as A Parable for Our Times. And my foreboding only increased upon hearing the underclass’ neighborhoods referred to as “ghettos,” their streets littered with bodies of the recently deceased with numbers stenciled on their arms; it felt equally clear that, for Niccol, one parable wasn’t going to be enough. Yet while *In Time* isn’t without its obvious socio-political and -economic allegories and morally shaky allusions to the Holocaust, the shock of the movie lies in what a thoroughly engaging, nimble entertainment it remains despite the occasional heavy-handedness.

Key to the film’s almost incongruously lighthearted tone is the casting of Justin Timberlake. Portraying Will Salas, a time-strapped, working-class man who unwittingly acquires an extra century and becomes the prime suspect in a murder investigation, Timberlake doesn’t really have much to play here beyond the prototypical “guy on the run.” But happily, he’s an active, quick-witted screen presence, and a fine enough actor (and enough of a natural comedian) to suggest that an actual human being is trapped in Niccol’s carefully crafted web of intrigue. The eternally likable Timberlake gives this inventive yet potentially synthetic picture some much-needed rooting interest, and so does Amanda Seyfried, sporting a red bob for her role as the debutante who becomes the star’s initially unwilling traveling companion. Seyfried has actually been given even less to work with than her co-star – she seems to be around primarily so that Timberlake has someone to drag alongside him during chase scenes – but she’s frisky and touching, and scores most of the movie’s biggest laughs. (Seeing their faces next to one another on a news broadcast, Seyfried says, “We look *cute* together,” effectively, and

hilariously, vocalizing what everyone in the audience is thinking.)

In Time is at its most spectacular, though, in its bevy of wonderfully inventive throwaway touches, be they visual, vocal, or even narrative. (Timberlake’s Will is generally able to stay ahead of the law and his wealthy pursuers because, as characters frequently note, “he can *run*”; those with enough time on their hands to live forever don’t need to *do* that, and have consequently never learned how.) Whether Will is paying for his pricey dinner check and ordering the waitress to “keep a week for yourself,” or Vincent Kartheiser’s 111-year-old magnate is introducing Will to his mother-in-law, his wife, and his daughter – all of whom, naturally, look 25 years old – Niccol’s work is a beautifully detailed flight of fancy, one nearly equal to the filmmaker’s 1997 *Gattaca*. This movie doesn’t quite have the emotional resonance of that unjustly neglected sci-fi dazzler, but its design, which can best be described as “futuristic vintage,” is consistently outstanding, and in the supporting turns by Kartheiser, Johnny Galecki, Olivia Wilde (brilliantly cast as Will’s 50-year-old mom), and the great Cillian Murphy, it oftentimes pops with personality.

At least it does whenever Alex Pettyfer, who plays some kind of thuggish ghetto kingpin, isn’t around. I had hoped that after Pettyfer’s charisma-free, energy-draining performances in *I Am Number Four* and *Beastly* earlier this year, we were going to be spared any more – that Hollywood, unsuccessfully trying to make a hot young star out of (at best) an ambulatory magazine cover, would have learned its lesson. No such luck. Every time Pettyfer shows up in *In Time*, his amateurish readings and dead-eyed blankness kill the movie’s momentum, and his attempts at acting “dangerous” and “threatening” are unceasingly giggle-worthy. According to the Internet Movie Database, Pettyfer’s got another release scheduled for 2012. Why are we being subjected to more movies with this guy? As Niccol’s otherwise excellent new film reminds us, isn’t life *already* too short?



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