What the hell did I just watch?

There’s a refreshing idealism to *Megalopolis*. In a time overflowing with grim, nihilistic postapocalyptic stories, Francis Ford Coppola’s latest film is a retrofuturistic parable about creating a better world through architecture, science, and dreams. Unfortunately, that sheen fades almost immediately. The film wants viewers to imagine an idealistic future. But its vision for that future is so vague as to be meaningless. For all of its good intentions, *Megalopolis* is a confusing, bloated disaster.

This shouldn’t be too surprising, as the lead-up to the film’s release has mostly been focused on one controversy after another. There’s the long development time, with director Coppola working on the movie in some form since 1982, forced to self-finance the entire $120 million production because studios passed on it. There are the reports of inappropriate on-set behavior (and a subsequent lawsuit), specifically hiring actors “who were canceled at one point or another,” and all of those fake AI-generated review quotes. The four-decade-long process of bringing *Megalopolis* to theaters was an absolute mess, much like the film itself.

Now, this is the part of the review where I normally would give a clear summary of what the film is about. That’s not so easy with *Megalopolis*, because it borders on the nonsensical. It takes place in an alternate universe setting called New Rome City and is centered on a war of ideas between Mayor Cicero (Giancarlo Esposito) and Cesar (Adam Driver), the chair of the Design Authority (sort of like a really powerful group of architects who are treated like rock stars for some

reason). Cicero wants to keep New Rome as it is, a functional but not particularly inspiring place that could maybe use a lucrative new casino. Cesar wants to rebuild it as a fantastical utopia that, yes, is called Megalopolis.

The idea is pretty clear: America is much like Ancient Rome at its peak, a place full of excess and indulgence (which is exemplified by everyone doing lots of coke) that is also heading for a historic fall from grace. *Megalopolis* is trying to ask if there's another way. It doesn't necessarily have any answers, but it really wants to ask the question.

Almost every aspect of *Megalopolis* — both the film and the fictional city at its heart — feels completely underdeveloped, despite being in the works for so long. New Rome City, for instance, is literally just New York City with a perpetual golden hue. People drive modern cars, use QR codes, and read the *New Rome Post*. There's no creative design that might make for an intriguing parallel to our own world, aside from the occasional chariot race.

Even worse is Cesar, who is the core of the film. He's an architectural genius, which you know because everyone calls him a genius and because he won a Nobel Prize for creating a mysterious building material that is basically magic. (It can be used to create fantastical cities and dresses that render the wearer invisible and doubles as a handy cure for bullet wounds.) Cesar has the ability to stop time when he's inspired by his muse, who happens to be Cicero's daughter, played by Nathalie Emmanuel. This superpower isn't explained either literally or thematically and never really has an impact on the story in any way. It's just there.

Nothing Cesar does seems all that smart. He mostly quotes Shakespeare at length and says things like "what connects power also stores it" during design meetings. It's unclear how his dream city is being funded or constructed or how it will actually address real-world issues like income inequality or

joblessness, aside from giving every adult their own personal garden. I'm not asking for a blueprint of Megalopolis, but nothing in the city's concept ever rises above the depth of a "The World If" meme. When Cicero questions whether Cesar's city is realistic and is met with some philosophical musings, I found myself siding with the crooked mayor. Like Coppola, Cesar is only interested in questions, not answers. But this isn't a story about a man's tragic, idealistic hubris, either — his dream simply somehow works.

It might be generous to describe *Megalopolis* as having a story at all. Coppola has said that he collected thousands of clippings from newspapers and magazines while working on the script. And that's exactly how the movie feels: like a series of ideas thrown together, without a real narrative binding them. Things just… happen. A satellite crashes into New Rome despite having long been predicted to hit Labrador. When Cicero gets the news that it's on course to hit the city, he asks, "What do we do?" Then the scene abruptly ends with no answer.

Story isn't everything, of course, but it's not like *Megalopolis* has many other redeeming qualities. The acting is stilted and erratic, as if the performers are as confused about what's going on as the audience is. The dialogue veers between painfully obvious allegories and painfully juvenile jokes. You can imagine how bad the sex scenes are. Much of it is also just plain dumb. Aubrey Plaza plays a platinum blonde reporter named Wow Platinum, while Cesar's uncle Crassus (Jon Voight) hides weapons behind his erection. These moments are funny, but it's not clear if they're supposed to be given how serious the rest of the movie is.

There are some intriguing moments. At one point during the theatrical experience, the lights turn back on so that a real-world actor in the theater can lip-sync questions that a reporter is asking Cesar during a press conference. (How this will play out during wide release or when the movie hits Blu-

ray and streaming services is unclear.) But mostly, it’s the kind of movie that makes an audience laugh unintentionally.

I can appreciate the sentiment behind *Megalopolis* — hell, that’s something the world could really use right now. It may have been conceived in the ’80s, but the core of the film feels timely. It’s a shame that the rest of the movie — its story, characters, acting, and dialogue — does nothing but get in the way. If Coppola couldn’t clearly articulate that viewpoint with 40 years of work, there’s no way I’m going to understand it in two and a half hours.

Megalopolis *hits theaters on September 27th.*

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