Still Alice and *Kingsman: The Secret Service*—A woman battles disease and a street kid helps save the world …

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Still Alice, *directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, screenplay by Glatzer, based on the novel by Lisa Genova*; Kingsman: The Secret Service, *directed by Matthew Vaughn, screenplay by Vaughn and Jane Goldman, based on the comic books by Mark Millar and Dave Gibbons*

"Even then, there were neurons in her head, not far from her ears, that were being strangled to death, too quietly for her to hear them. Some would argue that things were going so insidiously wrong that the neurons themselves initiated events that would lead to their destruction. Whether it was molecular murder or cellular suicide, they were unable to warn her of what was happening before they died," writes former neurologist Dr. Lisa Genova in her 2007 novel, *Still Alice*.

This approach to Alzheimer's disease is at the heart of its presentation in the new film—with the same title—adapted from Genova's book and directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland. The movie is an examination of the physical and emotional trauma produced by a pernicious disease that in 2010 afflicted an estimated 21 to 35 million people worldwide, plus of course tens of millions more family members and friends.

Although the film's title suggests the disease can somehow be separated out from the individual, *Still Alice* must inevitably confront the reality that "molecular murder or cellular suicide" is tantamount to the destruction of the afflicted person's inner world.

Julianne Moore, who won the Academy Award for the part Sunday night, plays 50-year-old Dr. Alice Howland, an accomplished Ivy League linguistics professor. She has a devoted husband, John (Alec Baldwin), a research physician, and three attractive, successful offspring, Tom (Hunter Parrish), a medical student, Anna (Kate Bosworth), a married attorney trying to have children, and Lydia (Kristen Stewart), who has defied her mother's wishes by trading a college education for an acting career in Los Angeles.

Tragedy strikes hard when Alice is diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's of a rare familial variety, most likely inherited from her now-deceased, alcoholic father. Even worse, there is a 50 percent chance she has transmitted the condition to her children. Her neurologist explains that "with familial early-onset, things can go fast. And actually, with people who have a high level of education, things can go faster."

Obviously, it is a painful irony that a linguist is forced to struggle with increasing incoherence. In a lecture towards the film's beginning, Alice refers to Darwin's fascination with the "the babble of young children," a state she later runs the risk of being reduced to. At one point, she asserts she would rather have cancer. Clearly, as the film depicts, literally losing one's mind is a living death. ("My brain is going. Everything I've worked for my entire life is going." On another occasion she courageously remarks that "I am not suffering. I'm struggling to stay connected to who I once was.")

Moore's moving performance makes up almost the entire dramatic infrastructure of *Still Alice*. As the secondary characters orbit around the protagonist, little effort is expended on their development. Baldwin seems particularly out of place as Alice's husband, in that his special skills as an actor are not of the warm and fuzzy sort. He generally fares better as the caustic cynic. Bosworth and Stewart are decorative background material for the most part.

Alice's fate is dreadful, but the film's essentially complacent attitude toward broader realities is a problem. According to the logic of *Still Alice*, her little family universe (made up of brilliant careers, elegant homes in Manhattan and at the Long Island seashore, ideal children—including the willful Lydia) is a perfect one until shattered by disease. Of course, serious illness strikes down individuals from every background, but the implication that for any portion of the population, if it could only "have its health," existence would be free from the contradictions of modern life is a false and ridiculous one, and artistically debilitating.

Simply examining the fate of someone who falls ill is not by itself the stuff of great tragedy. Allowing so little of the world to make its way into the movie renders it dramatically one-sided and stilted—a stuffed replica of what it could be. We can certainly grasp that diseases like Alzheimer's are terrible and affect many lives, but we need more than this. Despite the talents of Moore, *Still Alice* tends to function as something of a

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cinematic truism.

In the production notes, the British-born Wash Westmoreland reveals the sad news that his co-director and partner Richard Glatzer has recently been diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease), and notes the similarities between Alzheimer's and ALS: "They are both terminal, incurable, and have the effect of isolating the patient from the world at large. Most crucially, both diseases eat away at the sense of identity and make it vitally important to *hang on to yourself* ."

One must point out that it is conceivable to create a work about disease and the struggle "to hang on" to one's self that is still located in the larger drama of social life. Hollywood screenwriters in an earlier day recognized the need to do that, even if their efforts were often formulaic. For example, in *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942), the biography of baseball legend Gehrig himself, the viewer sees glimpses of Gehrig's life in a working class New York neighborhood and the travails of his German immigrant parents. His mother wants him to be an engineer, doesn't want him to marry the woman he loves, etc. At least there is an effort to create a social and historical setting for the onset of the tragic ailment. Audiences at the time would have *expected* that.

Unfortunately, *Still Alice* belongs to a growing genre that operates at the microcosmic level of neurons. The filmmakers' intentions may be entirely sincere, but one cannot avoid pointing out the safe and harmless character of the trend.

Kingsman*: *The Secret Service

Based on Mark Millar and Dave Gibbons' 2012 comic book series and directed by Matthew Vaughn, *Kingsman*: *The Secret Service* is a film about a long-standing (founded in 1849), international, independent (of any government) and fictional spy agency based in England, staffed by British agents and loosely modeled on King Arthur's legendary Round Table. Along those lines, its leading figures are code-named Arthur (Michael Caine), Galahad (Colin Firth), Lancelot (Jack Davenport) and Merlin (Mark Strong). The secret Kingsman headquarters is hidden behind a posh Savile Row tailors' shop in London and the tongue-in-cheek pass phrase is "Oxfords, not brogues."

Firth as Harry Hart/Galahad is seeking to recruit Gary "Eggsy" Unwin (Taron Egerton), a tough kid from a public housing estate, into the Kingsman outfit, in part to repay the boy's father, a former Kingsman, who died saving Harry's life by tackling an Arab suicide-bomber in the Middle East in 1997.

The impeccably dressed Harry ("Manners maketh man"), who has enough gadgets and skill to dispatch a crowd of hoods, eventually convinces Eggsy to join the side of good. Making the grade for the organization is an arduous process, in which Eggsy will be competing with elite youth from Oxford and Cambridge.

The first half of the movie is a mildly entertaining send-up of the *James Bond* series, in the spirit of *The Avengers* or *Get Smart*, complete with a few slaps at the British upper crust (Eggsy to Harry: We're "cannon fodder for snobs like you"). The suave Firth hardly has to exert himself and Caine has barely a cameo appearance. Appealing newcomer Egerton is one of the film's genuinely liveliest elements.

The Kingsman's nemesis is a billionaire Silicon Valley industrialist, Richmond Valentine (Samuel L. Jackson with an annoying lisp), who believes the earth must be cleansed of humanity to avoid destruction through global warming. (In one scene, Valentine pitches his plan to the White House and someone intended to suggest President Barack Obama.) His sidekick and lover Gazelle (Algerian dancer and actress Sofia Boutella) sports flexible prosthetic legs that allow her to leap like the animal she is named after and double as weapons of mass destruction.

Although the movie stylizes its violence more than the average action blockbuster—and that is a minor plus—it does not escape the curse of money-saturated blandness. In essence, *Kingsman* is a pseudo-populist mishmash, seeking to cash in on vague anti-government sentiments, anti-terrorism (with a whiff of Islamophobia), concern about climate change and opposition to religious fanaticism (Harry demolishes a Kentucky church congregation full of racist, anti-gay, anti-abortion lunatics).

If one were to work out the film's logic, an effort truly not worth making, it is playing with the notion that Britain's sclerotic ruling institutions require an infusion of fresh blood and energy from below—that is, from the "commoners."

One last note: *Kingsman*'s unpleasant ending, a seriously misguided sex joke, both points to the film's sophomoric character and leaves a sour taste in the mouth.

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