

Hungry for more

Reflections on the 2007 animated film Ratatouille as the ultimate lesson for human empathy and acceptance.

Thirteen years on, and my appetite for Ratatouille has only been growing through time. My first viewing of this movie, at the age of 11, was on a Blu-ray CD, over-due on its rental expiration and over-watched to a point where I could play the entire film, vividly in my own head.

In many ways, Ratatouille has been a milestone film in shaping my worldview. As a child, it was the friendship between ambitious yet ashamed Remy and insecure yet generous Linguini that humored me. Packed with lessons of camaraderie and acceptance between the two friends, I lapped up the exaggerated gestures, colorful plates, and the absurd concept of a rat with a compulsive passion for food, with awe and adoration.

The film has been served to us as food for thought. Each periodic viewing has peeled open a new layer of truth to my advancing understanding of society. Within the film, I found a place to anchor my ideas of class and caste hierarchy and intolerance to the outsider. The simple idea of a rat cooking food in a kitchen is a bold one. Brad Bird (writer and director), says he was fascinated with the outlandish concept of a rat, who is only known to run away from human beings, shown to be so helplessly drawn to them. Remy's passion for food is painted with a lust to chase the impossible dream. It is a desire so human in nature, all in the tiny physical form of perhaps the most detested creature.

Human being's relationship with the rat has been a long-standing feud, as dramatically portrayed in the first few scenes of the film. Like a terrorist, the old lady pulls out her weapon and shoots at Remy and his colony, driving them away, from their own home. As my political views advanced over my multiple viewings of this didactic film, this scene is an explainer for growing hostility to the other. Parallely, in another one of my personal favorites, Tarantino's The Inglorious Basterds, the sprightly cruel character of The Jew Hunter (Col. Landa), played by Christoph Waltz, reveals his ruthless Nazi demeanor, with an analogy.

COL. LANDA

If one were to determine what attributes the Jews share with a beast, it would be that of the rat.....

Consider for a moment the world a rat lives in. It's a hostile world indeed. If a rat were to scamper through your front door right now, would you greet it with hostility?

PERRIER

I suppose I would.

COL. LANDA

Has a rat ever done anything to you to create this animosity you feel toward them?.....

If a rat were to scamper through your door this very minute, would you offer it a saucer of your delicious milk?

PERRIER

Probably not.

COL. LANDA

I didn't think so. You don't like them. You don't really know why you don't like them. All you know is, you find them repulsive.

Landa's ruthless comparison of Jews to rats justifies the mistreatment of the other as undesired and repulsive without necessary cause. Human history is fraught with examples of hostility to the other. Using the story of a rat being assimilated within human society acts as a question to test our capacity for sweeping hatred.

It's a natural reaction to cringe at the sight of a rat, without guilt. They're scavengers and pests and we're wired to kill them the minute we see them. Pop culture is littered with references to rats as undesired scum. But it's impossible for me to look at a rat again and not think of Remy or imagine desire, passion, or the spectrum of human emotions that 'little chef' experienced through his journey. As an allegory for the unwanted in the trials and tribulations of a talented artist coming from nowhere, Ratatouille is rebellious in its ambition to question where we would draw the line to extend our empathy and acceptance to the different. Doesn't a rat with human-like consciousness and talents deserve to be treated

humanely? Or at least at par with those of equal talents? What then separates the talents of a rat from us?

The title 'Ratatouille' becomes a satisfying point of culmination in the closing scenes of the film. It is with the softening of the character of Paris's harshest food critic, Anton Ego when he's served a plate of Ratatouille, made by Remy.

"There are times when a critic truly risks something. It is in the discovery and defense of the new. The world is often unkind to the new, but the new needs friends".

At this moment, Ego has swiveled completely from his reputation of superiority as a critic - impossible to please. Ego's monologue at the end of the film continues to be the spirit I hold on to when the artist in me feels weak and insecure. It's a joy to feel the peak resolution of Remy's passion for food come through the extreme thawing of Ego's character. With the very first bite of Remy's ratatouille, Ego transforms from a critic, pained by the routine absence of flavor, to a fascinated, hungry fool in love again. Ending the film with Ego's monologue leaves us with a warm and welcoming homage to those who create, against the odds, with daring courage and authenticity.

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Dedicated to Amita, Aarushi, and Gurkamal for always keeping the spark alive.

Sources:

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