

The Congress (2013)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours 2 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 2; Language 3; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

*What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet
forfeit their soul?*

Mark 8:36

This is another overlooked film that impressed the participants in the Movies That Matter Festival in Albuquerque last March. Based on Stanislaw Lem's 1971 science-fiction novel, *The Futurological Congress*, Ari Forman's film transports us into a future where psychotropics have created a population easily malleable, and computer science is about to free Hollywood from undependable living actors.

Robin Wright is an actress (named Robin Wright) who is finding it difficult to secure a role. She lives with her son Aaron (Kodi Smit-McPhee) in a converted DC-9 hanger. Worried because he needs expensive medical care to treat a disease causing him to lose his hearing, she needs money very badly. Miramont Studios boss Jeff (Danny Huston) proposes what he calls his last offer.

Sitting behind his power desk, he tells her, "We at Miramont, want to... want to scan you. All of you – your body, your face, your emotion, your laughter, your tears, your climaxing, your happiness, your depressions, your... fears, longings. We want to sample you, we want to preserve you, we want... all this, this... this thing, this thing called... "Robin Wright".

Robin responds. " What will you do with this... thing? That you call Robin Wright?"

Jeff, "We'll do all the things that your Robin Wright wouldn't do."

Robin at first refuses the highly lucrative offer because of the clause that dictates she must never again act in public, on the screen or even in a high school play. Her friend and agent Al (Harvey Keitel) counsels her to accept, knowing that few middle aged actresses can hope to find a leading role. She reluctantly agrees, and we see her standing in the large machine as it scans her body while she goes through the whole gamut of emotions.

Jump to 20 years later—and from live action to cartoon style—when Robin is invited to speak at The Future Congress, a large trade show in Abrahama in the Animation Zone. She and the others receive a dose of a hallucinogenic drug so that they perceive reality through their imaginations as if in a cartoon world. Her digitized self has been appearing in films so popular that she is a superstar, a box office champion. She sees her face emblazoned on blimps and billboards advertising the cheesy action films that she had abhorred before signing her image away.

The moguls now want to go one step further by transforming her into a drug that will enable her rabid fans to *become* Robin Wright. She might even become a soft drink. Apparently any way that they can profit by her, the profiteers are willing to try it. The moguls have their agenda, and Robin has her own, to find the son that she has lost track of. She has come to regret her deal, realizing that family is what really matters. She meets some bizarre characters in her search, and we come to wonder what will be her fate in this world dominated by chemistry and technology so that visuals are more important than the real thing.

This fascinating film should make us think about the power of imagination and our use of technology. What kind of a brave new world is in store for our children? Have we become so

sophisticated and scientifically skilled that, as Bonhoeffer observed as far back as the first half of the 20th century, God has been crowded out of the world? Who needs God if we can manipulate not just our external world, but ourselves? “So in the image of themselves, Humanity created humanity.” Is this an improvement on Genesis 1:27?

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the August issue of VP.