

The Economy in Perspective

Now on screen: X-Pansion, a new-age thriller, rated PG-13 for mild violence and economic jargon, running time of three years and then some...

The mega-blockbuster, *X-Pansion*, is an insightful, ultimately heartening, portrayal of the U.S. business cycle, but it is not the conventional feel-good story. In fact, it seems designed to unsettle the audience and subject it to almost unbearable suspense. We feel that the cable car inching its way up to the mountain-top station must arrive before the cable snaps, but the longer it takes the more tense we become.

Connie Sumer, the film's hero, is a likeable but complex character. Buoyant and fundamentally optimistic, she is also vulnerable to self-doubt and hesitation. We see the results in a scene that takes place in November, when initial reports of strong retail sales during the weekend after Thanksgiving are upended by the far more mixed report for the entire month. It's too early to know if Connie will regain her confidence in time to salvage the holiday sales period, but the possibility keeps our hearts pounding.

Meanwhile, as Connie seems to hesitate just when decisive action is needed most, Bazness Furmm, a battered but valiant capital spender, begins to rouse himself from inaction. After avoiding new investments in equipment and software for nearly three years, Bazness increases his purchases of these items at a 14% annual rate during the third quarter and manages to maintain his strength in October. It seems possible that Connie and Bazness are becoming a supportive duo who will take turns pulling one another through crises. This development could give the story some much-needed balance. Frankly, an audience tires of watching consumers snatch up autos, cars, and new homes. We yearn to see a tycoon splurging on enterprise-wide grid computing systems or to cheer on a cell-phone-toting entrepreneur installing a new DNA sequencer in her genetics lab. At this point, even the purchase of a machine to form corrugated cardboard boxes would be a real audience pleaser.

And the malcontent Job, so central to the plot: What should we make of him? White hat or black hat? Knight or knave? Agent or double agent? Early

in the action, Job is the character who never fails to strike fear into our hearts. He burdens us with doubts that the story will ever reach a happy ending. Vampire-like, he seems to suck the lifeblood out of this expansion, preventing the audience from feeling a sense safety: Fewer people are employed today than when the recession began in 2001. But Job has been acting strangely in the past few months. Employment levels have stopped declining and even have begun to advance. Is Job's recent behavior evidence of his character's rehabilitation, or is he building up our confidence only to disappoint us again?

No thriller would be complete without the appearance of an exotic stranger to increase the mystery and excite our emotions. In *X-Pansion*, Chai-Na is such a character. She enters the film as a dark force, conspiring with Job to keep employment growth from developing momentum. But she also interests Bazness Furmm, who is drawn to her by a mixture of love and mistrust. He insists that if Chai-Na really cared for him, she would allow her hair, which is pegged tightly in a bun, to fall to its natural level. Yet Chai-Na is also a complex character. For much of the movie, she seems aloof and self-absorbed, but in the later scenes she apparently wishes to placate Bazness. And as her character develops, her relationships with both Bazness and Connie seem to have as much potential for long-term good as for short-term suffering.

The movie's soundtrack deserves particular mention, because the atmosphere it creates is so pervasive. The soundtrack is dominated by the melancholy singing of Jaye Pan, whose plaintive laments express all the hardship and grief of a decade-long recession that has not yet clearly ended. Her song seems to warn that neither Bazness nor Job will meet with much success in the opening scenes of *X-Pansion*.

The movie's passionate, compelling story has been told and re-told for generations, but each version seems to have its own brand of suspense. The most recent rendering offers something for everyone—glamour, intrigue, and temperamental characters. Fortunately, *X-Pansion* is still playing at neighborhood theaters everywhere.