

Friends With Money and The Break-Up

Who's to blame?

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Friends With Money, written and directed by Nicole Holofcener; *The Break-Up*, directed by Peyton Reed, screenplay by Jeremy Garelick and Jay Lavender

Neither one of these is a particularly successful or insightful work. Nicole Holofcener's *Friends With Money* operates at a somewhat more conscious level than Peyton Reed's *The Break-Up*, and it possesses a greater consistency of tone and look, but the former film can hardly be said to break new ground or much ground at all. And when Holofcener's self-satisfaction and willingness to evade the thorniest problems are taken into account, I don't see that her work deserves much more credit than the other, crasser work.

Our present situation is a peculiar one. One can sense around the edges of most contemporary films, with the exception perhaps of the most mindless "blockbusters" or self-involved "art" films, some degree of anxiety, perplexity or concern about the general state of things. And, at the same time, hardly anywhere are these sentiments worked up in a profound manner. So we have a great many misshapen, partially evolved, largely unmemorable works.

A film is fixed in the memory by an image or series of images that sharply, even astonishingly, brings into focus a circumstance that has been on many minds or that has hovered in the popular consciousness or semi-consciousness, but has not yet found its most appropriate expression. Some degree of social insight is necessary for such an operation.

Four women in Los Angeles have known each other for years in Holofcener's *Friends With Money*. Three—an heiress, a fashion designer and a screenwriter—are married and economically secure. The fourth, Olivia (Jennifer Aniston), who is single, recently quit her job teaching the spoiled children of the rich and makes a living cleaning houses. The film principally treats the relationships between the various women and the attitudes and behavior of the trio with money toward their friend without much.

The characters suffer from various forms of discontent. The wealthiest couple, Franny and Matt (Joan Cusack and Greg Germann), seems the happiest and best adjusted. The clothes designer, Jane (Frances McDormand), on the other hand, is given to inarticulate rage in public places. She has also decided not to wash her hair any longer. Her friends are convinced her husband Aaron (Simon McBurney) is gay. Christine (Catherine Keener), the scenarist, is splitting up with her insensitive cad of a mate and writing partner, David (Jason Isaacs).

Olivia appears to be unfortunate in love. She is essentially

stalking a former lover, a married man. And her next relationship, with a personal trainer (Scott Caan) who comes along on her cleaning jobs and then insists on a cut, hardly seems more promising. In the end, Olivia, however, seems to strike gold. At least we seem encouraged to think so.

Holofcener, director of two previous feature films (*Walking and Talking* and *Lovely and Amazing*), plus numerous episodes of television series (*Sex and the City*, *Leap of Faith*, *Gilmore Girls* and *Six Feet Under*), brings a certain care and intelligence to her work. But this care and intelligence are devoted to the small details of life. Those details in the proper hands can illuminate much larger situations, but not here.

Incidents verge on the significant, but veer away. The screenwriting pair are adding a second story to their home, oblivious to its impact on their neighbors. Jane has a breakdown in a department store when a couple cuts into line. The wealthy woman buys a \$1,000 table at a charity dinner, for a cause no one can keep straight, and invites her friends as her guests. She refuses, however, to lend Olivia a small amount of money for a training course. The husband who may or may not be gay meets another man with the same name and they become fast friends. Olivia reduces her rates as a cleaner at the insistence of a man who turns out to have millions.

The film is constructed out of the notion that these small moments constitute life. Perhaps they do for some people. But it is not a terribly interesting life, and it seems rather myopic of Holofcener to imagine that we will be fascinated by it. Is she making films only for professional people of a certain income and lifestyle?

The filmmaker's interest in money and its role in contemporary relationships seems legitimate, but how deeply does she investigate the matter? She told one interviewer, "I've always been a person who wanted to break the money taboo." The director went on: "I'm so sick of this privacy thing about salaries.... I just don't want to feel ashamed of what I'm making, whether it's too little or too much. If it's too little, you're being degraded, and people say, 'Hey, you should be making more.' If it's too much, you're 'inflated' and it's obscene what you're making, and you feel ashamed. But I feel like money should be a part of my intimate conversations with people that I know well. It's money—it's a huge part of everybody's lives." (*Truthdig.com*)

In what sense does Holofcener's film truly "break the money taboo"? *Friends With Money* tells us that money is an issue in this

social layer, that it causes anxiety and jealousy, that having it needn't be a burden, however, that some people hide their wealth and others flaunt it, and so forth. How much of this did we not already know?

The true taboo in American society surrounds any discussion of the vast chasm that has opened up between the wealthiest layers and everyone else. Holofcener is quite clear that whatever her film is about, it isn't about that.

This is from the *Guardian* in Britain: "Since the subject of class is one of American society's most unmentionable, it's both rare and refreshing that *Friends with Money* addresses such an awkward topic—except that, according to Holofcener, it doesn't. 'Or if it does, it's inadvertent,' says the 46-year-old director, sitting on her patio overlooking Topanga's lush, undulating landscape. 'The characters are all in the same class. They all started out with somewhat similar advantages; they're all white and well-educated. It's more about money than class itself. I'm just writing about fun characters and their problems, and yeah, unconsciously, how I feel about certain topics will come out. But I'm not analysing our class system or making any statements.'

It's another feature of our unhappy situation that an artist would more or less boast about not "making any statements." How are we expected to reply? Well, congratulations then, you've succeeded very nicely! And, of course, while intended to sound unconventional, the remark could hardly be more stereotyped and predictable. One strains to think of half a dozen American filmmakers who might respond in a different manner.

Naturally, Holofcener has the right to make films about anything she likes, but this one seems too circumscribed and complacent, self-consciously mundane. And I don't believe, at a more profound level, that the film accurately reflects life even in this social layer at the given moment. First of all, money is a far more tormenting issue than Holofcener indicates. Studies reveal, in fact, that it has not made the wealthy happy in America, a fact that we might have guessed at. No doubt, riches ease some strains, but they create others. This is only hinted at here. Moreover, is there not a single social or political issue that concerns this crowd? Not the war in Iraq, not the Bush administration? It seems very unlikely. One strongly senses Holofcener imposing her own taboos.

The Break-Up is a strange film. Gary (Vince Vaughn) and Brooke (Aniston again) meet and move in together and break apart within the first few minutes. Owners of a well-appointed condo, neither wants to move out. They both stay, claiming separate territories and essentially tormenting one another.

The comic moments are rather few in number, and, it seems, deliberately so. One remembers the anger that erupts in both characters, but especially Vaughn's Gary, more than any other feature of the film.

The Break-Up cannot make up its mind what it wants to be, comedy or drama, lighthearted or rather bleak. Red herrings abound, characters are introduced, threaten to become central figures and then vanish. Vincent D'Onofrio does an extraordinarily odd turn as Gary's brother, something he does these days with an alarming frequency. And why is Ann-Margret only in the film for 30 seconds or so?

Peyton Reed's film seems organized from the point of view of Gary's camp (his brothers and friends), rather menacingly at times. One feels a little frightened for Aniston's character on occasion. The misogynistic tone of the script is palpable. Much of the humor in *The Break-Up*, in fact, comes from Gary's parrying of her quite legitimate indignation at his laziness and self-centeredness.

Brooke's means of getting back at him (including a humiliating scene in which she parades naked before Gary) only tend to emphasize the real relationship of forces, much to her disadvantage.

In the end, *The Break-Up* would have us believe that Gary has a drastic change of heart and realizes how miserably he's acted. But here too, the Vaughn character has the better of it, because now he's able to act contrite and, later, brokenhearted. All in all, this is a rather unpleasant little work, with a great deal of unconscious anger floating around in its depths, or lack of depth.

Again, of course, filmmakers are free to make anything they like, even empty-headed works. But, then, perhaps we have the right to ask for something different too. For example, honest and direct films about life in America, films that expose the social situation, the economic deprivation and the spiritual malaise that afflicts so many.

No one is obliged to treat only the oppressed layers of society, although it might be helpful if some film artist indicated at least a slight interest in their fate, but whether the characters are rich or poor, why will no one at present depict our situation with any complexity?

The filmmakers are lagging far, far behind. Much of importance is beginning to be discussed in this country, not of course in the official venues, where it's prohibited, but in offices and factories and colleges, in kitchens and bedrooms. There's tension and drama in everyday life, and almost none of it finds its way to the screen. We need a breakthrough.

Imagine a film that treats its human figures seriously, considers their histories and environment, regards their dilemmas as part of a social process, brings out the difficult moral questions that confront people in the contemporary circumstances, goes deeply into things and works them through in an artistic manner. Such things must be possible! We don't need geniuses at first, much less the self-proclaimed variety; above all, we need people with something to say. Yes, something important to say.



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