

Duplicity: The essential unseriousness of it

David Walsh
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Written and directed by Tony Gilroy

In Tony Gilroy's *Michael Clayton* (2007), George Clooney played a law firm's "fixer," called in when one of the firm's senior partners suffers a mental collapse while taking a deposition in a lawsuit against a large and sinister conglomerate. The film's depiction of a corporation's ruthless pursuit of profit at the expense of the population struck a chord with critics and audiences and bestowed on the work, which had its definite weaknesses, a certain heft.

Michael Clayton aroused certain expectations, as any serious or even semi-serious work will do at a time when such efforts are relatively few and far between.

Writer-director Gilroy has followed up with *Duplicity*, a trivial and emotionally uninvolved movie. Two former intelligence agents, one American (Julia Roberts) and one British (Clive Owen), join forces, more or less, to defraud two giant corporations engaged in bitter competition. The spectator, hopeful that the new work might offer some ultimate reward, strains to follow *Duplicity's* numerous twists and turns. All for naught.

Even within the limited framework of the "romantic spy caper" genre, the denouement of Gilroy's new film is a failure—dispiriting, limp, pointless. One simply feels had. The conclusion of all the goings-on is not merely unsatisfying, it is so glaringly empty and anticlimactic as almost to be provocative.

But the ending, of course, has something to do with the rest of *Duplicity*. The pointlessness of the final moments helps bring out the essential unseriousness and banality of the previous two hours.

The film's high point, and one was aware of that possibility while watching the sequence, comes in the silent opening scene, when corporate rivals, Dick Garsik (Paul Giamatti), CEO of Equikrom, and Howard Tully (Tom Wilkinson), of Burkett & Randle, meet on a rainy airport runway, berate and jab fingers at each other, and ultimately wrestle one another to the tarmac, before horrified fellow executives.

The destinies of CIA agent Claire Stenwick (Roberts) and MI6 operative Ray Koval (Owen) become interwoven with those of Garsik and Tully in a complicated fashion that is

hardly worth describing in detail. Claire arranges to meet and "seduce" Ray at a consulate party in Dubai; having drugged him, she later steals secrets from his hotel room. Several years later, they meet again in Rome, apparently by her design, and after spending several days and nights together, decide to leave their respective agencies and go into corporate spying as a team, with the aim of making one massive score that will give them financial independence for the rest of their lives.

Claire goes to work for Burkett & Randle as assistant director of counterintelligence, but secretly reports to Equikrom, where her handler is Ray. Knowing they are being listened to, Claire and Ray perform a little play, in which he feigns indignation at her behavior in Dubai. In any event, Burkett & Randle appears ready to release a groundbreaking product onto the market, and the two corporate spies prepare themselves to take advantage. Things, needless to say, do not turn out as planned for many of the parties involved.

The performers do perfectly well. Julia Roberts is generally endearing, with fewer of the toothy smiles and whoops on which she previously tended to rely. Clive Owen is too pleased with himself, but that may have something to do with the smirking character he plays. Giamatti and Wilkinson, as always, take their roles with great seriousness. Their ruthless corporate moguls provide the film with whatever grains of truth it contains. The assorted secondary performers make a generally favorable impression.

The film, however, is stillborn. The attempts at humor barely register. The following piece of dialogue, for various reasons, is repeated a number of times. Ray says to Claire, who is pretending not to recognize him: "I'm not great on names. Where I'm solid? People I've slept with. That's been a traditional area of strength for me. You charm me. Seduce me. Screw me. Then you dope me and ransack my hotel room. And how sick is this? Last thing I remember before I passed out was how much I liked you." Those who find this kind of language "effervescent" lead all too sheltered artistic lives, in my opinion.

The "thrills" are late in coming in *Duplicity* and revolve around people and events we hardly care about.

And this is not a small matter. Gilroy seems to feel that it makes little difference in what setting and among whom he unfolds his story. But it does make a difference. No genre is purely a formal mechanism, which guarantees a particular audience response without regard to other concerns. The level of engagement of both author and spectator with any given group of human beings depends on our overall knowledge and experience of such people.

"That was the one idea that I was carrying around all the time," Gilroy told the *Daily Telegraph* in Britain. "How would two people who don't trust anything, or are completely untrustworthy, fall in love? The film is purely about the idea of romance. Nobody's worried about getting married, nobody's worried about communicating and nobody's biological clock is ticking. It's elemental. Can I trust you? Can you trust me?"

Just any two "completely untrustworthy people" in a film "purely about the idea of romance"? Writers and directors and producers simply don't think their own material through. Gilroy's comments to various interviewers, invariably centering on himself and his career, suggest a disturbing degree of insulation from the current state of the world. Here we are, in the wake of financial collapse, in the midst of two wars pursued by Washington, and this is the kind of film we are offered.

It seems again almost a provocation at this moment in history, but probably results from sheer thoughtlessness and indifference, to attempt to establish as sympathetic figures CIA and MI6 agents operating in the Middle East! Rather than with "wit," "banter," "sophistication," "romance," many around the globe would be more likely to associate such individuals with "oil," "conspiracy," "torture," "assassination"....

Gilroy seems oblivious to the problem, but the problem doesn't thereby leave him untouched. It must have a dampening, art-damaging effect. Instinctively or otherwise, the writer-director knows that to treat the lives of US and British agents in the Middle East in a three-dimensional fashion would introduce details that would not be flattering.

In an interview, the filmmaker notes that he came by his knowledge about corporate spying from contacts in the intelligence business he met in the course of researching various films. Gilroy refers to "all the guys who'd worked in SAS [Special Air Service], who'd gone through British intelligence, [who] were pretty much all setting up shop privately." He points to "a whole vast community that goes all the way up to the DynCorps [private military contractor] and...all these different Blackwaters" (ComingSoon.net). In many cases, these are cold-blooded killers. What does this have to do with the charming, slyly grinning Ray Koval?

Necessarily then, *Duplicity's* characters remain largely

ciphers, human beings about whom we know very little. But men and women kept at that kind of distance are of less interest.

The artistic result is something quite cold, mechanical, perfunctory, unmoving, something done in bad faith.

The fact that *Duplicity* was in the planning or preparation well before *Michael Clayton* does not diminish the sense one has that the new work is something of an olive branch extended to Hollywood and America at large. "Listen," Gilroy is telling those inside the industry who count, "if you thought there was anything especially earnest or critical about *Michael Clayton*, here's something that will reassure you."

And one has the impression the message has been received.

Lisa Schwarzbaum in *Entertainment Weekly* notes, with some ambivalence, that "Unlike in *Clayton*, though, the twists in this new puzzle are their own ends, not the means to express a more resonant despair." She takes notes of the new film's "frivolity," which centers on the attempted corporate theft of a product that does not, to say the least, "contain powers of life or death. The filmmaker left that heaviness behind with the conscience-stricken company man played by [Tom] Wilkinson in *Michael Clayton*."

Florence Waters in the *Daily Telegraph*: "Unlike his other success stories, *Michael Clayton* or *The Bourne Identity* [for which Gilroy wrote the screenplay], there is no great moral struggle, no violence and not a bullet or a bomb in earshot in *Duplicity*.... The film's plot does delve into the callous world of corporate espionage, but the objective of *Duplicity* is simple: pure escapism."

Scott Foundas in the *Village Voice* writes approvingly, "Whatever one thought of the undeniably smart, often unbearably overwrought *Michael Clayton*, few would have pegged it as the work of an inspired farceur. Yet *Duplicity* is nearly as bubbly as the champagne whose corkage becomes a running motif, as if the heretofore dour Gilroy were finally releasing a long-suppressed giggle. Even the corridors of corporate malfeasance are a markedly less sinister place this time around...."

Why should one feel relief that Gilroy's newest film is a triviality, or worse?



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