

Up in the Air and the social calamity in the US

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Directed by Jason Reitman; screenplay by Reitman and Sheldon Turner, based on the novel by Walter Kirn

Up in the Air, directed by Jason Reitman (*Thank You for Smoking*, *Juno*), begins by offering a glimpse at the current social calamity in the US.

Rarely in American cinema do the tremendous problems besetting wide layers of the population make their way onto the screen. It is therefore both jarring and welcome when white-collar workers in the film's opening sequence face the camera and react to the news they are losing their jobs. "This is what I get after 30 years of service," says one bitterly, while another likens being made redundant to death.

Reitman, to his credit, describes this moving scene (shot with actual jobless people in Detroit and St. Louis) as "now one of my favorite parts of the film." In fact, it is probably *Up in the Air*'s strongest moment.

"Transition specialist" Ryan Bingham (George Clooney) is the bearer of the devastating tidings. Ryan works for an Omaha-based company contracted by corporations to inform employees their employment is being eliminated. In the process, agents like Bingham hand the newly jobless severance packets and try to diffuse shock and anger by telling them not to "take this personally."

Considered highly skilled at his job, Ryan answers resistance with the stock phrase, "Anybody who ever built an empire or changed the world sat where you are." In one case ("I make \$90,000—what is unemployment insurance, \$250 a week?"), Ryan paints a picture of new opportunities for self-fulfillment and personal "reinvention."

Whether or not Ryan delights in his work, the lifestyle of an almost perpetually airborne traveler compensates, in his view, for any drawbacks bound up with his profession's more unsavory aspects. "The things you probably hate about flying," he explains to us, "are reminders that I'm home."

Moreover, as a sideline, Ryan delivers motivational speeches to corporate audiences, urging the attendees to empty their "emotional backpacks" of possessions and personal connections: "Make no mistake, your relationships are the heaviest components in your life. All those negotiations and arguments and secrets, the compromises. The slower we move the faster we die.... We are not swans. We are sharks."

As more businesses downsize their offices, Ryan's firm is gearing up for a major upgrade. His boss, Craig Gregory (Jason Bateman), licks his lips: the "worst times on record for America" mean "this is our moment." To maximize profits, he has hired an ambitious young efficiency expert, Natalie Keener (Anna Kendrick). Serious cost savings could be achieved, she points out, by taking agents out of the air. Flying Ryan and others around the country axing people face-to-face will be replaced by layoffs via computer terminal.

When Ryan objects that Natalie knows nothing about firing employees (although what he really dreads is the end of his career as a constant flyer), he is ordered to take her along on one of his cross-country jaunts. Their experiences on what is supposedly Ryan's last such trip make up a good portion of the film.

For Clooney's character, "letting people go" as a profession meshes with his deliberate avoidance of long-term attachments in his personal life. However, it so happens that as he travels around with Natalie destroying jobs his studiously casual relationship with Alex (Vera Farmiga), a fellow air-traveling "shark," threatens to change. She accompanies Ryan to his sister's wedding in Wisconsin, and the couple seems on the verge of deepening their affair. But Alex turns out to be an even more determined shark.

Up in the Air has amusing and truthful moments. That Reitman has allowed the social crisis, ignored by most of his fellow Hollywood filmmakers, access to his film is not insignificant. The production notes explain that Reitman "decided he would go out to capture real, direct, unscripted reactions from ordinary Americans who had just gone through the intensely emotional experience of losing a job in a faltering economy. It proved to be an eye-opening and moving process."

And the director and co-writer states, "Every day you see news stories about job cuts but it's usually about a number, so it's easy to forget who these people are. What I'm most proud of is that the movie puts real faces to the numbers."

This is unusual and all genuinely to the good.

However, its positive features should not blind anyone to the work's perhaps inevitably disjointed character. The various social and psychological issues are not worked through in a convincing manner, nor—as a result—is the comedy-drama

internally consistent, seriously weakening *Up in the Air*'s impact.

Additional comments by Reitman, in an interview, point to some of the difficulties: “[T]his is not a movie about job loss. It never has been.... I would say that less than 10 percent of the film takes place in the world of corporate terminations.”

He describes it, in the production notes, as a story “about a guy who has to deal with the fact that, even though he thinks his life is complete, he’s been ignoring something very important, which is the responsibility to be part of something larger.” Ryan “is so scared off by the burdens of joining a community that he’s been missing out on the value of that.... [I]t seems as if we are more connected than ever—while, in reality, people don’t look each other in the eye much anymore, and we have fewer real relationships.” This is banal, and if there were nothing more to the film than this, it could be interpreted as a moralizing endorsement of ‘family values.’

The director’s apparently contradictory comments indicate that Reitman found himself impelled as an honest filmmaker to treat an important reality, while not at this point being capable of integrating the different elements.

There are various difficulties. We are apparently meant to feel by the conclusion of *Up in the Air* that Ryan has been leading in many ways an empty existence. However, the earlier portions of the film paint his lifestyle in quite attractive and even quasi-glamorous colors. Whether it is his carefully worked-out (and engagingly, briskly recounted) approach to airport security hurdles, his accumulation of perks for millions of miles of flying, or his ease with (we assume) various women he meets en route, Ryan seems someone to envy. His life has left him charming, lighthearted, *and* sensitive. Who could ask for more?

Indeed, Reitman (who acknowledges that Ryan’s attitude toward air travel matches his own: “I’m a flyer. I fly a lot. I have a very specific way that I go through security”) can’t quite seem to help himself. Again, we are apparently intended to disapprove of Alex and Ryan’s affair in the end, but in their initial scenes together the pair could hardly be more pleased with themselves as they compete for travel points and rendezvous in various airport hotels. Presumably, this is supposed to change after Ryan’s crisis and certain revelations about Alex. But our first experience of them is the strongest: the couple is simply too cool and together for words. That Ryan later looks gloomily out of a hotel window does not alter the fact.

Perhaps most critically, what is it that causes Ryan to reevaluate his life? Screenwriter Sheldon Turner raises this issue in the production notes for *Up in the Air*. Referring to Walter Kirn’s novel, he says: “I was captivated by his [Ryan’s] job, his unique world and collateral toll exacted by firing people for a living.”

But is it the toll of destroying hundreds, or thousands, of jobs (and, potentially, lives) that brings about the change? Not

really, according to the film’s own logic. The spectator can insert this factor, or build it up, if he or she likes, but Reitman’s film would have us believe that Ryan has little difficulty carrying on with his work, as long as he can do it in person, and that the crises brought on by his family situation and developing feelings for Alex are what teach him the value of human attachments.

(In fact, Ryan is a decent man and one is left wondering how he has so easily pursued his career up to now. It does not appear to be much more troubling for him to perform his duties as the economy worsens and the prospects for the unemployed diminish.)

Natalie, on the other hand, gets turned inside out by the stories of those she’s firing, particularly as her role is to make the task of eliminating people even more efficient. The plaintive visages of the soon-to-be unemployed are haunting. She turns out to be the film’s most engaging character, because she’s the liveliest person on screen, reacts negatively to things, is affected by events, and eventually quits the people-firing business. But, unfortunately, she remains a subsidiary figure.

Opposing social pressures and impulses compete in *Up in the Air*.

Reitman brought big questions into his movie, which he began working on in 2003, changing the story in the process: “[W]e were at the tail end of an economic boom [in 2003] and as I approached the actual shooting of the film we were now in one of the worst recessions on record and I had to adjust how we were doing these firing scenes.”

He permitted these problems enough space to show up his original concept, about an individual who tries to live without connections and learns this is not a good idea, as relatively trite. Unhappily, he only made certain adjustments. Nonetheless, in its artistic failings, *Up in the Air* is more interesting than either *Thank You For Smoking* or *Juno*.



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