

# *Demolition*: Take an investment banker apart, and what do you find?

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*Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée; screenplay by Bryan Sipe*

*Demolition* is the new film from Canadian-born director Jean-Marc Vallée (*Dallas Buyers Club*, *Wild*). The film tells the story of Davis Mitchell (Jake Gyllenhaal), a New York investment banker working for a \$6 billion firm who experiences an emotional unraveling after his wife dies in an automobile accident. While the film purports to give us an unvarnished look at the inner life of its protagonist, in truth *Demolition* is little more than a pastiche of clichés and easy outs, many of which serve to reinforce some of the most pernicious myths about American life.

After a brief scene between Davis and his wife that highlights the upper-class dullness and predictability of their marriage, Davis awakes in a hospital waiting room. He is told of his wife's death by his father-in-law Phil (Chris Cooper), who is also his boss at the investment firm. Davis' reaction is an odd sort of numb indifference, bordering on nonchalance. Unable to mourn the death of a woman to whom he had never felt much of a connection, Davis unfeelingly goes through the motions of grief and funerary ritual, at one point even needing to practice crying before a mirror.

A malfunctioning vending machine in the hospital waiting area prompts Davis to write several letters of complaint to the vending machine company, wherein he improbably spills his guts about his loveless marriage, his unfulfilling bourgeois lifestyle, his disdain for his father-in-law, his petty grievances about modern life, etc. The letters attract the attention of Karen (Naomi Watts), a customer service representative stuck in her own unhappy relationship. Despite fears of making a "dangerous" personal connection, Karen secretly begins following Davis around the city.

Though he tries to maintain his daily routine, Davis begins to sense that something is deeply wrong at the center of his reality, and that his life must be taken apart piece by piece to find the source of his discontent. He externalizes this desire and begins obsessively disassembling appliances and electronics that have begun to malfunction, including his refrigerator, his work computer, a cappuccino machine... He begins working with a home demolition crew, finding destruction and physical exertion to be a form of therapy.

Davis forms a bond with Karen's moody 15-year-old son Chris (Judah Lewis), and the two of them take a pair of sledgehammers to Davis' expensively decorated, upper-class home. The demolition uncovers evidence of his wife's secret life, and Davis confronts his in-laws. The latter portion of the film proceeds exactly as one would expect.

Though Vallée showed promise with *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), in which the AIDS epidemic was movingly and sensitively dramatized with powerful performances from Matthew McConaughey and Jared Leto, the director followed that up with the pedestrian *Wild* (2014) and now this tepid effort. It would seem that the social themes found in *Dallas Buyers Club* were only incidental to the director's real interest, which lies primarily in individuals forcing their way past their own emotional roadblocks, often undertaking an extreme physical effort to do so.

The notion of the "cleansing" power of individual suffering is quite inappropriate when coming from well-heeled Hollywood filmmakers, and it is here made even more so by the filmmakers' choice of protagonist. A drama about wealthy investment banker would be very much in order if it provided some insight into such a personality and such a life. But Vallée never questions

the fundamental legitimacy of this activity. We are merely expected to laugh at Davis' self-consciously eccentric antics, to nod along with his fantasies of becoming an armed TSA guard, to sympathize with his eventual discovery of some feeling for his dead wife. Gyllenhaal does his best to wring emotion from the trite words the screenwriter has put into his mouth, but he is given precious little substance to work with.

The "demolition" metaphor is heavy-handed from the beginning, and only becomes more so as the film drags on. We endure numerous scenes of destruction and disassembly. In one particularly stupid scene, Chris shoots Davis in the chest with a handgun while the latter wears a bulletproof vest. The ensuing pain causes him to feel more "alive."

But to what end? We are repeatedly told that Davis' "demolition" will yield some sort of greater insight into his life—and presumably our own. So what does Vallée find when he digs into his protagonist? Just dime-store pathos and a longing for connection. The filmmakers are perfectly content to leave it at that, in the end reassembling Davis into his well-groomed, wealthy former self, essentially unchanged save for a bit more emotional openness (and, of course, all the money necessary to replace everything he had broken in his tantrum of grief).

And then there is *Demolition's* fascination with "honesty." Again and again, the characters remark that Davis is a "brutally honest" person, who "tells the truth" all the time (there is little evidence to back up these claims other than Davis' tactless dialogue and proclivity for behaving foolishly in public). The filmmaking style itself, with its natural lighting, shaky-camera footage and clipped, staccato pacing, strives to convince the viewer that he or she is watching unfiltered truth unfold.

As noted, a "brutally honest" portrait of a banker would certainly be welcome. But what "truths" do the filmmakers believe they are uncovering? That bourgeois life is unfulfilling? That marriages among the rich sometimes take place for reasons other than love? That grief affects people in strange ways? Is there anyone to whom any of this would come as a shock?

In one telling scene, Chris promises to tell Davis "the truth about American military presence in the Middle East." Again, such a truth would be greatly appreciated. But he then proceeds to act out a grisly and stupid story

about an American soldier blown to smithereens while savage Afghans shout "death to America" in triumph. Yes, wonderful. A truth so searing it could be featured on CNN.

At no point does it seem to occur to the filmmakers that their characters' difficulties could be rooted in anything other than individual psychological traumas and fears, that Davis' personal malaise might have some connection to his place in a diseased social order, that exploiting his fellow humans as a profession might cause him to feel distant from them and render him emotionally insensitive. These are not the kinds of problems that can be solved by dancing in the subway, making shadow puppets and riding an old carousel, which Davis does to considerable personal relief.

Ultimately, the film's "demolition" of its central character goes only skin deep. If contemporary culture is to progress beyond the threadbare banalities expressed here, much more foundational elements of society will have to be demolished, theoretically and practically, and reorganized.



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