

Money Monster: Who are the criminals?

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Directed by Jodie Foster, screenplay by Alan DiFiore, Jim Kouf and Jamie Linden

Money Monster is the latest film to treat the 2008 financial crash and the criminal manipulations of the financial elite. Its predecessors range from the worthy (*The Big Short*, 2015, *Margin Call*, 2011) to the genuinely execrable (*The Wolf of Wall Street*, 2013).

Jodie Foster's new movie is a sincere, but limited effort to address the impact of the economic collapse on the broader American population—a population, however, that the filmmakers tend to imagine, and at times even caricature, rather than accurately portray.

George Clooney plays Lee Gates, a stock picker who hosts a New York City-based television show called “Money Monster.” The program makes use of dancing showgirls, ridiculous costumes and all manner of cheesy props to promote Lee's picks. He is more confidence man than financial adviser. The film is presumably arguing there is only a fine line between the two, given the prognosticative abilities of the media-financial community leading up to the 2008 disaster.

The long-time producer of Lee's show, Patty Fenn (Julia Roberts), keeps him in line with non-stop directives delivered through his ear-piece. The basic truth is that the man who puts himself forward as a financial expert is a careless and cynical loose cannon who regards his viewers as a herd of sheep to be manipulated.

In the middle of a live broadcast of “Money Monster,” a young man makes his way onto the set brandishing a gun and takes Lee hostage. The interloper then forces the television host to don a vest laden with explosives. The “terrorist” turns out to be a parcel delivery worker, Kyle Budwell (Jack O'Connell), who earns the unlivable wage of \$14.00 an hour. The source of Kyle's outrage is that he lost his life savings—a \$60,000 inheritance from his recently deceased mother—through investing in one of Lee's “tips.”

Soon after Lee promoted IBIS Global Capital as a safe bet, \$800 million went missing, ruining many small investors like Kyle. Having cancelled an appearance on Lee's show that day, IBIS CEO Walt Camby (Dominic West), from an unknown destination, lays the blame for the loss of the money on an algorithm glitch.

Tension builds and scores of police are positioned to “take out” Kyle, referred to as “the psycho.” Global news programs flash Camby's face across their screens, like electronic wanted posters. In his absence, IBIS' flustered communications officer, Diane Lester (Caitriona Balfe), tries to stall and defuse the situation with the improbable claim that “we believe in complete transparency.”

In desperation, Diane tracks down the programmer in question in Seoul, who insists the problem does not lie with the “algo,” but with a “human fingerprint,” which underscores the suspicious character of Camby's disappearance. At one point, Lee even appeals to the worldwide audience to save his life by buying IBIS stock en masse, a futile and humiliating gesture.

The pressure escalates as the hostage drama moves out of the television studio and into the street. In the course of the ordeal, Lee sheds some of his self-obsession and becomes sympathetic to Kyle, who does not want money but answers and apologies. The reality is that “IBIS is a pig in a prom dress” (Patty), and Camby is a garden variety speculator-gambler. The bottom line, as Camby awkwardly attempts to explain to Kyle, is that his crooked shenanigans are legal within the parameters of the profit system.

Clooney is in comic good form in *Money Monster*, especially in his dance routines in the film's opening sequences. Roberts also performs well. O'Connell is credible as the central dramatic character, although his energy is occasionally strained and unsupported by an undeveloped script—and the constricted atmosphere

(most of the film takes place in the television studio, and the goings-on are sometimes a little flat and disorganized). West as Camby is sufficiently corrupt and nasty. Foster, refreshingly, is not particularly sympathetic to the police.

It is noteworthy that a major strike by South African gold miners (bringing to mind the historic struggle of Marikana platinum miners in 2012), which the union is unable to quash, plays a role in the film's denouement.

Money Monster's main concern, as Clooney suggests in the movie's production notes, is that the "world of money has gotten out of control. When things go wrong, you don't actually understand what it is that went wrong—and the regular guys get screwed." This is pretty miserable at this point in history.

In fact, the 2008 financial crash, the incredible wealth accumulated by a handful of individuals, the misery inflicted on "regular guys" all over the world—none of this is mysterious nor is it the result of something external to the profit system that can be fixed by government control. All of this is objectively rooted in the capitalist system of production itself.

When asked by an interviewer which presidential candidate would use the film as a talking point because of its subject matter, Foster replied: "I have no idea—I've never made a movie like this. The good news is that the financial world and the world of technology are on everyone's lips: right-wing, left-wing, moderate, center. It's a very relevant topic right now. I think you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone, candidate or otherwise, who doesn't believe that our financial system needs reform."

The economic contradictions that gave rise to the 2008 meltdown have not been reformed, and never will be, by any leading "candidate or otherwise," but instead are threatening a new and more devastating crash.

Foster and company are sincere in their concerns, but they are largely insulated and isolated from the full extent of the social crisis in the US, and its explosive political implications.

It is not enough today to vaguely invoke America's democratic traditions as the filmmakers do by setting the finale of *Money Monster* in Federal Hall in lower Manhattan (now a national memorial), the first capitol building of the US and the scene of George Washington's inauguration as the first president in

1789. What do they make of America in 2016?

In line with her restricted, liberal viewpoint, Foster chooses to focus on Robert Reich—academic, commentator, former Secretary of Labor under Bill Clinton and now a Bernie Sanders supporter—in the film's closing images. Reich asserts weakly that "Wall Street is a casino."

Giving Reich, a thoroughgoing establishment figure, the final word only diminishes the impact of Foster's criticisms of the stock market bigwigs and their criminality.

The stretching and straining has artistic consequences too. Foster and the screenwriters tend to use histrionics to cover up unconvincing, implausible narrative elements—for example, in the scene in which Kyle's pregnant girlfriend Molly (Emily Mead) is brought in by police to talk Kyle down and instead mercilessly berates him for squandering their savings. He is understandably left shattered.

Nonetheless, Foster has had enough insight and gumption to present Kyle as the personification of an angry population, a population that hates the banks, Wall Street and the rich and has given millions of votes in primaries to a presidential candidate who claims to be a "socialist."

The best moment in *Money Monster* comes when Kyle, waving a handgun around, fiercely demands to be heard: "I want everyone to know something. I might be the one with the gun here, but I'm not the real criminal. It's people like these guys. They're stealing everything from us and they're getting away with it too. Nobody's asking how. Nobody's asking why. You gotta open your eyes out there. It's not like the government's no help. They just look the other way. Since after they're done stealing our money, they barely even have to pay the taxes on it."



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