

# Noah Baumbach's *Jay Kelly*: A veteran film star undergoes a crisis

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Directed and co-written by Noah Baumbach, *Jay Kelly* is a movie about film stars and filmmaking, featuring George Clooney as one of the former and Adam Sandler as his loyal, long-suffering manager. Their relationship is at the center of the movie. Baumbach satirizes the obvious failings of the contemporary movie industry and mocks the self-involvement of prominent performers.

Jay Kelly (Clooney), with decades of a movie career behind him, is finishing one film, with another looming immediately ahead of him. He would like to spend a bit of time with his younger daughter Daisy (Grace Edwards), but she prefers to accompany her friends on a trip to Paris and Italy. He learns from Ron, his manager (Sandler), that his old friend and mentor, British-born director Peter Schneider (Jim Broadbent), whose request for assistance Jay recently turned down, has died. After Schneider's funeral, Jay runs into an old acting school colleague, Tim (Billy Crudup), who over coffee accuses him of stealing his career. They have a scuffle, which leads to Tim's filing a lawsuit.

Jay decides to follow Daisy and friends, skipping out on the new film and leaving for Europe, where he will attempt to kill two birds with one stone by attending a career tribute (in Tuscany) he previously turned down. During the trip, which he cheerfully begins with his entire entourage (with hints of Preston Sturges' 1941 *Sullivan's Travels*), Jay is deserted by his publicist, Liz (Laura Dern),—tired of his demands and capriciousness—and her assistant (Nicole Lecky) and his hairstylist (Emily Mortimer); fails in his efforts to draw closer to Daisy, as well as his older daughter Jessica, who lives in San Diego; nearly destroys his lengthy association with Ron; proves unable to convince even his own father (Stacy Keach) to attend his tribute; and generally undergoes a significant emotional and career crisis.

The subject matter is intriguing and important on the whole. Filmmaking has been at the center of cultural and to a certain extent political life in the US for a century. Its vicissitudes reflect the general ups and downs of social life and struggle. One would be pleased to encounter a serious accounting of Hollywood's recent decades in particular.

But Baumbach's treatment is too tepid, too complacent. Not much is fully or convincingly carried through, or nearly fierce and angry enough.

Baumbach aspires to be an acerbic commentator on certain middle class moods and fads and sentiments, and sometimes succeeds at that, but overall he is too much part of the milieu he criticizes. Too often his films (*The Squid and the Whale*, 2005; *Margot at the Wedding*, 2007; *Greenberg*, 2010; *Frances Ha*, 2012; *While We're Young*, 2014; *Marriage Story*, 2019) have been "damaged by self-satisfaction and self-consciousness." *White Noise* (2022), his film adaptation of a

Don DeLillo novel, on the other hand, was "lively, extravagant," and removed "Baumbach, at least for a time, from the narrow confines of the not very fruitful or absorbing middle-class introspection ... within which he previously seemed to be enmeshed."

*Jay Kelly* is not a step forward. It does not explore its territory deeply enough.

As a critique of Hollywood, the celebrity phenomenon or the entertainment industry generally, *Jay Kelly* all but vanishes in the face of various Hollywood films of the past, including *What Price Hollywood?*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *The Big Knife*, *A Star is Born*, *Two Weeks in Another Town*, *The Sweet Smell of Success*, *In a Lonely Place* and many others, including, more recently, *The Player*.

Kelly is self-centered but generally amiable. It is not entirely clear what the complaints of Liz and the others are. What, frankly, did she and they expect? She tells Ron, before jumping ship,

It was different when we were young. It was fun. Jay was our baby. ... Acting out at 60 is a bad look. ... He's behaving like he's the first person to ever have a nervous breakdown. ... We're all having nervous breakdowns, Ron.

Discovering self-centeredness among film personalities, including genuinely talented and appealing figures, hardly breaks new ground. In any event, the individuals in question are not primarily responsible for this condition. Official society encourages and nourishes the egoism for its own purposes. The film and music industries create, market and make money out of prominent figures, by flattering and mythologizing them and serving them up to the public as demi-gods. In so many cases, the process proves disorienting and destructive to the artist him or herself. Hollywood history is full of sad life-stories and tragic fates.

Moreover, as conditions worsen for tens of millions, as social mobility declines and as real-life opportunities dry up, the need to live vicariously through celebrities—film stars, athletes, supermodels, etc.—grows exponentially.

Individual psychological flaws aside, is not such self-centeredness also in part the product of a distorted, one-sided relationship between the artist and his or her audience, between the artist and his or her work, with bourgeois society strenuously encouraging the notion that an important work of art is merely or primarily the result of unique genius or will?

Unpleasantly, the characters orbiting Kelly feel rather sorry for

themselves, including his two daughters, who continue into adulthood to blame him for neglecting them as children. Jessica complains, “Do you know how I know that you didn’t want to spend time with me? Because you didn’t spend time with me.” And later, “So you think that if I go and I celebrate your career, that your brilliance is gonna make me forgive you?” Please, enough. But Liz, Ron and various others too suffer from serious cases of unbecoming self-pity.

One of the difficulties is that Baumbach wants to have his cake and eat it too. He would like to indict Jay for his arrogance and obliviousness to others’ difficulties or even *existence* at times but retain him as an amusing and occasionally insightful fellow, capable of laughing at himself. Finding himself traveling by public transportation for the first time in decades, Kelly charms and delights his fellow passengers and ultimately invites them all to his Italian tribute:

There’s so many people here. I haven’t been on a train in 20 years. ... Everyone is so nice. People are so nice. ... How can I play people when I don’t see people? Don’t touch people?

Of course, such a personality is possible, but it then removes Kelly from the center of the satire or criticism. As it should, in a certain sense. But what exactly is being held up for the audience to scrutinize? In the end, Jay’s tribute takes place and everyone stands up and cheers heartwarmingly. Again, the cake and eating it too. Without much bite.

Baumbach largely harps on the secondary or even slighter (and within the existing social relations, inevitable) facts of film-celebrity life. In the end, the industry is mostly let off the hook, along with its products, and one is invited to blame Jay Kelly for his moral and emotional shortcomings. Looking into the camera, he has regrets: “Can I go again? [as in another take.] I’d like another one.”

Ron’s character is a legitimate matter for a film comedy-drama, but it is not worked through to the end. He is subservient and rushes to Jay’s side, as he has done apparently for decades, but abruptly decides to leave his client and friend:

I was up all last night. ... And I think you have it right. There comes a point when you have to reassess. I love you. I really do. And I appreciate the apology. But I ... I can’t work with you anymore. It’s not good for me.

And then Ron changes his mind again rather easily. It’s not very strong or convincing.

All in all, wouldn’t it have been more interesting if the filmmakers had *concretely* examined the movie business during the years in which Clooney has been a leading figure, with its various strengths and weaknesses? Clooney is not the narcissistic Jay Kelly, everyone involved hastens to explain, but that’s not really the issue. Aside from a brief montage of scenes of Clooney’s films (standing in for Kelly’s) shown at the tribute, we learn next to nothing about what the fictional actor has *actually been doing* for 30 or 40 years. What were his movies like, what did they do or say, how did they make people feel or think?

Daisy’s new French boy-friend, intending to get on her good side or

not, asks the girl

How does it feel to have the hero of so many brilliant films of our time  
to be your father? ... Jay Kelly is a hero of cinema.

This is the *sum total* of what we learn. Was Kelly doing significant work? Did it contribute to how people made sense of the world and themselves? Kelly’s successful career is simply taken for granted, without its actual content *ever* being looked into.

But such an exploration—if it were to take up, for example, something like Clooney’s career—might prove challenging, probably unsettling. The past four decades have been the most inadequate in the history of cinema, not the fault of the actor, of course, or any other individual.

Clooney has been a significant figure in film and television for 40 years, one of its more attractive. He can be comical and sly, self-effacing and down to earth, and, at times, legitimately angry at the way things are. In his weakest films, his characters are smirking and pleased with themselves, infuriatingly “in the know.”

To date, Clooney has done his most substantive and socially ambitious film work in one 10-year period, from the end of the 1990s to the end of the 2000s. This coincided to a considerable extent with the widespread popular opposition, including within certain middle class layers, to the Bush-Cheney administration. This was the decade of the 9/11 attacks, the neo-colonial invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the horrific crimes at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, the systematic assault, in the name of the “global war on terror” and codified through the “Patriot Act” and other sinister pieces of legislation, on democratic-constitutional rights.

Clooney played a leading role in these films: *Out of Sight* (1998), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *Three Kings* (1999), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *Welcome to Collinwood* (2002), *Solaris* (2002), *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002), *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), *Syriana* (2005), *The Good German* (2006), *Michael Clayton* (2007), *Burn After Reading* (2008), *Up in the Air* (2009) and *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (2009).

The election campaign of Barack Obama brought a considerable portion of the former petty-bourgeois oppositionists back into the fold, from which many have not since strayed.

To look at this record and this film era honestly and objectively and artistically could be valuable, amusing, dramatic. Unfortunately, Baumbach, with his eye on ostensibly moral issues, family relations and various matters of personal identity hasn’t any apparent interest in the *particular* circumstances and evolution of Kelly-Clooney’s career. So the results are poorer, more diluted than they should be.



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