

George Clooney and the Death of the American Grown Up

by Geoffrey Clarfield (July 2014)

In the once robust and now obscure field of anthropology that was once called “Culture and Personality,” psychoanalytically informed practitioners suggested that the culture of any one society is a psychological “projection” on to the world. This projection comprises the dominant values and value conflicts, hopes and fears that characterize a society during any one stretch in its history. They make up the dominant assumptions of the time. Some scholars call this the “climate of opinion.” These cultural projections can be described and analyzed with good anthropological technique.

“Culture and personality” as a movement within anthropology had its hey day in the post war celebration and application of the theories of Freud and his numerous disciples (some legitimate and some bogus) in the analysis of cultural patterns and then died out as cultural relativism and cultural Marxism took over the field in the late 1970s. It is a pity, for although the theory was advanced to try and explain the unique characteristics of non-Western and small scale, pre-industrial societies; it can just as well be applied to North America and to the United States in particular. As films are literally projected perhaps they are also projections of contemporary American concerns. They can also act as potent indicators of what is troubling this great nation.

Walter Kirn is an American novelist whose job made him highly mobile, constantly in flight and living from airport hotel to airport hotel. In short, his life was lived “*Up in the Air*”- the title of his novel. Kirn’s book is about a handsome, middle-aged American whose job it is to fly around the United States and fire people from corporations that are “downsizing.” In 2009 Canadian born director Jason Reitman turned the novel into a film. The main protagonist, Ryan Bingham, is played by George Clooney, whose screen persona harkens back to a time when American male actors looked like men, spoke like men and acted like men and which perhaps at an unconscious level is why he is so popular among baby boomer film buffs.

Indeed, during the film we see that Bingham has a very tough job. He is a hatchet man, a modern form of corporate executioner, a “hit man,” who is hired to do the job of terminating contracts because the captains of industry have become too cowardly to fire the people they hired. Despite his manly toughness and the seriousness with which he carries out his job,

there is something definitely wrong with Bingham and the film spends most of its time showing us rather than telling us that this is indeed the case.

The beginning of the film shows us the various verbatim responses of the people that Bingham fires, the moment they are fired, and the camera shows us Bingham's dignified but emotionally unattached response as he gives them a packet of materials which is their "road map" to new employment. At some point in the voice over, he points out that they will never see him again, although it is implied to the people fired that this is not the case. So, despite the fact that Bingham is supposedly the tough guy that the corporate heads treat as a hired gun, Bingham never sticks around for the nasty outcomes of his behavior. Later in the film we discover that this can have deadly consequences.

Next we see Bingham enjoying his first class flight service and how he just loves to be in transit and treated so well by the airports and airline companies who "value his loyalty." Of course the director has just artfully contrasted that Bingham fires people who have been "loyal" to their companies for years and is rewarded with air mile points for his own "loyalty." These subtle contrasts permeate the film and are a tribute to director Reitman's ability to render the depth of a novel on screen.

Then we discover that Bingham is not only a skillful corporate hit man but, surprise, surprise, surprise, a popular motivational speaker as well! We see him on the podium, impeccably dressed, confident, totally in control of his diction and delivery, pausing to let the crowd absorb his message and then, ever so subtly, for those who are really listening and watching the film, he preaches a message of detachment; cut ties, get rid of possessions, do not be burdened by family and relationships and he preaches that this is the ultimate personal salvation. Because he is George Clooney, and the directors have shown him in a situation of mastery, I suspect that the viewer does not quite get the message that he is telling the audience, which is, "If you want to be happy, live like me."

As I have gotten older I have noticed with growing horror, that in so many of the most popular American films, if the "hero" of the film is handsome, confident and assertive, when he or she causes collateral damage, the audience actually sympathizes with the protagonists of the film. I now shudder with horror and rage whenever I see a typical American film that glorifies bank robbers. When the inevitable innocent black or Irish looking bank guard gets gunned down as the bank robbers shoot and terrorize whoever is in the bank, the camera work focuses on the perpetrators, and it is so easy to fall into an unconscious identification with these murderous thieves. To give you an example, I have come to hate the film *Bonnie and Clyde* with a passion, and all other films of that genre.

My heart breaks each time I seen an innocent killed. I think of their family and the futility of their deaths.

During one of his flights Ryan meets a gorgeous woman at a hotel bar, Alex Goran. Like him, she is an ever-travelling businesswoman. After comparing perks and air miles they end up in bed together. This romance "in the air" shows us that now in the age of fully established feminism, women can behave like men. Whether the novelist or the director are aware, and I hope they are, Goran is Bingham's double, his dopple ganger and in the rules of story telling, we are now able to compare and contrast the connected destinies of the two romantic protagonists of the film. Meanwhile, Bingham's sister, who is estranged from her husband and organizing the marriage ceremony of his niece, calls to talk about the wedding. We see that no matter how hard Bingham tries to cut himself off from long-term attachments, ultimately, the ritual cycle of the family reluctantly draws him back towards his origins.

In a wonderful twist of irony, Bingham comes back to his company's head office in Omaha, Nebraska to find that his boss has just hired a young woman, fresh out of business school. She explains to the employees that it is cheaper and more effective to fire people over the Internet. It will save the company millions. Bingham challenges her in front of her boss, suggesting that there is more to the job than meets the eye, and that you have to "be there" when you are giving people the worst news of their lives. They go out on the road together and we eventually see how difficult the job really is. Natalie, the young woman, begins to see that it is not so easy, and that the emotional fall out on the one who gives the message can be very high. As they travel together there much back and forth between the young female protégé and her "mentor."

Despite her millennial attitude that she can do anything and start at the top (which she has almost done) Natalie tells Ryan that ultimately she believes in companionate marriage, family, children and roots for without that, life is meaningless. He retorts that if he flies enough he will be rewarded by his airline with a special card for having flown ten million miles and he will be the seventh person in the world to achieve this goal. He makes it sound like he is going for gold in the Olympics. I suspect that this is when viewers begin to question the whole worldview and life style of the man. He is detached and indifferent and seems like a kid who collects baseball cards. Natalie is the more sympathetic of the two, as she is trying to reconcile work with life, not life with work.

By semi-accident Ryan and his part time lover Alex end up in a hotel with Natalie when she discovers her boyfriend has dumped her. The fact that he did so by text message and not in person, using the techniques that Natalie herself recommends for the handling of work-life

crises, is not lost on either of them, given the kind of work they do. It beggars belief when in the ensuing conversation she thanks Ryan and Alex's generation for the feminism that freed her age set to pursue their own dreams. Ryan and Alex uncomfortably accept her thanks. They all then crash a party at the hotel. Natalie has a one-night stand with a stranger and we assume that Ryan and Alex are consummating their part time bliss as well. Ryan tells Natalie that his feelings for Alex are superficial. It is not love. Natalie finds that hard to accept.

Ryan then asks Alex to join him for his niece's wedding and she comes. We, the watchers of the film see that Ryan has tender feelings for Alex, which seem to be reciprocated. At that point in the film we all become traditionalists. Yes, this is a love story, we think. Ryan has finally met his match. They will both settle down and live happily ever after, we think, we hope. When the groom gets cold feet and Ryan helps him work it out, like a gifted coach or psychotherapist, the marriage proceeds and we hope that this is a foreshadowing of Ryan's own romantic awakening to Alex, his near perfect and gorgeous companion.

Back at the office Natalie is now coaching staff how to fire people on the Internet. She says she wanted to call them "terminators" but the legal department did not allow it. They are now "termination engineers." There is something Germanic in all this and the echo of WWII is in the air at a corporate level, in this brave new world of firing in a time of economic decline. There is a portentous whiff of death in this innocent sounding statement.

Once more Ryan is about to give his motivational speech about cutting ties. He leaves his plush venue without finishing his speech and flies to Chicago to find Alex. We assume that marriage is on his mind. Unannounced, he knocks on the door and we the audience are back in the old Hollywood stereotype. We expect a surprise and a romantic embrace. Instead, Alex opens the door; Ryan hears children and realizes she is married. Her husband asks her who is there and innocently she says, "Just someone asking for directions." He leaves.

These are the kinds of lyrics that you find in Leonard Cohen songs, a simple phrase, which in this case is the metaphor for Ryan's life, a man who is constantly travelling but knows not the direction of his journey. Later, during a phone call, Alex explains to Ryan that he is a parenthesis, a break in her own life. She implies that although enjoyable, their relationship is secondary and not really central for her. The audience is then confronted with one of the twists of modern feminism. Now women have the money and power to act the way men did in the past. He discovers that he is part of someone else's affair, when he thought that they were simply "birds of a feather," flying together.

Ryan flies home and on this flight, he is presented with his ten million mile flying card, a

reward for his loyalty, in a clear contrast to his assumed and what has turned out to be superficial loyalty to his relationship with Alex. Clearly he is depressed as they offer him champagne and the captain sits beside him to congratulate him. His is the hollow victory of a now thoroughly hollowed out man.

Ryan returns to the office and meets with his boss who tells him that one of the women that they fired committed suicide as she had threatened to do, when Natalie fired her while Ryan watched her do it. So much for termination and terminators. He takes no responsibility for her death and his boss then tells him that they are going back to the old method and that Ryan can now fly as much as he wants.

This is a bitter reward for Ryan, for he has clearly lost the taste for being in the air. In his absence, his protégé Natalie, has quit. She did so by a text message, just like her boyfriend broke up with her. Natalie gets a new job, partially because of the heartfelt recommendation of Bingham, who recognizes the conflicted but old fashion virtue that Natalie has displayed during her journey of professional discovery, even after inadvertently causing the death of one of her "clients." Ryan has already given much of his frequent flyer points to his niece and nephew so that the couple, after their marriage, can see the world. It is not much, but it is something, like a teenager giving away two expensive World Series tickets to his fellow players whom he negligently hit in the stomach with a series of hardball pitches.

At the end of the film Bingham is in a jet and we hear him say in a bitter voice over: *"Tonight, most people will be welcomed home by jumping dogs and squealing kids. Their spouses will ask about their day, and tonight they'll sleep. The stars will wheel forth from their daytime hiding places and one of those lights, slightly brighter than rest, will by my wingtip passing over."* Like Icarus, Bingham flew a little too close to the sun, a little too often. In this film no one ends up living happily ever after.

As this is an essay about a film and not a film review, I have tried to give a clear summary of the narrative, and the messages that the audience can draw from it. But as a contemporary example of a projective screen about modern America (let us not forget those anthropologists of the culture and personality school to whom I referred to earlier) we need to make sense of the film in a wider context, as the film is a few years old in this sense it is still contemporary. Two books come to mind.

The first is Cullen Murphy's (editor of Vanity Fair) unsung masterpiece, *Are We Rome?*, where he compares contemporary America to Imperial Rome. One of the things that Murphy points out is that after WWII more than eighty percent of corporate leaders had military experience, many

having seen battle in Europe, the Pacific or Korea. This is now down to around 5%. Now, America's corporations are run by spoilt baby boomers who went from pampered suburb, to pampered college, Ivy League universities and into the boardrooms of big corporations. They simply do not have the courage to fire an employee, let alone learn how to fire a gun. In a related vein, Diana West has written a book with the self explanatory title, [The Death of the Grown-Up: How America's Arrested Development Is Bringing Down Western Civilization](#). It is about the kind of characters depicted in this film, such as Bingham and his bosses. I have read both books carefully and recommend them to anyone who wants to take the pulse of American today.

Whoever did the casting for *Up in the Air*, got it right. George Clooney as Ryan Bingham looks like a man, moves like a man, talks like a man but, he acts like a teenager. His arrested development is on display in almost every scene of the film. Alex, looks just like a woman, talks just like a woman, walks like a woman but acts like a man. Ryan's job as "corporate hit man" is driven by the cowardice of his bosses and the heads of the corporations who are too frightened to fire their own employees and sincerely help them get a new job. By the time Bingham rediscovers his family, he is already flying in the other direction. He is no longer an American exception, or an exceptional American. He has become a baby boomer's "Everyman."

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