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Up in the Air: The Case Against Happy Endings

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After seeing this film last December, I'd wax poetic about it every time I'd have a glass of wine. At length my roommate, herself a keen critic of popular culture, convinced me to write an essay about it. What follows is my own analysis of how Up in the Air portrays current romantic anxieties.

When I was a child, one of my favorite films was Labyrinth. In this 1986 Jim Henson film, a 15-year-old girl wishes her baby half-brother away to the Goblin King. In order to recover the child, Sarah must successfully traverse a labyrinth filled with creatures comical and frightening. Against this backdrop peopled with wonderful Henson creations, the Goblin King and Sarah face off in a sexually charged battle of wits.

The film "offers up a buffet of contemporary anxieties: our stagnating economy, our shifting and contested definitions of marriage and social responsibility. . ."

The film's success, and the success of other films like it, hinges on its ability to tap into archetypal fear—a child is kidnapped by goblins while the parents are away, a sexually maturing girl tests her mettle against an older and more

powerful man. The labyrinth, ultimately, represents two temptations: the allure of adult sexuality and the fantasy of perpetual childhood. In order to rescue the child and escape the labyrinth, Sarah must shoulder the burdens of responsible adulthood. As an audience, we want Sarah to stay in the labyrinth forever as much as we want her to escape from it.

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Jason Reitman's 2009 romantic comedy, *Up in the Air,* also taps into fear. Or, rather, this film offers up a buffet of contemporary anxieties: our stagnating economy, our shifting and contested definitions of marriage and social responsibility, our young people coming of age in an economically fragile landscape where professional ambitions and familial loyalties split our days, if not our hearts. Add to this the pressures of endlessly evolving technologies that move our human interactions more and more into the realm of cyberspace, where plastic boxes and wires mediate communications between living bodies, and it's easy to see how unstable the ground has become beneath the feet of would-be lovers.

The situation the film presents is this: Ryan Bingham (George Clooney) is a polished yet isolated man who flies around the country firing people. His independent lifestyle is threatened when a young Cornell graduate, Natalie Keener (Anna Kendrick), wants to revolutionize the downsizing business by firing workers via video conferencing. This would effectively ground Ryan. Meanwhile, Alex Goran (Vera Farmiga), a female version of Ryan—she describes herself as "the woman that you don't have to worry about. [. . .] Think of me as yourself, only with a vagina"—threatens to ground Ryan in a different manner.

Ryan is so obnoxiously self-confident that the audience roots for his polished façade to crack, and it does. He falls for Alex. However, when the final veil is removed, Alex is revealed not as a messiah but as a Jezebel. She already has a

husband and a family. This revelation comes as bitter yet necessary medicine. The untouchable man has been touched but not healed.

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It is hard to imagine a woman more unrelentingly assertive than Alex. If the intention of the film is to shatter stereotypes about whether men or women pull the strings while the other does the marionette dance, then would a more passive heroine have sufficed? Assertiveness is a quality that has rarely been celebrated in women. It is almost always set up as the object of conquest: The assertive woman must be matched and, ultimately, unmanned. This is a familiar trope, going back to Shakespeare's *As You Like It:* Rosalind cannot stay in Arden.

But *Up in the Air's* Rosalind does stay in Arden. Alex exists, and can only exist, in the liminal space of professional travel, a space traditionally reserved for men. Yet the disenchantments that Alex wears on her sleeve are strikingly familiar. After Natalie's boyfriend breaks up with her via text message, causing her to break down in a hotel lobby, Natalie, Ryan, and Alex find themselves at the hotel bar, talking romance. Alex offers up a standard thirty-something's litany:

Ryan (George Clooney) and Alex (Vera Farmiga) at a bar

Well, by the time you're thirty-four, all the physical requirements are pretty much out the window. I mean you secretly pray he'll be taller than you. Not an asshole would be nice? Just someone who enjoys my company. Comes from a good family—you don't think about that when you're younger. Wants kids. . . . Likes kids. [. . .] Please let him earn more than I do. [. . .] Nice smile. . . . Yep, a nice smile just might do it.

What the audience doesn't yet know, but will know soon, is that the anxieties put forward by Alex are false. She has much of what she wants already—not all at once, and not all in one place, and not in any way that the family-values crowd would laud, but she exists in, or at least between, two worlds: the security of family life and the excitement of responsibility-free dating.

The bright romanticism Natalie projects is equally familiar. She is young enough to believe that time is unlimited and every option remains open forever. Her counterpoint to Alex: "When I was sixteen, I thought by twenty three, I would be married, maybe have a kid. . . . Corner office by day, entertaining at night." Her litany is the litany of the educated, successful twenty-something. She describes her ex-boyfriend before sliding into a description of an abstract, idealized partner:

Natalie (Anna Kendrick) and Ryan (George Clooney) at the office

You know, white collar. College grad. Loves dogs. Likes funny movies. Six foot one. Brown hair. Kind eyes. Works in finance but is outdoorsy, you know, on the weekends. [. . .] In a perfect world, he drives a Four Runner and the only thing he loves more than me is his golden lab. Oh. . . and a nice smile.

Natalie knows what she wants but doesn't know it doesn't exist. Alex knows that what she wants doesn't exist, at least not all in one place, but wants it anyway. These are two manifestations of the same anxiety. In a world where gender roles and definitions of success are up for grabs, both women, well educated and economically empowered, are eager to name their desires and realize them.

Natalie's story is a standard coming-of-age story. When the boyfriend for whom she has given up a job opportunity in California leaves her, there is a loss of innocence. Alex, who lost her innocence long ago, lives in a world where she gets to have her cake and eat it too—but at a cost. Her relationships, both marital and extramarital, cannot be fully realized because both are conducted through a veil of dishonesty.

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In the children's book *The Velveteen Rabbit*—which makes a cameo appearance in the film when Ryan is cast into the unlikely position of soothing his sister's husband-to-be, who has last-minute cold feet—the Rabbit asks the Skin Horse what it takes to make someone Real:

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"What is most surprising about this film is its refusal to offer salvation."

The difficult truth of *Up in the Air* is that we are drawn to Ryan for precisely the same reasons we are drawn to 15-year-old Sarah in *Labyrinth*. These characters represent an escape from responsibility that we, as adults, know—and even as adolescents suspect—is morally dubious. For as much as we want Ryan to become Real, we know that for him to do so would strip him of the very qualities we find so compelling—his perpetual adolescence, his withdrawn air, the practiced grace with which he moves unfettered through the world. Ryan values these qualities too, but by the film's conclusion, he has become a familiar figure: the powerful man who can have almost anything but wants the one thing he can't have.

What is most surprising about this film, then, is its refusal to offer salvation. The smart, sexy heroine doesn't save the hunky businessman from himself. Natalie, who sacrificed so much for love, has been deserted by it. She lands another job in California but will continue to make tough choices between career and family. We suspect that she will be vaguely dissatisfied whatever choices she makes. Alex stays in her presumably lackluster marriage, a marriage from which she wants "an escape, [. . .] a parenthesis." Ryan, though his awareness of his own need for companionship has been deepened, still walks away alone. The film's final sequence shows him, once again, up in the air. He will continue to travel, aging slowly, becoming less and less Real, until, like all of us, he ceases to exist at all.

Ryan (George Clooney) at the airport

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In a sense, children's books and children's movies exist to dispel fear so that children can sleep soundly at night. Mature literature and film bring us close to fear, hold fear up for examination, and encourage a certain restless tossing and turning that is the lot of the thinking person. Maybe this moral restlessness makes us better people, more inclined to treat each other well despite our rough edges, our fragile parts. That is, I think, the hope of any artist.

I admire *Up in the Air* precisely because it chooses a riskier but ultimately more satisfying conclusion than do most Hollywood romantic comedies. Rather than offer easy, and therefore false, answers, the film offers up the labyrinth of contemporary romance without map or key.

When my friend and I walked out of the theater after seeing this film for the first time last winter, my friend blinked in the cold air and looked at me. She said, "You know, I liked that, but, really, what was the point?" I shrugged and buttoned my wool coat, and together we walked down the street to the bar.

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