

The Adjustment Bureau: Fighting fate

By David Walsh
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Written and directed by George Nolfi, based on a story by Philip K. Dick

George Nolfi's film, *The Adjustment Bureau*, is loosely based on a short story by science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, first published in 1954.

In Nolfi's film version, David Norris (Matt Damon) is a relatively youthful, up-and-coming politician, a candidate for the US Senate in New York. As the result of some embarrassing revelations, he ultimately loses his election bid. While preparing his concession speech, he meets Elise (Emily Blunt), a young woman with an unconventional, breezy manner. Their encounter is interrupted before he finds out anything about her.

Some time later, David, riding a bus, spots Elise on the street and eventually obtains her telephone number. Mysterious men in hats discuss his case. One of them has overslept and failed to set into motion a process that would have delayed David, thus preventing him from meeting Elise again and also from coming into work on time at an investment firm, where he finds some of the same mysterious men "recalibrating" his boss.

The men in hats grab him and take him to a warehouse, where they explain that he has accidentally "seen behind the curtain" of everyday reality, which actually proceeds along the lines of plans worked out by the "Chairman" and is enforced by "the adjustment bureau." They warn him that if he tries to see Elise again, they will wipe his brain clean.

Three years later, however, David does precisely meet up with Elise—a talented dancer, it turns out—and they begin a relationship. The men in hats, otherwise known as "angels," intervene to try and stop the affair. A new, tougher agent is put in charge of his case, who informs David that the Chairman allowed humans "free will" at various times in history, with disastrous results: the Dark Ages, World Wars I and II and the Holocaust.

Those in charge of his fate have big plans for David, and they fear that a relationship with Elise will give him enough emotionally that he will put aside his political ambitions. They also threaten to injure Elise, if he continues to see her.

In the end, David has to decide whether to fight for her or accept the "plan" set out for him. Elise is faced with a similar dilemma.

I will leave it to the perspicacious reader to figure out the choices they make.

This is thin stuff. Philip K. Dick's original story, "Adjustment Team," is slight, written in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner. In the end, its major concern is not free will as such. "The Old Man" explains to the story's central figure: "The natural process must be supplemented—adjusted here and there. Corrections must be made. We are fully licensed to make such corrections. Our adjustment teams perform vital work."

More to the point perhaps, one senses Dick's own unease about American reality in the 1950s. The surface of life in the story could hardly be more conventional, even banal, but postwar, Cold War anxiety runs through the piece. The "adjustment" being made in the story relates, in a convoluted manner, to an effort to ease US-Soviet tensions.

Nolfi (who wrote *Ocean's Twelve* and *The Bourne Ultimatum*) has decided to make a film about an individual fighting against powerful, well-organized forces so he can pursue the love of his life. Is this a big question in contemporary America?

A struggle over the right to love whom one loves can have artistic and emotional significance, of course. When central characters in a novel, play or film face social or family disapproval, racial or ethnic prejudice, economic pressures, etc., the drama takes on to a certain degree the character of a struggle by the lovers against a repressive or indifferent social order. Hollywood has done this powerfully in the past, in

films such as *You Only Live Once* and *They Night*.

This is not going on, however, in *The Adjustment Bureau*. David Norris is so privileged that only by creating unlikely, indeed extra-terrestrial obstacles could the difficulties put in the place of his romance possibly have any impact. Possibly is the key word. In fact, they don't. Much of the film seems devoted to chase sequences, and once the secret of the hatted angels' ability to get around Manhattan at unusual speed is revealed, there is not much of interest left to the film. No one is likely to be especially moved by the characters' "difficult" choices, which are not prepared dramatically and which, one knows perfectly well, will come out right in the end, in any event.

In passing, and probably inadvertently, Nolfi does shed light on the current state of American politics, or the film industry's conception of it. Norris is a "maverick" politician, a genuine "outsider," who after he loses an election (and prepares for another one) goes to work for a Wall Street venture capital firm, presumably raking in the dough. His single act of groundbreaking sincerity involves telling an audience that politicians hire media consultants to advise them on every detail of their appearance, something that every 9th grader in America probably knows.

Emily Blunt is an appealing performer. She first came to international attention in Pawel Pawlikowski's *My Summer of Love* (2004). She helped to make *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) somewhat more bearable than it might otherwise have been, and charmed in *Sunshine Cleaning* (2008).

Matt Damon is an interesting and intelligent actor, with more than 15 years of credits already behind him. In recent interviews, Damon criticized Barack Obama, asserting that "I think he's [Obama] rolled over to Wall Street completely," and noting that "In his State of the Union he [the president] didn't even say the word 'poverty.' You've got millions of people languishing in it." The *Independent* explained that Damon "is upset that Mr. Obama, who promised to 'spread the wealth around', has extended the Bush tax cuts and that the inequality gap has widened."

The point is that Blunt and Damon are considerably more intriguing than the film they are acting in. The scenes in which they talk, flirt, walk down the street are the most pleasing in *The Adjustment Bureau*. (In

another pleasant feature, New York City is well photographed, including the reading room at the 42nd Street public library, which appears to form a part of the adjustment team's headquarters.) Unhappily, 100 minutes of the two performers conversing about acting, filmmaking, politics, etc., might well have been more compelling than this \$50 million effort.

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