



THE ADJUSTMENT BUREAU (Cert 12)

Reel Issues author: Clive Price

Overview: A Bourne-meets-Matrix thriller with echoes of Hitchcock, which focuses on the big questions of destiny and the divine.

Director: George Nolfi (2010)

Studio: Universal Pictures

Running time: 101 minutes

Caution: Contains brief strong language and short sex scene (no nudity)

SUMMARY OF PLOT

David Norris (Matt Damon) is failing as a politician. While preparing his speech to accept defeat in the elections for the senate, he meets Elise Sellas (Emily Blunt). It's clearly love at first sight.

However, working away in the background is a strange group of 'men in black' entities who are manipulating David's destiny for him. They seem invincible and suddenly materialise in places by using a series of doorways.

But their plans go wrong when one of the entities, Harry (Anthony Mackie), misses his cue to delay David – who then has one of his 'chance' meetings with Elise. She seems to have a liberating influence on him, whereas the entities are trying constantly to ensnare him within 'the plan'.

David stumbles upon the entities at work in his office. They can stop time and motion in a localised space while they 'programme' people and events. One of the leaders, Richardson (John Slattery), explains to David he must keep their existence quiet. David must also stop seeing Elise – and stick to 'the plan'.

However, David's world has changed forever. Harry meets him to explain what is happening. He tells him the entities, or 'case officers', are working for 'the chairman'. This is clearly a reference to a superior being – perhaps God – who is ultimately in charge and creates plans for everyone's lives.

Years pass by. David's popularity as a politician grows again. Yet he still searches for Elise. They meet again, and another series of events follows where the 'case officers' try to keep them apart. A heavyweight officer, Thompson (Terence Stamp), is assigned to crush the relationship, as The Adjustment Bureau have a greater plan – for David to become US president.

Harry comes to David's assistance, and shows him how to travel across the city using secret doorways. With echoes of the Duke of Windsor and Mrs Simpson, David puts his presidential destiny to one side in a bid to be with the woman he loves. Their story ends with the thought-provoking statement: '...free will is a gift you'll never know how to use until you fight for it'.

SOME KEY ISSUES

Human and divine

At the start, David Norris and the entities are working against each other's aims, in a 'paradise lost' scenario. By the end, one of the 'case officers', Harry, takes on a messianic role and works with David. He hands his hat to David, which means he is sharing his special powers with him. Paradise is regained in that deal. David wears the hat, is able to walk through heavenly portals, leaving Harry hatless. This is a Christ-like role, the relinquishing of privileges so that others may benefit.

People and destiny

Throughout the story, there is a strong emphasis on the need for David to stick to 'the plan', which is never

questioned by the entities. Is there a set plan our lives are bound to follow, or that we should strive to reach – or are we empowered to take responsibility for our futures?

God and his plan

The plan appears in little black books, like a cross between a police officer's notebook and a tube map or even an electrical diagram. We learn there have been earlier versions of the plan for David's life. So it becomes clear that 'the chairman' is far more flexible than his 'case officers' would lead others to believe. Does God have only one plan, or does he improvise?

CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

Clip 1: DVD chapter 2. Runs 11.03 minutes to 16.03 minutes (approx. five minutes in length).

When are leaders being truly 'authentic'? Bitterly disappointed with election defeat, David Norris begins to share his trade secrets with his supporters. His rallying call was approved by a focus group. His tie was chosen by specialists. He'd paid a consultant US\$7,300 dollars to come up with 'the perfect amount of scuffing' for his shoes. This revealing speech sets the scene for the entire movie, because it tells us that other forces manipulate the reality around us, shaping it from the correct market research. Straight after this, we are introduced to two of the entities who are manipulating David's greater reality. It seems that several levels of manipulation are happening, all at the same time. And one simple incident determines the rest of his destiny.

In pairs:

- How do you feel about politicians' suits and speeches, after seeing this clip? Should public figures invest so much time and expense,

researching what they should wear, and which words and phrases they should use? What is the point of that? Where does one draw the line between good communication and total manipulation?

- Norris speaks with his assistant on the phone, and tells him the media mainly focused on his receding hairline. Has the media worsened or improved in this area, of concentrating on the physical appearance of politicians and their teams? And does that part of them really matter at all? What does that say about great leaders of the past like Winston Churchill – would he have passed the beauty test?
- Do we ever catch ourselves tailoring our words or appearance to meet other people's expectations of us, and, if so, how do we feel about this? How 'authentic' are we in our relationships with other people – and with God himself?

Clip 2 DVD chapter 6. Runs 30.36 minutes to 33.56 minutes (approx. three minutes in length).

Who is shaping our world? Norris comes face-to-face with Harry, one of the entities who are guiding his life's path. But they are not what any of us expect. They are like federal agents from a Hitchcock movie, dressed in smart suits and wearing trilbies. Harry makes a number of big statements about some big issues – from the idea of a supreme being with a plan, to the direct intervention by celestial beings who he calls 'case officers'.

Whole group:

- Who or what manipulates our reality – at home, work and church? Do we have much say in how

those worlds are shaped? Are we quite happy to go with the flow and accept everything that is done for us?

- Can one incident change our entire life pattern? Or do we have other opportunities to reconfigure and reshape our world? For instance, our society puts much emphasis on A Levels and degrees, as if that is the only gateway to a proper education and a future career path.
- In some churches, much emphasis is placed on making a decision, responding to an emotional appeal, because that 'moment' is important. In others, there is much talk about finding 'the right person' to marry – or discovering 'God's plan for your life', implying there is just that one chance to stumble upon it with no going back. How accurate is this perspective?

Clip 3: DVD chapter 12. Runs 1 hr 00.37 minutes to 1 hr 04.36 minutes (approx. four minutes in length).

Whatever happened to free will? 'You don't have free will – you have the appearance of free will,' Thompson tells David Norris. David learns he and Elise were always meant to be together, but that was in an earlier plan. 'David, you can change the world,' Thompson tells him, as he makes it clear he has to choose to become president or be with Elise. 'I choose her, come what may,' he decides. This is clearly a disappointment to the entities. Interestingly, we know now that the three main entities are called Thompson, Richardson and Harry – in other words, 'Tom, Dick and Harry' – which means an anonymous person. The fact there are three main entities is also interesting, because this could symbolise a Trinitarian ideal, or the

Greek 'fates' who were three beings controlling human destiny.

In pairs:

- What message about free will is conveyed by the movie? How does this compare to the message we receive from Scripture?
- The chairman, the superior being in the story, seems to rewrite his plans. Is that how we should believe the God of the Bible works? Or is there one solid plan laid down for all of eternity?
- In a world where supernatural entities seek to enforce one grand plan, what does it mean to exercise free will? What would be the consequences of doing so? How much freedom do you think we have? Are we limited, as in a card game, by the hand we've been given, or can we transcend this? Can we choose to live a different life?

Clip 4: DVD chapter 15. Runs 1 hr 13.59 minutes to 1 hr 29 minutes (approx. four minutes).

'She's enough,' Harry tells David. 'If you have her, you won't need to fill that void inside of you with applause and votes and dreams of one day making it to the White House. That's important, but it's not the only thing that matters.' So it appears there is even more to life than becoming President of the United States, the most powerful man on earth. Elise has brought the factor of love into David's life, which is the most liberating force of all, and indeed, the greatest force in the entire universe – as the Bible tells us (1 Corinthians 13).

'Most people live life on the path we set for them, too afraid to explore any other,' Harry says right at the end of the film. 'But once in a while, people like you come

along who knock down all the obstacles we put in your way – people who realise free will is a gift you'll never know how to use until you fight for it. I think that's the chairman's real plan. And maybe one day we won't write the plan – you will.'

Whole group:

- In what ways does God empower his own children to write their own plan? Does this really happen, or is it just a fanciful idea?
- Is it really a responsible thing to do, for the character of David Norris to choose a romantic relationship above and beyond duty to his country? What is the film telling us about that conflict of priorities?
- There is another key phrase issued by David Norris in one of his speeches. 'I'm here to tell you that your future is about your choices,' he tells his audience. How much of our future is really about our choices? Surely there are forces at work beyond our control?

GOD'S STORY

Human and divine

The Bible itself is all about interaction between the human and the Divine. Deals are done, covenants or agreements are arranged, and plans are drawn up between the two parties. The classic example is Abraham, who had a specific calling to leave his homeland, but also felt he could bargain with God by interceding for a city. Moses also had a particular mission agreement with God, but asked if the speaking part could be delegated to someone else.

God initiates these bi-party covenants, but they are more than that. They are not just legal agreements in a vacuum – they are also forged around relationships. God is presented as someone who, although quite

capable of creating the ultimate plan, is also ready to listen to intercession and to negotiate with his creation. He invites us to reason with him, as explained in **Isaiah 1.18**.

Read Genesis 12.1–3; Deuteronomy 5.1–5; Isaiah 1.18; 2 Chronicles 33.9–13 – How far do you think God is prepared to go, in terms of negotiating with us? How important is our co-operation if God is all-powerful? What is the part played by prayer in this context?

People and destiny

God assures us in his Word that he has good plans for our lives. Yet it seems from time to time he also frustrates people's plans when they don't match up to his – and when they break the terms of the covenant.

Read Jeremiah 29.11–14; Psalm 33.10,11 – How can God have good plans for his children, when bad things happen to good people? Why doesn't God always frustrate the plans of bad people – like the 9/11 terrorists, for example?

God and his plan

During the heady days of the early church, it seemed that plans changed, people went on one journey and were then forced on to another – almost like the case officers' doorways. There were arrests, imprisonments, shipwrecks – and angelic intervention – yet whole communities were transformed amid this apparent chaos.

Before Elise came along, David's life was following a strict plan. Then her love liberated him from 'the law', just as Christ's love has lifted us out of condemnation. The famous passage from 1 Corinthians 13 – which interestingly, is often quoted at weddings – offers us not so much a strict blueprint for living, but a guide

for our behaviour and decisions. The main rule is that love should rule. The New Covenant spells out the freedom God gives us to act, not by a written code, but guided by the Spirit, as in Galatians 5.16-25.

Read Acts 1.21-26; Acts 5.17-21; 1 Corinthians 13.8-13; Galatians 5.16-25 – What factors are at work in the decision taken in Acts 5.17-21 – and what do you think about them?

Can you think of moments in your life when it seemed that divine intervention prevented a tragedy from happening, or helped you to survive a crisis? Would you be willing to share this story with others, and allow them to comment from their perspective?

Clive Price is a writer, editor and lecturer who has written about film and TV, and formerly taught media production at Chichester College. A qualified journalist, he is sub-editor of Bible Society's Word In Action magazine.

© Bible Society 2011. Permission is given to make up to ten copies for use within a single Reel Issues discussion group.