

THE QUESTION OF VALUE: A REVIEW OF
MICHAEL CLAYTON

By *Pei-Suin Ng*

In civil law, value is invariably reduced to lucre. The suffering of trauma and injury is measured by restitution; a lawsuit is appraised by the award of damages. Defending a corporation against clear liability, in turn, is a yielding of million-dollar billings to shore up the profits of the law firm and guarantee the bonuses of its partners.

The currency of value is a prominent theme in Tony Gilroy's *Michael Clayton*, a cinematic web of legal drama, sinister double-dealing and corporate wrongdoing. Michael Clayton (played by George Clooney) is a lawyer who is called in to investigate when his firm's senior partner, Arthur Edens (Tom Wilkinson), inexplicably goes berserk while defending U-North, a large (and guilty) agrochemical corporation, against a class-action suit for environmental pollution. As Clayton is drawn deeper into the furore, he faces off Karen Crowder (Tilda Swinton), chief legal officer of U-North and intent on keeping the company's secrets buried. After Edens is murdered, Clayton realises he is the next target and the stakes ramp up.

The plot reads like a classic action-packed thriller, and the film certainly possesses its share of gripping scenes, notably a car chase in which Clayton is hunted down by gunmen in a spectacular cat-and-mouse game. Yet, the film also burns with a quiet intensity which belies the histrionics of its pyrotechnics. Eschewing the agitations of a shaky-cam aesthetic, the camera work and editing are calm and steady, underscoring a measured counterpoint to the action. The pace is also dampened by a number of domestic scenes which, while giving pause to plot development, heighten the film's emotional resonance. However, the film plumbs its greatest depths in the portrayal of Clayton's character. Unlike the hotshot lawyers of John Grisham-adapted legal thrillers, Clayton is refreshingly unsuccessful: a self-described "janitor", he deals with the unglamorous cases, sorting out legal messes which nobody else wants to touch. Divorced, in debt and with a son he only sees on Saturdays, his social life revolves around a card table in a Chinatown backroom. Clooney kindles the screen with all of Clayton's complexities—his cynicism, failures and grimness make him an ambivalent hero and, by extension, the film a more intricate battle between good and evil.

Some critics might fault these aspects for being irrelevant and, thus, jeopardising the film's effectiveness as an action thriller. Yet, this is precisely why I find *Michael Clayton* excellent, for these stoppages are recess breaks from the action in the most literal sense: to stop the action, to give us time to think. What is the value of people's lives and health destroyed

by corporate greed? What is the value of a lonely life and a loathed career? What is the value of what we fight for, through the law but also through each battle we engage in each day? The law has its own responses to these questions; *Michael Clayton* forces us to re-think its answers.

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