Name

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Course

Date

***The Wolf of Wall Street***

**Film Review and Analysis**

*The Wolf of Wall Street* is a Black American Comedy film based on biographical memoirs of Jordan Belfort. The film was released in December 2013 and directed by Martin Scorsese. It was distributed by Paramount Pictures, and it was a commercial success. The film is basically a recount of Jordan Belfort’s career as a New York Stockbroker on Wall Street. It illustrates how Jordan Belfort’s firm, Stratton Oakmont, engaged in fraudulent activities and made him a fortune until the bubble burst upon FBI investigation into his activities. The film’s contents, explicit scenes and use of animals earned it controversial status. However, the film has received positive acclaim from most of its critics. The controversy surrounding the film arose from its shady moral depictions, drug and explicit sex scenes and use of profane language.

The jangled story line concentrates closely on Belfort’s perspective; his voice guides the action, and Scorsese’s freewheeling direction captures the autobiographer’s raunchy, discursive vigor. Scorsese unleashes a furious, yet exquisitely controlled, kinetic energy, complete with a plunging and soaring camera, mercurial and conspicuous special effects, counterfactual scenes, subjective fantasies, and swirling choreography on a grand scale (Toumarkine). He also introduces a great device to impose the protagonist’s point of view: Belfort narrates the action even while he is in the midst of living it, addressing the camera with monologues that show him to be both inside and outside the events, converging on-screen his present and former selves.

The movie has a sharply rhythmic swing, like a great jazz band in flat-out rumble, due to Scorsese’s stylistic inventiveness and the wild, exhilarating performances that he elicits from his cast. Leonardo DiCaprio, playing Belfort, gives a fully satisfying, elbows-out, uninhibited screen performance. In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, he leaves impersonation behind and unleashes spontaneous bursts of energy that seem to tear through the screen. Instead of fitting his performance to a preconception of Belfort, DiCaprio seems to be improvising on the theme of Belfort, spinning out an electric repertory of gestures and inflections (Toumarkine). By being, more than ever, himself on-screen, DiCaprio realizes his role more deeply than ever before.

Scorsese makes Belfort’s life look as jazzed and as swinging as Belfort must have felt it was. Brilliantly, Scorsese does not hide the story behind the story—he makes the planning of a repellently decadent party even more absorbing than the event itself, and somehow manages to make a self-administered enema seem like part of the fun. Belfort is furiously appetitive, idiosyncratically gifted, and perceptively opportunistic; he does not so much turn to the dark side as stumble into it and just keep going. His story is one of sex, drugs, and rock and roll, but with financial machinations replacing the music.

Belfort appears to be a savant of sales, a complex art of rhetoric, performance, and psychology, combined with boundless chutzpah. He takes pleasure in the money that he moves from his clients’ pockets to his own, but he also takes pleasure from the very exercise of power over his victims. He is not Gordon Gekko, who engineers his greed into a social good, as if rendering himself a disinterested servant of abstract principle; Belfort loves what he does (Toumarkine). It is thrilling for Jordan Belfort to use and abuse this power, and it is thrilling for us to watch—and his understanding that his actions are wrong only adds to the thrill.

Belfort’s misadventures are driven by his desire for a wilder experience, a greater pleasure, a higher high, a more shattering ecstasy—an extreme of sensation joining pleasure and pain (one of the movie’s most telling scenes involves a session with a dominatrix). He has not just a self-defeating intelligence but a self-punishing one. It took a sort of genius to conceive Belfort’s plan, talent to realize it, and stupidity to think he could escape it. The smarts and the stupidity do not coexist side by side; they overlap (Toumarkine). The risk is part of the pleasure, the anticipation of the fall is part of the thrill, the humiliation and degradation are built into the excitement of his success. For all of his crudeness, vulgarity, and cruelty, he is one of the high-wire élite, akin to those actors and directors, those musicians and writers, those monstrous potentates whose vast and dark range of experience is precisely the source of their allure.

Scorsese, without at all seeking to justify, explain, or apologize for Belfort’s actions, reveals the impulse behind the vulgar self-indulgence and the grotesque insensitivity, the terrifying yet ecstatic inner force within the petty monster of vanity. The already celebrated expressionistic comedy of Belfort’s quaalude-spastic night crawl to his Lamborghini is matched by the crazed crowd-stoking as he addresses his employees before taking leave of his firm. The speech runs the gamut from a frenzied sentimental intimacy to a shattering outburst. What makes the movie a comedy is that, after all that Belfort underwent, all that he put others through, all that he may have come to regret—having done enough to have a past—he survived it, and, having survived it, his memories take on a wry tone of wonder that such things could ever have happened, even to himself.

Yet within the comedy, Scorsese’s vision is a tragic one, rooted in the stark wisdom of Belfort’s division of the world into those who, unendowed with such a gift, a hunger, and a will, are relegated to lives of frustration and narrowness; and those who, thus endowed, seek to fulfill their unfulfillable cravings by taking advantage of the former (Toumarkine). Scorsese also suggests a third category—the sort of person embodied by the F.B.I. agent (played with a cagy dialectical bonhomie by Kyle Chandler) and the prosecuting attorneys who bring down Belfort. Despite the authentic justice of their work, these people of principle are no saints. As Scorsese shows, they bind themselves in a carapace of order and discipline that allows them, too, to take visceral pleasure in the exercise of power.

Certainly, Scorsese does not approve of Belfort’s actions. We may wish that such behavior did not exist, but its existence is a central part of human nature, and there is a reason that we can not stop watching, just as we can not stop watching the terrifying storm or the shark attack. Within the movie’s roiling, riotous turbulence is an Olympian detachment, a grand and cold consideration of life from a contemplative distance, as revealed in the movie’s last shot, which puts *The Wolf of Wall Street* squarely in the realm of the late film, with its lofty vision of ultimate things.

Works Cited

Toumarkine, Dories. “Film Review: The Wolf of Wall Street.” *Film Journal International*. 23 Dec. 2013, www.filmjournal.com/content/film-review-wolf-wall-street. Assessed on 8 May. 2018.

*The Wolf of Wall Street*. Directed by Martin Scorsese, performances by Leonardo DiCaprio, Jonah Hill, and Margot Robbie, Paramount Pictures, 2013.