

(cite as Barrie Wilson, "*Changing Lanes: It's All the Rage.*" A Presentation to the Toronto Psychoanalytic Film Study Group, April 2019. www.barriewilson.com)

CHANGING LANES – film - Analysis

"It's All the Rage!"

Barrie Wilson, PhD
Professor Emeritus and Senior Scholar
Humanities, York University
Toronto

Changing Lanes was released in 2002 to rave reviews and box office success. Roger Ebert described it as "one of the best movies of the year."¹ He gave it 4 stars out of 4. It was also a commercial success. Against a production budget of \$45 million, the film netted over \$95 million. An amazing cast was assembled to host this fast-acting drama -- one incident in the lives of two men provokes anger and rage. These raw emotions have behavioural manifestations that ripple far into the lives of many others.

The film focuses on Gavin versus Doyle. Gavin is played by Ben Afflick. He's an ambitious lawyer who's out to make a mark in his father-in-law's firm. In Gavin's constellation of relationships we have --

- Cynthia -- Gavin's wife -- played by Amanda Peet.
- Michelle -- Gavin's legal associate and former lover. Played by Toni Collette.
- Stephen, the head of the law firm -- he's Cynthia's father and Gavin's father-in-law.

Doyle, played by Samuel L. Jackson, is an insurance agent. He's also a recovering alcoholic with marital problems. In Doyle's family we have Valerie, Doyle's wife, played by Kim Staunton. They have two children. Doyle and Valerie and in the midst of a custody battle.

¹ www.rogerebert.com, April 12, 2002 "Changing Lanes."

The plot turns on one incident: a 20-minute loss of time. These 20 minutes change the lives of Gavin and Doyle and their families. *Changing Lanes* is reminiscent of another film, *Run Lola Run*. In that movie the loss of just a few seconds dramatically altered people's lives.

The director is Roger Michell. Prior to *Changing Lanes*, in 1999, Michell directed a popular film starring Julie Roberts called *Notting Hill*. That's also a story about a life-changing incident – spilled orange juice leads to an affair. After *Changing Lanes* in 2002 he went on to direct such features as *The Mother*, 2003. That's about a mother who has an affair with a younger man who is also sleeping with her daughter. That was followed by *Hyde Park on the Hudson*, 2012, which concerns the love affair between Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his cousin Margaret Stuckley.

Most recently Michell directed *My Cousin Rachel*, 2017. This film has to do with the romantic allure of a beautiful cousin who may be a murderer. The cousin is played by Rachel Weisz. Roger Michell is noted for tackling serious topics, employing top stars, and involving plots in which one incident forever changes the future.

That brings us to *Changing Lanes*. The story is told in a straightforward linear fashion. It has a three-part structure:

1. a catalyst that propels the problems that must be solved
2. a series of cascading destructive actions – the fall-out from one anger-provoking incident
3. and then the aftermath.

The story takes place on one day and a bit of the next. Let's examine each segment in turn.

1. The catalyst

The catalyst is clear. Two individuals – Gavin the lawyer and Doyle the insurance agent – have appointments in different courts for which they cannot be late. The film opens with fast-paced shots of a car where the driver is obviously in a hurry, rapidly changing lanes, weaving in and out of traffic erratically. They are literally changing lanes. A couple of flash-backs establishes that Gavin has an important legal matter to attend to, a disputed power of appointment to a foundation's Board of Directors. Doyle is pleading for joint custody of two kids.

An accident occurs. Gavin is at fault. Doyle wants to exchange insurance information – “to do it right” as he says. Gavin is frazzled, on the phone, and he drops an important file – the key file as it turns out for his legal case. He’s frantic, in a hurry, and so he hands Doyle a blank cheque and drives off leaving Doyle stranded. As he leaves he shouts: “better luck next time,” words that come back to haunt him.

Both are under pressure to get to court. Both are frustrated by the delay, aggravated, annoyed.

Late for court, Gavin is ordered to produce the original file by the end of day. The court requires the signed Power of Appointment form. Gavin realizes that he must have dropped it when hastily exchanging information with Doyle.

On the other hand, Doyle learns that because he is late, he has lost the opportunity to plead for joint custody. His case is dismissed. He learns his wife, Valerie, is going to move from New York to Oregon, taking with her the two kids. He senses defeat and wanders out of the court room dazed.

And so we have enormous loss. For Gavin, the loss is loss of a file, possible loss of a case and loss of respect within his firm. For Doyle, his loss is the loss of an opportunity to plead his case, possible loss of custody, possible loss of ever seeing his kids again. The compounded loss for each is overwhelming. Out of this sense of huge loss and further loss down the road, anger, outrage and rage ensue. The sense of loss is a typical trigger for anger.

2. Cascading destructive actions

What happens next is a cascade of destructive actions fueled by anger. These escalate in seriousness as Gavin and Doyle pound each other. They can think of nothing else than how to get back at the other.

Doyle throws Gavin’s file in a waste bin. As their paths cross on the street, Doyle rejects Gavin’s offer to buy him a new car. Doyle doesn’t want money or a car: he wants his morning back – the lost “20 minutes.”

Learning how important the file is to Gavin, Doyle retrieves it. He faxes a page to Gavin with the message, “better luck next time,” the very words Gavin had used dismissively of him. But Doyle’s anger is not assuaged and depression takes hold: he orders a glass of bourbon and sits alone in a bar contemplating drinking it. Doyle’s AA contact tells him that he’s angry and that “anger has gotten him in the one place he shouldn’t be.”

Meanwhile Gavin lies to the firm’s partners. He says that the Power of Appointment issue had been successfully resolved. He barges into Michelle’s office – his former lover -- and rudely disrupts things. She aids and abets Gavin’s desire for revenge by suggesting he contact a guy who “helps out with things that need help.” He does so and authorizes this guy to bankrupt Doyle. In desperation, realizing that he may not be able to retrieve the all-important file, he fesses up to the partners that he has lied. After raking him over the coals – more anger -- his father-in-law suggests a way out: forge a Power of Appointment form using a page from a signed will.

So anger has given way to lying, manipulation and plotting. Destructive behaviour escalates.

Gavin sets off the sprinkler system in the law offices. He learns that the partners have benefited from the trust – each received 1.5 million dollars. Doyle, on the other hand, goes on physical rampage in the bank when he learns he is bankrupt. This destroys his chances to obtain a mortgage on a house – the house he wishes to buy in order to forestall his wife’s move to Oregon with his kids.

Meanwhile Gavin’s wife, Cynthia, meets him and assures him that all is well. Take the way out of the mess offered by her father, she tells him, and don’t worry about the affair you had with Michelle. After all, as she says, the practice of law, is finding ways to cheat. She’s one of the few people in the film who’s not angry.

The battle rages on. Doyle unscrews a tire on Gavin’s car, causing a minor crash. Gavin goes semi-berserk, landing up in the confessional during a Good Friday liturgy, asking about meaning. He lies to Doyle’s kids’ school that Doyle is a threat to his kids. This causes a terrible incident in which Doyle, thinking his kids were in trouble, rushes to the school where he is taken down violently.

At this point, everything is out of control: rage has caused a cascading sequence of increasingly destructive actions.

* * *

When I first saw the film, I thought that it contained a central flaw. Gavin is a lawyer; Doyle has a legal problem. Why couldn't Gavin have proposed a swap: the file he needs in exchange for representing Doyle in his custody battle? Makes sense, at least in a rational way.

I don't think, however, that there is a flaw. After the accident and both having lost their respective court battles, they are not rational. They are consumed with anger.

Another feature of rage, besides being triggered by a sense of loss, is its ability to block out rational solutions. They are not thinking straight. They want to get back at each other. They are not coolly analyzing the situation and thinking of solutions. The film is realistic in ignoring this obvious compromise. Anger leads to obsessive behaviour that blinds us to solutions to conflict. Rage seems to take on a life of its own.

In terms of the film's central metaphor, they have changed lanes. Once they have set their respective courses down the path of anger, it's hard to get out of that lane.

3. The aftermath

The aftermath. At this point, things seem to subside: they have gone far enough. Gavin sees how upset Doyle's kids are. He goes to the bank to help rectify Doyle's mortgage application.

The partners file the forged Power of Appointment papers in time. Doyle gives Gavin the original file. They both say they are sorry. Gavin gives his father-in-law the file over dinner as they dine with their wives. Gavin suggests he'll get on with the practice of law but says first he'll devote some time to helping a man buy a house. He also demands that the partners return 3 million dollars to the trust. He also visits Doyle's wife, Valerie, but we are not privy to the conversation.

Besides changing lanes, there's another symbolic element: it's that most of the action takes place on Good Friday, a time when – theologically speaking -- evil seems to win out over good. But the film ends enigmatically and things are left hanging. Is there an Easter, a redemption, a healing?

Is there reconciliation between Gavin and Doyle? We don't know. Doyle sees his wife and kids across the street from the house he has now presumably purchased. Valerie has a bit of a smile on her face. Do they move in together? Do they reconcile? We don't know.

I've emphasized three main themes:

- * rage as triggered by a sense of deep loss
- * rage as causing a cascade of destruction behaviour
- * rage as all-consuming, taking over our rational judgment and blinding us to real solutions.

There are other themes as well: anger and race, black vs white; anger and polarization, that is, anger blotting out the ability to perceive the valid concerns of others. You may detect other themes as well.

One final word. And this goes to President Clinton. In the book he wrote with James Patterson -- *The President is Missing* – he wrote:

“All too often anger works better than answers; resentment better than reason; emotion trumps evidence. A sanctimonious sneering one-liner, no matter how bogus is seen as straight talk, while a calm, well-argued response is seen as canned and phony. It reminds me of the old political joke: Why do you take such an instant dislike to people? It saves a lot of time.”