

*The Vow* (2012) Directed by Michael Sucsy. Written by Abby Kohn, Marc Silverstein and Jason Katims.

*The Vow* at least has an interesting slant on an over-used premise. Paige (Rachel McAdams) is an upper-class young artist from Chicago who lives downtown and does clay sculptures that look like trees trying to become human (or vice versa). She is successful, bohemian, uninhibited, quirky, and happily married to Leo (Channing Tatum), who owns and runs a small recording studio.

It snows a lot in Chicago. On their way back to their cool apartment, which is full of artsy artefacts and the residues of lively evenings, they make the fatal mistake of making out at a red light. The streets are deserted, right? Not quite. There must be an inch of snow, but the ploughs are out anyway. Perhaps the driver didn't see the light or was distracted by the car's busy occupants, but he ploughs into the little red car mysteriously stalled at the intersection, propelling it from behind until it comes to a sudden stop against the light pole, Paige's head collides with the windshield. Her body follows her head through the shattered glass and ends up splayed on the hood.

After an induced coma, Paige comes back to consciousness in the hospital and mistakes Sam for a doctor. Once again, the plot takes a turn to the blind side: amnesia. The injury has taken away Paige's memory of the crash but much more than that, erasing backwards to where Paige can't remember anything about the last six years of her life. That includes being married to Leo, dating him, meeting him in the first place, being an artist, moving downtown from the affluent suburbs; she doesn't even recall being estranged for the whole six years from her obnoxious parents. Leo has never met them, but he meets them now when they find out about Paige's accident (around the time she regains consciousness). And it isn't just memory loss Paige faces because she is no longer in love with Leo. Is love in the head rather than the heart? Is love just a memory of an emotion experienced at one time?

Leo's memory and therefore his emotions are intact. His first hope is that Paige will recover her memory and, with them, her former feelings. Clutching the doctor's advice to help Paige resume her normal life, Leo doesn't think through Paige's delicate condition and plunges her immediately up to her forehead in the past life they've shared – cue the audience's automatic disapproval to this bonehead move. It serves the purpose, however, of bringing Mom and Dad back into Paige's life. She had been well on her way to another life entirely, following her father's footsteps into law school until, for an initially unexplained reason, she dropped out of Northwestern short only a couple of credits towards her law degree. She cut herself off from her family, moved into the city, and carved out a new life that, after a couple of years, included Leo.

For Paige's parents (played by Jessica Lange and Sam Neill), her amnesia is a convenient opportunity to bring their life back to where it went astray when Paige decided to move out. They're immediately available, even eager to intervene; Leo tries to hang on to his business and look after Paige at the same time. Her sense of geography has gone as far west as everything else. She doesn't remember her inner-city neighbourhood – quite a place to dump an unaware rich kid from the burbs. It's not long before she seeks refuge back home, in her past and possibly new future.

Is this an opportunity for Paige to rediscover who she was, maybe who she was meant to be; to take the path untaken? Not on your life.

At first, Leo tries to become a dutiful in-law as well as husband. Paige's parents see her amnesia as convenient because forgetting Leo is the best thing that's happened to her. It's not

just Paige's love for Leo that is rooted in her brain, but everything else she had become, her love of art, her ability to sculpt, her attachment to the bohemian lifestyle, her character and personality. Jason Bourne, another movie amnesiac, may have forgotten who he is, but his body remembers how to fend off cops and thugs. At one early family dinner, Leo tries to describe what he does for a living. Running a small-time recording studio is not just low class, it's unsound business. Computer technology has made studio recordings obsolete and Leo has no future. But Leo's attachment to his studio art is not based on rationality (as Weber might say). It is a passion and, as he tries to put his feelings into words over the meat and potatoes, he becomes passionate about his work. There's something magical and mysterious about the energy that emerges spontaneously when musicians jam together. The session is electrifying, each musician feeds from the energy of the other, and the final creation has qualities that can never be duplicated outside the studio. Leo's explanation hits the table like a speck of dust; no one understands him, not even Paige who *used to* because she had persuaded Leo to start the business in the first place. Finally, Leo tries dating Paige, not to bring back the old feelings but in the hopes of kindling them anew. We can see some of his charm and spontaneity (such as an impromptu midnight dip into Lake Michigan), but Paige was a different person when they first met, and the eyes through which she judges him now are no longer the same.

Soon, Paige is meeting up with her former girl-friends, helping her sister with her conventional and affluent wedding, and sinking into the mindless drivel of girl culture. She starts dressing like the preppie she was, and enrolls in law school to finish her degree. She even takes up with her ex-boyfriend, Jeremy (Scott Speedman), a corporate executive who works in downtown Chicago – but certainly a different end of town from bohemia – and who quickly dumps his new fiancé for a second shot at Paige. We never get very much into the depth of any of the secondary characters, Jeremy included, with the exception of Jessica Lange, who has one tearful scene of confession and self-understanding. Meanwhile, Leo reads the writing and, regretfully, signs the divorce papers.

If the movie is going to follow the conventional Hollywood script, something has to change for Paige. Can you ever really go home again? In her class on property law, Paige begins doodling instead of taking notes, drawing designs suspiciously similar to her tree-human sculptures. Something drove her out the first time, more than just her controlling parents – some family secret which she has also conveniently forgotten. Soon, history repeats itself. All – what there is of it – is revealed (the audience might wonder whether the revelations would have been enough to shunt Paige's life onto such a different track). Paige drops out once more, moves back downtown, and resumes a career in art – again alone and Leo-less, but ready for a spontaneous and un-thought-out second coming.