

The absence of democratic sensibility in American filmmaking

By David Walsh
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Million Dollar Baby, directed by Clint Eastwood, written by Paul Haggis, based on stories by F.X. Toole

“UPI News Service (01/14/2005)—Hollywood tough guy Clint Eastwood publicly threatened to kill Michael Moore if he ever pointed a camera in his direction. Eastwood, a political conservative, was accepting a Special Film-making Achievement prize for *Million Dollar Baby* at the National Board Of Review Awards dinner Tuesday in New York when he urged Moore, a liberal, to avoid making him the subject of any future projects. ‘Michael, if you ever show up at my front door with a camera, I’ll kill you,’ said Eastwood. When the audience began laughing, Eastwood emphasized his point: ‘I mean it.’”

Million Dollar Baby, Clint Eastwood’s new film about a female boxer, has been met with virtually universal acclaim, including from “left” critics. In my opinion, the acclaim is entirely undeserved; the film’s rancid individualism will prove no help to anyone. There is something foul at the heart of *Million Dollar Baby* that no one wants to talk about.

Eastwood’s work centers on the relationship between Frankie Dunn (Eastwood), an aging boxing trainer who owns a gym in a rundown section of Los Angeles, and Maggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank), a refugee from a trailer park in Missouri with aspirations of becoming a successful fighter. Frankie has known near success in the boxing world. He also has some painful unhappiness in his personal life; each one of his weekly letters to his daughter, who we never meet, is returned unopened.

Frankie’s friend and employee, Eddie ‘Scrap-Iron’ Dupris (Morgan Freeman), narrates the film. A former boxer, ‘Scrap’ lost an eye in a fight that Dunn tried to stop. Coming upon her late at night—he has a small room at the gym—Scrap is the first to offer Maggie advice about boxing technique.

When she asks Frankie to take her on, he sneeringly replies, “I don’t train girls,” but following the defection of his most successful fighter, he changes his mind. Frankie agrees to train, but not manage, Maggie. In the end, he does both, guiding her to a title bout worth half of a million-dollar purse. Then disaster strikes, and Dunn is obliged to make a difficult decision.

There are reasons why *Million Dollar Baby* will find an audience, and not entirely bad ones. Hilary Swank (*Boys Don’t Cry*) in the central role is a talented, appealing performer; her enthusiasm and energy are infectious. One wants to see her on screen. Moreover, audiences, sick of gun play, bombast and special effects, may find the Eastwood film’s relative calm and quiet, its coherent story-line and its apparent concern with everyday life attractive. It may appear a throwback to a more human and humane kind of cinema.

However, spectators (as well as critics!) have a responsibility to think things through, to approach what they see critically, not to be satisfied with “at first glance.” Are there not sufficient grounds, given the present ideological and political atmosphere and Eastwood’s own history and well-known social viewpoint, to be cautious, at the very least? It is easy enough to become teary-eyed, but perhaps somewhat more difficult to

stand back a bit and consider the film’s logic and implications. A serious analysis will reveal that this is fool’s gold, not genuine social drama, not genuine social realism ... and certainly not genuine social criticism.

The film reviewers, often overlapping in their comments, muster a number of arguments in support of *Million Dollar Baby*. Eastwood’s film, we are told, bears comparison with some of the most compelling, hardboiled boxing films of the late 1940s and 1950s. More generally, the veteran filmmaker is said to be something of classicist, who eschews gimmickry; his supposedly precise, patient and pared-down style reminds his admirers of studio (particularly Warner Brothers) films from Hollywood’s ‘golden age.’

With varying degrees of forcefulness, the critics express sympathy as well for Eastwood’s themes. His deep pessimism and fatalism are openly acknowledged, indeed viewed as positive traits. His, it is said, is a “violent,” “savage” and “unforgiving” universe, in which hope is nothing more than a memory and dreams alone sustain you, even if they prove to be chimeras. The only rules and obligations are those that people create for themselves, independently of society, church, family and so forth. And this apparently represents a progressive trend.

Is it true, first of all, that *Million Dollar Baby* substantively resembles boxing films from an earlier decade? Some historical perspective is called for.

Hollywood studios turned out a good many films dealing with boxers and boxing in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s and beyond, but certain ones stand out in the memory: *The Champ* (1931), directed by King Vidor; *Kid Galahad* (1937), directed by Michael Curtiz; *Golden Boy* (1939), directed by Rouben Mamoulian; *They Made Me a Criminal* (1939), directed by Busby Berkeley; *City for Conquest*, directed by Anatole Litvak and Jean Negulesco; *Body and Soul* (1947), directed by Robert Rossen; *Champion* (1949), directed by Mark Robson; *The Set-Up* (1949), directed by Robert Wise; *The Harder They Fall*, also directed by Robson (1956); *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956), also directed by Wise; and *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1962), directed by Ralph Nelson. (Of course Marlon Brando’s memorable character in Elia Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* is also a former boxer.)

Disparate as they are, these films share certain common traits. They generally treat boxing as a corrupt field, controlled or influenced by ruthless businessmen or mobsters, or both. Working class kids, naïve or otherwise—or aging, battered fighters—are used and tossed aside by the ‘big shots,’ or they become infected themselves by corruption and lose their way. The films portray the boxers and their families and friends essentially as victims of a money-making operation, ruled by violence. These themes are developed with varying degrees of subtlety, sometimes with little subtlety at all, but nonetheless their recurrence suggests that they represented something more than mere opinion. These were commonly accepted views, possessing the force of objective truth.

Body and Soul, directed by Robert Rossen, written by Abraham Polonsky and starring John Garfield, is widely recognized as one of the

most successful works in the genre, and indeed a number of critics in their comments on *Million Dollar Baby* refer to it as a kind of measuring stick, without, however, going into detail.

In Rossen's film, the Garfield character turns to professional boxing out of economic need, after his father is killed in a gangland slaying and his mother faces the prospect of going on relief. Garfield rises in the boxing world, but along the way makes a pact with the devil, in the form of an unscrupulous promoter. He loses his girlfriend, who objects to his new management, and takes up with an opportunistic nightclub singer.

The corrupt promoter sets up a fight between Garfield and the old champion, played by black actor Canada Lee, who he knows is one blow away from serious injury. Lee nearly loses his life in the ring, and Garfield, stricken with guilt, hires him as a trainer. Finally, the promoter orders Garfield to take a "dive" in a fight with the new contender. Garfield agrees, but when he is double-crossed, knocks out the challenger. When the promoter threatens Garfield, the champion replies, "What are you gonna do, kill me? Remember what you told me, 'Everybody dies.'" He and his old girlfriend walk off together.

As Carmen Ficarra, at *moviemaker.com*, notes: "The best boxing movies dote on the corruption of the sport, the evil irony of strong men being owned by weaker ones and forced to do their bidding. ... [In *Body and Soul*] John Garfield plays Charlie Davis, another Lower East Side [of Manhattan] kid who discovers he's got a chance at a career in the ring—or, as his old-world mother puts it, 'making a living hitting people, knocking their teeth out.' Here's where boxing movies started throwing their own punches. Out went the tender pathos of Keaton, the indomitable smile of Cagney. In came the greedy fighters, crooked managers and malicious syndicate bosses who'd as soon use their boxers for ashtrays than treat them with anything resembling respect."

A hostile, right-wing critic observes that in *Body and Soul*, "the corruption of the boxing ring is clearly a metaphor for capitalism. 'It's business,' is the mantra of the corrupt promoter as he tempts the aspiring champ (John Garfield) into moral compromise."

Indeed, any examination of the film is meaningless unless it takes into account the left-wing views of Rossen (who subsequently succumbed to the McCarthyites and 'named names'), Polonsky (who refused and was blacklisted) and Garfield (who suffered a heart attack and died under pressure from the witch-hunters).

Most of the boxing films mentioned above were informed by left or liberal ideas, generally critical of corruption, business and profit-making. Left-winger (at the time) Clifford Odets wrote *Golden Boy*; Garfield also starred in *They Made Me a Criminal*. The central figure in *Kid Galahad*, a Warner Brothers production from the late 1930s, is not the boxer, but the promoter, played with ferocious energy by left-wing actor Edward G. Robinson; Michael Curtiz, whom German filmmaker R.W. Fassbinder loosely and admiringly termed an "anarchist in Hollywood," directed.

Even more than any single view of boxing as an industry, most of these films—certainly the best ones—convey discontent and restlessness, specifically working class discontent and restlessness. They take for granted popular aversion to big business, to authority, to the police.

The significant directors, writers and actors of the time, after all, had been intellectually and morally shaped by the Depression and the Second World War, the horrors of fascism and authoritarianism in Europe. Whether they more or less uncritically supported Roosevelt's New Deal or had more radical visions, of a socialist society, the most substantial figures in Hollywood took for granted the need for social change.

Speaking of the film industry in the postwar period, Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, in their *Radical Hollywood*, comment: "The vision of a reborn world, after the defeat of Nazism, had been constructed out of the experiences of the New Deal and the widespread public sentiment—among powerful sections of elites as well as ordinary folk—of the need for fundamental social and economic reform. ...

"Capitalism, at least old-style capitalism, still seemed discredited globally, exhausted with fascism and colonialism. ... *Hollywood reflected and perceived reality through a fun-house mirror, distorted but nonetheless recognizable.*" (Emphasis added—DW)

This is quite critical.

Where does *Million Dollar Baby* stand in relation to this?

First and foremost, the element of a protest against existing reality, including the reality of the boxing world, is entirely absent from Eastwood's film. There is nothing remotely anti-establishment here. Although Maggie comes from poverty, she accepts without hesitation all the conditions and hardships imposed on her. Of course such unquestioning individuals exist, but the director registers the lack of resistance with obvious approval and even relish. Maggie is willing to do anything to succeed. It should be noted that her nickname for Frankie is "Boss," accurately reflecting the nature of their relationship.

Million Dollar Baby takes as a positive given an attitude that would have been scorned by the filmmakers of another era—relentless individualism. Frankie reminds Maggie on a number of occasions that her one thought should be, "Always protect myself." The film recognizes the dog-eat-dog character of society and boxing and accepts it entirely, indeed revels in it. Its substitution of the authoritarian, paternalistic relationship between trainer and fighter for a wider, human solidarity is hardly an advance on the earlier films.

Aside from its three central figures, who are given some sort of special dispensation, Eastwood's work expresses nothing but contempt for humanity, especially for working class humanity. The black and Latin kids in the gym are malevolent louts; the one decent "gym rat" is mentally handicapped and a rather pathetic figure. Maggie's final opponent, a savage former "East German prostitute," is the product of someone's fevered and unpleasant imagination.

Most telling of all, and most grotesque, is the portrayal of the members of Maggie's family in Missouri, as lazy, selfish monsters, caricatures of 'poor white trash.' This slander against a healthy portion of the American population, which is one of the most socially revealing characteristics of *Million Dollar Baby*, has gone almost unnoticed and certainly uncriticized by the critics, suggesting they sympathize with or share this view.

Far from expressing pride in her daughter's accomplishments as a boxer, Maggie's mother ridicules her profession and tells her to "find a man ... live proper." More than that, she angrily greets the gift of a house that her daughter has bought her with winnings from the ring, because "they'll stop my welfare." I would be grateful to Eastwood and his screenwriter if they could provide me the name of a single successful athlete or entertainer whose working class family has responded in such a manner. Truly, this is a case of unconvincingly and absurdly distorting reality, damaging one's drama in the process, to sustain a reactionary social conception.

Nothing about her life—not poverty, not waitressing, not living in a wretched little room, not the rigor of boxing, not Frankie's dictatorial ways—angers the ever cheerful and ebullient Maggie, with the exception of her impoverished family (legitimately, of course, within the contrived framework of the film). In *Million Dollar Baby*, the shiftless, parasitical Fitzgeralds from the Ozarks are the principal villains.

The fate that the film holds in store for Maggie, after all her backbreaking effort, is rather grim. However, we are still not encouraged to criticize the circumstances of her life in any shape or fashion or the brutal manner in which she has been obliged to earn a living. On the contrary, Maggie accepts her destiny without a murmur, and Scrap tells Frankie that she would never complain because, after all, "She got her shot."

The logic of Eastwood's film suggests a rather bleak prospect for ordinary Americans. (He, meanwhile, is many times a millionaire.) *Million Dollar Baby*, by implication, acknowledges that the "American

Dream” has become far less attainable under contemporary conditions, but that does not prevent the filmmaker from urging its pursuit.

How enticing this will prove to wide layers of the population in the long run, that they should strive for individual success, even though they are unlikely to come by it and may very well pay a terribly high price, is an intriguing question.

The hollowness and falseness of its perspective—not its supposed grappling with the harshness of social reality—imparts to the film its dark, pessimistic tone.

Eastwood’s outlook is unsavory; and, one would have to say, on the basis of a viewing of *Million Dollar Baby*, increasingly so. In terms of the desperately narrow continuum of official American politics, Eastwood would seem to locate himself on the “Libertarian” (which has nothing genuinely ‘libertarian’ about it) Right. He is obviously not of the Christian Right. The filmmaker goes out of his way to make clear that he has little use for organized religion. In fact, this latest film has come under attack from fundamentalist circles for Frankie’s final, “amoral” act.

The notion that the director’s rejection of family and church has a progressive character is profoundly naïve, and mistaken, in my view. Eastwood’s attitude appears to owe more to some variety of “Don’t Tread on Me” social alienation and reaction. Above all, he wants elbow room. And he is prepared to ‘force the issue,’ to use violence in that undertaking. Eastwood’s persona consciously takes the law into his hands, vigilante-style, and gets away with it. One needs to bear in mind that there is also a right-wing, anti-democratic critique of existing institutions. This is a man who would like to be given the opportunity to see to it that the trains run on time.

Commentators argue that in recent films Eastwood has portrayed conflicted individuals wrestling with important moral dilemmas. The filmmaker’s (and commentators’) conception of a moral struggle, however, is remarkably limited. The characters Eastwood plays are not answerable to anyone, except themselves. As long as they pull a long face, furrow their brows and look pained after the fact, they are permitted to commit any number of crimes.

In a serious artistic representation of an inner conflict the individual is shown weighing the implications of his actions—including the real possibility that *his entire course of action is wrong and should be abandoned*—and either not committing the act or living differently afterward, atoning for it somehow, not simply looking glum.

Eastwood’s characters, on the other hand, take matters into their own hands and then go about their business, *convinced of their essential rightness*, with no indication that they would not carry out the same act in the future. In other words, as he mows you down, Eastwood tells you, with a grimace, ‘This will hurt me more than it will hurt you.’

As for the film’s simple, pared down style, one has to be blunt. This is not the result of some arduous and time-consuming effort on the filmmaker’s part to subtract the superfluous. As an artist, Eastwood has not yet arrived at anything terribly complicated. Some of his films have bordered on the primitive. In recent years the critics have made far more of him than he deserves.

His direction of actors varies wildly. Sean Penn, Tim Robbins, Marcia Gay Harden and the rest in *Mystic River* gave poor, thoroughly misguided performances in a muddy, misanthropic work. Swank, a gifted performer, is more effective here because the character and story are rather more linear (although equally false).

The critical whitewash, with a few honorable exceptions, that *Million Dollar Baby* has received speaks to the essential unseriousness and superficiality of what passes for film criticism in the US at present. Eastwood’s film itself reveals the extent to which elementary democratic sentiment, as the result of a decades-long social and political process, including the anti-communist purges, has eroded in the US film industry. And these things have consequences!!

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