

"Moneyball": An Inquiry Into Media Manipulation

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"Moneyball" was one of the best-received films of 2011 and an Academy Award contender for best film at the 2012 Oscars. It was based on the 2003 nonfiction book by the same name by Michael Lewis and was directed by Bennett Miller from a screenplay written by Aaron Sorkin and Steven Zaillian. "Moneyball" recounts the story of the 2002 season of the Oakland A's major league baseball team. Both the book and film center on A's general manager Billy Beane's efforts in to put together a winning team that year despite a limited budget and having lost several key players from 2001 who had signed with other teams.

Both the story line and dramatic conflict in the film revolve around Beane, played by Brad Pitt in a superb performance, trying to interject new ways of assessing players and thinking about in-game strategy amid strong opposition from the tradition-bound A's player personnel people and field manager. Beane is advised and, really, directed in this effort by his young, mid-twenties, assistant, Peter Brand, pudgy, non-athletic, baseball outsider. Brand is portrayed by actor Jonah Hill in an impressive performance--both Pitt and Hill were nominated for Academy Awards.

The Brand character, based primarily on Paul dePodesta, is a recent graduate from Yale in economics. He makes the case to Beane that statistics should guide player selection and game decisions rather than the experience and judgment of the team's aging, baseball-lifer scouts and field manager. Beane is himself a long-time baseball man as a player and front office executive, although, in his early forties, he's not been in the game as long as the scouts and field manager by the look of them as depicted in the film. In particular, Brand underscores the importance of on-base average (OBA--the percentage of times at bat that a hitter gets on base by any means--hits, walks, and being hit by a pitch) as a key indicator of a player's productivity. The numbers reveal, says Brand, that the more times on base the more runs, and the more runs the more wins. Brand points out to Beane that, contrary to accepted thinking in the game, bunts, stolen bases, and fielding count for little in producing victories. He also makes the case that productive players have been overlooked when putting together the

team in the past because they didn't look or act like ballplayers ought to look by conventional standards. Outcomes, Brand politely insists, which statistics measure objectively, are what really matter in winning games, not fallacious notions about the physique or face a player has to have, or requisite personality traits or personal habits, as bantered about with such assuredness by the A's scouting department.

All that sounds really good to Beane, especially when Brand points out why, based on statistics, he himself wasn't as good a player as the major league scouts thought he was when he was a teenager. They had said he had "all the tools" when he signed his first pro contract, but he turned out to be a washout as a player. He now greatly regrets not having taken the scholarship to Stanford University offered him when he had had the chance. Now he is a high school graduate trying to make his way in baseball's upper echelons of management. Brand's statistics-based analyses seem to have him pegged as a player and explain why things turned out as they did for him, which lends Brand general credibility in Beane's eyes. Beane finds Brand's perspective especially appealing given his limited budget, because the kinds of players Brand is hyping are available on the cheap since their skill sets are currently being overlooked by teams putting together rosters.

Beane says to Brand, let's you and I get it done. He signs up a washed up catcher whose arm is shot and who is basically immobile by the name of Scott Hatteberg to play first base. He brings on board aged outfielder David Justice, whose legs are gone and whose fielding range is virtually non-existent. Why? They are high OBA types. He promotes to the big team minor league pitcher Chad Bradford, whose progress has been blocked because he throws funny, just about underhand. In baseball argot, he's a submarine pitcher, and you need to come over the top (throw with your arm raised high) to make it in the big show according to traditional baseball thinking.

Needless to say, none of Beane/Brand's maneuvers go over at all with the crusty old scouts and the beer-bellied field manager, Art Howe. I'll say here what just about every reviewer of the film has pointed out: these are white guys. There is something really white about the antagonists in "Moneyball"; it jumps out. I'll go beyond that to note that they are good-old-boy white guys, the type that come out of small town or rural backgrounds or the South. More,

they have a gentile look to them--and they just might be Fundamentalist Christians--in contrast to the Peter Brand character played by Jonah Hill (born Jonah Hill Feldstein), who looks distinctly Jewish. The real Peter Brand, Paul dePodesta, is a native of Alexandria, Virginia and attended Episcopal High School and went on to Harvard University, where, as did the Brand character, he got a degree in economics. Tall and lean and athletic, dePodesta played both football and baseball in college. He worked as a major league scout before assuming a front office position.

I understand fully that as long as you mean it in a disparaging way you can talk about white guys in print, but you aren't supposed to single out white gentiles for attention. And I realize that you aren't supposed to note that a character in a film appears Jewish if he or she isn't specifically identified as such in the film, which Brand isn't; and that you absolutely don't do it if you aren't going to applaud this character, which I'm not going to be doing in this writing. But for better or worse these years, if I see something I think might bear on an analysis I'm going to say it; I'm not going to be disingenuous or dishonest. I'll let readers and anybody else do with that as they will. In any case, we have our heroes and villains in the movie: Beane and his smart advisor representing enlightenment and progress on one side and, on the other, the anachronistic, vaguely malevolent scouts and field manager saying what the hell is going on, Beane, we thought you were one of us? and who is this fat little alien handing you file folders?

Since Beane is higher up in the A's chain of command, he wins the day and things are done his way and the 2002 season begins. He soon runs into a major problem. The manager Art Howe wants to play somebody else at first base rather than Beane/Brand's guy Hatteberg. Beane solves that problem and puts Howe in his rightful place by trading the player Howe prefers to another team. Another problem comes up, the A's turn out to be a pitcher short. A lengthy, and very well edited, scene in the film has Beane working the phones with aplomb to wrangle a pitcher, Ricardo Rincon, from the general manager of another team.

The season progresses. Beane, edgy and unsettled but a good guy and highly appealing (imagine Brad Pitt), pumps iron to deal with the stresses and strains of the season and tries to stay in good contact with his teenage daughter as a divorced parent. The underdog A's go on a long winning streak and win the American

League West division championship (imagine the last scenes in "Rocky" with everybody cheering ecstatically and the music blaring). The A's lose to the Minnesota Twins in the first round of the playoffs, but that doesn't detract from the victory of Beane and his sidekick Brand and their modern ways (Hurray!) over the ignorance and rigidity of the past as represented by the scouts and field manager (Boo!). Quite the guy that handsome Billy Beane. And Peter Brand too--being obese and nerdy didn't obscure his superbness in our discerning eyes. We were there with both of them every step of the way. We knew what those loser baseball throwbacks couldn't get through their thick heads. We can think highly of ourselves and go about our business feeling all is well.

"Moneyball" is a well-acted and well-made mass-market film. I'm prone to quit on DVDs these days, and I lasted all the way to the end credits. Although I must say that watching "Moneyball" left me with the feeling I get from consuming a Milky Way candy bar and half of a second one before I catch myself--why did I buy a box of the damned things: good while I'm doing it, but afterward I have a bad taste in my mouth and a strong desire to brush my teeth. On balance, would I recommend "Moneyball"? I suppose. For that matter, I'd recommend Milky Way candy bars, tasty, but I think you'd be better off if you passed on "Moneyball" and instead watched a DVD of "Raging Bull," the old film about boxer Jake LaMotta, played by Robert DeNiro.

With that said, this writing isn't about "Moneyball" as an entertainment or a work of art. This is about "Moneyball" as a depiction of reality: what it leads viewers to believe happened in Oakland, California ten years ago. And it is about the lessons this film teaches. I'm a professional educator, and I look at "Moneyball" as a school of sorts that teaches lessons to its students about what is true and preferable, both as they apply specifically to the events depicted in the film and generally. What were the lessons of "Moneyball"--or, another way to put it, what were the messages in this film--and how were they imparted? That is the focus here.

"Moneyball" is based on a non-fiction book. With the exception of the Brand character, everybody in the film goes by the name of the real person involved. The thesis of this writing: what we are told in the film isn't true. Or better, it is true here and there but fundamentally untrue. "Moneyball" obscures significant truths. It portrays things as lucid and simple and resolved that are in fact

muddy and complex and open to debate. (I'd say the same thing about the book.) From what I have heard and read, people accept "Moneyball" as an accurate picture of what went on with the A's ten years ago, and its ideas, premises, as valid ones, when I consider them highly questionable and in need of qualification if not fundamentally false. There is enough fraudulence in "Moneyball" for me to dub it, I suppose clumsily, "Moneybull." To the extent that I am accurate in my perceptions, it is very important for reasons that go beyond this popular entertainment, and that is what presses me to give as much energy as I'm putting into this writing.

To begin, a great percentage of our contact with the world is mediated rather than direct. That is to say, we weren't there--in this case in the A's front offices and locker room in 2002--someone told and showed us what went on there and what it meant. I wasn't in the Civil War or World War II, I've never met John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King, I've never been to Iran or met its leaders, I've never been in the presence of President Obama--you know what I'm getting at. I am now in my office at the university typing these words on a computer screen, and then I'm going to Hannaford's super market to pick up a salad to eat for dinner with a glass of white wine I have in the refrigerator. On the way to Hannaford's, I will see streets and sidewalks and buildings through the car window. When I get home after Hannaford's, I'll sit on the leather couch and eat the salad and drink the wine, and maybe I'll have an apple, and then I'll clean the bathroom, and at some point I will go to bed and feel the sheets on my skin and fall asleep. Everything else the rest of my day will be a mediated experience, including the *New York Times* I will read online while eating the salad and drinking the wine and the biography of Will Rogers, a humorist back in the 1920s and '30s, I will pick up where I left off last night.

I'm better off, I've decided, if I keep in mind the difference between my time at Hannaford's and the Rogers' biography, which, by the way, I'm enjoying very much.* Hannaford's I'd call a direct experience--there it is, I'm looking at it, hearing it, touching it, smelling it, and tasting it, or at least the salad, when I get home. Will Rogers, on the other hand, is a mediated experience. I've never seen him or met him. All I know about him is what the biographer tells me about him. I'm picking up from the book that this writer, Richard D. White, is left of center in his politics, as was Rogers, and

liked Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, which Rogers supported in a big way. And that's all fine, but without letting it getting in the way of my having a good time with the book and learning from it--I'm picking up a lot about what went on in the 1920s and '30s and what people were like back then--I want to be sure to stay aware that this take on Rogers and what transpired in those years is not the gospel truth. Someone else would undoubtedly tell of very different story about Rogers and that era.

Where "Moneyball" comes into this is if upon examination it turns out that this mediation of reality can't be trusted--and the claim here is that it can't be--it surfaces the question of what other mediated experiences are one-sided, distorted, or outright untrue? And it raises the question of just who is mediating reality for us. Who are these mediators and what are they selling us and how are they doing it? That's what I hope to shed light on in these next pages, particularly as it relates to film.

Consider:

The central narrative line of "Moneyball" is grounded in the premise that bringing high OBA-type players to the A's roster would result in more runs and thus more wins. And we are led to believe that doing that worked and that's why they won the division championship, good for Beane and Brand. The reality is that the 2002 A's scored the *fewest* runs of any team in their division. They scored 800 runs over the course of the season, which was a whopping 84 fewer runs than the team scored in 2001! The A's didn't win the division in 2002 because they were scoring runs--no team was as bad as they were at doing that.

The A's won in 2002 because they *prevented* runs. The statistic that jumps out when you review the A's record in 2002 is team earned run average (ERA is the average number of runs pitchers give up per nine innings). It was the best in the division, a brilliant 3.68. And that accomplishment didn't result from the performances of the pitchers Beane brought on board, Chad Bradford (with the funny throwing motion) and Ricardo Rincon (the pitcher obtained in the trade), who won a total four games between them. It was due to three superb young starting pitchers, Barry Zito, Tim Hudson, and Mark Mulder, who collectively won 57 games. You will be hard-pressed to find three pitchers on any team, any year,

who won that many games. Who scouted and signed those three remarkable pitchers? That's right, the old dumb white guys.

Something else that leaps out when you review the A's 2002 season is the performance of two young position players, shortstop Miguel Tejada and third baseman Eric Chavez. Who scouted and signed them? You got it. I follow baseball closely and I'm trying to think of a collection of better young players all drafted by a major league team than those on the A's in 2002. And yet the player personnel people that signed those players were very effectively made to look like morons, jokes, in "Moneyball."

The first baseman that our hero Beane traded away to force misguided manager Art Howe to play Scott Hatteberg, one of Beane's big accomplishments according to the film? Twenty-four-year old Carlos Pena, who went on to make the All-Star team, lead the league in home runs, win a Golden Glove (best fielder) Award, and is still active with the Tampa Bay Rays--all of these accomplishments over the years for other teams and not the A's because of Beane's put-down of Art Howe that the movie and DVD and streaming audience cheers in "Moneyball." And where is Scott Hatteberg, whom no one has ever claimed was more than a non-descript journeyman player? Long gone.

"Moneyball" promotes the idea that there is but one criterion for assessing success in baseball: the number of wins in a season. The game is about winning says Brand: do whatever it takes to win. By that measure, the A's were successful in 2002. They won the division championship. Although the movie disingenuously leaves the impression that the A's became big winners that year compared to past years because of Beane and his clever advisor. Exactly how many more games did the A's win in 2002 than in 2001? One. Lewis in the book and Sorkin and Zaillian in the screenplay stayed clear of two valid measures of success other than winning:

Profits. The Oakland A's are a company. The company's product is baseball games they charge people to watch and television and radio stations to transmit. And it sells concessions and paraphernalia, hats and jackets and so on. That's how the company makes money. The bottom line in professional sport is, well, the financial bottom line.

How did Beane do when measured by the profits he generated in 2002? Commercial sport teams don't go public with their profits, but we can get a sense of it from looking at attendance figures. The

A's had the worst attendance in the American League West division that year. Average attendance was up a bit in 2002 compared to 2001, 26,788 versus 26,337, about 450 people a game. But certainly attendance didn't increase dramatically that year as the increasingly-large-and-frenzied-as-the-season-progresses crowd scenes imply, and the A's 450-per-game increase over 2001 was worse than every other team in the division save one, the last place Texas Rangers. Any increase in revenue from attendance has to be considered in light of the 21% increase in the A's player salaries in 2002 over 2001. A scene in the film with Beane and the owner leads us to believe that Beane didn't have more money to work with in 2002--not so. Beane is still the general manager of the A's and attendance under his watch has consistently been flat, nothing special. Currently, the A's ownership has gone public that their revenue has hit rock bottom, the worst in the major leagues, although some are arguing that that is a ploy to support their desire to move the franchise to San Jose. Whatever the case is on that, I see no evidence that Billy Beane has contributed positively to the A's profits as a corporate entity.

The point here is that something--say, Scott Hatteberg and his on-base average--could win a game here and there, but at the same time not put people in the seats. Whatever his merits, and I can personally attest to this, Scott Hatteberg standing at the plate looking for a walk, and pretty much guaranteed not to give the ball a ride, and lumbering from base to base if he did get on base, was a yawn to spectators. Carlos Pena blasting the ball over the outfield wall makes the turnstiles spin.

Its effect on the game. Baseball isn't simply about its final result--winning or losing--it about a *process*, what happens during the game. It is about the *experience* of both players and spectators during the game. It is about the *quality* of the game as an activity. Most basically, baseball is about playing baseball. Sabermetrics, the use of statistics to guide operations, arguably has hurt the game of baseball as it is played. The emphasis on on-base averages has resulted in batters taking strikes and waiting pitchers out in an attempt to get walks and thereby increasing their OBAs. Rarely these days does a batter strike at the first pitch. Pitch counts run up. An already slow game gets even slower. Action is replaced by inaction. Assertion is replaced by passivity. The joy of the game is diminished for both player and fan. Steal attempts are fewer and

the excitement of the game is diminished for both player and fan. Bunts are fewer and strategy goes out of the game. Like life, baseball is not just a destination, this and that outcome or result; it is also, and most fundamentally, a moment-to-moment experience. The quality of the moments of our lives, including the time we spend playing and watching baseball, needs to be taken into account.

To make sense of "Moneyball," it is helpful to view it as a part of the public discourse. By public discourse I refer to the topics of concern, factual claims, images, analyses, arguments, proposals, ethical and moral assertions, and dialogue that are "out there in the world" at any point in time. Public discourse contrasts with private discourse, our personal, private, immediate, here-and-now communications and exchanges. The two are not separate and distinct, as public discourse provides a context for and influences private discourse; and it works the other way as well, private discourse can, over time, be reflected in the public discourse. In this writing, I'm focusing on film as a vehicle of public discourse, and looking at the contribution of "Moneyball" to the public discourse via this medium, but we should both keep in mind other contributors and their vehicles, among them, intellectuals, writers and artists, interest groups, political and religious figures, television and music industry owners and producers, magazine and book publishers, news organizations, journalists, teachers and professors, and Internet communicators.

Back to "Moneyball," what was its contribution to the public discourse? Beneath the particulars of the story, what were its messages? What was this film saying, contending, about what matters, and what is so, and what ought to go on? Let's look at that. I speculate that if we identify messages or lessons in "Moneyball," at some level of awareness those responsible for this film knew they were there and liked that they there and meant them to be there. What makes this analysis intriguing and compelling to me is that as I tease out and explicate the lessons in "Moneyball," I am struck by how much they align with a dominant message in the public discourse of our time: traditional America is messed up and needs to be transformed, and those who have been top dogs in traditional America need to be brought down and replaced. That message, theme, lesson, secular sermon, whatever to call it, comes at us from

every direction by those who control the flow of public discourse currently; and, with increasing intensity, this has been the case since the end of World War II. "Moneyball" isn't telling us something new or different; rather it is reinforcing, supporting, what is already out there in spades: traditional America and those who prop it up have to go.

Cheering on the good guys as they take on tradition and traditionalists in "Moneyball" conditions, habituates, smoothes the way--I'm searching for the best term--those exposed to it doing the same thing, or supporting it at least, in other areas of traditional American life that also need to be dismantled and reformed. Think of any aspect of American life and preface it with the word "traditional" and see what comes to mind. Some examples: the republican traditions established by the Founders; traditional economic practices (free enterprise, capitalism); traditional religion; the traditional family; traditional morality; traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity; traditional views on race; traditional American patriotism; traditional individualism; and traditional education. My guess is that all of them have negative associations in most people, or at least evoke strong ambivalence. If it is an aspect of traditional America, it has come in for strong negative critique in the public discourse for decades.

With each of the traditional areas listed above, and you can add your own to the list, create a picture in your mind of a person who embodies or represents that particular tradition. How many of the people you imagined were African American? Asian. Hispanic. Jewish. I'm going to guess that most if not all of the people you conjured up were, I'll say it, white gentiles. And more than that, they were of northern European heritage. Did you think of people of eastern or southern European background? And, I'm guessing, most of them, all of them?, are men, is that right? And you have vaguely or strongly negative feelings toward all these people your imagined, is that correct? If your mind went in the direction I've predicted it would, it's understandable because as long as you've been alive in all likelihood the most powerful voices in the public discourse, including Hollywood, have pushed you in that direction. While the details differ from area to area, the overall thrust in the public discourse has been to de-traditionalize America, and in particular to collectivize it (move the focus from the individual to the group); democratize it (republics place too many

limitations on governmental prerogative); equalize it (redistribute wealth); de-Europeanize and "de-white-gentile-ize" it); de-Christianize it; and "expertize" it (let the enlightened and progressive call the shots and get us where we need to go). About the experts, it is a particular sort of expert that gets play, the kind that philosopher Russell Kirk pejoratively referred to as the "sophisters" and "calculators," the ones really good at stringing out words and using numbers to make their case.

The press to "expertize" America is supported by the message, lesson, of "Moneyball" that the experience, personal judgment, and instinct of average Joes can't be trusted. These old scouts had looked over prospects since the beginning of time and had come to conclusions about the physical characteristics and personality traits that give a young ballplayer the best chance of being successful at the major league level; and they had decided what contributes to wins on the field--the best line-up, the most effective game strategies, and so on. Well, they were wrong.

This "don't trust your perceptions" message in "Moneyball" squares with the message coming at from the public with regard to every area of traditional American life: don't lean on what has gone on in the past, and don't believe your own experience and thinking; instead, go by what I'm telling you. Politics, history, morality, foreign policy, education, men-women relationships, race, art, whatever I bring up--reality is what I say it is. It's kind of like the old Lenny Bruce joke. A guy's wife walks in on him in the heat of a romantic entanglement with his secretary. She's aghast. He says to her, "Are you going to believe me or your lying eyes?" The point, if you get across the lesson that connections with reality and the inferences drawn from it and one's own reasoning can't be trusted in baseball, you pave the way to getting people uncritically to buy what the Peter Brands are selling in other, more important, areas of American life.

A message in "Moneyball": have faith in the numbers. Peter Brand says his statistical data indicates such and so, the importance of OBA, the insignificance of bunts and fielding, and so on. I realize that it would have slowed the pace of the film if Billy Beane had said, "Are you sure your numbers are accurate?" (This gets at reliability--are the numbers we are working with the real ones.) Or, "Let's look at how valid these data are." (Validity gets at whether quantifications tell us what we really want to know.) "Are you sure

your statistics with reference to fielding really measure fielding, Brand?" But still, Beane's silence on that made a statement, and sure enough, statistical measures developed in the last decade have endorsed what anybody who has ever played the game of baseball, or watched a shortstop wave at a ground ball that went through for a hit, knows in their gut: fielding matters big time. It turns out dumb old Art Howe was on to something. As for steals, I played many years of baseball as a middle infielder, shortstop and second base. I know that when a fast runner is on first base threatening to steal it distracts a pitcher and affects the delivery of his pitch to the plate, and that the infielders pinch in a tad and their fielding range is narrowed. Because the numbers don't or can't measure those realities doesn't mean they don't exist.

Here again, the transferability to other areas. Whatever the area, the experts say you can be assured the numbers I give you are accurate and that they are the only ones you need. "These are the unemployment numbers." (Are they accurate?) "Scores on standardized tests of math and reading measure schools' success." (Do they?) There are fewer women in math and science than men, which proves there is gender discrimination in those fields." (Really?) IQ score differences between blacks and whites are meaningless. (Are you sure?) My view, bring a healthy skepticism to bear on the sophisters and calculators, and note how the public discourse, including popular films, promotes deferring to them.

Back to the matter of race, which I wish I could bring myself to avoid, the hero in "Moneyball" was Beane/Pitt, who aligned himself with the expert critics of tradition and sided against his tradition-upholding white kinsmen. The lesson: that's a good thing to do. For decades that has been a theme in the mainstream public discourse. Name the area: the exemplary whites are the ones who take on their brethren. I recently saw "Saving Private Ryan" again on DVD, and this time I saw white young people slaughtering other white young people. I tried to think of examples of films about blacks heroically killing bad blacks, or Jews killing bad Jews, say, in Africa or Israel. At my university, whites in power proudly discriminate against other whites in the hiring of faculty and student admissions and are applauded for it by the experts in the public discourse. I'm trying to think of examples of African Americans being applauded for discriminating against their people in any way.

Late in life, I'm noting that all of my life the villains in the drama have been white gentiles like me, and most often men, like me. White (gentile) Southerners--slave owners, segregationists, hicks, rednecks (my family is from rural Georgia). Dead white (gentile) men in history, including the Founders of America--ugh. Boorish, oppressive, sexist (gentile) "white males" (my father was a man; I'm a white male)--the enemy. Racists, haters, and homophobes look like me. I think of a widely and favorably reviewed book used as a required reading in many university courses by George M. Fredrickson entitled *Racism: A Short History*.** Fredrickson defines racism in the book broadly to include religious persecution and the mistreatment of blacks and Native Americans and anti-Semitism and imperialism and fascist excesses, the Nazis and so on. When I finished the book, it hit me that absolutely every example in the book, over a span of two thousand years, no exception, was white gentiles doing foul things. I'm reminded of the remark by the late literary critic and essayist Susan Sontag that whites are the cancer of human history, and I don't think she was referring to Jewish whites in that instance.

As far as I can tell, I've never hurt a human being of another race or ethnicity or religion in my life, and neither has anybody in my family as far back as I know about, and I don't believe the vast majority of my fellow white gentiles have either. Yet the word comes down that I and others like me are guilty of something really bad and need to atone for it by sort of turning against my people and joining up with the other side. It didn't come as a surprise to me that the white hero in "Moneyball" took up the cause against other whites. What would have been a surprise would have been if "Moneyball" had been an African American or a Peter Brand type taking on a coterie of out-of-it blacks or Jews. I realize this is a very complicated and highly sensitive and charged matter, and that I'm limited in so many ways. At the same time, I know in my heart I don't feel animosity toward any human being or group of people and wish everyone on the face of this earth well, but that includes white gentiles. I'm not saying I'm an expert, listen to me; I'm but expressing what's going on with me.

Why do people accept the ideas in "Moneyball" so uncritically?
Some possible reasons:

Film is a literal medium. To get at a big reason people uncritically buy into what's presented to them in "Moneyball," you have to look at the nature of film as a medium. Motion pictures, and this applies to television as well, and video taped productions, are literal representations of something. You can see and hear what's going on right in front of you, there it is. You know there is a script and those are actors and it's a partial depiction of a feigned reality and it's been edited. But still since you can see it happening and hear it, it looks absolutely real, it's no abstraction, you believe it. I remember reading about the difficulty film director Alfred Hitchcock had depicting a dream in one of his films. It is very difficult to portray a non-objective, intangible phenomenon in film; everything looks real. He finally sought out artist Salvador Dali to construct the scene and it was memorable, but still it was unconvincing. Anybody who can control the visual depiction of what is going on in the world, mediate reality in that way, has enormous power.

We buy what attractive protagonists sell. Brad Pitt is a very appealing guy. When we look at Billy Beane we see Brad Pitt. He's a handsome guy, and those other people aren't handsome, and he is really nice to his daughter. The camera is on him from the beginning of the film to the end. The movie is about him. We follow him around. We watch him take on challenges, and confront obstacles, and take hits and come back from them. We come to identify with him and root for him. If a Brad Pitt is for it--or Tom Hanks or Julia Roberts or Sandra Bullock, or in times past Kevin Costner or James Stewart--it must be good and we're for it too. We transfer our positive feelings toward the attractive protagonist to the messages, or lessons, he embodies. Of course, in any particular film that is a good or bad thing depending on your point of view. Obviously, while I respect greatly Pitt's performance in "Moneyball," I have some serious issues with what he represents. On the other side of things, decades ago it got a lot of people up in arms that Clint Eastwood, about as appealing a lead actor as they come, seemed to be fronting for scary right wing and even racist and homophobic ideas in the film "Dirty Harry." In any case, if you have some ideas you want to propagate in a film, get yourself an attractive protagonist to represent them.

We accept the familiar. If you are promoting some ideology, program, whatever it is, it helps to embed it in what is familiar and

thus comfortable to an audience. Stay within your audience's frame of reference, don't stir them up or make them stretch, keep them cozy and warm. That's the best context for getting across your messages. If everything else makes sense to the audience of "Moneyball," then so too, they conclude without really thinking about it, must the basic premise of the film make sense: traditional ways in baseball (and, tacitly, American traditions generally) need an overhaul. "Moneyball" was replete with familiar themes and images: the appealing lead on the good quest; the unenlightened, stuck-in-the-past, establishment bad guys; the underdog story line (the lowly A's); the outsider scorned at first and then accepted; the good dad; the ultimate triumph just before the end credits. None of that is going to make the theater audience or home viewers shift around in their seats or chairs and start questioning what they're seeing.

Imagine the reverse of "Moneyball": Underqualified Beane and his presumptuous, pseudo-informed buddy are the villains. The camera shows Pitt's facial pockmarks rather than hiding them in shadows. The old scouts and the field manager are dedicated and decent men who have signed all these terrific young pitchers and position players and there are Beane and Brand presuming to tell them they don't know what they are doing. The camera follows the scouts and field manager; it's their movie. The theme, what are they going to do with these two power-hungry lightweights? The Beane and Brand combo bring in a lead-footed retread (David Justice) to play the outfield and in the process make the terrific young pitchers' jobs tougher--balls that should be caught turn into doubles and triples. The two jerks trade for a left-handed pitcher that wins exactly zero games. They pull rank on the field manager and tell him how to do his job and insist he play a Frankenstein's monster in the field and sleep inducer at the plate at first base. When he objects, they trade a future all-star first baseman to take the decision out of his hands. They impose deadly dull, no-steals, no-bunts, no strategy, station-to-station baseball on the team, which sends fans streaming out of the ballpark by the seventh inning. (A friend and his young son and I went to an A's game in 2002 and were bored stiff and left in the fifth inning.) Beane's ex-wife is given a scene where, tears streaming down her face, she tells how this self-consumed, metrosexual weightlifter with a teenager's haircut abandoned his family. The A's win the division in spite of the two

dickheads and the music swells and the scouts and field manager hug each other in triumph and the end credits roll. The idea that tearing down tradition is a really good thing to do wouldn't sell within that story line, and I'm saying that angle is as plausible as the one "Moneyball" actually employed. And by the way, two years following the events of "Moneyball" the real Peter Brand, Paul dePodesta, became the general manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers; he was fired a year later after the team had its worst record in eleven years.

We believe what makes us feel good about ourselves. "Moneyball" is a self-confirming experience for an audience. We get to sit there feeling in the know and on the side of the angels and linked up with a cool guy like Brad Pitt. We are superior beings and we didn't have to do anything to achieve it beyond springing for a movie ticket or a DVD rental. And we are safe; nothing goes on that challenges or threatens us. The finger is never pointed at us; we're never ridiculed or the butt of the joke--those losers on the screen, yes, but not us. We are nestled comfortably among the wise and righteous and don't have to think about anything or do a damn thing except go to bed when it's time. If you want to get something across, make sure those in your audience feel good about themselves.

People are basically lazy. Sorry. The truth is if you are half way slick at all you can tell people just about anything and be assured that they aren't going to think about it or check into its veracity. This is what's going on, you say. OK, they reply. That something might be true but there are other truths that need to be taken into account along with that truth--too complicated. That something might be true in a qualified way, or its truth contingent on some other thing going on--who needs to get into that? Really, if you tell people something that has just a surface level plausibility and it doesn't shake up anything in their lives, they aren't going to question it or critique it or devise alternatives to it, anything like that. They'd rather work on their cars or check their Facebook accounts or take a nap. If you've got a microphone or a camera or a lectern and are able to put your ideas onto a filing card, and your people can shut up and shut out anyone with contrary views, you'll do fine with the masses. You don't have to be any big genius. Hitler and Mao proved that.

So what do we do? We can take seriously my mother's advice to me: "Robert," she said on numerous occasions when I was little, "you believe everything anybody tells you. Quit doing that." And there's the point I made above, we can distinguish between mediated and direct experience. We can differentiate abstractions--words, concepts, assertions, rhetoric--from concrete reality. The Lenny Bruce joke: we can start trusting our eyes more--and our minds and our judgment--they aren't lying to us like they are trying to tell us. And we can look directly at the people hawking whatever it is and ask: Who exactly are they? What exactly is their agenda? What exactly is in it for them and theirs? And we can make our own movies. We can join the public discourse, if not now, later. If others can make movies--or TV shows, or write books, or give lectures, etc. --so can we. (This website is my movie now.) If you are young and silent, or not young but still silent, you can get it in your head that you are going to go public. You can get your knowledge and skills and credentials together, and your sense of your own value and importance, and you can get clear about your hopes and goals for yourself and the world, and you can come to grips with your mortality and the fact that you only have one shot at getting something worthwhile done in your time on this earth, so that someday, and the sooner the better, you can start making your movies. And we can remember that private discourse counts too: our movie, so to speak, might be speaking up at the meeting or social gathering later today when normally we would remain silent. And last, we can find better movies to watch than the likes of "Moneyball."

*Richard D. White, *Will Rogers: A Political Life* (Texas Tech University Press, 2011.)

**George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton University Press, 2003).