

"Moneyball": An Inquiry Into Media Manipulation
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The film *Moneyball* was well-received by both audiences and critics and an Academy Award contender for best film at the 2012 Oscars. It was based on Michael Lewis' 2003 nonfiction book by the same name and directed by Bennett Miller from a screenplay written by Aaron Sorkin (who I understand was the guiding force behind the film) and Steven Zaillian. *Moneyball* recounts the story of the 2002 season of the Oakland A's major league baseball team. The film centers on A's general manager Billy Beane's efforts to put together a winning team that year despite a limited budget. The thesis of this writing is that *Moneyball* is a good illustration of how the media distort reality and transmit negative perceptions of white people and their ways.

The dramatic conflict in *Moneyball* revolves around Beane, portrayed by Brad Pitt in a superb performance, trying to interject new ways of assessing players and thinking about game strategy amid strong opposition from the tradition-bound A's player personnel people and field manager. Beane is advised in this effort by his young, mid-twenties, assistant, Peter Brand — short, pudgy, non-athletic, baseball outsider. Brand is portrayed by Jonah Hill in an impressive performance — both Pitt and Hill were nominated for Academy Awards. The Brand character, the only one who doesn't go by his real-life name, is based on Paul dePodesta, an assistant to Beane at that time.

Brand makes the case to Beane that statistics should guide player selection and game decisions rather than the experience and judgment of the team's baseball-lifer scouts and field manager. Beane, in his early forties, is himself a long-time baseball man as a player and front office executive.

Brand underscores the importance of OBP (the percentage of times at bat 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 by the conventional standards of the A's scouting department. Outcomes, Brand insists, which statistics measure objectively, are what matter in winning games, not antiquated notions about the physique or face a player needs to possess, or requisite personality traits or personal habits.

Beane finds Brand's perspective particularly appealing given his limited financial resources, 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. He says to Brand, let's you and I get it done. He signs 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 OBP types. He promotes to the A's major league roster a 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.

None of Beane/Brand's maneuvers go over with the crusty A's scouts and their beer-bellied field manager, Art Howe. It's important to note in this context that these are white guys; there is something really white about the antagonists in *Moneyball*, it jumps out. In fact, they are archetypal white guys: from small town or rural backgrounds or the South and of the sort likely to be fundamentalist Christians, in stark contrast to the Peter Brand character played by Jonah Hill (born Jonah Hill Feldstein), who comes across as distinctly Jewish. The Brand character also

contrasts with the real person, Paul dePodesta, a tall, lean, and athletic gentile, who played both football and baseball in college. Unlike the Brand character, who is new to baseball, dePodesta was a baseball insider who had worked as a major league scout before assuming a front office position with the A's. It appears that the makers of *Moneyball* inserted a Jewish protagonist into the 2002 Oakland A's story.

In any case, we have our heroes and villains in the movie: our man Beane and his smart Jewish advisor representing enlightenment and progress on one side and, on the other, the dim, anachronistic, vaguely malevolent white 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 your file folders?

Since Beane is higher up in the A's chain of command, he wins the day and things are done his way during the off-season. The 2002 season begins, but 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 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 of the season and does his best to stay in contact with his teenage daughter as a divorced parent. The underdog A's go on a winning streak and win the American League West division championship (imagine the last scenes in *Rocky* with everybody cheering ecstatically and the music blaring). They 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 over the ignorance and rigidity of the past as represented by the scouts and field manager.

Quite the guy that Billy Beane. And Peter Brand too — being obese and nerdy and “other” 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.

Moneyball is a well-crafted mass-market film. I'm prone to quit on DVDs these days, and I lasted all the way to the end. That said, this writing isn't about *Moneyball* as an entertainment or a work of art (for certain, it's not a work of art). It's about *Moneyball* as a depiction of reality: what it leads viewers to believe happened in Oakland, California in 2002 and what it meant.

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. What is on the screen is presented as being what truly happened back then. But really, 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 — also the case with the book.

From what I can tell, both audiences and critics unquestioningly accepted the film (and the book too) as an accurate account and valid interpretation. But there is enough fraudulence and slick propagandizing in *Moneyball* for me to dub it “Moneybull.” The way people were taken in by this film needs to be understood, both for itself and to help us get a clearer sense of how media socialization, education, indoctrination, conditioning, salesmanship — whatever the best word for it — operates. I'll offer some thoughts on that.

To begin, it's important to keep in mind that a great percentage of our contact with the world is mediated rather than direct (thus the term “media”). That is to say, we weren't there — in this case, in the A's front offices and locker room in 2002 — someone showed us and told us about what went on and why and what it all meant. I wasn't in the Civil War or World War II, I

never met John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King, I've never been to Iraq and Iran or met their leaders, I've never been in the presence of President Trump. Anything I know about any of that list I've gotten second hand; I didn't experience it with my own senses, directly.

If upon examination it turns out that *Moneyball* can't be trusted, it surfaces the question of what other mediations, call them that, are one-sided, distorted, or outright misrepresentations? I hope this focus on a single film and its creators prompts your critical, analytical, examination of other mediators, interpreters, of reality, among them, public intellectuals, writers and artists, interest groups, political and religious figures, television and music industry owners, producers, and performers, magazine and book publishers, news organizations, journalists, teachers and professors, and internet communicators. Who are these people and what are they selling and how do they go about it?

Let's look at *Moneyball*.

It's grounded in the premise that bringing high OBP-type players to the A's roster will result in more runs scored and thus more wins. The film leads us to believe that the A's went in that direction and it 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 A's 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, an excellent 3.68. 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). They won a total of 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, that won that many games. Who scouted those three remarkable pitchers? That's right, the out-of-touch 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 found them? You got it.

I follow baseball closely and I'm trying to think of a collection of better young players drafted by a major league team than the ones on the A's in 2002. And yet the player personnel people who signed those players were very effectively made to look like morons, dinosaurs, in *Moneyball*.

The first baseman our hero Beane traded away to force misguided manager Art Howe to play Scott Hatteberg, one of Beane/Brand'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 Gold Glove (best fielder) Award, and play for twelve more years in the major leagues — all of these accomplishments for other teams and not the A's because of Beane/Brand's put-down of Art Howe the manager that the movie theater, DVD, and streaming audience cheer on in *Moneyball*. What happened to Scott Hatteberg, who no one has ever claimed was more than a non-descript journeyman player? Gone from the A's in three years.

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 prior years because of Beane and his clever advisor.

Exactly how many more games did the A's win in 2002 than in 2001? One. *One*.

Lewis in the book and Sorkin and Zaillian in the screenplay stayed clear of two valid measures of success other than winning:

The first, *profits*. The Oakland A's are a company. The company's product is baseball exhibitions they charge people to watch and television and radio stations to transmit. And it sells concessions and paraphernalia, hats, 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 companies don't go public with their profits, but we can get a sense of them 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. Attendance didn't increase dramatically that year as the movie's increasingly large and frenzied crowd scenes imply, and the A's 450 person-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.

Something — say, Scott Hatteberg and his on-base percentage — could win a game here and there, but at the same time not put people in the seats or increase television ratings. 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. That year I went with a friend to an A's game; bored stiff, we left in the sixth inning. In contrast, Carlos Pena, the player Beane and his advisor

traded away, blasting the ball over the outfield wall makes the turnstiles spin.

Beane remained the A's general manager through the 2015 season. Attendance under his watch was consistently nothing special. Near the end of his time, the A's ownership went public that their revenue had hit rock bottom, the worst in the major leagues, although some argued that it was a ploy to support their desire to move the franchise to San Jose. Whatever the case is on that, I see no evidence that Beane contributed positively to the A's profits as a corporate entity.

The second valid measure of something's success is *its effect on the game of baseball*. Baseball isn't simply about its final result — winning or losing — it about its *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 fundamentally, 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 OBPs. Seldom these days does a batter swing 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 players and fans. Steal attempts are fewer and the excitement of the game is diminished for both players and fans. Bunts are fewer and strategy goes out of the game. Like life, baseball is not just a destination, this and that outcome; it is also, and most basically about, 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.

Beneath the particulars of the story, the larger, tacit, message in *Moneyball* is that the whole of America, not just baseball, is messed up and needs to be transformed. And who is standing in the way of that? Whites, that's who. More specifically, as

demonstrated in *Moneyball*, genteel white men of northern European heritage. Simply, their time is up. They've got to step aside, or be pushed aside. *Moneyball* gets across the idea that one good way to make that happen is to "expertize" things — that is, let our enlightened betters (Peter Brand is what they look like) call the shots and get things to where they need to be.

A message, lesson, of *Moneyball* is that the experience, personal judgment, and instincts of average (white) Joes can't be trusted. These scouts had come to conclusions about the physical characteristics and personality traits that give a young player the best chance of being successful at the major league level, and the field manager had decided what contributes to wins on the field. Well, they were wrong, says *Moneyball*. It's Peter Brand, who by the looks of him never swung a bat in his life, who has it wired.

This "don't trust your perceptions" message in *Moneyball* squares with the message coming at the public with regard to every area of American life: don't believe your own experience and thinking; instead, go by what I'm telling you. Politics, history, morality, foreign policy, education, gender, race, art — reality is what I say it is, not what you think it is. It's like the old Lenny Bruce joke: A guy's wife walks in on him in the heat of a romantic interlude with his secretary. She's aghast. He says to her, "Are you going to believe me or your lying eyes?" 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 promoting in other, more important, areas of American life.

A message in *Moneyball*: have faith in the numbers I put in front of you. Peter Brand says his statistical data indicate the importance of OBP, the insignificance of fielding. To the contrary, statistical measures developed since the early 2000s have confirmed 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 the depth of their being: fielding matters big time. Dumb (white) Art Howe was on to something.

Looking at the film from a racial angle, the hero in *Moneyball*, Billy Beane, aligns himself against his white kinsmen, the scouts and manager. The lesson: doing that kind of thing is good. For decades that has been a theme in the mainstream media. I recently saw *Saving Private Ryan* which depicts white young people slaughtering other white young people because they were evil Nazis. I'm trying to think of films about blacks heroically killing bad blacks, or Jews killing bad Jews, say, in Africa or Israel.

Why did people accept the ideas in *Moneyball* so uncritically? Some reasons:

Film is a literal medium. Motion pictures, and this applies to television as well, 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 real, it's no abstraction, and thus you believe it.

We buy what attractive protagonists sell. Brad Pitt is a very appealing guy. When we look at Billy Beane in the movie 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 movie is about him. The camera is on him from the beginning of the film to the end. We watch him take on challenges and confront obstacles, and we see him take hits and come back from them. We come to identify with him and root for him. If someone like Brad Pitt is for it, it must be good, so we're for it too. We transfer our positive feelings toward the attractive protagonist to the messages, or lessons, he embodies. If you have some ideas you want to propagate in a film (or want to sell beer or cars), have someone attractive represent them. I understand that Jews call gentiles, like Pitt, who serve that purpose for them "toy goys."

We like 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 feeling cozy; that's the best context for getting across your messages. *Moneyball* was replete with familiar themes and images: the appealing lead on a worthy quest; the unenlightened, stuck-in-the-past, establishment bad guys; the underdog storyline (the lowly, small-market A's); the outsider who is scorned at first and then accepted (Brand); the committed dad; the ultimate triumph of the good guys.

Imagine the reverse of *Moneyball*: Underqualified Beane and his zero-life-experience, know-it-all, weaselly little partner in crime are the villains. Beane is played by an unattractive, anonymous character actor. The scouts—one of them played by Brad Pitt — and field manager are dedicated, hands-on-get-it-done, real men who have signed all these terrific young pitchers and position players, and here are these two suits presuming to tell them how to do their jobs. The camera follows the scouts and field manager; it's their movie. The Beane and Brand combo bring in a lead-footed retread to play the outfield and make the fine young pitchers' jobs tougher — balls that should be caught turn into doubles and triples. The two jerks congratulate themselves for trading for a pitcher who wins exactly zero games. They pull rank on the manager and dictate that he play a Frankenstein's monster in the field and sleep inducer at the plate. When the manager objects, they trade a future all-star 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 sixth inning. Beane's ex-wife is given a scene where, tears streaming down her face, she relates how her husband abandoned her. The A's win the division in spite of the two front office 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 the current ways of conducting affairs is a really good thing wouldn't play well within that story line, and I'm saying that angle is as plausible as the one *Moneyball* actually employed.

We believe what makes us feel good about ourselves. *Moneyball* is a self-confirming experience for its audience. We get to feel in the know and on the side of the angels and linked up with a cool guy like Brad Pitt, and all we had to do to achieve that status was spring for a movie ticket or a DVD or streaming rental. And we are safe; nothing goes on that challenges or threatens us. We are nestled comfortably among the wise and righteous and don't have to think about anything or do a damn thing.

We are basically lazy. If you are halfway slick you can tell people just about anything that is simple to understand and has a surface level of plausibility (as long as it doesn't make them feel bad about themselves—these all go together) and be rest assured that they aren't going to put effort into thinking about it or checking into its veracity or coming up with alternatives to it.

So what can we do?

We can take seriously my mother's advice to me when I was a kid: "Robert, you are a nice boy, but you believe everything anybody tells you. Quit doing that."

We can differentiate mediated from direct experience.

We can distinguish abstractions—images, words, concepts, assertions — from the concrete realities they supposedly represent.

The Lenny Bruce joke: we can trust our eyes more, our senses, our experience of things.

We can look directly at the people pushing something and ask: Who are these people? What's their agenda? What's in it for them and theirs if we buy what they are selling?

We can think for ourselves and not let other people do the thinking for us.

We can become mediators of reality ourselves.

And we can find better movies to watch than the likes of *Moneyball*.