

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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MTV and "Million Dollar Baby"

Two articles recently appeared on the "Entertainment" page of a large city's newspaper: "Group blasts MTV for 'sleazy' shows", and in reference to the film "Million Dollar Baby," "Amid accolades, controversy."

The first article was prompted by a study that criticized MTV for the "incessant sleaze" of steamy programming aimed at young people. During a single week in March, 2004, the Parents Television Council recorded 3,056 flashes of nudity or sexual situations and 2,881 verbal references to sex. In "Spring Break Fantasies," five women in swimsuits rubbed lotion on a man, using more than their hands. An episode of "Room Raiders" showed a man looking through a woman's underwear drawer and commenting on what he found. Beyond sexual content, the PTC said it recorded 3,127 instances of profane dialogue "bleeped" out and another 1,518 other instances of unedited rough language.

The second article, "Amid accolades, controversy," explored the debate surrounding the end of the movie favored to win the Academy Award for best picture, "Million Dollar Baby."

[Spoiler alert: The following gives away a plot twist within the movie].

Eastwood stars as old-school boxing trainer Frankie Dunn, who becomes mentor to young fighter Maggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank). A father-daughter relationship ensues as Frankie coaches Maggie's rise through the ranks. However, "Million Dollar Baby" is not simply a boxing drama along the lines of "Rocky." An opponent blindsides Maggie, paralyzing her from the neck down. Maggie decides that she would rather die than live so handicapped. She asks Frankie to help her end her life, and Frankie does. Some have raised concern that "Million Dollar Baby" is a sucker punch against the notion that people with paralyzing infirmities can lead productive lives. The film's harshest detractors say it's little more than propaganda supporting legalization of assisted suicide. (*Interestingly, the Spanish film "The Sea Inside," starring Javier Bardem as Ramon Sampedro, who fought a 30-year campaign for his right to die after a paralyzing accident, was also nominated for an Oscar for best foreign-language film).

While most Christians find little difficulty in critiquing the sex and language on MTV, and speculate freely as to how it might influence teen behavior, a movie like "Million Dollar Baby" tends to be more removed from our concerns. Yet the influence of *all* media is their power to normalize certain acts and attitudes. The media act as epicenters of culture, the means by which values and ideas

come into being and are disseminated. They provide, as sociologist Peter Berger has noted, the "official definitions of reality." If I watch attractive, intelligent college students engaging in sexually promiscuous ways on MTV, I may begin to believe that this is how intelligent, attractive college students behave. At the very least, consistently positive portrayals of such behavior will numb my conscience. In like fashion, if I watch movies that present engaging characters making the choice to end their life rather than face a future of physical handicap, and if the direction of the movie leads me to embrace this emotionally as heroic and noble, I may begin to think that a life of physical challenge is not worth living. Again, at the very least, I can become de-sensitized to those who make such choices.

This does not mean Christians should avoid all MTV programming, much less such films as "Million Dollar Baby." I would stand with those who consider Eastwood's latest effort an important film to watch and think deeply about, if for no other reason than its undoubted influence on cultural discourse on one of the most important ethical issues of our day. But that is the point – to be able to engage such efforts at their points of influence. "All media work us over completely," Marshall McLuhan once warned. "They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered." Film director Oliver Stone - deflecting criticism for the distortions and factual errors in his films, particularly the feigned documentary expose on the Kennedy assassination *JFK* – once said in a lecture at American University that films shouldn't be the end-all for what is true. "[People] have a responsibility to read a book," he said. "[Nobody] is going to sit through a three-hour movie and say, 'That's that.'"

Tragically, that is *exactly* what they do – and what we must not.

James Emery White

(*For more on viewing film, download the free "Whitepaper" on film at www.serious-times.com).

Sources

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About Serious Times

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