

Filthy lives have filthy consequences

Road to Perdition, directed by Sam Mendes

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Road to Perdition, directed by Sam Mendes, screenplay by David Self, based on the graphic novel by Max Allan Collins and Richard Piers Rayner

Director Sam Mendes' *Road to Perdition* is the officially-approved US film of the moment, overwhelmingly endorsed by the media and starring "America's favorite actor," Tom Hanks. An unstated assumption is that the movie's pedigree makes it an obligatory cultural or quasi-cultural experience for certain social layers. It is a gangster film with darkened images meant to impart an art-house quality. Set in the early Depression era, it is also insinuated that a social insight or two can be found lurking in the shadows.

Road to Perdition, even more than Mendes' previous much-acclaimed film, *American Beauty*, is fool's gold. The filmmaker has once again wrapped up crude banalities in shiny tin foil. But at least the latter film made some pretense at critiquing American materialism and careerism.

Adapted from the comic-book novel (the third major film adaptation of a graphic novel this year!) by Max Allan Collins and Richard Piers Rayner, the film centers on father-son relationships in the upper echelons of an Irish mob in Rock Island, Illinois in 1931. Michael Sullivan (Tom Hanks) is the right-hand man and surrogate son of gang chief John Rooney (Paul Newman). Sullivan's older son, Michael Jr., witnesses his father and Rooney's son Connor (Daniel Craig) machine gun dissident gang members.

Connor's long-time jealousy toward Sullivan now finds an "excusable" outlet: he kills Sullivan's wife and younger son, whom he mistakes for the young Michael. Michael Sr., knowing that Rooney will protect Connor, turns to the Capone gang, run by Frank Nitti (Stanley Tucci), in Chicago. Although Sullivan is viewed as an asset and commands much respect from his underworld cronies, Nitti is protecting Connor and hires a killer to dispatch the unrelenting elder Sullivan. The Michaels, father and son, head for a relative's home in a town called Perdition, hotly pursued by Maguire (Jude Law), a psychotic assassin who kills his victims and then photographs them. The Sullivan's six-week journey and struggle for survival form the film's core.

The biggest problem with *Road to Perdition* is that it is false from beginning to end. In the first place, the film depicts some imaginary breed of gracious and principled gangsters. In an early sequence, Sullivan comes home to his beautifully understated house, with an adoring wife and two perfectly normal children

waiting for him. It is the picture of an ordinary middle class family. One forgets, or is intended to forget, that prior to walking across the threshold Michael Sullivan has been out murdering people for his equally charming and respectable gangland boss, John Rooney.

A description in the movie's screenplay highlights this point. Michael Jr. is "watching in silence, cautious yet fascinated by the mysteries of a father's ritual. ... Sullivan removes his cufflinks and places them in a box of his personal things ... removes his tie and gracefully lays it on the bed ... takes off his jacket, revealing a holstered COLT 45, removes the holstered gun and places it on the bed." In fact, this loving father and husband is nicknamed "The Angel of Death."

The portrayal of mob czar Nitti as a respectable and fair-minded businessman is equally ridiculous and reprehensible. Nitti, known as The Enforcer, ran the crime syndicate while Capone was in prison in late 1920s and early 1930s (he eventually committed suicide in 1943). This is the sort of company Nitti kept:

"In 1933, Frank Nitti's leading labor terrorist, Three Fingers Jack White, recruited Fur Sammons to help fight the Touhy gang in the labor wars of 1933.

"It was an excellent choice, Sammons was a certified psychopath and a killer and he took enormous pride in both these facts. He specialized in labor terror although, like White, Sammons' record was long and varied.

"In 1900 Sammons and four others kidnapped an eleven-year-old schoolgirl off the street, raped her and then beat her so savagely she almost died. The girl weighed 85 pounds. They broke her nose, punched out one of her eyes, and stabbed her in the vaginal area with a pencil" [John William Tuohy, *Just Plain Crazy*].

Whether Nitti was also a psychopath (like Capone and Sammons), or merely employed them, Mendes' characterization is a travesty. In the film's production notes, the director justifies his irresponsible glamorization: "I wanted to put a lie to some of the perceived notions about gangsters. You will see no double-breasted pinstripe suits, no spats, only one machine gun, and that has a very specific and unusual presence in the movie." One wants to ask: whence comes this desire to prettify thugs and murderers?

Within this context, the filmmakers take meticulous and absurd care to distinguish between a good man who has, more or less incidentally, led a bad life (Sullivan and the mobsters) and a genuinely bad man (Maguire, a grungy toothed random killer). The

argument is meant to be the scaffolding for the movie's father and son theme. The production notes ask: "Can a man who has led a bad life achieve redemption through his child?" Of course no man is simply "bad." Even an assassin has human qualities. However, *Road to Perdition* is making a different argument: that a horrible, gruesome job has no apparent impact on an individual's inner nature.

In any event, the comment about leading a "bad life" is fraudulent, because neither Sullivan nor Rooney nor Nitti is truly portrayed as a "bad man." On the contrary, they are quite sympathetically presented, as "men of honor." Only the outsider, the hit man who seems to enjoy his work, Maguire, is cast in a negative light.

There is no serious exploration of the father-son theme. Michael Jr. fails to experience any serious inner conflict once he discovers that his father murders people for a living! He is presented to us as a sensitive soul, yet he does not even seem to hold his father responsible in any manner for the deaths of his mother and younger brother. And Sullivan's insistence on seeking revenge places his surviving son in danger and nearly costs him his life. That hardly constitutes redemption for leading a "bad life." The film lazily glosses over this and every other discrepancy.

The spectator never obtains any clear conception as to why the film is set in 1931. Nothing serious is made of or revealed about the period. With the exception of a few passing comments and a brief, idyllic interlude with a farming couple, the film's only reference to this pivotal time is through costume and set detail—references that are fundamentally superficial and extraneous to the plot drama. The original screenplay describes "a vast stretch of closed factories ... and a line of hungry people outside a soup kitchen" during the opening sequence. Such material would not have solved the film's problems, but, remarkably, neither the closed factories nor hungry people made it into the final product.

In the section of the film's production notes entitled *Circa 1931*, much is made of the world-wide hunt for period clothing. This brings to mind Orson Welles's clothing solution for his low-budget masterpiece, *Othello*. When costumes did not arrive in time for the shooting of the first scene due to the bankruptcy of the film's Italian backers, Welles improvised by setting the action not in the street, where the actors would have to be costumed, but in a steam bath, where towels alone would do. As opposed to Welles, high-roller Mendes and his crew were endlessly obsessed with the secondary, the trivial.

Producer Dean Zanuck talks about setting *Road to Perdition* in "the last mythic American landscape—the 1930s, the Depression era, when there was still space to lose yourself in the vastness of America ... where there were mystical golden cities rising up, like Chicago."

This is a rewriting of history. By 1931 the US was experiencing its most severe economic devastation in modern history, resulting in misery for wide layers of the population. Stock market losses in October 1929 alone amounted to \$16 billion, an astronomical sum at the time. In 1929 more than half of all Americans were living below a minimum subsistence level and by 1931, a year in which the GNP fell 8.5 percent, nearly 20 percent of the population was unemployed. By 1932, between 12 and 15 million people, 25-30

percent of the work force, were jobless, as manufacturing output fell to 54 percent of its 1929 level. None of this is even hinted at in *Road to Perdition*, much less the mood of growing anger that would explode in conflicts with revolutionary implications a few years later. This is a film that essentially takes place, despite the illicit nature of the characters' occupation, within a comfortable, middle class milieu.

Why is there such a level of falsification in *Road to Perdition*? Ignorance and laziness about historical issues undoubtedly play a major role. Also, as Mendes himself states, in his desire to be different, he feels able to play fast and free with historical facts. The creators of *Road to Perdition* can make history whatever they want it to be, because it does not much matter if they get it right. They feel no obligation to anyone and there are no consequences. Given the present state of film criticism, there are no challenges to this method.

One senses as well that in the film's diehard insistence on gentlemanly gangsters "with a classic sense of style," there is more than a tinge of whitewashing going on in regard to contemporary America's corporate and ruling circles. Precisely at the moment when the criminalization of the ruling elite is such a pressing issue, when daily revelations emerge about unconstitutional, undemocratic, gangster-like method employed at home and abroad, a film appears with much fanfare that alters the historical record, painting gangsters in rosy colors. There is some significance to this. It comes out of a certain mood and perceived need. There is a certain defensive self-justification at work.

Mendes, the Zanucks and Hanks are making an argument here, that wealth and corruption do not have any long-lasting significance for the individuals or the society involved. There is never any indication in the film that the characters have carried out heinous crimes. (Hanks's glare is not a substitute for that.) Murderers seem entirely untouched by their actions. So the argument can be made that filthy lives and filthy men can beget a wholesome son and future generations. But filthy lives do have consequences.

The American elite is guilty of corruption and thievery at home and murderous activities against peoples abroad. Mendes and company would like us to think that none of this prevents an individual from being a "good person." Indeed this is a social layer coming to realize that crime and corruption have their attractive qualities. The title, *Road to Perdition*, is more apt when applied to the project itself and the trajectory of the social milieu than to anything intended by the film's creators.



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