

The generally lackluster *Gold* and 20th Century Women

Joanne Laurier
1 February 2017

Gold, directed by Stephen Gaghan, screenplay by Gaghan, Patrick Massett and John Zinman; 20th Century Women, directed and written by Mike Mills

Representative of the generally lackluster crop of current movies, *Gold*, directed by American filmmaker Stephen Gaghan (*Syriana*, 2005), is very loosely based on one of Canada's most notorious stock scandals and one of the largest mining scandals in history. The value of Bre-X Minerals Ltd collapsed in 1997 when a supposedly enormous gold deposit in Indonesia proved to be a giant hoax.

In Gaghan's rearranged and refocused—and Americanized—version of events, Matthew McConaughey plays Kenny Wells, who according to the movie's prologue, is being groomed in 1981 to take over the family mining business in Reno, Nevada from his father (Craig T. Nelson). Kenny is a born prospector, but also a drunk and a flim-flam man.

Seven years down the road, Kenny, now balding and paunchy, has lost everything and operates out of a bar where his long-time girlfriend Kay (the endearing Bryce Dallas Howard) works. In his booze-soaked, addle-brained state, he suddenly recalls legendary geologist Michael Acosta (Édgar Ramírez), who went looking for bauxite in Indonesia and struck it rich by finding copper instead.

Pawning all his valuables, Wells flies to Indonesia to meet Acosta, who is convinced that vast deposits of gold lie buried in the jungle. Beset by disease and labor strife, the pair ultimately discover “the largest goldmine of the century.” Sealing a deal with Mike on a paper napkin, Kenny returns to Reno and soon catches the attention of big-time New York investors like Bryan Wolf (Corey Stoll), followed by South African mining tycoon Mark Hancock (the exceptional Bruce Greenwood). There are effective moments here.

Kenny and Mike ride a tidal wave of success. However, their manipulative and savvy Wall Street partners view the crude Nevadan in particular as a “drunk raccoon [in possession of] the Hope Diamond.” News arrives that Indonesia's military under dictator General Suharto has taken over the operation, and Kenny and Mike try to salvage their pot of gold by going into business with Suharto's troublesome son. Remarkably, during the stock market euphoria over the Indonesia “gold rush,” none of the short-sighted investors bother to investigate a mine that never yields a single ounce of gold.

Gaghan's *Gold* relies too heavily on McConaughey's talents and personality to push forward its flaccid narrative. Presumably feeling the burden on his shoulders, the actor compensates for the defects of the drama by running wild and devouring a good deal of the scenery. In the face of the lead actor's pyrotechnics, Ramírez and the rest of the cast maintain some degree of composure.

However, the movie's major problem is not McConaughey's acting. While Gaghan is probably sincere in his desire to make a statement of some kind about Wall Street predations, he prefers not to address it head-on—or with much genuine commitment.

As the director mentions in an interview, “I wanted it to be a fable of capitalism, a fairy tale. I didn't want it to be a literal interpretation of something.” A more concrete, compelling presentation of a major stock market con job, in fact, would prove more of a nightmare than a fairy tale. There was a fascinating story to be told in the Bre-X scandal. But *Gold* suffers from the type of half-hearted, amorphous opposition to the status quo that prevails in relatively comfortable film circles. These are not life-and-death questions to this milieu. *Syriana*, it must be said, was a more intense

and intriguing work.

Inappropriate comparisons have been made between *Gold* and John Huston's classic film, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), which involves a trio of ill-fated gold prospectors in Mexico. Huston's movie is a sharp critique of get-rich-quick schemes, self-deluding pipe dreams promoted by poverty and desperation and, more generally, the corrupting, debasing influence of the pursuit of gold and wealth.

B. Traven, the author of the 1927 novel on which the film is based, was a left-wing German who lived in Mexico for many years (although a good deal of mystery still abounds about his identity). In addition to *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Traven wrote a remarkable series of books, the so-called Jungle Novels, about the harsh conditions in Mexico prior to the Revolution. Sad to say, both the Traven novel and Huston film belong in a different category of artistic endeavor than Gaghan's *Gold*.

In Huston's film (from his own script), a toothless old prospector (Walter Huston, the director's father) has this to say: "A thousand men, say, go searchin' for gold. After six months, one of 'em's lucky—one out of the thousand. His find represents not only his own labor, but that of 999 others to boot. That's uh, 6,000 months, uh, 500 years scrambling over mountains, goin' hungry and thirsty. An ounce of gold, mister, is worth what it is because of the human labor that went into the findin' and the gettin' of it..."

"Aw, gold's a devilish sort of a thing anyway. You start out to tell yourself you'll be satisfied with 25,000 handsome smackers worth of it, so help me Lord and cross my heart. Fine resolution. After months of sweatin' yourself dizzy and growin' short on provisions and findin' nothin', you finally come down to 15,000 and then 10. Finally you say, 'Lord, let me just find 5,000 dollars' worth and I'll never ask for anything more the rest of my life.'...Yeah, here in this joint, it seems like a lot. But I tell you, if you was to make a real strike, you couldn't be dragged away. Not even the threat of miserable death wouldn't keep you from tryin' to add \$10,000 more. \$10,000, you'd want to get 25. \$25,000, you'd want to get 50. \$50,000, a 100. Like roulette. One more turn, you know, always one more."

20th Century Women

Mike Mills's *20th Century Women* is set in Santa Barbara, California in 1979. The three "twentieth century women" in question are Dorothea (Annette Bening), Abbie (Greta Gerwig) and Julie (Elle Fanning). The goings-on revolve around the raising and maturing of Dorothea's 15-year-old son Jamie (Lucas Jade Zumann) and take place in her old Victorian home, which is being restored (ever so slowly) by the only adult male in the household, William (Billy Crudup).

Jamie develops under the guidance of archetypal females from three different generations. While there are a few passing references to cultural landmarks, the movie makes the most of President Jimmy Carter's July 1979 "Crisis of Confidence" speech, treated by the filmmakers as a font of wisdom and an example of presidential genius. Carter claimed that the "fundamental threat to American democracy" came from a "crisis of confidence," reflected "in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation." It is not entirely clear what Mills would have us make of this. Carter presided over a reactionary administration, at home and abroad, and helped set the stage for what was to come.

In any event, Bening is amusing in this trite piece and provides some sorely lacking dramatic weight.

Mills's movies tend to draw on his own life experiences. His latest film apparently mirrors the feminist influence on him of his mother and sister, while 2010's *Beginners* deals with an adult man whose father comes out as gay late in life, as Mills's father did. With all due respect, given the overall banality of *20th Century Women*, why does Mills continue to think his life will be so fascinating to the rest of us?



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact