



*Little Chickadee* (1940). Universal Studios. Directed by Edward F. Cline.  
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# HOLLYWOOD'S AMERICA

## TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA THROUGH FILM

Edited  
with an Introduction  
by

STEVEN MINTZ and RANDY ROBERTS

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## Reaffirming Traditional Values The Blue Collar Ethnic in Bicentennial America: Rocky

Daniel J. Leab

ars after it first appeared, Rocky remains one of the most popular films made during the 1970s. In this essay, the historian Daniel J. Leab locates the film in the context in which it was originally made, and shows how it reflected shifting cultural attitudes toward race, class, and ethnicity, and a broad cultural impulse to reaffirm traditional values that took place in the middle and late 1970s.

The very foundations of the American Dream had been severely shaken during the first half of the 1970s: the Watergate crisis had resulted in the resignation of a president of the United States and criminal prosecution of high-ranking federal officials; the armed forces had been defeated in combat by an Asian people; the Arab oil embargo forced recognition that the United States no longer enjoyed unlimited natural resources; the economy floundered between the seemingly irreconcilable forces of increasing unemployment and inflation; a vocal and alien counterculture had challenged successfully various traditional values; "crime-in-the-streets" as well as rioting in the inner city and on campus threatened permanent damage to domestic tranquility; various minority groups through escalating, sometimes violent, demands seemed to have irreparably rent the fabric of American society. So dour, indeed, did everyday American life appear that in 1974 a positive and hopeful assessment of the United States in the 1970s characterized the decade thus far as "the age of the rip-off." Suddenly, in 1976, with the celebration of the two hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the creation of the United States, the nation's mood changed perceptibly. Bicentennial America, almost overnight, put behind it Watergate, Vietnam, stagflation, and many other problems. The media – which for so long had highlighted the negative side of American life – now spoke of "the ongoing resilience of what used to be called The American Dream." Even *U.S. News and World Report*, well known for its weekly prophecies of doom and analyses of the various malaises troubling the United States, now unabashedly declared that "nowhere on earth ... do the hopes for the future appear more exciting than they do in the U.S., rich in spirit ... power ... and people." A German observer of the American scene found that concern over America's problems had given way, at least for the moment, to celebration of the bicentennial.

*Rocky* is an integral if somewhat unusual part of that bicentennial binge. Set in the white ethnic working-class slums of South Philadelphia, *Rocky* deals with such unappetizing aspects of current life in the United States as organized crime, professional boxing, media exploitation, and the hard-scrabble world of the working-class, blue-collar ethnic. Yet, even though dealing with the underside of contemporary America, *Rocky* is a celebration of the American Dream. Movie critic Frank Rich perceptively analyzed the film's wide appeal when he described *Rocky* as a "fairy tale" that "tapped the popular spirit of the present: ... the old-fashioned, Bi-Centennial vision of America."

At first glance the film's eponymous protagonist seems an unusual hero for bicentennial America. Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone) – self-styled "The Italian Stallion" – is a dim-witted, fourth-rate, thirty-year-old club fighter of no particular distinction, except perhaps for the fact (of which he proudly boasts) that in ten years of fighting his nose has never been broken. Professional boxing has netted him nothing. He earns his keep working as a muscle man for Gazzo, a loan shark. Rocky's life is bleak. He seems to have no future. He lives alone, in squalor. Drunks, bums, and seedy layabouts line the streets of his rundown Philadelphia neighborhood. His friends and acquaintances are corrupt, moronic, or venal. Avuncular advice to a young teenage girl about "hanging out" at night "with them coconuts on the corner [older boys]" earns Rocky a derisive "Screw you, Creepo!!!"

Whatever the drawbacks of Rocky's world, the film makes clear in that peculiar cinematic shorthand so well understood by movie audiences all over the world, that although he may be a bum, he is a bum with heart. Rocky (to use one reviewer's exaggerated but apt words) is presented as "an innocent ... an earth child from the streets of a slum." He likes animals: his confidantes are two pet turtles named Cuff and Link. He cares about people: on a cold night he takes a drunkard out of the gutter and carries him into the corner saloon. He is not mean: even though ordered to break the thumb of one of Gazzo's clients, Rocky refrains from so doing.

Happenstance lifts Rocky out of his nether world. A bicentennial world heavyweight championship match has been scheduled for Philadelphia. A few weeks before the match, the contender is injured and the champion, Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers playing a nasty caricature of Muhammad Ali), decides that rather than scrap the intricate and profitable arrangements that already have been made, he will fight a "local boy." Creed chooses Rocky, in part because Rocky seems easily beatable, and in part because the champion believes that the "Italian Stallion" nickname should make good media copy and help maintain interest in the fight. A surprised Rocky is offered 150,000 dollars and a chance at the title. He accepts and trains to win. On the eve of the fight Rocky recognizes that he has been deceiving himself, but he resolves to prove his worth nevertheless by going the distance with Creed. And in a bruising, gritty, fifteen-round brawl Rocky does just that – even managing to knock down the champion several times. The decision goes to Creed, but Rocky has won personally, having proven that he is not "just another bum from the neighborhood."

As important as the title match for Rocky's growth in self-esteem is his romantic involvement with Adrian (Talia Shire), his friend Paulie's (Burt Young) painfully shy spinster sister. Adrian works in the pet shop that Rocky frequents. However, their first date comes about at the instigation of Paulie, who virtually orders Rocky to ask out Adrian and forces her to accept. Initially she appears on screen as an unattractive,

ousey, withdrawn drudge who forlornly lives with and looks after her brother. ut then Rocky takes her out, takes down her hair, takes off her glasses, and takes her bed. As their romance blossoms she becomes a new person in the best traditions of lollywood's Golden Age. And by the end of the film she has become a graceful, ractive, spirited young woman. After an argument with Paulie about his attempts use Rocky, she moves out of her brother's home and in with the fighter. This on- sion to modern mores notwithstanding, the relationship between Rocky and rian is presented as sentimental and uplifting. In an age of sexually blatant movies, ocky's love scenes are discreet: the sexual overtones are there, but only romance is ade explicit; nudity and copulation are left to the audience's imagination.

Rocky's story is essentially the work of Sylvester Stallone. He began writing it in the rly spring of 1975. He was in his late twenties and after six years of brash effort emed to have failed as an actor. His one big part had been in *The Lords of Flatbush*, 1974 artistic success/commercial flop. The majority of his roles had been small id/or forgettable in movies like *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* (1975), *Capone* (1975), and *Death Race 2000* (1975). He also had tried writing movie and television ripts but won little recognition – the major exception being a credit he earned for additional dialogue” on *The Lords of Flatbush*.

Stallone got the idea for *Rocky* after watching the March, 1975, title bout between Muhammad Ali and Chuck Wepner for the heavyweight championship. Wepner, “a uy on the skids” known as “the Bayonne Bleeder,” not only managed to knock Ali own, but also (unlike most of the champion's previous opponents) almost went the istance – the fight being stopped nineteen seconds from the end of the fifteenth and nal round. Stallone and Gene Kirkwood, a “fledgling producer” (to use *Newsweek's* escription) had been discussing various movie possibilities before the Ali-Wepner atch. Inspired by the fight, Stallone in three and a half days of almost nonstop effort rafted the screenplay that became *Rocky*. An interesting sidelight to current movie- aking is Stallone's comment that this “script was about 122 pages long and went to ore than 330 or 340 pages of revisions and we barely altered it from the original oncept.” Kirkwood interested the independent producing team of Robert Chartoff nd Irwin Winkler in Stallone's script. They in turn offered it to United Artists, who ultimately agreed to undertake the production. Shooting began in December, 1975.

Stallone was determined to play Rocky. The producers recognized the quality of the ript but wanted a name star for the title role. They offered Stallone well over \$100,000 to sell the script and “to bow out.” He refused, even though, as Kirkwood ecalls, Stallone was “hard up for bucks”: he had a bank balance of \$106, a pregnant wife, and few other foreseeable prospects. Stallone later recalled telling his wife “if you lon't mind going out in the backyard and eating grass, I'd rather burn this script than ell it to another actor.” She agreed, but the need to eat grass never arose. Stallone layed Rocky. He won critical acclaim as well as Oscar nominations for his script and is performance – placing him in very select company, as only Orson Welles and Charlie Chaplin had received these dual nominations before.

Stallone made good media copy, and understandably he received far more publicity han anyone else connected with the film. However, as critic James Monaco pointed out, “while *Rocky* has been advertised as the protean conception of its star-writer, irector John Avildsen's contributions are essential to its success and should not be overlooked.” Avildsen has a flair for the kind of working-class milieu portrayed in

Rocky. Indeed, he first came to prominence in 1970 as director and photographer of *Joe*, whose central character was also lower class – albeit very different from the good- natured Rocky. Joe was a foul-mouthed, beer-drinking, hippie-hating factory worker, who joined with an upper-middle-class “friend” to murder some Greenwich Village “drop outs.” The film's phenomenal box-office success stemmed in part from Avildsen's ability to present Joe so realistically and dramatically that there were “recorded incidents of kids shouting ‘We'll get you, Joe!’ at the screen.” Joe's success enabled Avildsen to escape making exploitation pictures such as *Turn On To Love*, and in the next few years he directed a variety of films, including the 1973 Paramount release *Save the Tiger*, whose star, Jack Lemmon, won the Oscar for Best Actor.

Avildsen, noted for his economy and speed, shot *Rocky* in twenty-eight days (two under schedule) and did not overspend his budget. Critical response to Avildsen's direction of *Rocky* varied considerably. Pauline Kael found his approach to be “strictly- from-hunger.” Andrew Sarris asserted that Avildsen provided “no glow, no aura for his hero.” *Newsweek's* Janet Maslin, on the other hand, maintained that the film had been “crisply directed.” In *Time*, Richard Schickel argued that in *Rocky* the director showed a “stronger naturalistic gift than in *Joe* or *Save the Tiger*.”

Certainly the film benefited from Avildsen's ability to capture the gritty atmosphere of South Philadelphia's garbage-strewn, joyless streets and seedy, worn, row houses. English critic Tom Milne waxed rhapsodic over Avildsen's ability to film the “extraor- dinary nocturnal landscapes of strangely dislocated urban geometry ... in which the human figures seem both estranged and yet as much a natural part of the scene as the tenuously impermanent structures themselves.” Milne argued that Avildsen and his cameraman had turned the Philadelphia exteriors “into something very close to a series of Magritte paintings.” Amidst all the justified praise for Stallone, it should be remembered that Avildsen won an Academy Award for his direction of *Rocky*.

Both the much-publicized genesis of the film and Stallone's insistence on playing Rocky had Horatio Alger overtones that appealed to bicentennial America. But the production of the film reflects no sentiment, only the hard-headed economic realities of the American movie industry in the 1970s. Chartoff and Winkler are not producers in the traditional sense; they are “packagers” and as such part of what the film journalist Axel Madsen has dubbed “the New Hollywood.” They do not work with any one studio. They put packages together and then look to the studios for financing. As Chartoff has explained: “We go to Warner's and say ‘Look, we have such and such a project that so and so is interested in ... ; the whole thing can be made for so and so much money ...’” If Warner's is not interested, “United Artists, Columbia, or any of the other majors then look at it and say yes or no, sometimes no ... or yes, if we can bring it down to such a figure.” Chartoff, a theatrical lawyer, and Winkler, a television agent, met “by accident,” became one of the first independent producing teams in Hollywood in the mid-1960s, and prior to *Rocky* had produced eighteen movies, including such interesting ones as *Point Blank* (released by MGM in 1967) and such clinkers as the Charles Bronson melodrama *Breakout* (distributed by Columbia in 1975).

After *Rocky* had proved itself, the head of West Coast production for United Artists floated over “the excitement” provoked both by the film and by Stallone. But when Chartoff and Winkler initially sought approval from United Artists to meet Stallone's demand that he himself play Rocky, the company set some hard conditions. The film's budget was cut almost in half to one million dollars; Stallone was to be paid a minimal

salary of twenty thousand dollars (albeit also a percentage of the possible profits); Chartoff and Winkler had to guarantee to make up any budget overruns. Just before the film was released, Winkler told an interviewer "everyone sacrificed for potential profits. We hope it pays off – we think it will ...."

And it did, probably far beyond his expectations. Financially the film turned out to be a bonanza, "one of the biggest movie winners of all time," according to *Newsweek*. Its one-million-dollar budget was very modest in terms of 1975–76 feature film production, "peanuts in today's movie world," to use critic David Sterritt's clichéd but apt description. By the end of April, 1977 – five months after the film had been released – *Rocky* had grossed over fifty million dollars in the United States and Canada. And in August, 1977, *Variety* estimated that thus far *Rocky* had grossed over one hundred million dollars in the United States and Canada, and that the film still had considerable earning potential in those markets. *Rocky* had proved to be one of the highest grossing films ever made, on a par in terms of impact and drawing power with films like *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *The Sound of Music* (1965), and *Jaws* (1975).

Critically, *Rocky* also scored a major triumph – albeit one less overwhelming than its box-office success. Film reviewers used words like "schmaltz" and "cliché" in discussing *Rocky*, and there was criticism of some aspects of the film in most reviews, but overall, few reviewers failed to respond positively to it. Even the toughminded and unsentimental Pauline Kael found much to praise in *Rocky*, and although alert to its shortcomings she described the film as "engaging" and "emotionally effective." Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* was a notable exception to the generally favorable critical response; he found the film lacking in verve, seemingly fraudulent, and he thought it "never quite measured up." But his comments had little effect. *Rocky* won a wide variety of awards, including ten Oscar nominations and three Academy Awards (Best Director, Best Picture, and Best Editing).

To what can one attribute *Rocky's* extraordinary commercial success and generally favorable critical reception? An extensive, hard-hitting, intelligent publicity campaign played a significant role. A seemingly untiring Stallone, for example, made himself available for interview after interview by representatives from every branch of the media. Indeed, so ubiquitous was Stallone that one commentator claimed that *Rocky's* creator "has granted more interviews in recent months than any American short of Lillian Carter." The *Variety* review of *Rocky*, written almost a month before the film went into release, noted that "the p.r. juggernaut is already at high speed." Vincent Canby in his *New York Times* review expressed uneasiness and displeasure at "the sort of high-powered publicity ... that's been attending the birth of *Rocky* ...." The extent of this high-powered publicity campaign is emphasized by the many echoes of Canby's attitude among reviewers. A trade journalist examining the selling of the film found that "whether rave, pan, or ... 'no opinion,' review after review of *Rocky* tore into the crescendo of advance comment. ...."

Hype alone, however, cannot account for the wildly enthusiastic response that many movie audiences afforded the film. They cheered *Rocky*, booed Creed, and at the end of the film, with tears in their eyes, applauded the credits. Critic Roger Greenspan reported that "the two times I saw *Rocky* people in the audience stood up and cheered at the end." Another reviewer detailed the reactions of an "Italian friend" at a screening of the film: "when the 'Italian Stallion' landed a savage right hook on the ... chin of Apollo Creed ... my friend let out a 'Whoop' as if he had a week's salary

riding on the punch." Frank Rich expressed amazement at the number of usually blasé New York City moviegoers who after seeing *Rocky* left "the theater beaming and boisterous, as if they won a door prize rather than parted with the price of a first-run movie ticket, and they volunteer ecstatic opinions of the film to the people waiting on line for the next show."

Viewing *Rocky* was an emotion-charged experience for many American moviegoers. The film touched "a live nerve with the public," as Frank Rich put it. American audiences, influenced by the bicentennial's strong emphasis on the validity of the American Dream, had lost interest in downbeat themes, in bleak reality, in attacks on old-fashioned values – all subjects which as films of one sort or another had recently done well at the box office. Stallone rather perceptively touched on the changing interests of moviegoers in one of his many interviews: "I believe the country as a whole is beginning to break out of this ... anti-everything syndrome ... this nihilistic, Hemingwayistic attitude that everything in the end must wither and die ...."

In discussing *Rocky's* appeal (as well as its positive outlook) reviewers and other commentators referred over and over again to the optimistic, idealistic, sentimental, 1930s movies of director Frank Capra. Even Avildsen announced that he was fond of the comparison: "Capra's my idol. I love the emotionalism and idealism in what he was doing ...." Capra himself said about *Rocky*: "Boy, that's a picture I wish I had made." But "Capra-corn" as evidenced by such films as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) or *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) will not and should not serve as a point of reference for *Rocky*. In the Capra productions, as film historian Richard Griffith has astutely pointed out, "a messianic innocent, not unlike the classic simpleton of literature ... pits himself against the forces of entrenched greed ... his gallant integrity in the face of temptation calls forth the good will of the 'little people' and through combined protest, he triumphs." *Rocky* may be an innocent, but he is not messianic, and the "little people" he associates with are not the middle class on which Capra dotes. It is not surprising that Capra, when discussing his films at an AFI seminar in 1971, declared that Ralph Nader "would make a perfect Capra hero." And *Rocky* certainly is not a Nader type.

Just as *Rocky* owed little to the Capra films, so too did it owe little to previous Hollywood treatments of boxing. These in the main had concentrated on exposing the ills of "the fight game." But *Rocky* had none of the bleak cynicism of *Champion* (1949), the oppressive social consciousness of *Golden Boy* (1939), the vicious corruption of *The Harder They Fall* (1956), or the sleazy hopelessness of *The Set-Up* (1949). However, *Rocky* does not exist in a vacuum. It does owe something to the ingratiating style of *Somebody Up There Likes Me*, the enthusiastic 1956 screen biography of one-time middle-weight champion Rocky Graziano. And *Rocky's* love story obviously owes something to *Marty*, the poignant 1955 film about two lonely people who expect never to find love, but come together. In one respect, however, *Rocky* is almost unique, and that is its working-class perspective.

As James Monaco has pointed out, "the intellectual, middle class establishment has always felt quite comfortable with films whose subjects were workers ...." But *Rocky* is not presented from a middle-class point of view; the film speaks for the working class, albeit as columnist Pete Hamill acidly commented: "nobody calls it the working class any more ... the bureaucratic, sociological phrase is white lower-middle class," sometimes referred to as "the ethnics." *Rocky* obviously was palatable to the American middle class, but its success rests on the film's appeal to the white ethnic American

(once succinctly described by a magazine writer as "perhaps the most alienated person" in the United States). *Rocky* endorsed the ethnic's prejudices, deferred to his fantasies, and highlighted his lifestyle.

The film's treatment of blacks accords with the racial attitudes that, in the view of many social scientists, govern the thinking of the white ethnic American. Their conventional wisdom holds that these white ethnics believe that they have "paid the costs" of American society's attempts to redress black grievances, that "the poorest, least secure, least educated, and least tolerant" in the white community believe they have been sacrificed by a liberal elite anxious to ensure "responsible social change." And, it is argued, the ethnics bitterly resent this attempt at change. Thus, a sociologist surveying the attitudes of a group of blue-collar workers about contemporary America in the early 1970s argues that except for the Vietnam war "the most explosive issue was the demand for black equality." And in this context he quotes as representative a carpenter who angrily declared, "I realize that something has to be done for the black bastards, but I sure as hell don't want them living next to me. I don't care to work with them either."

*Rocky* plays on these old prejudices and new fears. The film's racism is not overtly stated, but if not explicit, it is still vividly (and visually) implicit. At one point in the film Rocky is shown training in the meat-packing plant where Paulie works. He is training for the fight with Creed by using a carcass of beef as a punching bag, hitting the carcass until his hands are blood red from the juice of the meat. A local television station has sent a crew to film this unusual method of training. The reporter is an arrogantly glib, fashionably dressed, light-skinned black woman, who oozes condescension and contempt during her dealings with Rocky (and Paulie). In many ways she is an unpleasant burlesque of the female reporters found on television newscasts across the country. One can, of course, attribute her presence in the film to a hostility to television news programming or to the women's liberation movement. But one must also ask why a black woman, why that particular kind of arrogant black woman, who patronizes Rocky and Paulie. Here we must remember the words of a literary critic in dealing with another movie genre: "everything in a film is there because somebody wanted it there, although it is often hard to know why or even who that somebody was."

That "somebody" must also claim credit for the nasty, smarmy depiction of Apollo Creed. In public Creed acts the clown, satirizing traditional American values. He enters the arena for his fight with Rocky to the tune of "Yankee Doodle Dandy," and he prances around the ring in an elaborate Uncle Sam costume before stripping to star-spangled trunks. If publicly Creed mocks the bicentennial, privately he expresses contempt for the American Dream and views public belief in it as one more means of making money. Explaining his choice of Rocky as a substitute for the injured challenger, a mocking Creed says "I'm sentimental, and lots of people in this country are just as sentimental." The articulate, well-groomed, business-minded Creed stands in obvious contrast to Rocky — so much so that as Andrew Sarris points out, the "Italian Stallion" becomes "the most romanticized Great White Hope in screen history." Nor, despite over a decade of black heavyweight champions, should the White Hope feeling be ignored. Ali, for example, in his autobiography touches on "the racial issue" in boxing and asks "who put it there and who keeps it there." His answer is given by a veteran reporter who tells him, "they want your ass whipped in public, knocked down, ripped, stomped, clubbed, pulverized, and not just by anybody, but by a real Great White Hope."

The makers of *Rocky* had a feel for ethnic America. Somber authenticity marks the film's settings indoors and out. The home of Paulie and Adrian, for example, is in a row house with a tiny front yard in a decayed inner-city neighborhood. The furniture is neat but worn, the rooms are small, the lamps are chintzy, the living room is dominated by an old television set. The outdoor Christmas decorations, or lack of them, on various houses are just right for South Philadelphia, or Hamtramck, or Corona, or anyone of a hundred ethnic neighborhoods.

Paulie is presented as "pathetically brutish" (to use Judith Crist's apt phrase). A picture of him in uniform on the mantel hints at his only and temporary escape from the neighborhood. Paulie desperately wants to get away from the meatpacking plant and almost pleadingly asks Rocky for an introduction to Gazzo the loan shark. Paulie feels he could certainly do as good a job for Gazzo as Rocky. Michael Novak has commented that one of the reasons for "the new ethnicity" is the "suppressed anger" of the white lower-middle class. In a remarkable scene Paulie lets loose that anger, and stalking around his home strikes out wildly, viciously, forcefully with a baseball bat. He smashes doors, furniture, walls, as he rants against the dead-endedness of his life. Paulie, in Stallone's words, is "a symbol of the blue collar, disenfranchised, left-out mentality, a man who feels life has given him an unfair amount of cheap shots ...."

But in the final analysis neither racism nor reality brought people to the box office in such large numbers. *Rocky* succeeded because of its mythic qualities which neatly dovetailed with the imagery that had been sold by the bicentennial. The sociologist Andrew Greeley has argued that "ethnicity has become almost fashionable." But it was not that fashion which sold *Rocky*. The movie, as Frank Rich said, "can hold its own with Cinderella," as it sets forth that a bum can become a real contender overnight, that riches can come from nowhere, that hard work and the will to make good can still succeed in the United States, that "a shy and unattractive heroine can blossom into a worldly beauty by getting contact lenses and losing her virginity," and that happy endings still exist. And it is to such myths that *Rocky's* audiences responded so enthusiastically.

Historian William Hughes contends that the feature film does not just "reveal popular attitudes," but "like other forms of cultural expression, can reveal more than they intend." *Rocky* is an excellent manifestation of this "covert-overt" approach to looking at feature films. On the surface it is a "fairy tale," and quite an ingratiating one at that. But *Rocky* also provides strong clues to the public mood in the United States in the mid-1970s. *Rocky* could do this because as a French commentator on American film points out, "the freedom of the Hollywood director is not measured by what he can openly do within the system, but rather by what he can imply about American society in general." John Avildsen wove Stallone's story into a richly textured film, shot through with social implications, reactionary as some of them may be.

The film itself and the public's response to it speak volumes about how Americans saw themselves in 1976. *Rocky* captured the mood of bicentennial America, a mood which saw the reaffirmation of many traditional values, including racial prejudices that seemed rejuvenated by the economic and social pressures of the 1970s. *Rocky* also highlighted America's changing attitude toward the white lower-middle class and toward ethnic blue-collar America. Stallone hit at the core of the matter in his comments on audience response to the film: "when they're cheering for Rocky, they're cheering for themselves."