Mainstream American films - particularly those that win Academy Awards - fall into the general category "entertainment". This usually means that they are long on blatant illusion, simple-mindedness and technique and short on anything that even vaguely resembles critical thought. Rocky is an interesting exception to the general rule.

If you go along expecting the uncomfortable realism of Requiem for a Heavyweight, you'll be disappointed. Rocky is in that great tradition of boxing films illustrated by The Wizard of Oz and Singin' in the Rain: it's a fairy tale and one that uses the fight game as the vehicle for its down-market Cinderella message.

What's interesting about Rocky is the limited nature of the rags to riches transformation that takes place. The hero, a mediocrity both in his Friday-night club fight career and in his job as stand-over man for your friendly neighborhood loan shark, doesn't beat the reigning world heavyweight champion. And even more interesting is his realistic assessment of what he can actually achieve in the crack at the crown the man which has fortuitously come his way: all he wants to do is to "go the distance".

In a previous generation, Rocky would have been made in rampant Horatio Alger terms. It would have portrayed the come-from-nowhere-challenger as the eventual victor, celebrating the inexhaustible opportunities of the American dream. Today, in an America battered by Vietnam, Watergate, recession and the Arabs, the goal of just going the distance marks a fascinating reappraisal of the free enterprise myth.

It is this shift that makes Rocky interesting. It is also well-made - the final fight scene is stunning - and is studded with first rate performances. Some cliches remain - the mousey woman who becomes beautiful when she takes her glasses off - and there is a basic unbelievability about the plot - a South Philadelphia stumble-bum as heavyweight contender is stretching things more than slightly, and in these respects, Rocky is a dream factory product. But the limited nature of the hero's goal, of just making a creditable show rather than beating the opposition to a pulp, must send a shiver of uncertainty up John Wayne's ramrod spine. I sincerely hope so.

Most people on the left will welcome The Front. Martin Ritt's treatment of the infamous Hollywood "blacklist". A product of McCarthyism, the unofficial, unadmitted "blacklist" denied film and television employment to thousands of writers, entertainers, and producers in the 50's. Many of those blacklisted went to Europe to find work, some committed suicide and some were lucky enough to be able to work through a pseudonym or a "front" - someone who would allow their name to go forward publicly, thus hiding the identity of the blacklisted person.

In The Front, Woody Allen plays such a public person, fronting for 3 communist scriptwriters. His personal transformation from an apolitical, look-out-for-number-one "typical" American to a politiced opponent of the House Un-American Activities Committee is an interesting study, reflecting in some ways, the experience of many Americans who were not communists, who perhaps contributed to Russian relief (during the time when Russia and America were allies) or marched in May Day peace marches etc., and who were therefore regarded as untrustworthy, subversive, or whatever. This murky point is well made - that the fear of contamination represented so visibly by McCarthyism was incoate and confused. Therefore, it was impossible to specify what kinds of behaviour or activities qualified as un-American, and therefore every citizen was suspect.

The film also displays the petty nature of the allegedly offensive behaviour without making the whole enterprise seem ludicrous. As a pronounced spasm in the long tradition of American anti-intellectualism, anti-radicalism and xenophobia, McCarthyism often seems unbelievable to non-Americans. How could intelligent and creative people, as well as the nation as a whole, get caught up in such patently insubstantial bullying and innuendo? The risks you ran if you tried to buck the witch-hunt is convincingly portrayed, and in highly competitive and commercial industries like films and television, the network of fear based on self-interest could obviously reach frightening proportions.

What is disappointing about the film is the absence of any analysis of the social forces that produced McCarthyism and the blacklist. The entertainment industry would merely appear to be in the grip of weak and/or mad and/or evil individuals who "somehow" got control of things. By concentrating on the plight of the persecuted - an unlovely aspect of the American dream which is well worth exposing - we fail to get an understanding of the origins of the persecution, of the continuing current in bourgeois democracies to repress criticism and alternatives. Without such an exploration, The Front may be viewed as portraying an aberration - after all, both the producer and many of the actors were blacklisted in the bad old days of the 50's, but they are obviously working again now, so everything's alright.

We may conclude that McCarthyism is something which could obviously never happen again in these enlightened times, and, of course, something which could never happen here. We would be wrong.

- Kathe Boehringer.