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Movie Review: Ford v. Ferrari

Abstract

"The movie asks: do American companies care about making the highest quality goods?"

Posting about the movie *Ford v. Ferrari* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/movie-review-ford-v-ferrari/?highlight=ford%20v.%20ferrari>

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in things

December 6, 2019

Movie Review: Ford v. Ferrari

Josh Matthews

★★★★

Title: *Ford v Ferrari*

Directed by: James Mangold

Written by: Jez Butterworth, John-Henry Butterworth, Jason Keller

Starring: Matt Damon, Christian Bale, Jon Bernthal

Ford v. Ferrari promises a showdown between car companies. It is, partly, and it fulfills the promise of its title in spectacular fashion, with one of the most spectacular racing scenes I've ever seen at the movies.

But, it's really a movie concerned with the ideals that those car companies represent.

This is a thoughtful movie, meant for mature adults willing to ponder crucial issues regarding which business philosophies are correct, what excellence means, and what we should love and why. I came away from it exhilarated by the racing, inspired by the directing and acting, but most of all super-charged by the complexity of its ideas.

The "Ford v. Ferrari" showdown of the title refers to the 1966 Le Mans race, a grueling 24-hour race to determine the winner of the fastest, most durable, sportiest car in the world. Usually, the Italians win—specifically, Enzo Ferrari and his hand-crafted cars.

Looking for advertising and marketing glory, however, the Ford Motor Company decides to try to buy Ferrari's company, which is going bankrupt. But, Ferrari spurns their offer, insulted by the company's potential control of his ability to build cars and race them. He insults Henry Ford Jr., the egotistical CEO of Ford Motor Company, which then prompts

Ford himself to write a blank-check in order to build a race car to beat Ferrari in the Le Mans race.

Enter the main characters. Carroll Shelby, played by Matt Damon, is a former Le Mans driver who can't race anymore due to a heart problem. He not only knows the race, he knows sports-car design. Ford's Lee Iacocca asks Shelby how to win. Shelby replies that, in spite of Ford's blank-check offer, money alone can't buy victory.

What can? Experts who absolutely love cars, love racing cars, and are so familiar with the smell, feel, touch, and taste of cars that they alone—and not giant corporations with their computers—can craft a car that can win the race.

Besides Shelby, the one expert profiled in this movie is famed driver Ken Miles (played by Christian Bale, excellent as always), an ex-WWII vet and eccentric Englishman who, while not always a team player, is a gearhead that loves car engines (for example, the first shot of his appearance in the movie involves him sticking his head in an engine).

The entire movie plays with how independent Shelby and Miles can be, and how much they are allowed to play around in order to craft the greatest, fastest car they can. Ford writes them blank-checks, but that means that the company asks, at various times, for control of their enterprise. Ford has the money and the infrastructure to build the car, but it's clear in the movie that they meddle too much.

One of the main conflicts in this movie is so important that I think every organizational leader in American businesses and institutions needs to not just see *Ford v. Ferrari*, but study it. There's more wisdom in this movie than in a thousand business books combined. That conflict is excellence versus brand loyalty. For example, what does a company want: to make the best product, or to be the best at telling everyone they make the best product?

There's so much focus on branding and marketing these days that we miss how absolutely crucial it is to strive for high-quality. Companies seem to think they can trick people into liking their stuff, with fancy words and images, while not caring as much about whether what they are doing is truly outstanding.

So just how do you become the best at what you are doing? What exactly, in business, is "winning"? Is it just telling people that you are winning? These are questions the movie constantly asks.

I think the answers are found in the ways that Shelby, Miles, and the mechanics treat the cars. They imitate Ferrari's philosophy, which involves hand-crafted care, high-

quality above all else, and a deep love for the thing you are making (or driving). Miles is in contact because he is caring for, listening to, feeling, and smelling the cars.

Yet, Ford wants control of its brand. It wants brand loyalty, and this sometimes clashes with what Shelby and Miles are doing. They want race car drivers who will obey them, which Miles is not. They want cars that look nice and that they can show off as bright and shiny, when in fact they are poorly made.

Shelby and Miles have to figure out whether they will be loyal to Ford, who is responsible for their enterprise, or whether they will pursue a form of excellence that the Ford Motor Company doesn't want and cannot envision.

The movie asks: do American companies care about making the highest quality goods? What drives an organization—the visionaries trying to make the greatest products, or the marketing department? Are organizations more concerned with how people perceive their products, rather with the quality of the products?

In my experience, America is a land of marketing hype, but we don't always produce excellent products and services. *Ford v. Ferrari* is a criticism of what we produce. It also prompts us to get better at what we do—whether it's making stuff, providing services, teaching classes, or managing organizations.

The movie asks you and me to achieve the highest-quality job we can. To strive to be the best is to be like Shelby and Miles and Ferrari, not the corporate bureaucrats at Ford. The movie even suggests that an over-focus on branding and marketing seriously harms companies and institutions.

You'll notice that I haven't talked about the racing in this movie yet. That's because, although this is a sports movie that features plenty of fabulous old cars and many great racing scenes, the entire movie builds up to a thoughtful, complex finale. You will not anticipate what happens at the end of the Le Mans race—the question is, why is that the ending? I have tried to prepare you for it by asking questions about business philosophies.

Given that this is a movie about building the best race car, it has to be technically excellent itself, and it is. James Mangold's directing is quite good; when the anticipated Le Mans race happens in the last thirty minutes, he himself ups his directing game. The eclectic soundtrack is fun, the coloring of this movie has a retro shiny look (just like the cars within it), and the editing is outstanding.

My guess is that this is going to be, once 2019 ends, one of the year's best movies.