

David Walsh looks at the 70th Academy Awards:

Long live conformism and banality!

David Walsh
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The 70th Academy Awards ceremony was a pretty dire affair. The victory of James Cameron's *Titanic* in 11 categories certainly set the general tone. Academy members bestowed on this trite and mediocre film awards for best picture, direction, song, cinematography, art direction, film editing, costume design, sound, sound editing, original dramatic score and visual effects.

The secret of *Titanic*'s academy award triumph is not difficult to figure out. Great numbers of people in the film community worked on the film. Its success has enriched some and enhanced the careers of others. It has helped maintain and perhaps strengthen the grip of American studio production on the world market. The success of a film today is measured solely by its box office receipts. How many in Hollywood at present would be prepared to challenge *Titanic*'s achievement?

The ability of so-called independent films — such as *The English Patient* (which won nine awards), *Fargo*, *Shine*, *Secrets and Lies*, *Sling Blade* — to win both awards and attention at the 1997 Academy Awards produced outrage in major studio front offices. No doubt considerable money and pressure were brought to bear to make certain that there would be no repetition of such an embarrassment. Big-budget films and US stars swept virtually every award. In a nod, perhaps not entirely cynical, to youth and the unconventional the academy gave two awards to *Good Will Hunting*, written and starring two young performers, Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. Unfortunately, although Damon and Affleck were no doubt sincere in their desire to do something outside the mainstream, their film hardly challenges prevailing conceptions and attitudes.

In any event, after the tremendous financial success of *Titanic*, bestowing the best picture award on any

other work would have been perceived as a slap in the face to its many admirers. How could Hollywood get rich from the film and then refuse to reward it with its highest honors? The general cultural level of academy voters is probably not appreciably higher, if it is higher at all, than that which prevails at large. The number of those who had a difficult time convincing themselves that *Titanic* was an artistic as well as a commercial achievement was probably relatively small. The number who actively rejected the film was perhaps even smaller.

There are certain anomalies about *Titanic*'s victory that shed light on its real attraction to industry voters. James Cameron's script was not placed in nomination for best screenplay, making his film the first since *The Sound of Music* in 1965 to win the best picture award without its screenplay even being nominated. Nor did the film earn any of the acting awards; none of its male performers were nominated. How is it possible, logically speaking, for a film be the "best picture" when its script is not even in the running and none of its actors win any honors? The answer is relatively simple: when it earns one billion dollars.

Nearly every aspect of this year's ceremony bespoke wealth, privilege and complacency. Eccentricity and individualism were in short supply. Tuxedos and fashionable gowns that cost in the tens of thousands of dollars were the order of the day. "Fashion Tops Academy Awards Show," as one Associated Press story had it. The names on everyone's lips were not Fellini, Ford or Hitchcock, but Giorgio Armani, Gucci, Jean Paul Gaultier, Donna Karan and Halston. Not to mention Van Cleef & Arpels and "jeweler-to-the-stars" Harry Winston. Gloria Stuart, co-star of *Titanic*, wore a \$20 million blue diamond necklace from Winston; she was escorted by two bodyguards.

In contrast to recent years, there were only a handful of demonstrators outside the gala affair—Disney/ABC workers protesting against working conditions at the entertainment giant. Vanessa Redgrave, who created controversy two decades ago with her denunciation of Zionism, wore a dress created by one of Princess Diana’s favorite designers.

This is Hollywood at its worst, the unthinking celebration of fame, the naked worship of the “business” side of show business. It would be wrong to think that all this self-satisfaction means a great deal in the bigger scheme of things. Even in Hollywood there are people who know that *Titanic* is worthless and its triumph ephemeral, and that the money and conformism on display Monday night were disgusting. New perspectives, more serious projects will, we are confident, help the considerable talents and skills that lie largely dormant in the contemporary film industry to flourish.



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