

David Walsh looks at the Oscars

The Academy Awards: Hollywood at its worst

David Walsh
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The 71st Academy Awards ceremony Sunday night was a relatively unpleasant spectacle for the most part: a celebration of conformism, vulgarity and mediocrity. It seemed appropriate that the Hollywood establishment chose this night, on which it displayed its worst possible self, to honor Elia Kazan, the film director who turned informer in 1952 to save his career.

The entire affair was peculiar and off-putting from beginning to end. The verbal ineptitude, the graceless transitions, the shoddy decor, the ridiculous dance and musical numbers, the overlong and business-oriented acceptance speeches--everything gave evidence of an industry which has "never had it so good" financially and is at sea intellectually and artistically.

What did any of Sunday night's goings-on have to do with the quality of the films under consideration? There is something pitiful and unseemly about individuals, even talented individuals, bursting into tears on receiving one of these awards. It cannot simply be ascribed to ambition, to the career boost such an honor will provide.

There is something more insidious at work, an almost childlike, perhaps neurotic, obsession with recognition. If this is how the winners respond, how must the "losers" be feeling? How can serious work be conducted in such an atmosphere, where everything must be organized in the hopes of representing this year's lowest common denominator? If a distinctive film, one with personality and sharpness, is rewarded, it is largely accidental. None of last year's more interesting American films-- *Buffalo '66*, *Bulworth*, *The Thin Red Line*, *The Newton Boys* --received serious recognition at this year's ceremony.

Who wins the top awards and who doesn't at one of these affairs is largely the outcome of a months-long battle, going on behind the scenes, between rival

studios that spend millions of dollars to promote their individual products. This year was considered a victory for Miramax, responsible for *Shakespeare in Love* and *Life is Beautiful*. As the *Los Angeles Times* noted Monday, "Over the last decade Miramax's Oscar season marketing machine has become so aggressive that this year it evoked complaints from the industry." Some press reports accused Miramax co-chairman Harvey Weinstein of "bad-mouthing" *Saving Private Ryan* in his efforts to garner the prize.

In addition, there are all sorts of Byzantine political and personal relations in the film industry, which only someone who devoted him-or herself to the study over a period of years, perhaps decades, could begin to unravel.

And it is sad, in a sense, because Hollywood is not simply, or necessarily, a sham and a void. One is always made aware of the immense skill, resourcefulness, sophistication and beauty present in this community, at the same time one feels equally strongly that it is all largely frittered away on trivia, on the relentless pursuit of what is demonstrably not important.

The three films that took center stage-- *Shakespeare in Love*, *Saving Private Ryan* and *Life is Beautiful* --are legitimate, and not the worst, representatives of contemporary commercial film-making. The first is a trifle, clever and amusing enough, but not a work that can stand up to serious scrutiny. It is too calculatingly designed to suit an audience's sweet tooth. Steven Spielberg's *Private Ryan* is a sort of officially-approved version of World War II, a conformist and patriotic "anti-war" film. And Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, in my view, is also history designed to soothe and not perturb.

I found Benigni's performance at the Academy

Awards--his leaping up and down, his "charmingly" mangled English, his flattery of the audience--simply distasteful. His antics, a repetition of the act he put on at last year's Cannes festival, confirm my notion of him as a self-aggrandizer and narcissist, mostly infatuated with his own supposedly amusing self.

One might think that a man receiving an award for a film on the subject of the Holocaust might respond with a hint of dignity. This was not, after all, *Lethal Weapon 3*. Anyone is free to admire *Life is Beautiful*, but I hope Sunday night's display may induce more thoughtful people to consider the film in a somewhat more critical light. What, in the end, was the difference between Benigni's response this year and James Cameron's triumphalism in 1998? Anyone that consumed with success cannot have room for artistic concerns of a higher order.

The bestowing of the honorary award on Elia Kazan certainly represented the moral pivot of the ceremony. Outside the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion a crowd of perhaps 500 people opposed to the award noisily expressed their displeasure. Demonstrators held up placards reading, "Don't whitewash the blacklist," "Elia Kazan: Nominated for the Benedict Arnold Award," and "Kazan: the Linda Tripp of the 1950s." A number of blacklisted writers and directors or their relatives--including Abraham Polonsky, Joan Scott, Norman Barzman and Robert Lees, and Michael Wilson's daughter, Becca--were on hand for the protest.

The presentation of the award had a shamefaced character, as if it were being done with a guilty conscience. Despite all their protestations, those involved in honoring Kazan know, or at least sense, that his capitulation to the McCarthyites was a craven act. Nothing can wipe away the stain.

Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro spoke briefly and superficially about Kazan, Scorsese calling him a "poetic realist" and "angry romantic." The clips from his films were also brief and told little. Kazan himself, a man of 89, had nothing much to say. "Thank you very much. I think I can just slip away," he remarked. A far cry from Charlie Chaplin's triumphant appearance in 1972, upon which occasion Chaplin's moral superiority over his persecutors in Hollywood and Washington was palpably felt.

It seems certain that the Academy seriously underestimated the degree of opposition to the Kazan

award, not merely from the victims of the blacklist, but also from those in the current film industry. According to eyewitnesses perhaps half of the audience remained in their seats and did not clap, a remarkable number considering the propaganda campaign that had been waged on Kazan's behalf. The television cameras captured Oscar nominees Nick Nolte and Ed Harris pointedly refusing to applaud. There are some people with principle in this profession.

What is one to make of individuals such as Scorsese, De Niro, Warren Beatty, Paul Schrader, all liberals or radicals, and supporters of the award? Involved are perhaps equal doses of opportunism and superficiality. First, in my view, these figures vastly overestimate Kazan's influence and importance as a filmmaker. That is more or less an aesthetic issue, although I believe it involves wider social issues. Second, the argument that opposition to the award was some kind of misguided act of "political correctness," an attempt to mix art and politics in an irresponsible, even repressive manner, simply doesn't hold water.

McCarthyism was not a small matter, not a passing cloud in the sky. It expressed the outlook of the most predatory and representative sections of the American ruling class, organically hostile to working people, socialism and every striving for social progress. The anticommunism to which Kazan surrendered and which he materially strengthened had definite consequences, in helping to create a stultifying and reactionary political and cultural climate in the US, whose consequences have not yet been overcome. The award ceremony Sunday night bore witness to this, with its patriotic tribute to General Colin Powell, murderer of virtually defenseless Iraqis.

Significant historical and political issues have been raised by the Kazan award, issues that are not widely understood and need to be discussed and explored thoroughly. The *World Socialist Web Site* will continue to be a center for such a discussion. We also encourage readers to express their views.



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