

Academy Award nominations: a large dose of philistinism, some hopeful signs

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This year's Oscar nominations, announced Tuesday, suggest some of the tensions at work in the American film industry as well as a great deal of its confusion.

American Beauty received the most nominations, eight. The film, directed by Sam Mendes, is a pseudo-critical look at American life, which ends up in the most predictable and conformist places. It is a perfect choice for the Academy voter who senses that something is wrong with society, but doesn't care to investigate the matter too deeply. One can predict great things for this film come March 26.

Michael Mann's *The Insider*, a story of corporate greed and corruption—which does have some bite to it, but unfortunately has not done well at the box office—collected seven nominations. In this case, one hopes that the publicity will help the film.

The nomination of *The Green Mile* for Best Picture is simply an atrocity. *The Cider House Rules* and *The Sixth Sense*, the other two nominees for best film, indicate the attraction of the majority of Academy members to the middlebrow and the money-making, respectively.

It is, nonetheless, a positive sign that some of the more interesting English-language films that appeared last year, in addition to *The Insider*, did receive some degree of recognition, even if they ultimately fail to win awards. Mike Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy*, the best film in competition, received four nominations (for screenplay, art direction, costume and makeup), an apparently unexpected development.

Being John Malkovich collected three major nominations (for direction, best supporting actress and screenplay), while Hilary Swank and Chloe Sevigny, both fully deserving, received nominations for *Boys Don't Cry*. Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor were nominated for their screenplay for *Election*, a relatively

cold-eyed look at the American political process, among other things. Denzel Washington was nominated for his performance as the framed-up black boxer Rubin Carter, in *The Hurricane*. *Magnolia*, which contains an hour of a good film (out of its nearly three), won three nominations.

I have no idea by what arcane process the Academy arrives at its best foreign film nominations, but they continue to have almost nothing to do with the best that's actually being produced around the world. Pedro Almodovar's *All About My Mother* was inevitably chosen, as was the awful Cold War film, *East-West*, from France.

Wim Wenders' *Buena Vista Social Club* is certainly a worthy selection in the documentary category.

I wouldn't quibble with the nominations in the acting categories, because there are a great many deserving performers active these days. The most glaring omission was Terence Stamp in *The Limey*, but that was probably to be expected. Another obvious omission was Christopher Plummer in *The Insider*.

If Academy voters felt obliged to choose *The Green Mile*, at least they had the decency not to nominate Frank Darabont for his direction or Tom Hanks, who looks more and more like a Thanksgiving Day Parade float, for his acting. For some mercies, one can only be grateful. George Lucas's ridiculous *Star Wars—Episode I: The Phantom Menace* was also more or less excluded.

The major studios have already spent a great deal of money wooing voters. Over the next six weeks, they will spend a great deal more. An Oscar nomination alone “can mean millions of dollars in terms of revenue,” notes one film industry analyst. Estimates are already being made as to which films will gain the most by this year's crop (“[*American*] *Beauty* has reached a

sizable audience, but with eight nominations it could corner a lot of the mainstream audience,” and so on.) This is big business.

The Academy will stage its annual gala in March. It will be, as always a peculiar, bloated and occasionally intoxicating mix, in which, unfortunately, the element of the cynical attempt at mass hypnosis is likely to outweigh the recognition of the genuinely talented.



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