

This year's Academy Awards ceremony: Hollywood in full view

David Walsh
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There are Academy Awards ceremonies at which controversy or even the presence in the competition of a film that arouses particularly strong feelings (positive or negative) provokes some genuine interest and excitement. The decision by the Academy to honor filmmaker and informer Elia Kazan last year was such a ceremony. The possibility of *Titanic* sweeping the awards the year before aroused a peculiar kind of dread. One wanted to know if the worst was indeed going to come to pass.

Controversy is presumably the last thing the Academy show organizers want to encourage. This year there was virtually none. It was back to business as usual. There was thus little to divert our attention and we were obliged to gaze upon the American film industry in all its nakedness. And that is not a pretty sight.

US films dominate the world's cinemas at present and the studios' products are breaking attendance records. This is not the time to be modest. The industry is largely pleased with itself. A mood of self-importance, self-indulgence and self-involvement dominated Sunday's awards ceremony.

There must be those, however, even in Hollywood, who sense that financial success is not everything. Peer pressure, conformism, careerism, a lack of coherent oppositional ideas presumably work to make nearly everyone toe the line. One wanted to congratulate Sean Penn, one of the most gifted actors working today, for not showing up. Everybody in attendance seemed to take themselves and their films, many of which from any objective artistic standpoint have little to offer, terribly seriously. If my work were so limited and weak, I think I would be more circumspect: perhaps a private party with a few invited guests and an *apology*.

Instead, the pomposity of it all. The clothes, the jewels, the sets, the advertising. What a waste of time, talent and money.

At more than four hours, the lengthiest ever, the event was absurdly overlong. Year after year producers promise a shorter, more streamlined and somehow more sophisticated program. Each year vulgarity and philistinism predominate. At a certain point one has to conclude that vulgarity and

philistinism must be organically generated by the American film industry, and more generally, by any combination of art and commerce.

The film industry elite is as removed from the rest of society as the upper echelons in society as a whole. Indeed the billions of dollars being made in Hollywood have made studio executives and other notables into significant members of the ruling elite. The industry is one of the major financial and "moral" bases of support for the Democratic Party.

The insularity of this wealthy layer is extreme. Hardly anyone Sunday addressed an issue outside the film industry. Award winner (for *Boys Don't Cry*) Hilary Swank's plea for tolerance of sexual difference and novelist/screenwriter (*The Cider House Rules*) John Irving's thanking of Planned Parenthood and the National Abortion Rights League represented the extreme radical end of the ceremony's political and social spectrum. Other than that, conformism, conformism, conformism.

Warren Beatty's rambling speech accepting the Irving Thalberg award for lifetime achievement was particularly hard to take. Is extraordinary cynicism at work here, or simply shallowness and opportunism? Beatty, apparently intent on demonstrating that he has worked all the Bulworthism out of his system, virtually pledged allegiance to country, family and God, going out of his way to praise Elia Kazan, a notorious informer.

(Of course, this unsavoriness is not simply an American affair. Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodovar made almost as unfavorable an impression as Italian Roberto Benigni did last year.)

The bestowing of an honorary award on Polish filmmaker Andrzej Wajda, who once upon a time made decent films (*Canal*, *Ashes and Diamonds*, *Danton*), fit into the general scheme of things. Wajda delivered a disgusting little speech, in which he thanked his American friends for helping Poland rejoin the "civilized" nations, including their "security structure"! Presumably this is the "structure" responsible for bombing Serbia last year. It's not often that one hears a

onetime artist pay tribute to such things.

The triumph of *American Beauty* in five major categories (best picture, director, actor, original screenplay and cinematography) at this year's Academy Awards ceremony was relatively predictable. This confused and mediocre concoction, directed by Sam Mendes, about a middle-aged man's bold dash toward freedom—which took place I forgot exactly how—achieved that perfect balance of calculated “edginess,” titillation and comforting cliché that so many strive for but few achieve.

I hope all those who claimed or claim that *American Beauty* represents some kind of an insightful critique of contemporary society watched the presentation of the five awards. Was there a hint of opposition or protest in anything that was said? Kevin Spacey seemed to think it daring to dedicate his award to Jack Lemmon. It's always unpleasant when individuals who've worked on a second or third-rate film collect a batch of awards. Somehow the bad faith seeps through the smiles and hugs. Their photographs look like mug shots.

The Insider, an honest and hard-hitting film, won nothing. Neither did *Election* or *Being John Malkovich*. *Topsy-Turvy* won two minor awards. Then there was the apparently deliberate snubbing of *The Hurricane*. So much for the more interesting or difficult films. In bypassing *The Green Mile* academy voters chose to avoid serious embarrassment.

Michael Caine (*The Cider House Rules*) was gracious and human in winning. Swank turned in a good performance in a disturbing film, as did Angelina Jolie (*Girl, Interrupted*) in a dull one. Still, even the more talented performers did not come off well by and large. They are part of a system, based for the most part on subordinating their personalities to a falsification or simplification of reality, and that has its consequences for everyone. About the “star system,” Robert Bresson, the late French filmmaker, wrote that one is in “Film after film, subject after subject, confronting the same faces that one cannot believe in.” He observed that “*Oscars* to actors whose body, face and voice do not seem to be theirs, do not produce any certainty that they belong to them.”

In any event, the awards ceremony is important to many in Hollywood as the springboard to increased box office revenues. A fierce struggle goes on in the weeks prior to the ceremony show to sway academy voters. The last two years the principal battle has taken place between DreamWorks SKG, formed by Jeffrey Katzenberg, Steven Spielberg and David Geffen in 1994, and Miramax, headed by Harvey and Bob Weinstein, now part of the Disney empire.

DreamWorks executives were bitterly disappointed last year when Miramax's *Shakespeare in Love* beat out their *Saving Private Ryan* (directed by Spielberg) for the best

picture award. This year they determined to go all out to promote *American Beauty*. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “DreamWorks borrowed a page from Miramax's indie film playbook, bolstering traditional broad-based advertising and publicity with smaller, targeted maneuvers designed to reach the 5,600 academy voters if not literally where they lived (direct-mail campaigning is prohibited), then at least in casual, comfortable settings in their own communities.”

DreamWorks consultant Bruce Feldman explains another “brilliantly simple” idea. He took *American Beauty* screenwriter Alan Ball to the Santa Barbara Film Festival a day early, to attend a tribute to Anthony Hopkins. Feldman estimated that 30 to 40 academy voters reside in Santa Barbara, and that several were at the tribute. “Look, if you show up at a dinner, it doesn't make anybody vote for the guy. But it's human nature to be influenced by personal contact. We figured five, 10 or 25 voters could make a difference. Who's to say that it wouldn't?”

According to industry experts, DreamWorks bought twice the number of ad pages in the three trade papers—*Daily Variety*, *Weekly Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter*—purchased by any other studio. During the four weeks after the award nominations were announced DreamWorks spent more than \$774,000 to promote *American Beauty*, whereas Miramax spent some \$350,000 to advertise *The Cider House Rules*.

According to DreamWorks' Katzenberg, Harvey Weinstein phoned him more than a week before the award ceremony to congratulate him. “He said he called to say, ‘Congratulations. You saw the playbook and outplayed us.’” Weinstein later asked Katzenberg, cheerfully, “What's your Oscar movie for next year?”

I think it's safe to say that nothing serious will emerge from the American film industry, studio or so-called “independent,” unless it is *consciously* directed against all of this.



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