

The 73rd Academy Awards: Hollywood displays its wares

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27 March 2001

The most positive development associated with the 73rd Academy Awards ceremony was the news that television viewership fell 8 percent from 2000, that this year's award show received the lowest rating since at least 1986 and that, once the full national ratings are released, it stands a chance of being the lowest-rated awards telecast in history.

Almost everyone involved is fully deserving of that slap in the face from the public. At a time of increasing economic insecurity, when more and more people are wondering how they are going to make ends meet in six months' or a year's time, it is not surprising that this spectacle of opulence and empty-headedness has begun to wear thin for broad sections of the population.

Three films won the lion's share of support from academy voters this year: *Gladiator*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Traffic*. All three are poor films. The victory of *Gladiator* is the most distasteful. The film is violent and essentially pointless; its stylish cynicism and sadism apparently speak to moods within the film community. While it was pleasant to hear Chinese names singled out for praise by the winners in a number of categories for *Crouching Tiger*, Ang Lee's film is vacuous and a poor representative of Taiwanese cinema. *Traffic* is the policeman's eye view of the drug problem, which explains nothing and educates no one.

There was a time when award winners attempted to make some statement about the industry or the world. Sometimes the comments were self-indulgent, sometimes they were silly, occasionally they were insightful. Now we are submitted to endless lists of "thank yous" to studio executives and the like. It's tedious and simply underscores how little any of these well-paid people have to say. The over-the-top exclamations of joy are equally unseemly.

It is difficult to speak of high points. Marcia Gay Harden winning for *Pollock*, a sincere if not terribly

satisfying film, was one. Benicio Del Toro had the grace to thank the people of Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Mexico. Host Steve Martin made a few pointed cracks, as well as a number of inane ones. Cinematographer Jack Cardiff (b. 1914) and screenwriter Ernest Lehman (b. 1920) are deserving of recognition for their efforts.

No one cared to point out that Dino De Laurentis (b. 1919), the veteran Italian film producer also honored, began his career producing left-wing films like *Bitter Rice* (1948)—about a woman who betrays her fellow workers in the Po Valley rice fields—and a few decades later was setting up shop in cheap-labor North Carolina.

Low points included: Sting, Björk, the creatures in white fur hoods surrounding singer Randy Newman, the Pepsi-Cola commercial with Britney Spears and the shameless former Republican presidential candidate Robert Dole—Is there anyone with an ounce of dignity in either the Hollywood or Washington establishment?—Mike Myers making fun of the award he was handing out (achievements in sound and sound editing), Julia Roberts whooping and telling us, "I love the world, and I'm so happy."

One is almost obliged to use the same words year after year: bloated, self-important, trivial, pointless. The link between the Academy Awards and art in filmmaking is tenuous at best. One feels that the victory of a talented individual, which does happen, always contains an element of the accidental and arbitrary, and might never be repeated.

Mirroring and indeed forming a constituent element of the American social elite, those dominating the film industry comprise a small, insular and wealthy group. This thin layer is obsessed with money, prestige, looks, success, and more success.

No commentary in the media is complete without a mention of the gowns and tuxedos and jewels and lavish dinners and exclusive parties. Everything is done to

encourage backwardness and individualism in the general public. The subtext is: “Don't you wish you were one of these marvelous people? Aren't their lives infinitely better than your miserable one? Wouldn't you do almost anything to change places with them?”

Some reference to social issues and “human drama” is necessary to draw audiences in to view the particular commodity Hollywood is selling. But the sort of toothless liberalism that prevails in US filmmaking circles is nothing that would inconvenience anyone, and those involved are more than willing to amend or retract should they step out of line and provoke a backlash from powerful quarters. The central and abiding concern of well-heeled Hollywood is well-heeled Hollywood.

Principles? One would be pleased to encounter them. Award-winning Steven Soderbergh (*Traffic*) excoriated the film industry in the *International Workers Bulletin* in an interview in 1995. Apparently older and wiser, he was one of the toasts of last night's goings-on. His tribute to anyone “who spends part of their day creating” was amorphous enough to draw applause from a crowd that would for the most part consider a blue-jeans commercial or *Lethal Weapon VII* “creative” work.

Russell Crowe, who just signed a deal to make \$15 million on his next film, told a Massachusetts newspaper in 1997, “If I get paid \$10 million, that's the last bloody movie I'm going to make.” He encouraged the disadvantaged Sunday night to keep their hopes alive. In what? The possibility of becoming a film star?

Are there really no other stories to tell besides the ones that appear on cinema screens at present? With all the devastating and earth-shaking events taking place around the world, with all the changes occurring in the US itself, is this the best that film artists can come up with?

It's a miserable commentary. But the imagination, or lack of it, is not an individual matter. It speaks to the social outlook and orientation of those who make up the industry. We have been witnessing in recent years a crescendo of inanity and irrelevance. (Julia Roberts couldn't bring herself to actually mention the subject matter of the film, *Erin Brockovich*, that produced an award for her: the ruthless practices of a California energy company.) The narrower the layer of individuals enjoying success and the greater their wealth, the less rich the material and the less enduring the art. One could go out into the street in a dozen different cities and in 30 minutes come up with more interesting material. Contrary to the image portrayed in most films, humanity continues to suffer and think and resist—living, breathing humanity.

Why will no one show us any of that?

The competition in Hollywood is not between films or directors or actors, in the final analysis, but between large corporations or subsidiaries of corporations: DreamWorks vs. Miramax [Disney] vs. Sony, and so on. Winning an award may mean additional tens of millions of dollars in box office revenue. According to ABC News, “the films winning or even being nominated for key awards can expect to see a large increase in box-office revenue in the coming weeks. Three of this year's Best Picture nominees, *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon*, *Traffic* and *Chocolat* remain in theaters, where the receipts have come pouring in since they were given Best Picture nominations in February. *Crouching Tiger* and *Traffic* have both passed the \$100 million mark in box-office receipts. The two films had earned \$60 million and \$71 million, respectively, when the nominations were announced. *Chocolat* has earned \$56 million, with more than half of that coming since February.... Often major studios will spend \$5 million or more promoting a film as they push for Academy Award votes—in addition to the original marketing costs of the film—while hoping to see a payoff in the form of higher box-offices grosses.” This filthy atmosphere helps produce a certain type of film.

The world outside the film industry exists and it will intrude, in one fashion or another. For one thing, the possibility of strikes by writers and actors looms. The contract between the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers expires on May 1. The Writers Guild, which has 11,500 members, is demanding that writers benefit from the growth of videocassettes, cable television and foreign markets. According to the Associated Press, “In negotiations, studios have rejected what they consider unrealistic union demands, saying they ignore the realities of a slowing economy and shrinking audiences. This week, DreamWorks SKG executive Jeffrey Katzenberg said that meeting the WGA's demands even halfway could bankrupt the studios.” It is amusing to hear individuals like Katzenberg and others, whose personal wealth could provide food for a small country, crying poverty.



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