

This year's Academy Awards nominations

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What is one to make of this year's crop of Academy Award nominations, announced last week?

The first installment of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, received the greatest number of nominations, thirteen: including Best Picture, Best Director (Peter Jackson of New Zealand) and Best Supporting Actor (Ian McKellen). *A Beautiful Mind*, directed by Ron Howard, received eight nominations, as did Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*; both were nominated in the Best Picture category. Russell Crowe received a Best Actor nomination for the third year in a row for *A Beautiful Mind*. *Gosford Park*, directed by Robert Altman, was nominated in seven categories, including Best Picture. The other film nominated for that prize was Todd Field's *In the Bedroom*, whose two leading female performers, Sissy Spacek and Marisa Tomei, received award nominations, as did actor Tom Wilkinson.

Denzel Washington (*Training Day*), Sean Penn (*I Am Sam*) and Will Smith (*Ali*) were also nominated as Best Actor; Halle Berry (*Monster's Ball*), Judi Dench (*Iris*), Nicole Kidman (*Moulin Rouge*) and Renee Zellweger (*Bridget Jones's Diary*) as Best Actress.

Numerous articles have appeared in the press, as they do each February and March, reporting the vast sums of cash the various studios have expended and the publicity campaigns they have mounted in an effort to gain Academy Award recognition. It is, as usual, rather distasteful. Nominations and awards generally translate into millions of dollars at the box office. One report notes that "This year's Oscar spending has been up by as much as 20 percent." What a waste of time and effort!

It is difficult to perceive any obvious trends in the eclectic group of nominees, except that the films are poor for the most part. It would be misleading to suggest that the nominations were poorly made, however, because the Academy voters did not have much to choose from. Probably the best US or English-language film to show in North America in 2001 was made more than 20 years ago and recently reedited, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now Redux*.

Contemporary films are largely conformist, lacking in texture and depth. Such elements appear in artistic work when they are present in one form or another in the larger culture, specifically in political and intellectual life. At the moment we largely confront, in Shakespeare's words, "art made tongue-tied by authority." The average graduate of an American film school today has grown up in a climate of reaction, social regression, chauvinism, greed, worship of the market. This climate has helped shape him or her. How many, as of yet, are prepared to wage a struggle against these intellectual and cultural circumstances? To search for

"unconsciously subversive elements," as numerous critics do, in contemporary work is largely a fruitless effort. There is little or no unconscious opposition without conscious opposition.

In my opinion, of the films nominated for Best Picture, *Gosford Park*, the only one that contains an element of conscious protest, is the superior work by far. Altman's film examines class relations in Britain in 1932. It is not flawless. Two-thirds of the way through an unnecessary and essentially irritating police investigation is added to the plot, as though the filmmakers developed a case of cold feet and were suddenly afraid that their social critique would not hold an audience's attention. Moreover, English class society of a bygone era seems a relatively easy target. By its very existence *Gosford Park* underscores the crying need for a critique of contemporary American social life. Nonetheless, Altman's film is an honest, often sharp-eyed and generally heartfelt endeavor. The director remains one of the few honorable figures in the American cinema. I don't expect that his film has even a remote chance of winning the award.

In the Bedroom, despite critical acclaim, is not a good film, in my view. The story of two parents' response to their son's murder and the possibility of his killer's escaping harsh punishment left me relatively cold. I found it abstract and rather unmoving, more of an idea for a drama than a compelling drama itself. However, the film is intelligently and sincerely done. It was not intended to titillate, horrify or impress. It was made with an eye to attempting to shed light on certain facets of life and that is worth something.

The other three films nominated are far weaker. Instead of exploring or probing, each seems primarily concerned with *simplifying*, and in that manner *concealing*, reality.

Moulin Rouge!, about an English writer in love with a courtesan/singer in a fantasized Paris of 1900, is a mess of a film, silly, shallow, essentially pointless. This pastiche of new and old songs, bits of borrowed story-lines (from *Camille* among others), visual gags and relentless mugging by the performers largely gets on one's nerves. If this is the manner in which the musical is to be reinvented, I would say, let the genre rest in peace. A few things might be said to somewhat offset these harsh words. One does sense that somewhere, deep inside this work, but, unhappily, not necessarily visible on the surface, there is talent lurking. And it must count for something that *Moulin Rouge!* is not mean-spirited. Moreover, Nicole Kidman, while not electrifying, is rather endearing.

The Fellowship of the Ring is a more problematic work, about which we will soon be writing at greater length on the WWS. Tolkien's book, which attained a kind of cult status within the "counter-culture" in the late 1960s (much to the dismay of the

author apparently, a quite conservative man), holds a legitimate and enduring place in children's or adolescent literature. Tolkien was a scholar of the English language, specializing in Old (Anglo-Saxon) and Middle English (as well as a devout Catholic). He brought a deep feeling and knowledge of myth, folklore and language to bear on his work, in such a manner that the reader feels something of the glory and tragedy of a past age or at least the manner in which that age impressed itself on the human imagination.

It is not immediately clear that *The Lord of the Rings* is translatable into dramatic and film terms. Not every work is. Nor is it clear that there was a pressing need for a cinematic version. In any event, the filmmakers have produced an all too literal rendition, which leaves very little to the imagination. They apparently felt the need to reproduce as many of the book's episodes as possible, resulting in a work that rushes from one near fatal encounter with evil to another without giving the spectator time to consider, much less savor, the goings-on. After all, Tolkien invented another world, a variety of creatures, languages, etc. The film treats Rivendell, the magical city of the elves, for example, as briskly and perfunctorily as one might have expected from an old short subject about San Antonio, Texas or the building of the Golden Gate Bridge.

The film does linger on certain details, however, but they almost all involve the depiction of evil, cruelty. The creation of a ghoulish army is lovingly and sensuously treated. The special effects in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, so much acclaimed, are largely devoted to this macabre end. This phenomenon is not unique to Jackson's film. Unable to delve very deeply into social or psychological processes, a number of contemporary filmmakers (including Ridley Scott in the truly repugnant *Hannibal*) manage to display considerable ingenuity when it comes to depicting torture, murder and death. There is something sinister and rather sick about this trend.

A Beautiful Mind purports to recount the life of mathematician and Nobel Memorial Prize winner John Nash. A.O. Scott, in a valuable review in the *New York Times*, has already pointed out that very little of the real complexity of Nash's life made it to the screen. The film, directed by the intensely mediocre Ron Howard, Hollywood's lowest common denominator *par excellence*, paints a desperately inspirational picture of rise, fall and ultimate redemption. Nash (Russell Crowe), a brilliant mathematician but an awkward human being, goes mad during the Cold War period, hallucinating about spies and counterspies. His wife Alicia (Jennifer Connelly) stands by him. Electric shock, pills and the love of a good woman restore Nash to semi-mental health. Our tears fall as he declares his belief in the power of love before a cheering audience in Stockholm.

None of the following facts made their way into the final script, Scott points out, having gleaned the material from the biography, *A Beautiful Mind*, by Sylvia Nasar: "Before he [Nash] married Alicia, with whom he had a son named John, he fathered another child, also named John, with a woman named Eleanor Stiers, and abandoned both mother and child to poverty. He formed a number of intense, apparently sexual bonds with other men, and he lost his security clearance and his position at the RAND Corporation after

he was arrested for soliciting sex in a men's room in Santa Monica, Calif. When his illness became intractable and his behavior intolerable, Alicia divorced him. (They remarried last June.)"

"Worse," notes Scott, "the intellectual and political context that would throw both Mr. Nash's genius and his madness into high relief has been obliterated [in Howard's film]." The story, he continues, "egregiously simplifies the tangled, suspicious world of cold war academia. More than a few mathematicians and scientists at the time, including many at M.I.T., where Nash went to teach after Princeton (not, as the film has it, to conduct top-secret defense-related research), were sympathetic to Communism, and many more (including Robert Oppenheimer, whose name is mentioned in passing) were suspected of such sympathies. ... Even at RAND, the Defense Department think tank, he [Nash] was more interested in pure research than in its application, and in 1960 he tried to renounce his United States citizenship to express his belief in the necessity of world government."

"All this, apparently, is too much for audiences to take in: anything that would dilute our sympathy by acquainting us with the vicissitudes of Mr. Nash's real life has been airbrushed away, leaving a portrait of a shy, lovable genius."

Little needs to be added to that comment.

One wire service reporter, the day following the announcement of the Academy Award nominations, headlined his article: "Fantasy Dominates Oscar Nominations."

The writer was referring to the fact that *The Fellowship of the Ring* is a "fantasy epic" and *Moulin Rouge* a "musical fantasy" and that *A Beautiful Mind* recounts the "delusional fantasy life" of John Nash. The headline was presumably a journalistic device for lumping a number of films together in a convenient and eye-catching manner, but there may be something more to the idea than the reporter supposed.

We noted in December: "By any serious standard, 2001 was a poor year in cinema, particularly for American filmmaking. In the past fourteen months the American population has experienced the hijacking of a national election, the takeover of the US government by the extreme right, a suicide bombing attack (whose circumstances have gone entirely uninvestigated) on the country's largest city and the launching of a brutal and open-ended colonial war. Only a handful of US-made films even hint at the intensity of the social and political contradictions that have erupted to the surface."

In the face of such tragic and complicated occurrences, the thirteen nominations for *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* in particular can be seen as a response by a section of the population largely overwhelmed and confused by events. It is not surprising to observe the appeal of fantasy, escape, a parallel universe, a simpler, mythologized time. Not surprising, but not especially admirable either.



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