The 74th Academy Awards: of race, war and a lack of backbone

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There are features common to each year's Academy Awards ceremony: garishness, tastelessness, self-aggrandizement and, of course, the rewarding of much mediocre or even worse filmmaking. This year's ceremony was not lacking in any of these qualities. The interminable and bloated broadcast, at more than four and a quarter hours, was for the most part forgettable.

The personalities that trooped across the stage at the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood, the highly talented, the semi-talented and the untalented alike, seemed largely consumed with themselves and their careers.

The awarding of two of the top awards to black performers—Halle Berry (Monster's Ball) and Denzel Washington (Training Day) for best leading actress and actor—was the occasion for the commercial film industry to pat itself on the back. Everyone concerned exuded self-satisfaction: how progressive we are!

Indeed, the fact that only one black performer had ever won a best actor award (Sidney Poitier, who was on hand to accept a lifetime achievement award, in 1964) is disgraceful, but the success of Berry and Washington bears no necessary relationship to an improvement in American studio filmmaking, which would involve, above all, a commitment to confronting the harsh reality of social life in the US. At most their success means that a few more minority performers will gain entry to the exclusive club of Hollywood superstars, an event whose impact on American cultural life will not even be measurable.

Berry's near breakdown upon winning the best actress award made an extremely unfavorable impression. This latest outburst is part of a recent trend at Academy Award ceremonies. More than anything else, frankly, it reflects the performers' general self-absorption. As studio films have had less and less to say about the world, as budgets have soared, as career pressures have mounted, winning an academy award—with all the associated financial rewards and prestige—has become the end-all and be-all of an actor's existence. Sobbing and unable to speak at first, Berry went on to say that "This moment is so much bigger than me," as though such a thing were barely conceivable.

A Beautiful Mind, based on the life of mathematician John Nash, won a number of top awards, including best supporting actress (Jennifer Connelly), best director (Ron Howard) and best picture. In the weeks prior to the award ceremony, controversy swirled around the film, indicative in its own way of the narrow and insular character of the contemporary film industry.

Executives at Universal Studio, which released *A Beautiful Mind*, charged that unknown individuals, presumably from a rival studio, were conducting a "smear campaign," planting unfavorable articles about Nash in the media to cast the film in a bad light and hurt its chances for an award. Stories had begun to appear reporting Nash's arrest for indecent exposure, his alleged bisexuality and adultery, as well as his anti-Semitic comments. Nash and Sylvia Nasar, his biographer, came forward to refute or blunt the claims, attributing the anti-Jewish outburst in 1967, for example, to his mentally unbalanced state at the time. None of this, of course, would necessarily reflect on the truthfulness of the film.

Officials at the other major studios assiduously denied spreading the unflattering stories, which were, in any case, for the most part to be found in Nasar's book from which the film's screenplay was adapted.

The details of Nash's personal life are of no interest to anyone, except insofar as they shed light on his psychological makeup. (The apparent attempt by screenwriter Akiva Goldsman and director Howard to conceal their protagonist's sexual "misconduct" is unseemly, although it hardly comes as a surprise.) If the mathematician were a "rabid anti-Semite," as the *New York Post* claimed, that would have some significance, but it appears that he was not.

The film's more important falsification, although *A Beautiful Mind* is hardly unique in this category, was carried out in regard to historical truth. As the *New York Times* review correctly noted, "the intellectual and political context that would throw both Mr. Nash's genius and his madness into high relief has been obliterated." The film "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." None of this interests either the film's detractors or defenders.

In any event, one would not have to be familiar with a single detail of Nash's life to recognize the film's fatal defects. Its sanitizing of external reality is merely a reflection of an internal intellectual falsity. In face of the complexities of science, politics and sexual relations, *A Beautiful Mind* offers a series of banal pragmatic formulae: one must love and trust unconditionally; perseverance pays off in the long run; one mustn't give up hope even under the most dire conditions, and so on. The filmmakers did not have the courage to pursue and work through the one theme that might have had value: that a mind can be "beautiful" even if the man or woman is not. In the end, they insisted on making Nash appealing, even lovable, undermining the ostensible purpose of their own work.

The film's reductionist treatment of mental illness would require an independent and critical analysis. Suffice it to say that the notion that mental difficulties are the result of *purely* biochemical processes, without reference whatsoever to the content and quality of an individual's life or his or her social or personal circumstances, is part of a retrograde trend that absolves society of responsibility for much human unhappiness. All in all, *A Beautiful Mind* is a miserable effort.

A striking feature of the Academy Awards ceremony was the relative absence of patriotic demagogy. The events of September 11 were referred to only a handful of times and there was barely a mention of the war in Afghanistan.

In an opening statement, made in front of the curtain, actor Tom Cruise commented: "Last September came an event that would change us. An actor friend said to me, 'What are we doing? Is it important what I do?'

And what of a night like tonight? Should we celebrate the joy and magic that movies bring? Well, dare I say it? More than ever." This is rather weak stuff, but hardly a call to arms.

Director Woody Allen later introduced a tribute to New York in the movies with a few general remarks about the tragedy, and Academy Award-winner Kevin Spacey subsequently asked for a moment of silence to honor the "heroes" of September 11, referring to those who died in the suicide bombing attack. If the reference is made to rescue workers who died in the line of duty, the term might have meaning. When applied to office and maintenance staff at work when the airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center, it is misleading and inappropriate. These people weren't heroes, they were innocent victims of a terrorist attack, whose political roots lie in US foreign policy and, specifically, its disastrous intervention in Afghanistan.

In any event, one would generally hold the self-involvement and short-sightedness of show business personalities accountable for the lack of discussion of political events, but other processes seem to be at work here as well. For one thing, the Academy Awards ceremony has a global audience and the US film industry dominates a global market. Studio executives have to be somewhat circumspect about chauvinist antics that will not play well overseas. And the Hollywood milieu, although its liberalism is thoroughly corrupt and worn-out, has not entirely cast off its reformist, pacifist pretensions, at least on such occasions.

A far more important factor, however, is the undeniable reality that the post-September 11 atmosphere, in which anger and confusion dominated rational thought within a considerable section of the population, has dissipated sharply. If it ever was, the US population is certainly not presently consumed with war fever and has grown increasingly suspicious of the motives of the Bush regime; appeals to nationalism are reaping diminishing returns. There may be a vague, but commercially acute awareness in Hollywood that the recent spate of war movies has not made a significant dent on the public's attention. If the film industry, which is sensitive to popular opinion, eschewed a patriotic spectacle, it was for one central reason: such an event would have caused substantial numbers of viewers to change channels.

Naturally, the general absence of pro-war propaganda is not the same thing as registering conscious opposition to the Bush administration's reckless and sinister foreign and domestic program. Of this there was hardly a hint.

In accepting honorary awards, both actors Sidney Poitier and Robert Redford made oblique and muted references to critical thought and political principle. Poitier noted that he might not have been there, as a black actor honored by the film industry, if not for "an untold number of courageous, unselfish choices made by a handful of visionary American filmmakers, directors, writers, and producers." They had been "unafraid to permit their art to reflect their views and values—ethical and moral—and moreover, acknowledge them as their own. They knew the odds that stood against them and their efforts were overwhelming and likely could have proven too high to overcome. Still those filmmakers persevered, speaking through their art to the best in all of us."

He paid particular tribute to directors Joseph Mankiewicz, Richard Brooks, Ralph Nelson, Stanley Kramer, Guy Green and Norman Jewison, as well as producers Darryl Zanuck and Walter Mirisch.

The implication of the remarks seemed to be that directors and producers in the contemporary film industry lacked a willingness to stick their necks out and take a stand. (An unpleasant, but again unsurprising, aspect of the tribute to Poitier was the fact that all those featured in a short film honoring him were black, as though no white performers or directors could draw inspiration from his example.)

Redford, who established the Sundance Institute in 1981 (and later its film festival) to encourage American independent filmmaking, was, if anything, more timid in his comments. After praising "a solid and healthy industry," he added, "I really believe it's going to be important in the years to come to make sure we embrace the risks as well as the sure things. To make sure the freedom of artistic expression is nurtured and kept alive. Because I believe that in keeping diversity alive, it will help keep our industry alive."

Host Whoopi Goldberg, the comic, made one joking reference to the Bush administration's outrages, at one point wrapping a swath of cloth around the middle of the life-size Oscar statue and explaining that "John Ashcroft made me do this." The right-wing US attorney general recently insisted that the naked female personification of Justice be covered up in the Justice Department.

By and large, the upper echelons of the film industry—executives, producers and highly-paid writers and actors—have been shaped by decades of political reaction and conformism and the perceived need to accommodate themselves to the most immediate requirements of the market. They are fearful of stepping out of line, indeed such a concept is deeply alien to them, because the consequences for their careers and status would be so dire.

Another incident at the award ceremony probably has to be seen in this regard. One of the films under consideration in a number of categories was Robert Altman's *Gosford Park*, the only nominated work that sheds any critical light on social questions. Altman has come under attack from the ultra-right in the US recently, particularly by former marine colonel Oliver North, for comments he made to the *Times* of London in January.

The veteran filmmaker told a reporter: "This present government in America I just find disgusting, the idea that George Bush could run a baseball team successfully—he can't even speak! I find him an embarrassment." He went on, "When I see an American flag, it's a joke." North subsequently urged moviegoers to boycott *Gosford Park* and said Altman should stay out of America.

As it turned out, *Gosford Park* won only one award, for best original screenplay. In accepting the award, screenwriter Julian Fellowes, who is British, called the US the "most generous nation on earth," and added, "God bless America." Whatever Fellowes's intent, one had to interpret his comment as an impermissible concession to the right-wing attack. Backbone appears to be in short supply in the film industry at this juncture.