

Iraq war dominates 75th Academy Awards

Filmmaker Michael Moore denounces Bush

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Despite the efforts of organizers, the specter of war and widespread antiwar sentiment hung over the 75th Academy Awards ceremony in Hollywood March 23. Representatives of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences had made clear beforehand that they would provide as little opportunity as possible for expressions of opposition to the war. In the end, objective reality impinged on the event.

Given the peculiar character of the film industry and its personnel protest against the Bush administration's assault on Iraq was generally of a muted quality, but the atmosphere at the event reflected powerful social and political tensions. Each time the issue of war arose there was a noticeable electricity in the air. In its own right the event gave the lie to the media assertion that there is a national consensus in favor of the conflict.

The film artists who spoke out against the war or indicated their opposition did so in the face of a number of difficulties: a mass media eager to pounce on anyone who criticizes the war, an industry obsessed by celebrity and wealth which, for all its well-publicized individualism, deeply prizes conformism and, in general, the artists' own lack of political understanding and perspective. Nonetheless, voices were raised in a significant manner.

The most outspoken critic of the war and the Bush administration was Michael Moore, director of *Bowling for Columbine*, who won an award for best documentary. On stage with all the nominees in his category, Moore quite courageously denounced "fictitious election results," a "fictitious president" and "fictitious reasons" for war. He was one of the few award winners to go beyond individual wishes for peace. We include his remarks below.

The initial reference to the current conflict was offered by the winner of the first major award—best supporting actor—Chris Cooper, for his role in *Adaptation*. After thanking his fellow nominees and paying tribute to actress Meryl Streep and his wife, Cooper continued, "In light of all the troubles in the world, I wish us all—peace," laying considerable stress on the final word. His comment was greeted with an ovation.

Meanwhile ABC News continued to cut into the show, providing news of heavy fighting in Iraq.

Oscar winner for best musical score, composer Elliot Goldenthal dedicated his award "to the bridges we tried to

build, to the people of Mexico, to personal and political art."

Presenters known for their antiwar views—Susan Sarandon, Dustin Hoffman, Streep and Salma Hayek—were apparently intimidated into remaining silent. They had been told to keep to their scripts or face the consequences, and they did. Sarandon flashed a peace sign as she came on stage.

Hayek presented the award for best foreign language film to *Nowhere in Africa* from Germany—about a family of German Jews who go into exile in Kenya—directed by Caroline Link. The filmmaker did not attend, due to her daughter's illness, but from Berlin told reporters later that she opposed the US war. "I don't really like America at the moment," Link commented. "Such a high percentage of the population stands squarely behind their president's politics. I find that a real turnoff."

One presenter who had the courage to throw out the lines he had been assigned was Gael García Bernal, the star of the Mexican film *Y Tu Mama También*. Bernal, who was on hand to introduce a musical number from the movie *Frida*, the biography of Mexican leftist painter Frida Kahlo, launched a thinly-veiled attack on the Bush administration. He quoted Kahlo, "The necessity for peace in the world is not a dream, it is a reality," and went on, "If Frida were alive, she would be on our side, against the war." He also received applause.

Accepting an award for sound-editing, for *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, sound designer Ethan Van der Ryn lamented that there was "so much insanity in the world."

Moore's comments, for which he has inevitably come under attack in the mass media (Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* called it "one of the worst Oscar speeches" ever), were the highlight of the evening.

After accepting on behalf of himself and his producers, the filmmaker explained: "I have invited my fellow documentary nominees on the stage with us ... They're here in solidarity with me because we like nonfiction. We like nonfiction and we live in fictitious times. We live in the time where we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons. Whether it's the fiction of duct tape or fiction of orange alerts, we are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush, shame on you. And any time you've got the Pope and the Dixie Chicks against you, your time is up.

Thank you very much.”

Moore’s last sentences were drowned out as the program’s producers cued the orchestra and he was essentially cut off. By this time there were a number of audience members loudly booing, as well as some cheering. Backstage after the event Moore was asked about the crowd’s response, including the jeers: “I was extremely grateful for the response. I mean, that’s not what I saw. I saw the entire place stand up and applaud. I mean, don’t report that. Don’t say there was a split decision in the hall because five loud people booed. Do your job and tell the truth. This is how this town feels, and the majority of Americans did not support getting into this war.”

Speaking to reporters, Moore rejected the claim that Iraqi president Saddam Hussein represented an imminent threat to the US. The reality, he said, “is that we’re over there because they have the second-largest supply of oil in the world. ... [Bush] almost said it the other night when he said, ‘Now don’t burn those oil fields.’”

Only a few minutes after Moore’s comments, on receiving his award for best actor (in *The Pianist*), Adrien Brody made a heartfelt if somewhat confused plea for peace. After expressing surprise and joy at the award, Brody would not let the producers shut him up before he commented on the present situation: “It fills me with great joy, but also great sadness, because I’m accepting this award at such a strange time.” Then as the orchestra began to play over his words: “One second, one second, one second. Cut it out. I’m sorry. But you know, making this film made me very aware of the sadness and dehumanization of people at times of war. And the repercussions of war. And whatever you believe in, if it’s God or Allah, may he watch over you, and let’s pray for a peaceful and swift resolution.”

Oblique comments and criticisms were offered by a number of presenters.

Singer Barbra Streisand, a staunch supporter of the Democratic Party establishment, presenting the award for best song (won by Eminem for *Lose Yourself*), made a vague reference presumably to the current wave of attacks on antiwar actors and performers in the right-wing media when she said, “I’m very proud to live in a country that guarantees every citizen, including artists, the right to sing and to say what we believe.”

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences president Frank Pierson rather piously commented, “I want to say Godspeed, let’s get our troops home soon, and to the Iraqi people, let’s have peace soon and let you live without war.” He neglected to mention that the chief obstacle to the Iraqis’ living in peace was the administration of his own country, which is waging a savage war against them.

One of the final award winners of the night, Spanish director Pedro Almodovar, spoke directly to the war, although his comments were not easily registered. Reading rapidly from a piece of paper, he dedicated his award for best original

screenplay (for *Talk to Her*) to “all the people who are raising their voice in favor of peace, human rights, democracy, and international law, things that have been violated recently,” obviously referring to the Bush administration’s policy. Spain has been the scene of huge protest demonstrations and popular opinion is hostile to the government of Jose Maria Aznar, which supports the Iraq war.

Nominees who did not win, but intended to deliver anti-war comments, included British director Stephen Daldry and screenwriter David Hare (both for *The Hours*). Daldry told the British press before the ceremony that he would have no hesitation about using the Academy Awards as a platform to express his opinion about the war. “I certainly will mention the war in my speech; I think it would be impossible not to and I suspect most people will. I do not think the case for war has been made and most of the people I know feel the same. It could be that they think differently in Cincinnati but it certainly seems to be that way in New York.”

In terms of the awards handed out, there were a number of surprises worth noting at the 75th Awards ceremony. *The Pianist*, a moving and humane account of the Holocaust based on the memoirs of Polish pianist Wladislaw Szpilman, took three major awards—Brody for best actor, Ronald Harwood for best adapted screenplay and Roman Polanski for best director. The award to Polanski was greeted with a standing ovation; the Polish-born director has been in exile since fleeing the US in 1977 over a statutory rape charge.

Despite an aggressive campaign waged by Miramax, Martin Scorsese’s dreadful *Gangs of New York*, nominated for 10 awards, failed to win a single one. Indeed the Academy issued a rare rebuke of the studio for its campaign. According to a Reuters report, “Miramax crossed an unwritten but apparently sacred prohibition against Academy members revealing how they were casting their Oscar ballots with its aggressive effort to honor Scorsese,” when it hired former Academy president Robert Wise to write a commentary endorsing Scorsese for the best director award. The piece ran in the *Los Angeles Daily Times*, and was subsequently reprinted in several newspapers.

“Academy president Frank Pierson told the *Los Angeles Times* that some of the 5,800 voting academy members were so miffed that they had wanted their completed ballots returned so that they could strike Scorsese’s name,” notes Reuters.



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