

# Academy Award nominations: the globalization of mediocrity

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The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced the 76th annual Oscar nominations January 27 in Beverly Hills, California. The awards ceremony will be held on Sunday, February 29.

The final part of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Return of the King*, collected the most nominations, 11, including best picture and best director (Peter Jackson). *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, the Napoleonic-era naval adventure, won 10 nominations, also including best picture and director (Peter Weir).

*Cold Mountain*, the Civil War saga, gained seven nominations, but failed to win any for a number of top awards, including best picture, best director (Anthony Minghella) and best actress (Nicole Kidman). *Seabiscuit*, about the 1930s' underdog racehorse, also won seven nominations, including best picture. The story of two lost souls in Tokyo, *Lost in Translation*, received four nominations, including best picture, best director (Sofia Coppola, daughter of Francis Ford Coppola) and best actor (Bill Murray). Coppola became only the third woman nominated in the best director category and the first American woman.

Also nominated for best picture was Clint Eastwood's crime drama, *Mystic River*, which collected a total of six nominations.

In the best actor category, in addition to Murray, Johnny Depp was nominated for *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Ben Kingsley for *House of Sand and Fog*, Jude Law for *Cold Mountain* and Sean Penn for *Mystic River*.

The best actress nominees are 13-year-old Keisha Castle-Hughes in *Whale Rider*, Diane Keaton—*Something's Gotta Give*, Samantha Morton—*In America*, Charlize Theron—*Monster* and Naomi Watts—*21 Grams*.

All in all, not a very inspiring list of films or performances, with a few exceptions (Depp, Law and perhaps Kingsley). *Capturing the Friedmans*, an insightful look at Reagan-era America through the medium of a sex abuse case, was nominated in the best documentary category, along with Errol Morris's *The Fog of War*, a portrait of Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

Whether or not the result of conscious planning, two actions taken by the Motion Picture Academy have apparently made it even more difficult for independent films to win awards. First, the Academy advanced the date of the awards ceremony by one month, giving the 5,800 voters less time to see the 254 eligible films. Second, the Academy announced, in the name of the struggle against piracy, that voters would not be permitted to watch films in their homes, on video or DVD, although they eventually permitted videos to be sent out.

MSNBC critic John Hartl notes: "Availability of the eligible films is essential to the voting process, and so is the time necessary to sort through and watch them. But significant cutbacks have now been made in both areas, and the consequences could be dire, especially for independent films. ... It's doubtful, under the present circumstances, that an independent film such as *Boys Don't Cry* or *Pollock* could win an Oscar."

Along the same lines Andy Seiler in *USA Today* writes, "And though the ban on 'screeners,' which are videos and DVDs sent to show business and media insiders to boost under-the-radar low-budget films, was imposed in the name of anti-piracy by the lobbying arm of the big studios, it had a muzzling effect on the little guys. Far fewer of those screeners are out this year, so a lot of little movies simply aren't going to be viewed."

The large studios will have less time to conduct their lavish multi-million-dollar campaigns in support of their films, but they have the budgets to carry out the concentrated effort.

It is difficult to determine any thematic or artistic trends from the group of nominations. While not strictly a business or marketing operation, the Academy Awards tend to emphasize the least attractive sides of Hollywood: the obsession with box-office success, above all.

We already know, because the information was immediately published in the media, that *The Return of the King* (New Line Cinema), favored to sweep the award ceremony, has grossed \$337.8 million; *Master and Commander* (20th Century Fox), \$85.3 million; *Seabiscuit* (Universal), \$120.1 million; *Mystic River* (Warner Bros.), \$58.8 million; and *Lost in Translation* (Focus Features), \$34.7 million. These numbers, and the financial boost that Academy Award nominations traditionally bring, are what count.

If one were to judge the films by the degree to which they reflect some truth about contemporary existence ... well, there would largely be no point. Aside from *Capturing the Friedmans*, *The Fog of War*, *House of Sand and Fog* (in part) and bits and pieces of a few of the others, the films nominated remain resolute in their commitment to uncovering nothing important about modern life—under conditions of unprecedented social crisis and global volatility. This comes as no great surprise, but it is still worth noting, if only to encourage the growth of criticism and opposition.

The films purporting to show the “gritty” or “dark side” of life—*Mystic River*, *In America*, *21 Grams*, for example—are either misanthropic or hysterical, or both. They conceal more than they reveal. Virtually none of the films in competition was capable of spelling out the most elementary facts of social life, in America or elsewhere.

The internationalization of the Academy Awards process is another phenomenon of some significance, even if the results are relatively meager at present. The “American” cinema has never been exclusively American, with a large influence from the European immigration between the wars (Germany, Austria and central Europe in particular) and a fairly constant British presence, but the current situation is certainly unique.

Films directed by Jackson from New Zealand, Weir from Australia and Minghella from Britain threaten to garner the lion’s share of the awards. The British-born Law and Kingsley are competing for the best actor awards, while Castle-Hughes of New Zealand, the British Morton, British-born and Australian-raised Watts and South African native Theron vie for the best actress award.

Djimon Hounsou (*In America*) from Benin in West Africa, Ken Watanabe (*The Last Samurai*) of Japan and Iranian actress Shohreh Aghdashloo (*House of Sand and Fog*), who appeared in Abbas Kiarostami’s 1977 film *The Report*, are up for best supporting performer awards.

Brazilian Fernando Meirelles’s *City of God*, about life in a slum on the outskirts of Brazil, gathered four nominations, including best director.

A vast global audience for filmmaking has been created. The technological capacity exists with which to astonish, delight and enlighten this audience. The only ingredient lacking is that innovative and brave group of film artists, writers, directors, producers and actors that has something to say.



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