

76th Academy Awards ceremony: for the most part, torpor and self-satisfaction

David Walsh
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The Academy Awards ceremony this year was a largely boring and torpid affair, dominated by the deeply misguided self-satisfaction of nearly all involved. The films and performances that won awards were not good, the speeches by the winners were hardly more than lists of those to be thanked, the “comic” bits performed by the presenters were largely unamusing. The entire affair was listless and conformist, although not without indications that those involved know full well that the world is an explosive and dangerous place.

For Hollywood liberals or erstwhile liberals a presidential election year also holds special significance. The general political subtext of the affair was: the Democrats have a chance against George W. Bush, so no one must do anything to make waves. And no one did, including the so-called Hollywood left.

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King, the third part of the film based on the J.R.R. Tolkien fantasy, won awards in all 11 categories in which it was nominated, including best picture and best director (Peter Jackson). Only *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *Titanic* (1997) had previously fared as well.

Sean Penn and Tim Robbins won the best actor and best supporting actor awards, respectively, for Clint Eastwood’s *Mystic River*, while Charlize Theron (in *Monster*) and Renee Zellweger (in *Cold Mountain*) received the best actress and best supporting actress awards.

Sofia Coppola took the best original screenplay award for *Lost in Translation*. Denys Arcand’s *The Barbarian Invasions* (Canada) won the best foreign film award. *The Fog of War*, Errol Morris’s film about former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, gained the award for best feature documentary. An Honorary Academy Award was handed out to veteran filmmaker Blake Edwards.

Numerous commentators pointed out that after two years in which Hollywood presented a more subdued self in the wake of the September 11 attacks and the launching of the Iraq war, the film industry once again rolled out the red carpet. “Hollywood on Sunday night,” according to the *Washington Post*, “turned on the glam-power again—necklines plunged all the way to Chile and there was a Fort Knox worth of diamonds and bling-bling on the red carpet. Out: angst, dread, protest. In: pink, orange, red.”

Noted the *New York Times*, “Jewelers hawk wildly expensive

pieces during the week leading up to the Oscar ceremony as aggressively as if they were fishmongers in an open-air market. ‘I focused on television commentators,’ said Joan Parker, head of global communications for De Beers, ‘then you get the stuff talked about all night.’ Ms. Parker successfully placed \$1 million worth of jewelry on Ms. [Scarlett] Johansson, who wore a 30-carat \$600,000 diamond necklace among other items.”

Crassness and philistinism remain staple ingredients of the studio film system. Much of the appeal of *Lord of the Rings* stems from its international box-office success. Financed by New Line Cinema, a relatively new studio, to the tune of \$350 million, the trilogy has now brought in nearly \$3 billion worldwide. Nothing succeeds in Hollywood like success ... except even greater success.

CNNMoney didn’t beat around the bush, with its headline, “Time Warner wins Oscar race,” pointing out that New Line, a Time Warner unit, had picked up 11 awards and Warner Bros, another unit, two more (the acting prizes for *Mystic River*). Miramax, run by Bob and Harvey Weinstein, fared poorly this year, winning only with Zellweger’s performance in *Cold Mountain*. Neither Disney nor Fox Entertainment Corp. enjoyed much success (for the animated feature *Finding Nemo* and *Master and Commander*, respectively), while DreamWorks and Lions Gate were shut out entirely.

For the winning films, the Academy Awards ceremony represents one moment in a thoroughly happy process. Initial financial success generally thrusts a film before the Academy voters’ consciousness and its further success in obtaining awards generally translates into tens of millions of dollars or more in ticket receipts.

Certainly the triumph of *The Return of the King* has little to do with its artistic or intellectual merit. It is a largely gruesome, bloody, macabre piece of work, dominated by special effects and the latter’s monstrous creations. The final torturous sequence, in which the two Hobbits make their way up Mount Doom to destroy the ring of rings, has something Calvary-like about it. The extreme violence and apocalyptic tone of the work speak to the peculiar and troubling mind-set of certain social layers. Hobbits, wizards, elves and others are merely the means through which the very current frustrations and bewilderment of these layers find expression.

Mystic River is a misanthropic and essentially falsified picture of a working class neighborhood in Boston. All the acting performances in the work are poor, because the characters are distortions, organized to fit the essentially reactionary conceptions of the film's makers.

Tim Robbins, known for his antiwar views, set the tone for the evening. Receiving the first major award of the evening, he made no reference to the ongoing war of plunder in Iraq, preferring instead to urge victims of abuse to seek counseling. "If you are out there and are a person who has had that tragedy befall you, there is no shame and no weakness in seeking help. It is sometimes the strongest thing you can do to stop the cycle of violence." As though child abuse were not already a subject that receives great coverage in the American media and has been, one must say, in more than one case, the pretext for witch-hunts and anti-democratic persecution.

In comments to the media after the ceremony, Robbins made clear his awe in the face of the media and the supposedly right-wing mood that dominates the country. He told journalists that he had not dreamed of winning an award "because of the negative things that were written about me and [partner Susan Sarandon] for opposing the war." Robbins expressed his admiration for the fact that Academy voters didn't bring that sentiment into the voting process. "I'm sure that many who voted didn't agree with my politics, [but] they didn't bring the divisive stuff into it. I'm humbled and moved by it," he said.

Inevitably Sean Penn won his first academy award for perhaps the weakest acting work of his career, as a small-time hood and psychopath made somehow quasi-heroic by his obsession to avenge the murder of his child.

Penn has remained aloof from the Hollywood star system and had not even attended the Academy Awards ceremony on the previous occasions he was nominated. Indeed the actor was criticized last month when he failed to appear at the Golden Globe awards, where he won the dramatic actor award. However, "Since then," reports MSNBC, "Penn has turned up at other film honors and a luncheon for Oscar nominees, a sign that he was willing to play the game."

In his acceptance speech, Penn quipped that "If there's one thing that actors know, other than there weren't any WMDs [weapons of mass destruction in Iraq], there's no such thing as best in acting." He proceeded to pay tribute to Clint Eastwood, one of Hollywood's renowned political conservatives, "professionally and humanly," and, in one of the more revealing comments of the night, thanked his wife for joining him "on this roller-coaster I'm learning to enjoy."

Charlize Theron and Renee Zellweger each performed what has now become the norm, the part of the overwhelmed, nearly speechless, often-sobbing actress. Who knows where the performance ends and reality begins? It is doubtful they know.

Theron earned an award for her leading role in *Monster*, the story of convicted murderer Aileen Wuornos, executed in Florida in 1992. The film's desire to be compassionate is

overwhelmed in the end by its shapelessness and confusion. Zellweger, like Penn, earned an award for one of the weakest roles of her career and the weakest characterization in *Cold Mountain*, as the pseudo-plebeian Ruby Thewes.

Sofia Coppola earned an award for the screenplay for her film *Lost in Translation*. Starring Bill Murray, not so much an actor as a comic persona, Coppola's work, about a pair of lost souls who are thrown together in a Tokyo hotel, has its minor charms. In the end, however, the work does nothing so much as establish that its two protagonists are terribly sensitive souls. *Lost in Translation* has been accused of anti-Japanese chauvinism, but that seems to miss the point somewhat. It turns out that nearly everyone, Japanese or otherwise, is a philistine in the condescending and rather snobbish world view of the film.

Errol Morris made one of the clearer statements of the night, in accepting his documentary feature award. "Forty years ago," he commented to considerable applause, "this country went down a rabbit hole, and millions died. And I fear we're going down a rabbit hole again." He continued to press the point in comments following the awards ceremony, telling reporters, "I find our foreign policy atrocious and appalling. If *The Fog of War* contributes to the debate of what's going on in the world today, I am immensely pleased. My belief is that we live in a very dangerous time, and it's important for people to be thinking about these issues—we need to be thinking about what we are doing."

Following Morris's acceptance speech, host Billy Crystal joked, "I can't wait for his tax audit," then added, "Scary times."

But where are the critical voices in these "scary times"? No one can claim that the anti-establishment figures in the film and entertainment industry have simply been excluded. In addition to Penn and Robbins, John Cusack, Francis Ford Coppola (responsible, after all, for *Apocalypse Now*), Sarandon and others, including musical performers such as Annie Lennox and Elvis Costello, made their way to the stage of the Academy Awards. And barely a critical ripple was felt.

To the extent that individuals from this relatively insulated milieu do not actually join the establishment, they are convinced of the impossibility of challenging the political and media status quo and, as Robbins indicates, the essentially reactionary mood of the country. This helps to prevent them from responding to the deeper political and social currents, including the growing discontent of wide layers of the population.



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