

78th Academy Award nominations: realities begin to sink in

David Walsh
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Following the announcement of this year's Academy Award nominations on January 31, one commentator noted, "Most of the films seeking the top prize come from outside the major studio system, and are heavy on social messages"; another observed that "low-budget alternative films dominated" the nominations. Taking into account that Hollywood's notion of "low-budget" and "alternative" may be somewhat skewed, that can't be all bad, can it?

Brokeback Mountain, *Capote*, *Crash*, *Good Night, and Good Luck* and *Munich* represent a more serious group of films, notwithstanding their limitations, than any collection of best picture nominees in recent years. Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* is made with a genuine sense of protest (at sexual and social repression), George Clooney's *Good Night, and Good Luck* with genuine anger (at the current state of the US media) and Steven Spielberg's *Munich* with genuine revulsion (at the brutal state of Israeli and American politics). *Capote* (directed by Bennett Miller) is well done, although it seemed to miss the most essential points bound up with Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, and *Crash* (directed by Paul Haggis) is a generally confused look at race and social relations in the US. The directors of the five films are all nominated in the best director category.

By contrast, in the years 2000-2004, out of a total of 25 best picture nominations, only *Gosford Park* (2001) and *The Pianist* (2002) seemed of much value.

For some perhaps arbitrary reason, the nominees for best actress this year (Judi Dench in *Mrs. Henderson Presents*, Felicity Huffman in *Transamerica*, Keira Knightley in *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlize Theron in *North Country*, and Reese Witherspoon in *Walk the Line*) gave weaker performances or appeared in weaker films than their male counterparts (Philip Seymour

Hoffman in *Capote*, Terrence Howard in *Hustle & Flow*, Heath Ledger in *Brokeback Mountain*, Joaquin Phoenix in *Walk the Line*, and David Strathairn in *Good Night, and Good Luck*).

In the best supporting actress category, Rachel Weisz (*The Constant Gardener*) and Michelle Williams (*Brokeback Mountain*) are worthy nominations; so too, George Clooney for *Syriana* and Jake Gyllenhaal for *Brokeback Mountain*.

Clooney's *Good Night, and Good Luck* attracted six nominations; Spielberg's *Munich* collected a total of five; *The Constant Gardener*, based on the John Le Carré novel about the machinations of pharmaceutical giants, won four; and *Syriana* (directed by Stephen Gaghan), a sharp critique of US foreign policy in the Middle East, picked up two (best supporting actor and original screenplay).

Joyeux Noel (Christian Carion) from France, a somewhat amateurish but nonetheless affecting film about the fraternization of enemy troops during World War I, was among the works nominated as best foreign film, along with Palestinian Hany Abu-Assad's portrait of two would-be suicide bombers in *Paradise Now*.

The process by which social reality makes its way into and through the American film studio system is extremely complex and convoluted, with many blockages along the way. Wealth, insularity, self-involvement all come into play. Nonetheless, certain realities are making their presence felt. Disgust at the crimes of the Bush administration and the cowardice and impotence of the Democratic Party is energizing and even radicalizing liberal-left layers in the film industry. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the opposition, even as one recognizes and criticizes its limitations.

Something of a polarization is taking place within the

American cinema: at one pole, there is a newfound social criticism. Kenneth Rogoff, former chief economist at the IMF and professor of economics at Harvard, found time recently to ruminate about the emergence of conglomerates as “Hollywood’s Favorite Villains.” Making reference to *The Constant Gardener* in particular, Rogoff commented, “Today, it is multinational corporations that are increasingly being cast as the über-villains of our globalized world. For all their subliminal paid promotions and subtle product placements, corporations are getting drubbed in the main story lines of our popular culture.” He worried out loud that “Hollywood’s cartoon-like caricatures of evil multinational corporations may some day seize mainstream consciousness, leading to political upheavals that shatter today’s social contract.” Well, one can only hope.

At the other pole, one encounters films that are noisier, emptier and blander than ever. Hollywood’s domestic revenues finished at \$8.945 billion in 2005, down 5.2 percent from 2004, the first time since 2001 that the total fell below \$9 billion. Taking rising ticket prices into account, the picture was even darker, with attendance down 7.1 percent from 2004. US cinemas sold 1.41 billion tickets in 2005, the smallest number since 1997.

George Lucas’s ludicrous *Star Wars: Episode III—Revenge of the Sith*, gathered only one academy award nomination, for best makeup, while the \$200 million *King Kong*, directed by Peter Jackson (*Lord of the Rings*), was named in a handful of technical categories. Paul Giamatti, a talented performer, was nominated as best supporting actor for the generally appalling *Cinderella Man* (Ron Howard), while Russell Crowe was passed over in the lead role, fortunately. *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan), a very poor film, was nominated for its cinematography.

Sales of DVDs are sometimes blamed in part for the current box office slump, but halfway through 2005, *Variety* reported that revenue from home video sales were up only 2.54 percent, compared to a 15 percent increase in 2004. The US film studios are entirely deserving of their difficulties. Rather than consider seriously how they might improve their films, studio executives are principally concerned with spreading their dismal products around the globe, in markets like Russia and China, and breaking down restrictions to

those products where they exist, as in South Korea (which recently agreed to cut in half the number of days cinemas must devote to domestic films).

This year’s awards ceremony will be held March 5 at the Kodak Theater in Hollywood, California.



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