

78th Academy Awards: Hollywood's new "seriousness" and its serious limitations

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The recent trend toward a greater seriousness in American studio productions, reflected in a number of the nominations for Academy Awards, should be welcomed, but there is no reason to go overboard. American cinema has a great distance to travel before it provides the type of insight into life that will contribute qualitatively to the social, cultural and moral well-being of wide layers of the population.

There is always the danger of being satisfied with small successes (and we are speaking, to be blunt, for the most part, of genuinely small successes). One has the impression that no matter which films carry away major prizes Sunday night at the Academy Awards ceremony—*Brokeback Mountain*, *Crash*, *Capote*, *Munich*, *Good Night, and Good Luck* or even *Walk the Line* or *Transamerica* (*Syriana*, the most left-wing of the films, is unlikely to gain significant support)—the event will generate a good deal of self-congratulation on the part of liberal Hollywood. The thought of rather well-heeled presenters, recipients and audience alike all exuding in unison "How broadminded we are, how forward-thinking!" is relatively distasteful.

Yes, there has been a development. None of the films nominated in the best picture category this year is rubbish, or simply time-filling entertainment "extravaganza." Even *Crash*, as wrongheaded and confused as it is, should not be mistaken for mere pap.

This happenstance alone has evoked a considerable degree of concern, if not anxiety, in some quarters, both on the extreme right and within the film industry itself (where politics too no doubt plays a role). Various commentators are grumbling about the "independent," "artistic," "serious" character of the nominated films. The industry would be "more in touch with the average moviegoer," according to this line of reasoning, if it had nominated *King Kong*, *Batman Begins* or *Cinderella Man*, all dreadful or empty films.

This argument is as cynical as it is mercenary. In the first place, the ostensible aim of the Academy Awards is to honor the greatest achievements in filmmaking, not to reward the biggest financial successes. Moreover, if anyone is "out of touch" with the average moviegoer, it would appear to be the Hollywood studios. US cinema revenues dropped 6 percent in 2005, the first time since 1991 that there was a year-to-year absolute decrease in dollars generated at the box office, amid growing dissatisfaction, even within industry circles, about the generally miserable level of American moviemaking's offerings.

If the "blockbuster" films continue to draw larger audiences, the population is not chiefly responsible. Expensive, bombastic films, from which the studios have to make their huge investments back or go under, are marketed *ad nauseam* and in many regions often the only ones widely available for viewing. *King Kong*, for example, opened in 3,500 cinemas, while *Brokeback Mountain* appeared initially in 680. Individual cinemas in at least two US states, Utah and Washington, refused to show the latter film. Many independent and foreign films open in only one or two US cities, if they ever emerge at all.

Again, the notion that the American film industry gives the public "what

it wants" (and, implicitly, "what it deserves") under conditions in which a handful of giant conglomerates essentially determines what audiences will see, is entirely self-serving. By staying away in increasing numbers from the movie theaters, the US public is registering, in nearly the only manner available to it at present, a distinct protest.

The extreme right, ignorant and thuggish, is simply hostile to any signs of intellectual and critical ferment. Bill O'Reilly of "Fox News" bemoaned the success of *Brokeback Mountain*: "In popular culture, things are getting worse.... This gay cowboy movie—and it's going to win, you know, a lot of awards all over, and they're—the media is pushing this like crazy." Even less coherently, neo-fascist commentator Ann Coulter rants against the gay and "left" films that will dominate the awards ceremony.

The official media, echoing the right-wing complaints, warns ominously, in the words of an "ABC News" report, for example, that the nomination of films like *Brokeback Mountain* opens a "cultural can of worms." After all, writes James P. Pinkerton in *Newsday*, Ang Lee's film has only "taken in about \$75 million. That means that perhaps 10 million Americans have seen it." Only 10 million! Roger Moore of *Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service* comments sourly, without providing a shred of proof, that "history has proven Americans don't want to think that much about their entertainment."

Often contained in such pieces is the veiled warning to Hollywood executives that their predilection for "daring" and "independent" works will hurt the television ratings of the Academy Awards ceremony and perhaps further damage box office revenues. Moore's philistine article is headlined "Who wants to watch awards being given to movies they didn't see?," and he comments toward the end: "If the movies are to remain a part of the national/international dialogue, then the Oscars are going to have to be more representative than this.... Urge the mainstream to get better, yes. But it's not chic when everybody nominated has 'indie' cachet and esoteric subject matter."

The notion that the nominations have gone to artistic, "low-budget" films is absurd on its face. While it's true that the films nominated for best picture have "only" earned \$229 million worth of US tickets (the lowest figure for a group of contenders since 1986), they are not the efforts of artists starving in their garrets. As Paul La Monica of *CNNMoney* notes, "*Crash* is getting a lot of attention because it was produced by a true independent, Lionsgate. But the other four nominees are hardly the products of small companies. Focus Features, the studio behind *Brokeback Mountain*, is owned by GE's Universal unit. *Capote* was released by Sony's Sony Classic Pictures unit. Universal Studios is behind *Munich*. And Time Warner's Warner Independent Pictures released *Good Night, and Good Luck*."

It is telling, in fact, that the mere appearance of films that reflect, albeit distantly or inadequately, something about the current state of the world should arouse consternation in Hollywood and the American media. A concerted effort is being made to beat back such attempts, and one would be foolhardy to be complacent about the immediate outcome of the

struggle. The most sinister such effort has been the concerted attempt by pro-Zionist groups to revoke the nomination of *Paradise Now*, by the Palestinian filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad, in the best foreign film category. The work dares to “humanize” a pair of West Bank Palestinian suicide bombers, while obviously rejecting their methods, and takes for granted Israeli brutality and oppression.

The ire of the philistines and extreme right wing notwithstanding, one would make a great mistake in idealizing or overestimating the present state of American filmmaking. After decades of a drought, during which time socially critical filmmaking has been essentially banned in Hollywood, a degree of relief, perhaps even the momentary lowering of artistic standards, is inevitable in the face of more intelligent films. However, one needs to proceed with a certain degree of caution, and not out of some misplaced purism. Wishful thinking will not do anyone any good, including the filmmakers themselves.

As a collective, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Munich*, *Good Night, and Good Luck* and *Capote* no doubt represent an advance over recent Hollywood efforts, but not one rises above the level of a type of neo-left liberalism or, at best, a superficial radicalism. And their artistic weaknesses are associated with this limited outlook on the world.

Ang Lee’s film, expected to win in a number of categories on Sunday, takes a humane approach to gay relationships, which is praiseworthy and a sharp, deserved slap in the face of the pious hypocrites of the Republican Party and Christian Right officialdom. Behind the legitimate popular response to the film lies untold and ongoing misery for large numbers of people, victims of backwardness and sexual repression, and not only in Wyoming and Texas.

Nonetheless, *Brokeback Mountain*’s numerous admirable qualities need not shut our eyes to the film’s weaknesses. The short story by E. Annie Proulx, frankly, is more tough-minded, more “objective.” The film version is overlong, more sentimental and more manipulative. Certain additions, like Ennis’s relationship with a waitress and with his grown-up daughter seem quite gratuitous and perhaps a sop to perceived public prejudices. Genuinely sappy or “uplifting” music and unnecessarily significant close-ups diminish the impact of the film. Certain sequences, like the final one with Jack Twist’s parents, are so poorly done that the psychological and social implications are largely lost. Poverty-stricken themselves, the parents are made to be the villains of the piece; something rather conventional emerges at such moments.

While *Brokeback Mountain* takes seriously the working class circumstances of the two protagonists, it never transcends an outsider’s view of such lives, essentially a middle class and trifle condescending standpoint. This problem is present in the short story, too. Proulx writes in rather lush and elaborate language about the landscape and natural conditions, but when it comes to her *human* characters, insists on the most elemental language and thoughts. Why shouldn’t their lives and opinions be complex too? Certainly more complicated and unexpected than presented here.

Steven Spielberg’s *Munich* is perhaps the most ambitious and courageous of the films nominated for best picture, and on that basis alone, perhaps the most deserving of the best picture award. Its consideration of the moral consequences of Israeli repression, for conscientious representatives of the Zionist state itself, is the most advanced point reached by this group of films. Those trend-conscious critics and others who dismiss the work out of hand because it is Spielberg’s, and “we all know what he does,” have painted themselves into a corner. The film is an honest attempt to come to terms with not only Israeli, but current American brutalities. The killings in the film are not in the least “exciting” or titillating—they are quite horrifying. Those unaffected have themselves been made callous by life and the debased state of the cinema.

Still, Spielberg cannot entirely jump out of his skin, politically or

artistically. His liberalism, pacifism and left Zionism, as well as his artistic flabbiness, place definite limits on the film’s achievement. *Munich* dares to ask a number of important questions (“Who exactly are we killing? Can it be justified? Will it stop the terror?”), but not others. Artistically conscientious but not profound, unwilling or unable to probe the history that has brought things to such a pass in the Middle East, Spielberg ends to a certain extent where he should begin. The great tragedy of the Jews and Palestinians, victims of the twentieth century and its thwarted hopes, remains to be dramatized in a fully realized form.

Capote, directed by Bennett Miller, is an articulate and thoughtfully performed work. In my view, however, it sidesteps the most vexing and difficult questions associated with the Clutter murders in 1959 and Truman Capote’s writing of *In Cold Blood*; specifically, what it was in American postwar society—supposedly a great success story!—that could produce (and still produces) such horrendous, anti-social violence.

In *Good Night, and Good Luck*, actor-director George Clooney has chosen to celebrate the efforts of Edward R. Murrow, American broadcaster, to resist Sen. Joseph McCarthy and his witch-hunting efforts in the 1950s. Against the current crop of toadies and ignoramuses, Murrow unquestionably stands out. Clooney’s film is meticulously done, intelligent, truly well-acted. However, it lacks almost entirely any historical context or broader scope. It is quite claustrophobic, and deliberately so, in its narrowness, its “just-the-facts” approach.

Murrow without doubt sincerely despised McCarthy, but it could be asked: to what extent did his opposition represent concern and resistance in the establishment itself to the Wisconsin senator’s reckless smear campaigns, which were having destabilizing and potentially harmful effects within the state apparatus and elsewhere? What does *Good Night, and Good Luck* perhaps envision? A revival of Murrowism, in other words, a renewed and reinvigorated Democratic Party, perhaps personified, at least within certain quarters, in the campaign of Hilary Clinton in 2008? No, no, something quite different than that is needed.

The danger exists that this neo-left liberalism, this somewhat superficial radicalism, can be incorporated with relative ease by the status quo, can, in fact, become a safety valve for the harmless release of popular anger.

The artistic problems are associated with the general intellectual limitations. The loss of depth, texture and intensity, the inability to find dramatic form for the most compelling human problems, the absence of genuine anti-establishment sentiment, the lack of social acuity and a sense for life “as it presents itself everywhere...with all its everyday triviality,...ugliness and vitality,” these problems are far from having been overcome even in the best of the new works. We learn something about our present world from these films, but not nearly enough. The writers and directors have barely begun to scratch the surface.

We still are entitled to ask about the filmmakers: What do they know of the world? Which critical, life-changing experiences have they passed through? What do they read? What do they think about? What do they consider to be “life-and-death” matters, for the artistic pursuit of which they would sacrifice career and status?

There are hopeful signs, but the biggest questions remain to be thought and fought through in the American cinema.



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