

78th Academy Awards: why such a poor showing?

David Walsh
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In its own peculiar fashion, the Academy Awards ceremony is a political event. It reveals as much, sometimes more, about the state of America than it does about the condition of the cinematic arts. The most recent edition, the 78th, on Sunday night, was largely a sad and painful affair.

Nearly everyone involved made a pretty poor showing. Hollywood's elite, by and large, revealed its most insular and self-involved features. The choice of *Crash*, by a healthy margin the weakest of the films nominated for best picture, provided an unfortunately appropriate climax to the evening. How is it possible that a gathering of quite talented people, many no doubt with firm opinions about the world and their art, could be so limp and lifeless?

Almost nothing of the current turbulence in the US or the rest of the world seemed present in the ceremony. Not one of the words "Bush," "war," or "Iraq" were uttered. But not only that, the drama of everyday life, which one would expect to make its presence felt in a ceremony honoring individuals engaged in one of the most social of arts, was largely absent as well. The event, like so many in the US these days, had an unreal air. The numerous presenters and recipients came and went from the stage, more or less interchangeably, and hardly an image sticks in the memory.

The program managed to be both lengthy, at more than three and a half hours, and yet brief and superficial at any given moment. The majority of award recipients had sixty seconds in which to speak, including the time it took them to mount the stage. More than one winner noted with alarm how little time remained to him or her before the music, which now continues annoyingly in the background during the recipients' remarks, was going to swell up and drown him or her out.

Why did so little of our complex reality, which film artists, in one manner or another, are charged with representing and interpreting, make its way into the Academy Awards ceremony?

Various factors no doubt come into play. In terms of overt political opposition, the Academy officialdom has taken every possible measure to prevent any from surfacing at the awards ceremony, particularly since documentary maker Michael Moore's appearance three years ago, during which he denounced Bush's 'fictitious' electoral victory in 2000. Everything and everyone is vetted. The Academy even recruited former award winner Tom Hanks to narrate an eight-minute instruction video—"An Insider's Guide: What Nominees Need to Know"—on "how to give the best [or most inoffensive] acceptance speech."

The organizers of this police-state atmosphere seem possessed by panic at the thought of anything critical being said at the ceremony. A remark about Bush or the occupation of Iraq or oil... they saw such a possibility as positively incendiary. It might set off protests, a new political crisis, counterattacks from the Republican right—who knows what? And the Academy officials' instincts were essentially correct; the political situation in the US *is* that brittle; it would not take much to ignite popular anger.

An Associated Press story on the eve of the Academy Awards carried

the headline "Oscar Honchos Promise Little Politics." It began: "In the last official briefing before the big show, Oscar producer Gil Cates, director Lou Horvitz and Academy president Sid Ganis promised no political uproar—and no rain—at the Academy Awards on Sunday. ... Though host Jon Stewart is known for his political comedy on 'The Daily Show' and many of the nominated films have political themes, the Academy Awards show isn't about politics, it's about 'rewarding excellence' and reflecting the times, Cates said."

In the first place, what business was it of these establishment types to guarantee that there would be no signs of political life at the awards ceremony? Why should it be up to them to decide what the Academy Awards show is and isn't "about"? So much for democracy and freedom of speech in the film world! Has the McCarthyite reaction ever truly ended in Hollywood? One might simply say that the threat of external coercion was replaced relatively seamlessly by a mechanism of internal repression and self-censorship. Genuinely anti-establishment, anti-capitalist views remain, for all intents and purposes, outlawed.

And no one in the entertainment press corps bothered to inquire of Cates, Horvitz and Ganis how it might be possible at a moment of extraordinary crisis to "reflect the times" without recourse to politics.

It has been widely noted, and we have remarked on it ourselves, that this year's collection of nominees included a number of US and English-language films that were more critical and thought-provoking than their counterparts in recent years. These include *Munich*, *Syriana*, *Good Night, and Good Luck*, *The Constant Gardener*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* and perhaps *Capote* as well.

None of these is a work of genius, or perhaps even of enduring significance, but as an ensemble they clearly reflect the pressure of events, and a certain change in mood in the US in particular. A hated war, a hated presidency, the arrogance and corruption of those in power, the vast chasm between the rich and everyone else—all this is having an impact, including on film artists.

The process by which this social reality finds expression in the commercial film world is immensely complicated and obstacle-laden. Leaving aside the problem of the studio hierarchy, which, after all, is one portion of the immensely wealthy ruling elite and has no interest in the exposure of the current situation, the nature of Hollywood liberalism or leftism itself is an issue. How reliably or firmly such elements grasp the world, even at the best of times, is open to question. Contemporary political and ideological circumstances exacerbate the difficulties.

The forces disposed to be socially critical in the film industry at the moment are a heterogeneous lot, extending from those who identify firmly with the Democratic Party to the radical and oppositional among the more youthful. When they look at American and global society at present, what do these various layers see?

Relatively affluent and isolated from ordinary people, rather susceptible to the claims of the media, including the right-wing media, about the supposed conservatism of the population, Hollywood's leftists see little

that gives them a great deal of hope. This is perhaps the significance of the remark by actor-director George Clooney (*Good Night, and Good Luck, Syriana*) early in the goings-on Sunday. Responding in part to a quip by host Jon Stewart (which began, “A lot of people say this town is too liberal, out of touch with mainstream America...”), Clooney replied that this was perhaps so and that once in a while it was “probably a good thing.”

He went on: “We’re the ones who talked about AIDS when it was just being whispered, and we talked about civil rights when it wasn’t really popular. And we, you know, we bring up subjects. This Academy, this group of people gave Hattie McDaniel an Oscar in 1939 when blacks were still sitting in the backs of theaters. I’m proud to be a part of this Academy. Proud to be part of this community, and proud to be out of touch.”

Clooney’s history of the film industry is somewhat potted, and leaves out a critical episode—the anti-communist blacklisting in the 1950s—which has had long-term consequences. Not unrelated to the purging of left-wing elements, Hollywood continued to accommodate itself to apartheid-like conditions in the most backward regions of the country until long after mass protests had erupted in the US.

The relationship between actors, writers and directors and social reality is complex. Intuition plays a large role in their efforts, particularly today when the level of conscious social understanding has fallen so sharply. Artists pick things up; they are often drawn, as one senses in the case of Clooney and *Syriana*, to material more left-wing than their own outlook. But they are not the characters they play, although sometimes one expects them to be. They suffer, they gain, something is lost in the process, and something is added.

Hollywood is both ahead of and behind the population. The film artists are receiving vibrations from some source, but vibrations alone are not enough. The dominant fact in the situation is that they see no alternative to the present political constellation in the US.

Genuine opposition to the status quo finds no expression whatsoever within this current set-up, monopolized by two parties representing the wealthy elite. However, every opinion poll, in addition to those episodes through which the population can make its feelings known (the mass antiwar protests of February 2003, the success of Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the protests organized by Cindy Sheehan, etc.), reveals seething discontent. The Bush administration, its colonial-style war in Iraq, and its attacks on democratic rights are widely and increasingly unpopular, and there is no great enthusiasm for the wretched Democrats. Large numbers of people hunger for slashing, unforgiving criticism of everything official in American life.

Hollywood’s liberals and leftists are inevitably distant from this popular sentiment. No doubt many sincerely believe that the US is the grip of a right-wing fever, that Christian fundamentalism holds sway over vast sections of the country, and perhaps even that racism and homophobia are the majority’s cup of tea.

Already and irrevocably in the neo-fascist religious forces’ bad books (mincing no words, the Traditional Values Coalition noted on its website that the “politically-correct Academy will likely shower homosexual-themed, anti-American and anti-Capitalist films with most of the awards”), the most timid elements on the film industry’s left want nothing so much as to avoid further provoking the right-wing media, whose vileness they mistake for “America’s.”

This was no doubt an element in the decision by many to avoid voting for *Brokeback Mountain* and to honor *Crash* instead.

Critic Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times*, writing about the significance of *Crash*’s victory, noted that “you could not take the pulse of the industry without realizing that this film [*Brokeback Mountain*] made a number of people distinctly uncomfortable.”

Turan asserts that *Brokeback Mountain* was a victim of the “unspoken

fears and unconscious prejudices” of the academy voters, that while “Hollywood ... is a liberal place, a place that prides itself on its progressive agenda,” many voters were all too happy to have a film like *Crash* to vote for, a work that made them think they were “seeing something groundbreaking and daring.” And the *LA Times* critic observes that *Brokeback Mountain* “was in some ways the tamest of the discomfiting films available to Oscar voters in various categories,” referring specifically to *Munich* and *Paradise Now*.

Unconscious prejudices against homosexuality may have been a factor, but the desire to sidestep a confrontation with the religious right and the Murdoch-type press probably played a greater role. *Crash* is a poor film, which takes an essentially dim and unrealistic view of Los Angeles and its residents. Paul Haggis’ work suggests that racism and tribalism are innate or deeply ingrained, that the essence of culture is to overlay these dubious instincts of ordinary people with a layer of ‘tolerance.’

As it turned out, *Crash* served two purposes this year. It allowed many nervous voters to avoid *Brokeback Mountain*, simply a Pandora’s box as far as a good number of them were clearly concerned, while allowing them to cast ballots, as Turan suggests, for “something groundbreaking and daring,” and it actually reflects how many of them see the world. In that sense, *Crash*’s victory is not simply a fraud or a mistake; the point of view of Haggis’ film is closer to their own sensibilities.

Along those lines, *Brokeback Mountain*, for all its limitations, possesses something honorable about it. Ang Lee’s work contains a number of memorable and moving moments. One thinks of Jack driving away from Ennis after their first summer together and watching his figure grow tiny in the rear-view mirror. There is something to this image—some content.

The film touched on a question of genuine democratic significance. And it treated most of its ordinary characters with respect. Moreover, and this is perhaps of paramount importance, *Brokeback Mountain* was obviously directed against the current administration and its reactionary allies among the Christian fundamentalist forces.

When considering the current difficulties, there is a limited value in blasting away at the liberal and left elements in the film industry for their evident inadequacies. These inadequacies are not the product of malice or even social indifference. They are bound up with our present situation, as well as a certain inheritance from the traumas of the twentieth century.

There is mass dissatisfaction in the US, but it has yet to find coherent political expression. On the surface, and this impression is bolstered by the mass media with all the power at its command, political life appears to be continuing in the same narrow channels of the two-party system as before. Signs of organized opposition and resistance are still relatively few and far between. A certain gloominess pervades sensitive and humane circles. Some will conclude that the population has accepted the administration, the war and all the rest, and throw up their hands. Other left elements may not go so far, but work in quiet desperation, not confident of encountering support.

And there is an entire layer in the film industry, which came to prominence during the last radical wave of the 1960s and 1970s, who no doubt feel that they have been abandoned and don’t quite know what to do, individuals with genuine talent, like Jack Nicholson, Dustin Hoffman, Lily Tomlin, Meryl Streep and director Robert Altman—all rather forlornly in attendance Sunday night at the awards ceremony, none of them with much to say at present.

The ignominious collapse of the labor movement and the apparent ability of the corporations to slash jobs and wages at will, without yet provoking resistance, are real factors in the confusion and skepticism in Hollywood. The social movement of masses of people against the foundations of the profit system is an indispensable precondition for a major shift in the mood in artistic and intellectual circles. There is no point in demanding of people more than they can provide. An eruption of struggles will shatter existing relationships and conceptions, and fling the

door wide open. New forces and new voices will emerge. The crisis of capitalism is too deep; the social ailments cannot be swept under the rug.

And a new mass audience will emerge. Genuine and deep popularity, along with controversy and a further polarization, will come with audacity, telling the truth, and indicting the powers that be.

Those elements in the film industry who see no alternative to the Democrats, and accept the same essential social and ideological framework as their right-wing critics, are always on the defensive, disarmed, and impotent. In fact, no film art in our time will flourish except as a conscious rejection of the profit system, its defenders in both major parties, and the values of its 'entertainment industry.' The emergence of a *serious* left-wing in American cinema, and a far higher aesthetic quality in filmmaking, depends a great deal on the growth in influence of socialism and Marxism among film artists.



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