

79th Academy Awards: very removed from life

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There is not much to be said about the 79th edition of the Academy Awards. No one said or did anything of particular interest during the more than three-and-a-half-hour ceremony Sunday evening. The film that received the highest honors (best picture, best direction, best adapted screenplay and film editing), Martin Scorsese's *The Departed*, is a miserable, misanthropic work, the worst by some distance of the five nominated for best film (along with *Babel*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Letters from Iwo Jima* and *The Queen*).

The overriding impression left by the evening at the Kodak Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard is of a group of people far removed from the realities of American or global life. Wealthy, insulated and self-involved to an unhealthy degree, the Hollywood elite is not in any position to make serious or profound judgments on much of anything. And their lack of perspective extends to themselves and the awards program. Anyone with a reasonable degree of objectivity would recognize the largely limp and pointless character of the annual ceremony.

The powers that be in the film industry, organized in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, have concentrated their efforts in recent years on making certain that no one gets out of line. No comment is permitted on anything outside the confines of the film industry, unless it is an officially approved subject. So presenters now confine themselves to the scripted patter, and award recipients have been reduced to the small change of personal life stories and thanking family members, agents and producers. It's extraordinarily boring, by and large.

Unsurprisingly, television viewership for the Oscar ceremony has been falling in recent years. Each January or February, the Academy hierarchy makes known its new strategy for offsetting the growing irrelevance of the program. This year, according to Reuters, the show's organizers, including producer Laura Ziskin, were banking on "short acceptance speeches, young stars, music, and comedy from show host Ellen DeGeneres to change the atmosphere."

In fact, the result was a further decline on every front. DeGeneres was facetious, unfunny and unserious. The closest she came to controversy was an early quip to the effect that while "America didn't vote for" best supporting actress nominee Jennifer Hudson (*DreamGirls*), a reference to Hudson's departure from the "American Idol" program, "Al Gore is here. America *did* vote for him. It's very complicated."

Former television star Jerry Seinfeld left a bad taste in the mouth, making a series of humorless and philistine comments, culminated by his introducing the nominees in the documentary category as "five incredibly depressing movies." In general, the American presenters were the worst. Catherine Deneuve, composer Ennio Morricone,

Helen Mirren, Kate Winslet and a number of other European, British and Latin American artists demonstrated some dignity.

The desperate youth orientation in Hollywood is almost entirely debilitating. Many people, especially in America, do not become worth watching or listening to until they reach a certain age; but by that time the film world has long since left them on the side of the road. In any event, from whom are the younger actors to learn?

Providing some insight into the social mentality of those who preside over the US movie industry and their political allies, Sunday night's program was dubbed "green." Actor Leonardo DiCaprio shared the stage with former Vice President Al Gore to announce that the Academy Awards ceremony had been organized along environmentally conscious lines.

Officials at the Academy proudly announced that for the first time the awards show was "carbon neutral," according to the *Environment News Service*. "Renewable energy credits were purchased from Bonneville Environmental Foundation to offset carbon emissions from the pre-show, the red-carpet event, the Oscar telecast, and the Governors' Ball."

An "energy audit" was carried out at the Kodak Theatre, which resulted in "an efficiency plan and recommendations for upgrades. Hybrid vehicle transportation was provided for presenters and staff. Ecologically superior paper was used for telecast and non-telecast event materials such as nomination ballots, envelopes, press materials, programs, invitations, and certificates."

One cannot make these things up. "The menu for the Governors' Ball featured organic and environmentally-friendly food, including seafood, dairy, produce, and even the large chocolate Oscar. Left-over food from the Ball was donated to Angel Harvest, a nonprofit which delivers good, un-served, perishable food to emergency feeding programs throughout Los Angeles." Where is Oscar Wilde?

Academy President Sid Ganis, who has supervised the clampdown on any show of political opposition or controversy, declared, "This effort embodies our industry's collective interest in taking responsibility for reducing our environmental footprint."

The destruction of the natural environment by the waste and anarchy of capitalist production, driven solely by profit, is an urgent issue, but the self-satisfied "green" measures taken by the well-heeled film industry insiders will not have the slightest impact. The unseemly coronation of Gore Sunday evening, a longtime leading representative of one of America's two big-business parties, gives some indication of how thoroughly the Hollywood crowd has thought this issue through.

The film on global warming with which Gore is associated, *An Inconvenient Truth*, directed by Davis Guggenheim, won in the best

documentary category. It was the weakest in the group (which included *Deliver Us From Evil*, *Iraq in Fragments*, *My Country, My Country* and *Jesus Camp*). Guggenheim and Gore (on stage for a second extended segment) were permitted to speak about the subject without being cut off. Gore declared that the climate crisis was not a “political issue, it’s a moral issue. We have everything we need to get started with the possible exception of the will to act. That’s a renewable resource. Let’s renew it.”

Guggenheim claimed that he had been inspired to make the film by Gore’s example, “all of us were inspired by his fight for 30 years to tell his truth to all of us.”

In fact, the truly “inconvenient truth” of the evening, so inconvenient that no one referred to it, is the ongoing murderous occupation of Iraq, as well as the plans for a massive American-led assault on Iran. None of the words “Iraq,” “Iran,” “Bush” or “Cheney” passed any lips once during the ceremony. The US is undergoing an unprecedented political crisis as a result of the disaster in Iraq, and that went entirely unmentioned. In general, one would have obtained almost no sense of contemporary American life, or its more complex and painful aspects, from the awards ceremony.

How is this possible? On the one hand, some in the film industry, the most jaded and world-weary, are simply not interested by such matters. They live in a comfortable enclosed universe of making films, parties, gossip and money. Others, “activists” of the tamest, most harmless variety, are convinced that the Democratic Party (around which they all circulate) has a good chance in the 2008 elections and nothing must be done to rock the boat. They are perhaps the most vigilant, insuring that *Fox News* has no morsels to lead with the next morning. All in all, a fairly cowardly and shameful spectacle.

It is worthy of note that some of the more controversial figures in Hollywood, Sean Penn, Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and others, were not present. Not that any of them have been outspoken at recent awards shows. Still, one can never be too careful.

The policy of eliminating any possibility of spontaneity, personal opinion or political conflict has the result of utterly squeezing the life out of the event. Predictable, empty of content, the Academy Awards ceremony has largely been turned into another of the rituals through which the official American calendar year dismally unfolds.

The Academy authorities were praised for their efforts on this score. The *Financial Times* commented, for example: “Astounding scenes were witnessed at the 79th annual Academy Awards ceremony. The Best Actress made a sensible speech. The best director won the Best Director prize. No one wore a weird dress. No white person commented that anyone was black (or vice versa). No one said they had been brought up in a trailer park. And Al Gore, winning the Best Documentary Oscar for *An Inconvenient Truth*, began to announce his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination, only for a twinkle to give him away as the music police, otherwise known as the Academy orchestra, took the liberty of drowning him out.”

It’s unfortunate. There is talent in Hollywood, even in these relatively bleak artistic times. There is even life and entertainment in some of its products. The Academy Awards at this point manages to bring out the very worst in the industry. It underscores the extraordinary wealth of this community and its distance from the problems of everyday life.

What is the American working population to the Hollywood elite? Largely an unknown. Insofar as the writers, directors and actors give much thought to the overwhelming majority, they draw misguided and

pessimistic conclusions. They tend to believe the image of the population—essentially patriotic, racist, homophobic, brutish—conjured up and encouraged by the right-wing tabloid media.

From that point of view, the selection of *The Departed* (along with Scorsese and scriptwriter William Monahan) by the majority of the Academy’s 6,500 voters was not accidental. The film incarnates this upper middle class view of a Boston working class neighborhood and its gangster milieu. Everyone in the film is foulmouthed, backward, violent and incapable of seeing beyond his nose.

This is what we wrote in a review:

“*The Departed* is poorly made, with its contrived and artificial dialogue, crude psychology, implausible events and ceaseless, gratuitous brutality. What does the succession of beatings, torture and killings, interspersed with snarling insults and obscenities, add up to? How is this productive or helpful to anyone? For some, this is still identified with ‘hard-hitting realism.’ When the shock effect of the killings and language wears off, and that occurs, it must be said, quite quickly, the incidents and four-letter words are merely tiresome. It’s possible to argue, in fact, that the noise and violence are organized in part to obscure the essential vacuousness of the goings-on. The events and locales and people are deeply unreal, constructs organized to confirm Scorsese’s superficial, disoriented view of things.

“In Scorsese’s early films (*Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*), confused as they may have been, the bloody denouements carried a certain weight, they were at least deeply felt and meant to be deeply felt. They emerged from and spoke to a sense that something was quite wrong with the world. Now the deaths are ritualistic and perfunctory. The director doesn’t seem to care very much for the characters he dispatches, so why should we? At one point, [Frank] Costello [played by Jack Nicholson] shoots a woman in the back of the head, and then mutters to himself: ‘She fell kinda funny.’ Is this ‘black humor’ à la Tarantino? It simply seems unhinged.

“Scorsese claims to be appalled by the violence in life and in his own films, yet he continues to glamorize sociopaths. It’s distasteful to have to say, but he seems to suffer from a disease that has afflicted more than one vicarious onlooker of what he or she takes to be the ‘heart of darkness’ at society’s core: a morbid fascination with the thug, under the mistaken assumption that the individual who is not afraid to use his fists or his firearms is somehow ‘freer’ than the timid petty bourgeois standing on the sidelines.”

The choice of the Academy Award voters was appalling.



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