

# 80th Academy Award nominations: a very poor showing

David Walsh  
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The Academy Award nominations, announced January 22, are more or less representative of contemporary filmmaking; the problem does not so much lie with the nominations or the nominators as with contemporary filmmaking.

Both *There Will Be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson) and *No Country For Old Men* (Ethan and Joel Coen), two brutal films that purport to make sense of American reality, earned eight nominations, including best picture and best director. The 'timeless' love affair, *Atonement* (Joe Wright), and the legal drama, *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy), each gained seven nominations, including best picture. *Juno* (Jason Reitman), about a pregnant teenage girl, was the fifth nominee in the best picture category.

Of the films garnering a large number of nominations, *Michael Clayton* is the most thoughtful, although one of those works that tends to fade somewhat from memory. It relies on a few too many formulas and hardly breaks new ground. In any event, its treatment of the cutthroat corporate-legal world rings true. George Clooney, Tom Wilkinson and Tilda Swinton, the film's three lead performers, all received nominations. They deserve them; however, the degree to which the film threatens to be honored sheds a light on the enormously weak competition.

Bloody-mindedness dominates the nominations, with *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country For Old Men* leading the way. For best supporting actor, Johnny Depp and Viggo Mortensen received nominations in two more exceptionally violent films, *Sweeney Todd* (Tim Burton) and *Eastern Promises* (David Cronenberg), respectively. One could add Casey Affleck, as best supporting actor, in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Andrew Dominik) and Amy Ryan for *Gone Baby Gone* (Ben Affleck).

Hollywood has chosen to sum itself up this way: a fascination with violence, on the one hand, or a belief that violence as a thing in itself rules the world, and, on the other, sentimentality, overt or disguised (*Atonement*, *Juno*, *Away From Her*). A few tame independent efforts, *I'm Not There* (Todd Haynes), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (Julian Schnabel), *Into the Wild* (Sean Penn) and a number of others, round out the selection.

*Sicko*, one of Michael Moore's weaker efforts, is a nominee in the best documentary category. James Longley's *Sari's*

*Mother*, about a woman seeking medical attention for her seriously ailing child in war-blasted Iraq, is a worthy choice for best documentary short subject.

The war in Iraq, now one of the longest and most disastrous conflicts in US history, received little attention from the academy voters, although their choices were limited. Tommy Lee Jones received a nod for Paul Haggis's murky *In the Valley of Elah* and *No End in Sight* was nominated as best documentary.

The latter was directed by Charles Ferguson, a former Brookings Institution fellow and co-founder of a software firm, who, as the WSWS noted in a review, "is a liberal establishment figure who believes that the war in Iraq has gone horribly wrong. He makes clear in interviews that his purpose in making the film, which he financed himself, is to point out the mistakes made by the Bush administration, so that future administrations can carry out interventions more effectively."

In addition, Philip Seymour Hoffman received a nomination for *Charlie Wilson's War*, Mike Nichols' defense of the 'good neo-colonial war' in Afghanistan.

Nominated in the best foreign language film category, Austria's *The Counterfeiters* (*Die Fälscher*), directed by Stefan Ruzowitzky, is an honest account of an episode during World War II. Jewish concentration camp prisoners are forced to create counterfeit bills as part of a Hitler regime strategy to destabilize the British economy by flooding the country with forged Bank of England notes. One Communist Party printer refuses to participate, precipitating a crisis.

The nominations, taken as a whole, however, are a pretty miserable showing.

Films are written, directed and performed by human beings who breathe the same air as everyone else. These individuals too live in a world dominated by increasing social inequality, war and the threat of more devastating wars, deep financial crisis, suffering on a massive scale—why are they so unlikely to reflect on these realities?

This year's award ceremony may take place under exceptional circumstances. If no settlement is reached in the film and television writers' strike, and actors respect the writers' picket lines, the ceremony itself February 24 at the Kodak Theatre will be a shadow of its usual self, for better or

worse. Social struggle is impinging directly on the academy's activities, but the films honored ...

The state of the world finds such a pale and inadequate reflection in American filmmaking in particular. This wasn't always the case. The Depression, war, fascism, the character of the ruling elite and problems of everyday life made their way into studio filmmaking of another day, albeit in a muted and sometimes misshapen fashion. What's the problem today?

Hollywood is a money-making operation, presided over by massive companies with a stake in existing social relations. The filmmakers themselves are often privileged and insulated from economic hardship. These facts explain some of the difficulties, but not all of them.

There is the matter of the social atmosphere and the three-decades' long period of political reaction. Social solidarity, compassion, a concern for the plight of the oppressed, a belief in the alterability of the world for the better—these ideas have been systematically attacked. The powers that be are enormously sensitive to any effort to pierce the veil with which the American media attempts to conceal harsh social realities.

Understanding the world is never easy. The artistic knowing of reality, which takes the form of thinking and feeling in images, is distinct from scientific cognition. "The nightingale of poetry, like the bird of wisdom, the owl, is heard only after the sun is set. The day is a time for action, but at twilight feeling and reason come to take account of what has been accomplished." (Trotsky)

However, some 'nightingales' are more prepared to sing than others. Even if we accept that art must 'limp' after reality, US filmmaking at present is hardly moving its limbs.

Certain very unpleasant characteristics predominate. The obsession with extreme violence, in mainstream, 'independent' or low-budget horror films, is clearly bound up with the brutality of American society and the bellicosity and aggression of the current administration, its reliance on force, its use of torture and abuse, its declaration of war on much of the world.

But the reaction of the filmmakers is terribly superficial and impressionistic. One would be led to believe, by the current crop of nominees, that the source of the problem lies in the 'American character,' indeed, one would draw the conclusion from many of these films that the ordinary American is a psychotic. The pretense is that in portraying the most savage behavior the filmmaker is somehow penetrating to the 'heart of darkness,' one is shedding illusions about humanity, that one is, in fact, being 'realistic.'

Can anything be explained in this manner? There is something self-serving, and lazy, in this cheap misanthropy and bleakness. It's also a libel against the population, who are the victims of exploitation and violence, not its initiators.

The source of the brutalities in American society, ultimately, is to be found in the violence of its class divisions.

The notion that any population is inherently cruel, that it might be almost eager to exhibit its indifference to suffering is

utterly wrongheaded; it is also belied by everyday experience. And the opposite of misanthropy and facile pessimism is not a resort to happy endings or prettification of the oppressed, or anyone else. It is a serious, painstaking engagement with the world and with humanity, with its capacity for nobility, treachery and everything else in between.

The filmmakers are responding uncritically to real historical and social problems. A vast political vacuum exists in the US. Where should the population turn for help? Where would it see examples of selflessness and self-sacrifice? What has become of the organizations and movements it believed represented its interests? If the filmmakers addressed themselves to these questions, they might get somewhere.

Contrary to current popular wisdom, inflicting pain on another human being is not something that comes 'naturally,' it is one of the hardest, most unnatural acts to perform. Being evil is difficult and exhausting. The German playwright Brecht wrote in the 1930s, when fascism was raining blows on various populations: "Is there no way of preventing man from turning his back on atrocities? Why does he turn away? He turns away because he sees no possibility of intervening. No man lingers in the presence of another man's pain if he is unable to help him." And further: "Brutality does not come from brutality, but from the business deals which can no longer be made without it."

This concrete social understanding is very far from the minds of most of our contemporary filmmakers. It is not encouraged by the media. Instead the most trivial nonsense is written about films. We will continue to hear mostly about which film will receive a "boost" from an academy award nomination. It is difficult to make films that reveal the truth, but it has to and will be done.



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