

Academy Award nominations: Hollywood plods on

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5 February 2010

The nominations for the 2010 Academy Awards were announced February 2. *Avatar* (directed by James Cameron) and *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow) each received nine nominations. Eight went to Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, and six to Lee Daniels's *Precious*. The 82nd awards ceremony, to be co-hosted by Alec Baldwin and Steve Martin, will be broadcast March 7.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences expanded the number of nominees in the Best Picture category this year to ten, for the first time since 1943. This apparently came in response to complaints from the industry that last year's nominees (*Slumdog Millionaire*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *Frost/Nixon*, *Milk*, and *The Reader*) did not include lavish studio efforts such as *The Dark Knight*.

The decision to widen the field is unfortunate in light of the generally poor quality of the movies released in 2009. It is difficult to think of five major studio releases deserving acclaim, let alone ten.

At any rate, the numbers that count for nearly everything in Hollywood relate to box office figures. From that point of view, if no other, 2009 was a very good year.

Domestic box office revenue rose last year by more than 8 percent, to \$10.61 billion, although some of the increase was attributable to more-expensive tickets (up by an estimated 4.5 percent). Actual ticket sales climbed in 2009 to 1.41 billion, from 1.36 billion in 2008, still short of the record set in 2002 of 1.6 billion.

Traditionally, depressed economic conditions send more people to the movies, considered a relatively cheap form of entertainment. Announcing positive box office figures last March, Motion Picture Association of America chairman and CEO Dan Glickman declared, "Movies have become an extraordinary escape valve. It's a communal experience."

A series of "blockbusters" prevailed in 2009: *Avatar* (\$352.1 million at the box office, and on track to set global records), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (\$402.1 million), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (\$302 million), and *Up* (\$293 million).

Whether moviegoers were genuinely entertained or satisfied by these films is not a question that Hollywood asks itself. As long as the receipts pour in, everything is rosy. One measure of the peculiar, unstable relationship between audiences and the film industry, however, is that while ticket sales have remained relatively stable or even risen, viewership of the Academy Awards program itself has continually declined.

While the percentage of American households estimated to have watched the Oscar ceremony rose last year to 21.7 percent (36.9 million viewers) from an all-time low of 18.7 percent in 2008 (31.7 million), this was still far below the 1998 total of 35.3 percent of US households and 57.3 million viewers. (This is very disturbing to ABC, the network that broadcasts the Academy Awards, because it has to cut the rates charged for advertising. The cost of a 30-second commercial will range from \$1.3 to \$1.5 million this year, the same as 2009, but down from a high of \$1.82 million in 2008.)

One could argue that people go to the movies, but relatively little of what or who they see excites them.

Warner Brothers' films took in \$2.13 billion in receipts in 2009, some 20 percent of the total. Paramount earned \$1.46 billion, Fox films brought in \$1.45 billion, Sony \$1.44 billion, and Disney \$1.21 billion. These same studios, which racked up \$7.7 billion at the domestic box office alone, led the campaign against the writers and actors in the most recent round of contract negotiations, complaining bitterly about the outlandish demands of their hired help.

As a commentator noted, "The 2009 solid results came about despite labor unrest within the film industry, turmoil at the executive level of many studios, wholesale firings at lower levels, depressed media stock prices, and cutbacks in overall production—not to mention the general effect of the worldwide economic downturn."

As for the artistic and social quality of most of the 2009 films nominated, the general level is weak. Superficiality, unseriousness and complacency largely prevail. In face of mass economic suffering and ever-expanding wars,

American film studios have had little to say so far.

The only film nominated that makes a reference to the current recession and widespread hardship, to its credit, is Jason Reitman's *Up in the Air*, although the reference is not directly tied to the film's central themes.

Avatar, James Cameron's expensive science fiction work, has been attacked by right-wing elements for its unflattering treatment of an invading, quasi-colonial military force. However, the film's formulaic and vacuous qualities are not likely to set anyone to thinking critically. Ultra-right commentators apparently are also unhappy with Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*, about a bomb disposal squad, although the film scandalously abstains from offering any commentary about the Iraq war, because it is not considered sufficiently gung-ho about the US armed forces.

The Messenger, which focuses on army personnel tasked with informing family members that their relatives have been killed in action, has come under fire too, for its "anti-military" proclivities. *District 9*, another science fiction film, from South Africa, about mistreated and quarantined aliens, has also been attacked. The various comments, however, tend to reveal more about the anxiety that prevails on the extreme right, which perceives anything that deviates from the official line as a potential threat and a provocation, than they do about the positive qualities of the works involved.

That Quentin Tarantino's dreadful *Inglourious Basterds*, about a World War II unit charged with hunting down Nazis, should receive nine nominations is a sign of disorientation in the film community itself. As the WSWS noted in a review, the movie is "a thoroughly repugnant work in which Tarantino once again inflicts a series of confused and sadistic images onto a mass audience.... The 'heroes' of *Inglourious Basterds* are sadistic killers who relish their mission of torturing, killing and even scalping their enemy. Fighting fascism with fascism."

Enormous events are pressing down on people, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the threat of wider wars. There is the official version, which promises decades of bloodshed in the name of the "war on terror"—in reality, US capitalism's pursuit of global domination. On the other hand, there is also deep popular mistrust and suspicion of the government and the military (including within sections of the film world) and their motives, which remains diffuse and politically unfocused. Tarantino is merely an exploiter of the present confusion. He adds nothing to the current situation but his particularly malicious brand of misanthropy and cynicism.

Overall, the facts of war, violence, and global chaos are identified in the films nominated, but poorly and impressionistically understood, misplaced, jumbled.... As the *Washington Post* noted, in its own relatively shallow

comment about this year's Oscars: "Then there's 'Avatar,' which is about racial tension and shock-and-awe tactics and anything else you'd like it to be. Group together the peace-loving Na'vi aliens, 'The Hurt Locker's' lethal Baghdad alleys, and the ferocious Nazis and Nazi-hunters in the final Best Picture nominee—Quentin Tarantino's Reichsploitation flick 'Inglourious Basterds'—and you've got a triptych of past, present and future warfare."

The best work named in any category may be *Ajami*—a portrait of Jaffa's largest Arab neighborhood and nominated for best foreign language film—the result of a lengthy artistic collaboration between Israeli Yaron Shani and Palestinian Scandar Copti. As a WSWS comment noted at the time of the film's screening at the 2009 Toronto film festival, "*Ajami* is a complex, deep-going work. The performers are all non-professionals, and, as the directors explain, come from tough backgrounds, 'where violence and crime are part of everyday life.' The notion that 'reality can be stronger and more interesting than imagination' animated the artistic exploration during 10 months of preparatory workshops with the actors."

A Serious Man, from the Coen brothers, is an intelligent and carefully wrought film.

Numerous talented performers are also up for awards. Jeff Bridges for *Crazy Heart*, George Clooney for *Up in the Air* and Woody Harrelson for *The Messenger* are certainly honorable nominations, as are Carey Mulligan for *An Education*, Maggie Gyllenhaal for *Crazy Heart* and, especially, Anna Kendrick for *Up in the Air*.

All in all, however, it is best not to expect much from the film industry in its current state.



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