83rd Academy Awards: Appealing personalities, but they still need something to say

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1 March 2011

The 83rd Academy Awards ceremony, held Sunday night in Los Angeles, yielded few surprises, in terms of either the various presentations and special appearances or the winners in the most-prized categories. Perhaps most disheartening is the thought that this result, *above all*, was what the organizers had in mind.

As predicted, *The King's Speech*, a slight (and Anglo-patriotic) account of the efforts of King George VI of England, with the aid of an unorthodox speech therapist, to overcome a severe stammer, carried off four major awards: best picture, best director (Tom Hooper), best actor (Colin Firth), and best original screenplay (David Seidler).

Christopher Nolan's murky *Inception*, about a corporate spy who steals information from dreams, also won four awards, although primarily related to its technical achievements. *The Social Network*, directed by David Fincher, a semi-biographical work about the Facebook social networking web site and its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, took three prizes, including best adapted screenplay (Aaron Sorkin) and original score. Natalie Portman won the best actress award for Darren Aronofsky's overwrought *Black Swan*. Tim Burton's very poor version of *Alice in Wonderland* won for art direction and costume design.

Melissa Leo and Christian Bale (best supporting actress and actor, respectively) were rewarded for their conscientious and sincere efforts in *The Fighter* (directed by David O. Russell), a film focused on the lives of a boxer and his older half-brother in the tough working class town of Lowell, Massachusetts.

Somewhat streamlined, the 2011 awards program, as has become the norm in recent times, was tightly scripted. The organizers' greatest fear seems to be anything not planned in advance. Drained of spontaneity and the possibility of the unexpected, this year's ceremony meandered rather tediously over the course of more than three hours.

Those behind the awards in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences strive as much as possible to detach the awards ceremony from the outside world. They encourage every ounce of self-celebration and self-congratulation, in a milieu that does not appear to need that much encouragement.

As part of the effort to exclude political and social life, the organizers have eliminated what until recently was the obligatory opening comic monologue. Granted, forays into that field over the past decade by Steve Martin, Whoopi Goldberg, Billy Crystal, Chris Rock, Jon Stewart and Ellen DeGeneres were neither especially amusing nor pointed, still they usually included some hints about contemporary life.

The co-hosts this year, actors James Franco and Anne Hathaway, both appealing and talented performers, were given the task of guiding a ceremony dedicated to the most socially connected and rooted of the arts without the ability to make virtually any reference to the universe outside the film industry.

It should be entirely possible, one must think, to entertain, celebrate film achievement and also shed light, in a comic manner or otherwise, on the great issues confronting masses of people. Why not? Of course, the problems of the film awards ceremony are not separate from the problems of filmmaking as a whole. Very few films both entertain and shed light on the human situation at present.

From a viewing of the Academy Awards one would not have gleaned, for example, that revolutionary upheavals had erupted in a part of the world with which America has had a great deal to do in recent decades. Or, for that matter, that mass protests had broken out in the midsection of the US itself. On the whole, one has to be struck by how isolated and insulated this world is.

To his credit, Charles Ferguson, the director of the award-winning documentary, *Inside Job*, about the financial crash of 2008, began his acceptance speech with this comment: "Forgive me, I must start by pointing out that three years after our horrific financial crisis caused by financial fraud, not a single financial executive has gone to jail, and that's wrong." Ferguson's remarks, which received loud applause, were sparingly covered in the mass media.

Events in Wisconsin found indirect reflection in the comments of two award recipients. Early on in the ceremony, Wally Pfister, recipient of the prize for best cinematography for *Inception*, made reference in his remarks to his "fantastic union crew." Later, Gary Rizzo, a co-winner of the award for sound mixing, also on *Inception*, thanked "all the hard working boom operators and utility sound people that worked on the production crew. Union, of course."

Backstage, Pfister explained his reference to reporters, "I think that

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what is going on in Wisconsin is kind of madness right now. I have been a union member for 30 years and what the union has given to me is security for my family. They have given me health care in a country that otherwise does not provide health care and I think the unions are a very important part of the middle class of America, so I stand strong behind any of the union members in this country and in any other country. All we are trying to do is get a decent wage and have medical care."

The dominant mood of the evening, however, was complacent and socially indifferent, perhaps summed up by billionaire television host Oprah Winfrey, who presented the best documentary award to Ferguson: "If we're feeling lousy, if the news is bad and people are hurting, what do we do? We go to the movies. And we escape."

The films being judged were, for the most part, rather bland—the more hard-edged *Winter's Bone* (nominated in five categories) failed to win an award—and justified that sentiment.

The producers of the broadcast took some pains this year to appeal to a "younger demographic," without apparently too much success. The initial figures on television viewership were disappointing. A great deal rides on the Academy Awards broadcast, perennially one of the most watched programs of the year, including the revenue accruing to ABC (owned by Disney) from the program itself. According to Kantar Media, "marketers have spent almost $720 million during the past ten years to advertise during the live network TV broadcast of the awards ceremony."

In 2010, the average price of a 30-second commercial in the awards ceremony was $1.4 million and the program earned $70 million in advertising revenue. ABC's initial asking price for 2011, reveals Kandar, was around $1.7 million for 30 seconds.

The US film industry faces a peculiar situation. With a quasi-monopoly of the world's cinema screens, Hollywood's studios continue to rake in significant earnings. Their gross revenue in 2010 amounted to nearly $30 billion, with Warner Bros. leading the way, claiming a record $4.81 billion in worldwide ticket sales.

US audiences are shrinking, however, whether because of economic circumstances (including rising ticket prices) or the generally unexciting quality of the films, or both. Last year ended poorly. December 2010 was the least-attended December in the US since 1993. "Not only did 2010 end with a whimper, estimated attendance was the lowest in 15 years," writes BoxOfficeMojo.com

The web site explains elsewhere that the January 2010 to January 2011 "drop [in box office revenue] was the steepest on the books at 29 percent, and the gross was the lowest since 2007. In terms of estimated attendance, January 2011 posted a 20-year low, and not by some slim margin. The month's ticket sales were optimistically estimated at 94 million, and one has to go back to 1995 to find another sub-100-million January."

A blockbuster or two may temporarily remedy the situation, but that will not resolve the crisis of American filmmaking.

The 2011 Academy Awards presented a highly contradictory picture of the entertainment world. A good number of appealing personalities made an appearance, including Franco and Hathaway, Leo, Firth, Portman, Bale, Randy Newman, Amy Adams, Gwyneth Paltrow (singing), Javier Bardem, Josh Brolin, Kevin Spacey, Jeff Bridges, Sandra Bullock and Cate Blanchett.

There is no reason to believe that, under changed conditions, these individuals, or others equally talented, could not do something more meaningful, more truthful, more in line with the way things are.

A handful of predatory giant conglomerates holds the film artists and technicians in its grip. Moreover, the consequences of the purge of left-wing elements in the late 1940s-early 1950s and prejudices against socialism have still to be overcome. The re-emergence of the US working class onto the scene of social and political struggle will shake a great many people out of their lethargy and cynicism.

Hollywood remains officially in the thrall of identity politics, with all the intellectually and artistically debilitating effects involved. Thus, we had the spectacle of Halle Berry paying tribute to the late Lena Horne as inevitably as though a performer of another skin color (or gender) were legally barred. Thus, the organizers felt the need to have presenter Hilary Swank inform everyone watching, more or less out of the blue, that in 2010 a woman (Kathryn Bigelow) won the best director award for the first time, so we would know—if only retroactively (there were no female nominees this year)—that the Academy was on the side of he angels. Absurd and demeaning.

Moreover, the cameo appearance by Barack Obama, unusual enough in itself, was a reminder of the degree to which the Democratic Party and the Hollywood elite are one. This is another stranglehold that has to be broken.

Corporate dominance is not the only problem in the film world. The limitations of contemporary American movies are bound up with the conceptions and social position of the film artists. It is not possible to do extraordinary film work in the absence of important ideas and purposes. To create imaginative and enlightening and *genuinely* entertaining works, one needs greater knowledge of and feeling for the real existing world and its people than are prevalent at present. Concretely, artistic purposiveness today would inevitably be bound up with fierce opposition to the present social order. Filmmaking will only make progress along that general line.

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