

The US media responds with hostility to this year's Academy Awards show

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A number of US media critics have attacked this year's Academy Awards ceremony, which took place February 26 in Los Angeles (see our comment), with such venom that it invites a second look. What is unsettling them? What would they rather see?

Leading the pack was *New York Times* television columnist Alessandra Stanley, who commented in "Even the Jokes Have Wrinkles": "Out with the new. Back with the old. ... The whole night looked like an AARP pep rally." She complained that the event was "familiar," "regressive," "tame." Stanley criticized a number of films (*The Help*, *Beginners*, *The Artist*) for their "oddly atavistic way of righting social wrongs," and added, "The industry congratulates itself on its big, progressive heart but it's the progressivism of a 62-year-old white man."

Along the same lines, in the *Los Angeles Times*, Patrick Goldstein wrote that "The 84th Academy Awards really looked their age Sunday night" and called the ceremony a "painfully cobwebby spectacle." On top of that, Goldstein adopted a right-wing populist stance, taking the Academy to task for honoring films that "didn't make much of an impression in Middle America."

Tim Goodman in the *Hollywood Reporter* labeled the event a "Badly Paced Bore-fest." He described host Billy Crystal's performance as a "safe, unfunny, retro-disaster" and called the overall event "as poorly paced as any in recent memory."

And so forth.

These critics, and others, found things they didn't like in the academy awards ceremony, and missed things they apparently did want to see. Their comments are murky and they may not be entirely aware themselves what disturbed them. When they demand the opposite of "safe" and "tame," what do they have in mind?

Each of the critics seemed troubled by the rather genial atmosphere of this year's show. These are individuals with a great deal invested in cynicism and superficiality. They react

with instinctive hostility to a relative lack of mean-spiritedness and backwardness. When Goldstein worried out loud that the event was not connecting itself sufficiently with "today's turbulent pop culture," unhappily, this is what he had in mind.

It is not the fault of the young, but there is a generational problem in the film industry and the culture as a whole. Max von Sydow and Christopher Plummer, both 82, do represent something substantial. Another nominee, Nick Nolte, 70, as well. All three bring a great deal of sincerity and a lifetime of understanding to their roles. These are people with a presence—with résumés, at least in the case of von Sydow and Plummer, including great roles in movies and on the stage.

The generations currently dominant in Hollywood have experienced decades saturated with anti-social and selfish conceptions. Nastiness, coldness, misanthropy, a lack of sympathy for people's difficulties ... these are looked on as virtues.

Variety's Brian Lowry referred positively to the appearance of black comic Chris Rock, who made various racially oriented jokes and then bragged about how much money he was paid for his services. Lowry added "there was a temptation to plead with him to stick around awhile, if only to infuse the joint with some energy." On the contrary, Rock's performance was far more tired and predictable than Crystal's routine.

As models, the critics might have in mind this year's appearances by Ricky Gervais at the 2012 Golden Globes and Seth Rogen at the Independent Spirit awards. Gervais delivered some clever lines, and Rogen felt free, in an event not broadcast on television, to pepper his monologue with obscenities, but both were thoroughly self-absorbed and generally unpleasant. Neither made a reference to a reality outside the entertainment industry. Appropriately, in the middle of his "naughty" presentation, Gervais made a most respectful reference to Kate Middleton, wife of Prince William. The problem is, with individuals like Gervais and others, they become institutionalized and tamed almost as soon as they enter the public eye.

Frankly, all that is left of the legacy of Lenny Bruce and

George Carlin in such cases are the four-letter words and a pretense of an “anti-establishment” stance, without any genuine oppositional content.

Far be it from us to come roaring to the defense of the organizers of the Academy Awards program. Hollywood is guilty of many, many sins, and the WSWS has been unwavering in its criticism of the industry’s products in recent years. However, there is a left-wing critique of the present film world, which presses for more seriousness, richness and artistry, for more of the reality of life in filmmaking, and *an essentially right-wing* critique, which demands more self-centeredness and worship of the famous and wealthy.

Alessandra Stanley of the *Times* is an unsavory figure from a number of points of view. Considering the reactionary views she espouses, one is not surprised to discover that her father was a major figure in the Pentagon, an authority on defense policy who served as assistant to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in the 1960s and later as a defense adviser in the US mission to NATO.

We have come across Stanley before: when she attacked the makers of “The Reagans” mini-series in 2003, a series cancelled by CBS after attacks from the Republican Party, for its “preachy, liberal agenda”; when she lambasted talk show host Jon Stewart in 2009, on one of his few good days, for taking on Wall Street’s mouthpiece Jim Cramer, accusing Stewart of treating his guest “like a CEO subpoenaed to testify before Congress”; and when, in a 2010 comment on the HBO series “The Pacific,” about the Second World War, she fantastically asserted that “American troops are once again fighting on two fronts against an implacable enemy that combats advanced weaponry with fanaticism and suicide bombers.”

(It should be noted, in passing, that Stanley, who served as co-chief of the *Times*’ Moscow bureau in the 1990s before graduating to her present position, is well known for the shoddiness and carelessness of her journalism. In 2005, a study of *Times* columnists revealed her to be the most error-prone.)

Stanley’s complaints about the age of the academy and the awards program organizers and their supposed insensitivity about issues of gender and race no doubt reflect her thinking. But one also suspects that the absence of patriotism, militarism and an “Obama moment” may have offended her even more. The ceremony was not particularly distinguished, but it was not actively offensive; the films were not especially bombastic or specimens of kitsch, à la *Titanic* or *Gladiator*. The award to the Iranian director, Asghar Farhadi, for *A Separation*, was especially welcome.

None of the critics of the program referred to Crystal’s comment early in the evening that the audience should enjoy itself, “because nothing can take the sting out of the world’s economic problems like watching millionaires present each other with golden statues,” but again one can only imagine that it did not make them happy.

Goodman of the *Hollywood Reporter* came closest to a response to that quip when he sniped that everything in Crystal’s monologue “was as obvious as a crying baby in church.” That vast wealth is flowing to the entertainment moguls in particular at a time of economic suffering for wide layers of the population is an “obviousness” that Goodman would prefer go unmentioned.

No one would claim that Crystal is a cutting edge figure, but the fact remains that with his “borscht belt” traditions and quick-wittedness, he remains a cut above many present-day comics. As a comic, an impersonator, with a considerable cultural sensitivity and a lengthy history behind him, Crystal represents something. A comment like the one about “economic problems” and “millionaires” comes out of a social experience. He is not someone whose every word has to be scripted.

One is not surprised to discover that his uncle was a left-wing figure of some cultural significance. Milt Gabler was the producer of “Strange Fruit,” the anti-lynching song written by a Communist Party member and recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939. Gabler, the owner of the first jazz record specialist store in New York City, brought out the moving song on his own Commodore Records after Columbia would not touch it. He also later recorded The Weavers (Pete Seeger and others) at Decca Records, along with a host of jazz and country artists. Gabler is also credited with producing Bill Haley’s “Rock Around the Clock” in 1954. He was inducted into the Rock and Hall of Fame in 1993 by his nephew.

The hostility of Stanley and company is directed here, toward the continued adherence of Crystal and others in portions of the Hollywood establishment to a certain cranky, old-fashioned liberalism. The vestiges of social consciousness and social conscience are what they dislike so intensely. Their goal is an industry of figures like themselves, who feel no responsibility to anyone or anything, except money and power.



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