

The 2013 Academy Awards: Mediocrities by and large, and at their worst

David Walsh
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The 2013 Academy Awards ceremony in Los Angeles Sunday night was painful to watch. It was one of those public events that diminishes virtually everyone involved, including the more or less “innocent bystanders.”

In the end, Academy voters chose one pro-CIA film, Ben Affleck’s empty, pointless *Argo*, as best picture and rebuffed another, Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty*. General enthusiasm prevailed for Quentin Tarantino’s violent racist fantasy, *Django Unchained*, and the writer-director was given the award for best original screenplay. The muddled, mystical *Life of Pi*, with multi-cultural overtones, won four awards, including best director for Ang Lee.

As expected, Daniel Day-Lewis won the best actor prize for *Lincoln*, and Jennifer Lawrence, a talented performer, was named best actress for David O. Russell’s weak, conventional *Silver Linings Playbook*.

All in all, with the exception of the almost unavoidable award handed to Day-Lewis, a pathetic and tawdry showing.

The icing on the cake was the appearance of Michelle Obama in the White House, before a line of decorated military personnel, to read out the title of the winner of the best picture award. The wife of the man who presides weekly over the preparation of illegal “kill lists,” those targeted for assassination by drone, explained that she was there to “celebrate the movies that lift our spirits, broaden our minds, and transport us to places we have never imagined.”

A day earlier, *Argo*, about the rescue of six diplomats from Tehran in January 1980, received the public endorsement of the new secretary of state, John Kerry.

Official Hollywood liberalism, to judge by Sunday’s ceremony and related events, is bombastic mediocrity in alliance with the military-intelligence apparatus.

These circles, engorged with wealth and self-satisfaction, can think of no higher achievement than recognition by the American state—especially with an African American president in the White House—as it goes about its business of attempting to subjugate the globe.

The Hollywood celebrants did not let their love affair with the CIA and the military be spoiled by the revelation Saturday that US Special Forces have been guilty of such widespread killing and torture in two Afghan provinces that the country’s puppet regime has been obliged to demand their removal.

An eerily colorless and suffocating atmosphere enveloped the proceedings, from the witless, tasteless performance by host Seth MacFarlane to the bland musical numbers and self-involved acceptance speeches.

One guiding principle prevailed Sunday evening: there could be no mention of a single problem of contemporary life. Indeed, one had the distinct sense that some powerful anti-reality filtration system was at work in the hall. Nothing about war, recession, poverty, nothing about *anything* outside the room and the film industry. These people for the most part have been disciplined and have disciplined themselves.

The media’s explanation for *Argo*’s victory over Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln*, a work of far greater artistic and historical weight, is revealing. Affleck’s film, noted the *Los Angeles Times*, is “a feel-good movie in which the American triumph over Iranian fanatics is all the more satisfying because it shows the U.S. actually pulled off a little victory at a time when the country seemed to be humiliatingly impotent.... Big issues were not on the minds of academy voters, it seems. More pivotal in their choice may have been the way the well-liked Affleck was denied a nomination in

the director's category.”

One media web site commented that although *Lincoln* “is certainly of Oscar-winning calibre it just wasn't quite a fun enough ride to take it to the top.” The *Guardian* asserted: “Towards the end of 2012 the suspicion remained that *Lincoln* was a movie people admired rather than loved, and this translated into immutable fact as the season wore on.”

Lincoln, in other words, was simply too intense and serious-minded for Academy voters. It raised, at least by implication, all sorts of complicated and difficult issues. It encouraged thinking, even the study of history. Spielberg represents, to a certain extent, an old-style liberalism. The filmmaker has attempted, in his own limited fashion, to deal with real historical questions.

On the other hand, *Argo*, which centers on a CIA plan to pass off the six hidden US diplomats in Tehran as members of a crew on a nonexistent film production to facilitate their escape, involves the cooperation of Hollywood and the state. In honoring *Argo*, the voters were also recognizing and rewarding themselves for their own allegiance to the military-intelligence community and its operative-in-chief. That such a film appears in the midst of—and contributes to—the unrelenting build-up for war against Iran is especially shameful.

Affleck affixes a prologue to his film, explaining something about US machinations in Iran in 1953 and Washington's responsibility for the Shah's regime. With that, he apparently believes he has acquitted himself of his responsibility to present a context for the drama, and the film can proceed as though that history had no further implications.

The American government and CIA helped turn Iran into a concentration camp of repression, torture and murder for 25 years. The crowds of Iranians seen in *Argo* have every reason to be outraged. As for the six diplomats themselves, the film assumes the audience's sympathy for them and feels no need to build up dramatically any such sentiment. In fact, one feels very little for them, much less Affleck's character, longtime CIA agent, Tony Mendez.

Not everyone present at the awards ceremony is a fool, not by a long shot—or has always been one, at any rate. In 2005, George Clooney appeared in *Syriana*, playing a CIA agent—not unlike Mendez—engaged in

conspiracies in the Middle East, including against Iran. As we noted on the WSWS, Stephen Gaghan's complicated film, which Clooney co-produced, was a “frightening portrait of the ongoing struggle of giant US corporations and their CIA sponsors to establish a stranglehold over the world's oil supply.”

Clooney was on stage Sunday night to help accept the best picture award for the miserable *Argo*, which he also co-produced, a whitewash of the same conspirators *Syriana* scathingly portrayed eight years ago.

This particular milieu, loaded with money and separated from the population by a chasm, is the sharpest expression of the corruption of what passes for the “left” in the US. Conformism is one element of their accommodation to the present state of things, but they have also stopped looking past the packaging of American imperialism, if they ever seriously did. Now that their cultural and lifestyle conflicts with the Bush administration have been settled, they are prepared to go along with even worse crimes. These people have surrendered themselves, made their peace in the age of Obama.

Change in the film world, and change there will be, will not come from within this social or cultural layer. Even in the hall Sunday night there were probably those who were disgusted, and there are a great many others who were not in attendance who feel far more strongly.



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