

2014 Academy Awards: Life versus the film industry

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The 2014 Academy Awards ceremony on Sunday was another terribly weak showing by the American film industry, largely bereft of excitement, urgency or insight. Self-absorption and self-congratulation, however, were much on display. Certain talented individuals made an appearance, but their efforts at present are mostly wasted on the trivial or misguided.

Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*, a science fiction film with quasi-religious overtones (which met with considerable box office success), took seven awards, including Best Director for Cuarón. Steve McQueen's relentlessly violent *12 Years a Slave*, based on the 1853 narrative of former slave Solomon Northup, won three prizes, among them Best Picture and Best Supporting Actress for Lupita Nyong'o.

Matthew McConaughey and Jared Leto won awards for Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor, respectively, for their roles in Jean-Marc Vallée's 1980s AIDS drama, *Dallas Buyers Club*, a well-meaning and moving film. Cate Blanchett won the Best Actress award for her role in Woody Allen's latest flat-as-a-pancake work, *Blue Jasmine*. Director Spike Jonze took home the prize for Best Original Screenplay for *Her*.

Neither David O. Russell's *American Hustle*, nominated in ten categories, Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* and Paul Greengrass' *Captain Phillips*, nominated in six, Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*, nominated in five, nor Stephen Frears' *Philomena*, nominated in four, won a single award.

In the "red carpet" prelude to the ceremony, one of the show's producers commented to ABC's Robin Roberts, "Anything can happen." Could there be less true words?

Aside from the actual distribution of the awards, the three-and-a-half-hour program was empty and predictable from beginning to end. Host Ellen

DeGeneres, making her second appearance at the Academy Awards, was, as one anticipated, bland, unfunny and self-satisfied. I am not the only one who felt this way. One online entertainment commentator noted the comic "had absolutely nothing biting or memorable to say." DeGeneres' most important comic bit, a running gag about having pizza delivered to the pampered audience members, was so sophomoric, it's not worth discussing.

The theme of the evening, although one might have been forgiven for not realizing it, was "Heroes in Hollywood," and that occasioned a few montages of disparate and even mutually antagonistic film clips.

There are no doubt many accidental and arbitrary factors in the awards voting process in Hollywood, where money, careerism and intense subjectivity create an unholy, unsavory mix. However, the final choices, when looked at with some perspective, make a certain amount of social and intellectual sense.

The upper-middle class layer of film industry liberals, like their counterparts throughout the country (and the world), are obsessed, above all, with race and gender. Such concerns go hand in hand with the belief on their part that they are the most high-minded and somehow "spiritually" oriented individuals, who really—given half a chance—could do without large incomes, large houses, swimming pools or cars altogether!

Thus, academy voters could honor *12 Years a Slave*, a "brutal" and "unflinching" film, which sheds little light on slavery as a social phenomenon, and *Dallas Buyers Club*, with its gay theme, a perfectly worthy film in and of itself, and entirely exclude *Nebraska*, which treats social life in contemporary America with a certain bluntness. Social misery and the conditions of the working class are of little interest in Hollywood, especially in so far as they might, at least by

implication, reflect unfavorably on the Obama administration.

And, to be perfectly honest, it is not that the subject of slavery was taken on with any great seriousness in *12 Years a Slave* (much less Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*). The three recipients of awards for *12 Years a Slave*, McQueen, Nyong'o and screenwriter John Ridley, in their acceptance speeches, hardly said a word about the historical issues involved.

Remarkably, McQueen first read the names of 16 individuals and five film companies off of a sheet of paper, then paid tribute to his family and, finally, almost as an afterthought, offhandedly dedicated the award "to all the people who have endured slavery." Nyong'o had the decency to point out that "so much joy in my life is thanks to so much pain in someone else's," before passing on to those in the industry she had to thank, along with "the Yale School of Drama." Ridley, who began with "I started writing in sitcoms a long time ago," restricted himself to mentioning Solomon Northup's name.

Making a film about slavery is largely an astute career move for such people, not an indication of any commitment to a fight against oppression, past or present.

The most important film nominated in any category, Hany Abu-Assad's *Omar* (for Best Foreign Language Film), which depicts Israeli oppression of the Palestinians in sharp and distinct colors, was passed over as well, probably to no one's surprise or shock.

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In the Best Feature Documentary category, *20 Feet from Stardom*, a decently done film about back-up singers, beat out three films which, all with limited degrees of success, pointed to aspects of critical social or historical reality: Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (about the 1965 massacre in Indonesia); Richard Rowley and Jeremy Scahill's *Dirty Wars* (about America's "global war on terror"); and Jehane Noujaim's *The Square* (about events in Egypt since 2011).

All in all, the film industry and its leading figures showed themselves March 2 at their worst, once again.

One observer wryly pointed out that perhaps the largest round of applause of the evening came for

Kevin Spacey and his brief impression of his Frank Underwood character in *House of Cards* ... a television series.

Watching the antics Sunday night, one had the sense of looking in on an exotic, enclosed little community whose inhabitants don't get out much. The acceptance speeches made almost no reference to the external world, except Leto's, which paid tribute "to all the dreamers out there around the world watching this tonight in places like the Ukraine and Venezuela." Everyone thanked his or her agent, publicist, innumerable studio executives, fellow performers and family members. Blanchett also thanked the "hair and makeup people." McConaughey, lamentably, thanked God.

The performers are something of an easy target, especially at this social moment. First of all, one still tends to commit the error sometimes of directly associating an actor with his or her role, and expecting him or her to speak as a private individual with the sort of depth often communicated on screen. The role and the performer are rarely identical; at times, they can be quite at odds. So, on Sunday, some very talented actors acted foolishly and said some unserious and empty-headed things.

It would take more social impetus than the present situation provides as of yet for the performers, along with the writers and directors, to withstand the pressures exerted by their publicists, agents, studio executives, hangers-on and the media and adopt a more critical or self-critical attitude.

Those who made a more favorable impression Sunday night included Spacey, Jim Carrey (looking and acting, to his credit, like an outsider and a malcontent) and the singer Darlene Love. An honorary award to 88-year-old Angela Lansbury was well-deserved. Blanchett showed some degree of gumption, one supposes, under the present conditions, for thanking Woody Allen, the target of an ongoing smear campaign, by name.

The rest, more or less, is silence (or worse).



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