

The upcoming Academy Awards: *Selma*, *American Sniper* and other issues

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The 87th Academy Awards ceremony will take place Sunday evening, hosted by actor Neil Patrick Harris, at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. If recent ceremonies are anything to go by, the event will be thoroughly scripted and lacking in spontaneity. Occurring at a time of unprecedented global tension and volatility, virtually no hint of the external world will be permitted entry into the self-absorbed proceedings.

As much as the Academy Awards broadcast becomes more embalmed with each passing year, it still passes for a major public occasion in the US. In fact, its generally stilted and meticulously stage-managed character places the awards show in the same category as every other event on the official calendar.

For good reason, the audience for the tedious three-hour plus broadcast has generally shrunk in recent years. The 2014 show attracted some 44 million viewers, one of the highest totals of the new century, but was still considerably down from the 57.25 million in 1998.

The awards show remains big business, both in terms of box office revenue eventually generated for the films that win major honors and advertising money for television network ABC, which broadcasts the ceremony. The price of a 30-second commercial this year is \$1.95 million, and the network anticipates netting some \$100 million.

The American film industry as a whole remains big business (\$31 billion in revenue in 2013), despite declining ticket sales. According to the tracking firm Rentrak, North American movie ticket revenue was down more than five percent in 2014, to an estimated \$10.35 billion (about 30 percent of the global total), the third such year-over-year decline in the past five years.

The declines in frequent film attendance among 18-to-24-year-olds (17 percent) and 25- to 39-year-olds (also 17 percent) were especially marked. According to one industry analyst, the film industry is “losing that younger audience because they’re agnostic about how they get their content.” The generally poor quality of the films coming out is also no doubt a factor at a time of widespread economic hardship.

The entertainment and media market in the US is estimated to be worth between \$550 and \$600 billion, the largest in the world and a third of the global total. The export of US entertainment services, including film, television, music, sports, gaming, Internet, etc., is calculated to be worth half a trillion dollars worldwide.

Too much is at stake on Sunday evening, in other words, to let genuine considerations of artistic excellence ultimately hold sway.

As for the nominations themselves, a host of arbitrary, subjective and “political” factors no doubt plays a role. This is Hollywood, after all.

The eight nominees for best picture, for example, vary widely in quality. The crassest elements in the film industry and media are protesting, as they have done in response to the Academy Award nominations a number of times in the past several years, that the highest-costing and largest-grossing films are “underrepresented” in this category. In fact, none of the seven top-grossing films received a best picture nomination. The budgets of the highest-grossing films averaged \$151 million, while the budgets of the nominated films averaged \$21 million (low by contemporary Hollywood standards).

Boyhood, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and *Selma*, despite their limitations, are worthwhile nominations. *Whiplash*, *Birdman*, *The Imitation Game* and *The Theory of Everything* contain intriguing moments and performances. Clint Eastwood’s *American Sniper* is a terrible film, which mythologizes the Iraq war and one “American hero,” sniper Chris Kyle. *Mr. Turner*, which did receive three other nominations, and *Foxcatcher*, with five, certainly deserved to be nominated for best film.

Complaints have been raised about the failure of Ava DuVernay and David Oyelowo to receive nominations for best director and best actor, respectively, for their contributions to *Selma*, the film about the 1965 voting rights march. Certainly, the inclusion of Bradley Cooper, who does little more than drawl and draw a bead on outgunned Iraqis in Eastwood’s film, at the expense of Oyelowo, is a travesty.

The failure of any black performers or directors to gain nominations this year has stirred the charlatan Al Sharpton and his National Action Network into action. In a statement, the group, which plans a protest outside the award ceremony Sunday, called on the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences “to accelerate [its] push to be more inclusive. With all of this year’s acting contenders being white and no women in the directing or writing categories. It’s obvious that the Academy has a diversity problem they are going to have to fix.” Sharpton’s outfit exists to pressure large corporate entities to employ a greater share of the African American upper middle class that it speaks for.

The question of *American Sniper* is a more vexing one. Why has the film found a popular response?

There are no doubt numerous factors. For one thing, Eastwood’s film had the good fortune to appear in movie theaters when there was virtually no competition. A number of the big-budget films that came out simultaneously were ignominious flops. Moreover, in its action sequences, *American Sniper* contains a certain tension and drama, and the film claims to depict a war the concrete facts and details of which few Americans know much—and are no doubt curious—about.

Eastwood’s own personality and career are somewhat complex issues. The actor-director, deservedly or not, has the reputation of being vaguely “antiestablishment.” His body of work as a director is generally poor, often abysmally poor, but it does contain a few genuine and humane bright spots, including *True Crime* (1999) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). His love of jazz and jazz musicians is also well known, reflected in his directing *Bird* (1988), a fictional tribute to legendary saxophonist Charlie Parker, and producing the documentary *Thelonious Monk: Straight, No Chaser* (1989).

As we have noted, *American Sniper*’s script downplays the filthy right-wing and anti-Muslim bigotry to be found in Kyle’s autobiography. Unlike the actual sniper, who apparently reveled in the killing of Iraqis, Cooper’s character looks sorrowful after each murderous episode and even tells a fellow soldier on one occasion to shut his mouth when he begins to celebrate.

Nonetheless, the claim that *American Sniper* is any sense “antiwar” or has merit because, in the words of producer Harvey Weinstein, “it introduces America to PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder],” is preposterous.

As we noted in a comment January 31 on the WSWWS: “The sequences set in Iraq present the American forces as engaged in a righteous campaign against an almost inconceivably savage and evil foe. *American Sniper*’s attitude toward Iraqis, and Arabs generally, is hostile and contemptuous. The US forces represent order, modernity,

civilization and sanity; the Iraqis—superstition, backwardness, treachery and violence. The American soldiers are obliged, according to the logic of the film, to exterminate great numbers of Iraqis both in self-defense and as some sort of act of public hygiene.”

The success of *American Sniper* is nonetheless troubling, and indicates some of the cultural and political problems in America, where the population has been bombarded with foul notions on a daily basis for the past several decades. The promotion of militarism has been especially poisonous. The American people are led to believe at every opportunity that the professionalized armed forces, with whom they have little to do on a daily basis, are made up of “heroes” protecting them from unspeakable evil. Skepticism and mistrust no doubt abound, but the relentless propaganda has its impact, including in weakening the instinctive empathy for the suffering of others.

The population is unaware to a large extent, thanks to the campaign of lies of the government and the media, of the atrocities being committed by the American military on a daily basis, and it is largely unprepared for the sinister role this mercenary force is readying to play in every part of the globe and in the US itself.

What’s being celebrated in *American Sniper*, after all, is especially despicable. Snipers have more often than not been portrayed in American films as cowards or worse. In films like *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *The Day of the Jackal* (1973), *Two-Minute Warning* (1976) and numerous others, the killer-sniper is presented as the lowest form of human life. And America has had its experience with real-life snipers, from the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, the University of Texas tower shootings in 1966 and beyond.

Whether *American Sniper* wins the best picture award or not depends to a large extent on how intimidated and cowed Hollywood liberalism is by the ultra-right and its spurious claim that wide layers of the population are enamored of the American military and the semi-fascist Kyle. By any logical artistic or intellectual standard, Eastwood’s film should not have a chance, but one shouldn’t hold one’s breath.



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