

87th Academy Awards: A more intriguing event than in recent years

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The Academy Awards ceremony Sunday night turned out to be one of the more intriguing ones in recent years. In a comment posted February 21, I observed that “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.” This turned out to be an overly pessimistic prediction, although social realities inevitably found expression on Sunday in a manner that accords with the film world’s peculiarities and contradictions.

Mexican director Alejandro Iñárritu’s darkly comic *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, about a once prominent actor attempting to get his life, family relations and career together, won the best picture, director, original screenplay and cinematography awards. *Birdman* has its moments (and Michael Keaton is a thoroughly engaging actor), but either *Boyhood*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* or *Selma* would have been a worthier choice.

Eddie Redmayne took the best actor award for *The Theory of Everything*, the dramatization of cosmologist Stephen Hawking’s life, while Julianne Moore, as expected, won best actress for her role in *Still Alice*, about an Alzheimer’s victim. Veteran J.K. Simmons and Patricia Arquette received the supporting performer awards, for *Whiplash* and *Boyhood*, respectively.

Wes Anderson’s imaginative *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, which treats events in the fictional Central European Republic of Zubrowka between the world wars, also gained four awards, although in relatively minor categories. *Whiplash*, about the relationship between a fierce music instructor-conductor and his jazz drummer student, took three awards, including Simmons’.

Academy voters selected *Ida*, by Pawel Pawlikowski, an intense film about the fate of the Polish Jews under Nazi occupation, as the best foreign language film. (Pawlikowski is developing an interesting body of work, which also includes *Last Resort*, *My Summer of Love* and *The Woman in the Fifth*). Graham Moore received the best adapted screenplay award for *The Imitation Game*, loosely based on the life and career of mathematician Alan Turing.

There was some significance as well in the fact that Marion Cotillard was nominated for her role in Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne’s *Two Days, One Night*, about a factory worker determined to save her job. Abderrahmane Sissoko’s *Timbuktu* and Wim Wenders’ *Salt of the Earth* also received nominations. Shamefully, Mike Leigh’s *Mr. Turner*, the best film of the year, failed to win any of the three awards for which it was nominated.

The victory of *Citizenfour*, Laura Poitras’ chilling documentary about NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, in the best documentary category, was certainly a high point of the awards program and a slap in the face for the Obama administration and the American

establishment. Poitras, who has not traveled to the US in recent years for fear of prosecution, accepted the award alongside journalist Glenn Greenwald and Snowden’s girlfriend Lindsay Mills, as well as editor Mathilde Bonnefoy and producer Dirk Wilutzky.

In her acceptance speech, Poitras said: “The disclosures that Edward Snowden reveals don’t only expose a threat to our privacy but to our democracy itself. When the most important decisions being made affecting all of us are made in secret, we lose our ability to check the powers that control. Thank you to Edward Snowden for his courage and for the many other whistleblowers. And I share this with Glenn Greenwald and other journalists who are exposing truth.”

In response to the award, Snowden released a statement through the American Civil Liberties Union: “When Laura Poitras asked me if she could film our encounters, I was extremely reluctant. I’m grateful that I allowed her to persuade me. The result is a brave and brilliant film that deserves the honor and recognition it has received. My hope is that this award will encourage more people to see the film and be inspired by its message that ordinary citizens, working together, can change the world.”

The award and Poitras’ comments were very warmly received by the audience at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood. Following the award, host Neil Patrick Harris attempted to undermine that mood of support by quipping that Snowden “couldn’t be here for some *treason* .” Greenwald later told BuzzFeed News he thought Harris’ joke was “pretty pitiful ... to just casually spew that sort of accusation against someone who’s not even charged with it, let alone convicted of it, I think is, you know, stupid and irresponsible.”

On the whole, Harris, a talented comic actor, was not especially impressive. The opening monologue, which was once the occasion for the host to offer *some commentary* on current events (as recently as the 2012 ceremony hosted by Billy Crystal), was dropped this year in favor of a bland tribute to motion pictures.

Indicating the organizers are themselves at least partially aware of the gap between the industry’s self-congratulatory attitude and the general, more critical view of its activities, actor Jack Black pretended to interrupt the opening number, mock-angrily denouncing the paean to the movies as “all a big crock.” He went on, “Now it’s market trends and fickle friends and Hollywood baloney. ... This industry’s in flux, it’s run by mucky-mucks pitching tents for tentpoles and chasing Chinese bucks. Opening with lots of zeroes, all we get are superheroes: Spider-Man, Superman, Batman, Jedi Man, Sequel Man, Prequel Man, formulaic scripts!”

Harris did joke at one point, “This year the nominated actors will receive gift bags containing \$160,000 worth of merchandise, including two vacations, makeup, clothes, shoes and an armored-car ride to

safety when the revolution comes.”

The evening as a whole had this somewhat schizophrenic character, with the series of insipid and complacent presentations interrupted occasionally by glimpses of reality. At any event, the absolute prohibition on commentary by award winners, which has been enforced by the Academy (or adhered to by recipients) since Michael Moore’s 2003 acceptance speech in which he indicted George W. Bush as a “fictitious president” and criticized the invasion of Iraq, has been broken through.

Receiving her award, one of the first major ones of the evening, Arquette commented with some feeling, “It’s time for us to have wage equality once and for all, and equal rights for women.” Its limitations notwithstanding, the remarks seemed to burst a certain dam, followed as they were not too much later by the award for *Citizenfour* and Poitras’ comments.

The performance of *Glory*, a song from *Selma*, the film about the civil rights struggle, contributed something as well. The number, presented by its composers, singer-songwriter John Legend (John Roger Stephens) and rapper Common (Lonnie Lynn), as well as paying tribute to the battles of the 1960s, made reference to police violence in Ferguson, Missouri. In his eventual acceptance speech, Legend observed, “We live in the most incarcerated country in the world.”

Graham Moore, in his comments, made oblique reference to Alan Turing’s tragic fate, persecuted by the British authorities for homosexuality and driven to take his own life. Iñárritu, in the closing moments of the ceremony, dedicated his award to “my fellow Mexicans,” and went on, “I pray that we can find and build a government that we deserve, and the ones that live in this country, who are a part of the latest generation of immigrants in this country, I just pray that they can be treated with the same dignity and respect as the ones who came before and built this incredible immigrant nation.”

None of this is earth-shattering, especially when one compares the comments to the severity of the social situation for vast numbers of people, and the various interventions remained within the general framework of identity (gender and racial) politics. But it would be equally mistaken to block one’s ears. The various performers spoke with some sincerity, and they should not simply be identified with the African American, feminist and gay politicians or activists who are in the profession of promoting the selfish interests of one or another section of the well-heeled middle class.

Of course, it occurred to no one in the auditorium Sunday night to address directly the vast mass of the American or global population and the great issues it faces—unemployment, poverty, declining living standards, the lack of decent health care, the destruction of public education and the never-ending military operations. The question of questions, the burning need to organize against the capitalist economic order, which offers nothing but new and far more catastrophic wars, social misery and dictatorship, is not something on the minds of many in the American film industry, or if it is, they remain silent about it.

The official atmosphere remains conventional and patriotic. Clint Eastwood’s *American Sniper*, a filthy film that lies about the reality of the Iraq war, was treated with thorough-going respect, although, fortunately, it was snubbed in all the categories in which it received nominations, except a minor one.

Right-wing circles are already mouthing off about how Hollywood’s “elite” is “out of touch” with Americans because Eastwood’s film did not win recognition. This is self-serving, reactionary nonsense. The mandate of the Academy voters is to select,

to the best of their collective ability, the “best” picture, not the most popular one. None of the top-grossing films, including *American Sniper*, received a major award, nor did any deserve one.

Given the current state of affairs in the US, where the population is both widely denied access to education and culture and comes under the immense pressure of a vast media-entertainment marketing machine (and, in the case of *American Sniper*, a semi-officially sponsored publicity campaign), there is no reason to accept box office success or failure as the last court of judgment. As though broad layers of the population truly had a choice, in any meaningful sense, about which films to see ... !

The Academy Awards broadcast brought something else home: how much of a waste of time it is blaming individual performers, directors and even studio executives—despite their undoubted and considerable limitations—for the present generally deplorable state of American filmmaking. For film writers and directors to engage more insightfully with the *current* state of life, they need to understand far more about the most profound experiences of the 20th century, above all, the fate of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union and the significance of Trotsky’s struggle against Stalinism. A *consciously socialist trend* has to emerge among filmmakers and performers with its eye on big questions and big lessons of history.

Bound up with that problem, there is the matter of the impossible character of the film-for-profit system and the celebrity culture that accompanies it in the US. One feels at almost every moment during an event such as the Academy Awards the crushing weight of the entertainment and media industry, which strictly polices mediocrity, conformity and triviality with the aim of offending (or enlightening) no one and protecting the interests of giant corporate entities. Not a single soul involved in the ABC broadcast, commentators, presenters, performers, the host himself, was genuinely allowed to act with any independence. To speak about “freedom of expression” under these conditions is to deceive oneself or others.



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