

The 88th Academy Awards nominations

David Walsh
15 January 2016

The 88th Academy Award nominations, announced Thursday morning, revealed the usual muddle-headedness, liberal good intentions and severe limitations of the social grouping that decides these things. The awards ceremony, presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, will take place on February 28 at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood. This year's host is comic Chris Rock, who presided miserably over the event in 2007.

For the second year in a row, following the success last year of *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, a film directed by Mexican Alejandro Iñárritu has gained the most nominations. Iñárritu's brutal and essentially pointless *The Revenant*, featuring Leonardo DiCaprio, received 12 nominations this year, including in the best picture, best actor in a leading role (DiCaprio), best actor in a supporting role (Tom Hardy), best cinematography and best directing categories. We will shortly post a review of *The Revenant*. The Mexican filmmaker, in the end, represents a school that hides its social evasiveness in overwrought and contrived drama.

George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road*, somewhat astonishingly, nabbed the second highest number of nominations, 10, including for best picture, cinematography and directing. In our review, the WSWS pointed to the "bombastic" film's "over-the-top computer-generated spectacle that takes the place of things like plot, believable characters and dialogue".

In this case, the filmmakers also threw identity politics into the violent mix, creating "a plot that 'criticizes' patriarchy and supports a watered-down and harmless version of modern-day 'feminism.'"

Two honest films about American life, *The Big Short*—on the 2008 financial crisis and Wall Street criminality—and *Spotlight*—about sexual abuse by Catholic priests—collected a number of nominations. Both films were named in the best picture and best directing categories; both had a supporting actor nominated (Christian Bale in *The Big Short* and Mark Ruffalo in *Spotlight*, respectively); both screenplays (one

adapted and one original) were nominated. *The Big Short* received a total of five nominations and *Spotlight* six.

Two other US-made films that played in movie theaters this year, albeit too briefly, merited far greater attention: Ramin Bahrani's *99 Homes*—about the housing collapse and foreclosure epidemic—and Andrew Niccol's *Good Kill*—on the horrifying subject of drone warfare. Neither received a nomination in any category.

Ridley Scott's *The Martian*, which had humane and fascinating elements, along with banal and irritating ones, garnered seven nominations (for best picture, for Matt Damon as best actor in a leading role, for best-adapted screenplay and a number of technical awards).

For his portrayal of Communist Party member and blacklisted Hollywood screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, Bryan Cranston deservedly received a nomination.

Todd Haynes's *Carol* and Tom Hooper's *The Danish Girl*, both of which focused on issues of gender and sexuality, gathered six and four nominations, respectively.

Many of the nominated acting performances were fine: Kate Winslet in the generally mediocre *Steve Jobs*, Alicia Vikander in *The Danish Girl*, Jennifer Lawrence in *Joy*, Mark Rylance in Steven Spielberg's poor *Bridge of Spies*, Saoirse Ronan in the overly sentimentalized *Brooklyn*, and others.

Michael Fassbender was recognized for his performance as Steve Jobs in the film of the same title, but his work in Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* was of a far higher caliber. Ruffalo did well in *Spotlight*, but Stanley Tucci's utterly determined and self-sacrificing lawyer Mitchell Garabedian in the same work was a considerably more intriguing character. In any case, as we have argued numerous times, in the American film industry today the problem does not lie with the actors.

Happily, Quentin Tarantino's malignant *The Hateful Eight* was only named in three categories (best actress in a supporting role [Jennifer Jason Leigh], cinematography and original score).

The failure of the Academy voters to nominate any African American actors or directors for a second year in

a row became a matter of controversy within hours on Thursday. In a statement, the NAACP commented, “With the announcement of the nominees for the 88th Academy Awards, the contributions of people of color to the movie industry...once again have been severely overlooked.”

On Twitter Thursday, professional charlatan Rev. Al Sharpton asserted that “Hollywood has a fraudulent image of progressive and liberal politics and policies. We must take direct action to correct this. Talk is cheap.”

There is nothing progressive about the actions of the NAACP, Sharpton and the rest of the so-called civil rights establishment. These are simply people looking for a larger share of the entertainment industry financial pie. Sharpton’s modus operandi in particular is to use the threat of “direct action” as a means of extracting concessions, jobs and cash. None of that flows to the general population.

The NAACP declares that it is not seeking to dictate “the artistic judgment of the Academy,” but, in fact, it is attempting to do precisely that. None of those complaining about the lack of “diversity” consider the possibility that the various performances by African American or Latino actors might possibly be unworthy of special recognition this year. There is simply an assertion that a certain percentage of the nominations, in a kind of quota system, should go to “people of color.” Again, there is nothing remotely progressive about this.

Of course, there is a massive “lack of diversity” problem in Hollywood, but it is not a racial one. The United States is an immensely complex society with a population of some 320 million people, the vast majority of whom work for a wage—or would like to. How well represented is the working class in American filmmaking, including the overwhelmingly proletarian African American and Latino population? In general, how thoroughly are the complexities of US society and its people depicted by Hollywood?

With a few honorable exceptions, contemporary American and global filmmaking solely investigates the lives and feelings of a small fraction of the population, the affluent, self-absorbed upper middle class, residing in their various pockets of affluence.

Where are the films about retail salespeople, cashiers, office clerks and food preparation and serving workers (including fast food)—the four largest occupations in America? Who is doing stories about the lives of registered nurses, waiters and waitresses, customer service representatives, janitors and cleaners, laborers and freight, stock and material movers, and secretaries and

administrative assistants—the categories that round out the list of the 10 most common professions in the US? More than 20 million people work at these jobs, and their lives count for next to nothing at present in the eyes of the American film studios.

The unemployed, the poor, the homeless...? Again, with a few honorable exceptions, their fates go untreated.

And there is also the issue of *political* diversity. Large majorities of Americans, black and white, oppose cuts in Medicare, Social Security and other programs. Majorities also consider Congress a corrupt institution, whose members are “out of touch with average Americans” and represent “special interests” (i.e., the corporate elite).

Wide layers of the population oppose the endless wars in the Middle East and Central Asia and the rampant police violence. Among those aged 18 to 29 in the US, more have a favorable view of socialism than capitalism, according to the Pew Research Center, and 43 percent of those making less than \$30,000 also view socialism more favorably than capitalism. Nearly three-quarters of the American people believe the country is headed in “the wrong direction.” Fifty percent think it is fair to say that neither major party is “the party of the American people.”

Where are the genuinely left-wing or socialist-minded films, which would speak to the opinions and feelings of a substantial section of the population? The answer is obvious.

Commentary about “diversity” that fails to take into account, first and foremost, the chasm that presently separates the film industry from American realities is idle and reactionary chatter.



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