

The semi-boycott of the “whites only” Academy Awards

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In response to the failure of any African-American or Latino actors to earn an Academy Award nomination this year in any of the four acting categories (best actor and actress, best supporting actor and actress), director Spike Lee and actress Jada Pinkett Smith, both black, have indicated they will avoid this year’s award ceremony on February 28. (They have both rejected the term “boycott.”)

A number of other voices have been raised in sympathy with the idea. Predictably, Rev. Al Sharpton has jumped on the bandwagon. Considerable pressure is being applied on comic Chris Rock, the host of this year’s ceremony, to step down in protest.

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) President Cheryl Boone Isaacs, who is black, issued a statement January 18 asserting that she was “both heartbroken and frustrated about the lack of inclusion.” Isaacs indicated that the Academy was “taking dramatic [but unspecified] steps to alter the makeup of our membership,” aimed at bringing about “much-needed diversity in our 2016 class and beyond.” According to a *Los Angeles Times* study in 2012, 94 percent of the some 6,000 Academy members were white and 77 percent were male.

Lee’s comments indicating that he and his wife would not attend or watch the February 28 event is no surprise. The director of a number of dreadful fiction films (*Do the Right Thing*, *Mo’ Better Blues*, *Jungle Fever*, *He Got Game*, *Summer of Sam*, *Chi-Raq* and others), which reveal a general contempt for humanity, Lee has made numerous public complaints in recent years about the lack of black film studio executives.

He returned to the theme on ABC’s *Good Morning America* on January 20, saying, “It has to go back to the [film industry] gatekeepers... We’re not in the room. The executives, when they have these green-light meetings quarterly where they look at the scripts, they [decide] who’s in it and they decide what we’re making and what we’re not making.”

Lee’s campaign is solely aimed at obtaining a larger portion of entertainment industry dollars for individuals like himself.

Smith, whose husband Will Smith, a talented actor, had been mentioned as a possible nominee for his role in *Concussion*, released a video on Facebook January 18 in which she explained, “I will not be at the Academy Awards and I won’t be watching.”

Actress Janet Hubert, who featured on the television series *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* along with Will Smith, scathingly responded to Jada Pinkett Smith’s video. She found it “ironic,” she explained, that people who had made “millions and millions of dollars from the very people that you’re talking about boycotting” were proposing such an action “just because you didn’t get a nomination.”

Noting that Will and Jada Pinkett Smith had “a huge production

company” that only produced films by the couple, their friends and family, Hubert commented, “So you are a part of Hollywood, you are part of the system that is unfair to other actors. So get real.”

In fact, the most selfish and miserable motives are driving the quasi-boycott of the Academy Awards. There is no indication that awards decided upon by the likes of Lee and the Smiths would improve matters in Hollywood to the slightest extent. Artistically, they are entirely unable to conceive of things in a broader, more universal manner.

As part of its lurch to the right, the American political and media establishment as a whole accepts and embraces a racist and divisive view of society and culture. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, for instance, in various articles and commentaries (for example, Cara Buckley’s “Another Oscar Year, Another All-White Ballot” in the *Times*, and “Why are the Oscar nominees so white? Because the Academy doesn’t want to change,” by the *Post*’s Mikki Kendall) have taken it upon themselves to lament the “whites only” nominations.

Those elements clamoring for racial and also gender “diversity” are not opponents of the profit system or the exploitation of the working class. They are principally consumed with resentment at the handful of billionaires who run American society and would like to squeeze out of this fraction of the top 1 percent a larger share of wealth for themselves, the next 5, 6 or 7 percent.

In essence, although they are loath to say it out loud at this point, the complainants of the Lee-Smith ilk are demanding racial-ethnic quotas, i.e., that a certain portion of awards be handed out to black or Latino performers, directors, writers and others. Why stop there? Why not organize separate movie theaters for minority and white audiences, each of whom apparently can “relate” only to films made by individuals of their own skin color or ethnicity? The racist-exclusivist trajectory is an extremely sinister and reactionary one.

The films and performers nominated this year include some valuable efforts (*The Big Short*, *Spotlight*, Bryan Cranston in *Trumbo*), as well as some very weak or even wretched ones (*The Revenant*, *The Hateful Eight*). The inclusion of the various movies with African-American actors and/or directors would not represent an overall improvement in terms of artistic quality or social breadth. *Concussion* is a well-intentioned exposé of violence in professional football, but *Creed*, *Beasts of No Nation* and *Straight Outta Compton* are poor films or worse.

In fact, none of those involved in the shunning of this year’s Academy Awards have contributed in any serious way to the treatment of the conditions and tragedy of the black working class in America. With all their (sometimes considerable) limitations, films

such as *Band of Angels*, *The Defiant Ones*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Odds Against Tomorrow*, *In the Heat of the Night*, *Souther, To Kill a Mockingbird* and even *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (for its indictment of liberal hypocrisy), along with independent films like *Nothing But a Man* and *Killer of Sheep*, shed far more light on American social and racial relations than the vast majority of current works.

We reject the Lee-Smith attitude toward the Academy Awards without in any way expressing support for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as an institution or its award-giving process, which, in the end, are elements of the process by which the American ruling elite maintains its cultural and ideological hold.

The sordid origins of the AMPAS are well known. The pompously named outfit was set up in 1927 at the instigation of Louis B. Mayer, the head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and perhaps the highest-paid individual in America at the time, essentially to forestall unionization of the film industry. In corporatist style, Mayer hoped that by setting up an "Academy," with various branches, film artists and workers would feel they were part of the industry and not make any unreasonable demands.

As for the awards ceremony itself, Mayer later cynically commented, "I found that the best way to handle [filmmakers] was to hang medals all over them... If I got them cups and awards they'd kill themselves to produce what I wanted. That's why the Academy Award was created." The MGM chief's strategy worked effectively until the early 1930s, when, under conditions of the Great Depression and the influence of left-wing figures, screenwriters and others formed their own independent unions.

During the purges of Communist Party and other left actors, writers and directors in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Academy played a rotten and cowardly role. As late as 1957, on the eve of the collapse of the blacklist, the AMPAS passed a by-law decreeing that no one who had invoked his or her Fifth Amendment rights (against self-incrimination) in front of the witch-hunting House Un-American Activities Committee could receive an Academy Award. It had also stripped award eligibility from anyone who had been a member of the Communist Party. In 1999, the Academy despicably went out of its way to bestow an honorary award on arch-informer, director Elia Kazan.

Moreover, even taking into consideration that the Academy is bestowing awards only for work in the American commercial film industry, its aesthetic record is likewise discreditable. For most of its history, the Academy has rewarded a type of middle-brow, commercially successful and often unchallenging work. It has regularly ignored the most compelling work being done under its very nose.

Astonishingly, many of the creators of truly great art, films that will continue to be watched for decades and decades, have gone unrecognized. Neither Orson Welles, Charlie Chaplin, D.W. Griffith, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, Raoul Walsh, Anthony Mann, Douglas Sirk, Samuel Fuller, Fritz Lang, King Vidor, Ernst Lubitsch, Buster Keaton, Otto Preminger, Michael Powell, Josef von Sternberg, Erich von Stroheim, William Wellman, F.W. Murnau, Arthur Penn, Stanley Kubrick or Robert Altman won a best directing award (some were not even nominated).

The list of remarkable performers who never won an academy award in the best actor or best actress category is too lengthy to write out, but it includes Marilyn Monroe, Cary Grant, Greta Garbo, Kirk Douglas, John Garfield, Robert Mitchum, Peter Sellers, Edward G.

Robinson, Barbara Stanwyck, Dana Andrews, Myrna Loy, Montgomery Clift, Judy Garland, Richard Burton, Lillian Gish, Deborah Kerr, Dirk Bogarde, Tony Curtis, Peter Lorre, Alan Ladd, James Mason, Rita Hayworth, Peter O'Toole, William Powell, Claude Rains, Lauren Bacall, Ida Lupino, Margaret Sullavan, Richard Widmark, Gene Tierney, Joseph Cotten, Agnes Moorehead, Lucille Ball, Irene Dunne, Jean Harlow, Ava Gardner, Miriam Hopkins and countless others.

In short, the Academy Awards handout, by its very nature, is a capricious process—and not to be taken as the genuine measure of any actor, director or film. Viewed historically—with a knowledge of those films, careers and performances that have stood the test of time—many of the most significant were passed over and ignored. In many cases, actors or directors were acknowledged only years after their best work. Honorary awards for "lifetime achievement" were intended to make amends.

Filmmaking is a harsh business, driven by commercial imperatives. Only on occasion have important social moods—and the personalities that corresponded to them—broken through.

Of course, Hollywood must reflect, in its own highly peculiar fashion, the general trends in American society. If anything, the overall quality of the winning films over the past 15 years has worsened (with a few exceptions), and the mediocre has been joined by the hysterical or ultra-violent: *American Beauty*, *Gladiator*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *Crash*, *The Departed*, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Hurt Locker*, *The King's Speech*, *Argo* and *Birdman*.

In any event, no one among the identity politics crowd criticizes the social outlook or orientation of the average Hollywood production. Lee, who deserves a special award for the most overrated American film director in recent decades, is an avid defender of capitalism and entrepreneurship (with an estimated net worth of \$40 million), who has directed commercials for a host of large corporations, including Nike, Converse, Jaguar, Taco Bell and Levi Strauss.

There is every reason for protest against the current state of Hollywood filmmaking, but on quite other grounds. Where are the films, for example, denouncing 15 years of the brutal "war on terror," with its accompanying attacks on democratic rights and its threat of police-state rule? Where are the films indicting the Bush and Obama administrations for their war crimes? Where are the writers and directors obsessed by the malignant growth of social inequality in America? There is no shortage of things to be outraged about...

As we noted in a previous article, the American film industry's genuine lack of diversity at present lies in its almost exclusive treatment of the not terribly intriguing opinions, feelings and foibles of the better-off, self-obsessed petty bourgeoisie. The increased presence of the working class as an independent force in American social and political affairs, of which we now see the first signs, will do more than anything else to break up the current stagnant, constricted atmosphere in art and film.



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