

Racialism, art and the Academy Awards controversy

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The controversy continues over the failure of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) to nominate any African-American or other minority actors or directors for an award this year.

According to innumerable media commentators, the lack of Academy recognition for several films directed by or featuring African-Americans—including *Straight Outta Compton*, *Creed*, *Beasts of No Nation* and *Concussion*—is proof of the 6,200 Academy voters' prejudice; and, still further, that race constitutes the essential foundation of society and its cognition. Therefore, how any given individual understands the world is determined, at the most fundamental level, by his/her racial identity.

The *New York Times* and its various critics and columnists have been particularly active in advancing a racial-gender perspective in art that has sinister implications.

As to the supposedly snubbed films, both F. Gary Gray's *Straight Outta Compton* and Ryan Coogler's *Creed* are relatively formulaic, individualist "success stories," with nothing terribly distinctive about them except their immediate settings. The first is a shallow, self-serving work about the rise of "gangster rap," the second, which has a few modest charms, centers on the training of a young boxer (Michael B. Jordan) for a big match by the aging, ailing Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone).

Cary Joji Fukunaga's *Beasts of No Nation*, about child soldiers in an unnamed West African country, eventually turns into, in the words of the WWSW review, "a virtually unwatchable catalog of crimes." Idris Elba, a gifted actor, here plays a conventional psychopathic warlord (Charles Taylor, Joseph Kony, etc.), the sort of figure useful to the proponents of great power intervention. Peter Landesman's *Concussion* is a well-meaning, limited film about the severe risks of playing professional football, with Will Smith in the lead role of Dr. Bennet Omalu, a Nigerian-American pathologist.

Would nominations of *Creed*, *Straight Outta Compton* or *Beasts of No Nation* for best picture, Gray or Coogler for best director, or Smith, Elba or Jordan for best actor have been merited?

It is difficult to answer this in the abstract. On the whole, this group of "African-American" films and acting jobs belong to a thick middle stratum of mediocrity, with no special respect for skin color, gender or sexual orientation, that emerges from the American film assembly line each year. These three or four films are neither better nor worse than many of the other 300 or so eligible for Academy Awards. None of them investigates deeply, or even indicates strong opinions about, existing realities for the mass of the African-American population, or anyone else for that matter.

In any event, there is no evidence that racial prejudice had anything to do with the fact that these films and actors were not nominated. A

number of Academy members have made their opinions known on this issue, with some feeling. In an open letter published in the *Hollywood Reporter*, screenwriter Stephen Geller addressed the proposal of Cheryl Boone Isaacs, the president of the Academy, to "diversify" the membership and weed out "inactive members."

Geller, who wrote the script for the adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972), challenged the Academy chief's assumption that those who have not had jobs in the industry for a decade were "responsible for the lack of diversity in the Academy, as well as in the film industry." He wrote, "There are as many reasons why one doesn't get an assignment or a film deal as there are reasons why a performer doesn't get a nomination by the Academy." He termed the plan to revise the rules concerning diversity "nothing more than a 'false flag' issue," and asked, "What Academy, historically, ever has dealt with contemporary realities? For better and for worse, that has never been its role."

Documentary producer and director Milton Justice (*Down and Out in America*, 1986), also in the *Hollywood Reporter*, referred to the failure of David Oyelowo to win a best actor nomination last year for *Selma*, writing, "Maybe there weren't enough actors in the actors' branch who thought he was good enough to be nominated. I'm not in the actors' branch, but I certainly didn't think he was very good in the part."

Referring to Isaacs' plan to add more minority and women members to the Academy, Justice asked rhetorically, "If there were more black actors in the Academy, would that have assured David Oyelowo's nomination? Would it have assured more black nominees this year? Do black people only vote for black people? Did I vote for Sean Penn in *Milk* because I'm gay?! The whole idea is both insulting to blacks and to the Academy members, who presumably vote on artistic merit."

Indeed, Isaacs' plan, praised by virtually every media outlet, is based on a thoroughly reactionary premise, that female or black voters will obediently nominate female or black films, filmmakers and actors. With this move, the Academy is moving in the direction of racial quotas, official or *de facto*.

The *New York Times*, as noted above, is at the forefront of the effort to promote the arguments of figures like director Spike Lee and actors Jada Pinkett and Will Smith, who have declared their intention not to participate in this year's awards ceremony February 28, and to push racial politics in general.

In a January 15 piece, "Oscars So White? Or Oscars So Dumb? Discuss," the *Times* introduces excerpts from a conversation among its chief film critics A.O. Scott and Manohla Dargis and critic at large Wesley Morris with this comment: "Are these the whitest Oscar

nominations ever? Or just the most recent Academy Award whiteout?”

In the discussion that follows, Scott refers to the “shocking—or maybe not so shocking—whiteness of this year’s field of nominees.” After noting that the Academy has “done a reasonably good job of recognizing black talent” in recent years, Scott observes, “Spike Lee’s lifetime achievement award feels like belated and inadequate compensation for a career’s worth of slights. At the movies, we may be in the age of *Chi-Raq* and *Straight Outta Compton*, but the Academy is still setting the table for *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*.”

The gravitational pull of his politics—and the fear of offending Lee’s supporters—is decisive here, because if Scott were objective in his artistic assessment, he would recognize that Lee has made a series of incompetently written and directed films, malicious, selfish and backward in their point of view.

Scott later comments, “The Academy’s blunder reflects the structural biases of the movie industry, which in turn reflects deeply embedded racism in the society at large. And no institution is immune.” Dargis chimes in, “My point being that the lived, embodied experiences of the membership greatly matter and that sometimes even the most well-intentioned white people just don’t *see* the racism and sexism in front of them.”

It is foul to argue that “whiteness” is the chief difficulty with this or any year’s Academy Awards, and, in fact, to address art and culture in such terms.

The *Times* ran a piece January 22 headlined “The Oscars and Hollywood’s Race Problem,” by Roxane Gay, which returned to the theme, and another column January 27, “The Oscars and Race: A Stir Over Rules to Change the Academy,” by Cara Buckley.

In the latter, after noting that the number of black acting nominees in recent decades has reflected the percentage of blacks in the general population, Buckley writes, “But the representational proportionality of black nominees applies only to the acting categories. Let’s look at all of the awards the academy doles out, across all categories, and see how they break down by ethnicity. Let’s look at all the films Hollywood churns out and do the same: Few of the roughly 300 features eligible for best picture last year told stories from the points of view of women or minorities. Besides, we’ve been fed narratives from an overwhelmingly white male perspective since Hollywood began.”

Is Buckley, swept away by the self-involved, exclusivist ideas that dominate her milieu and conformist to the core, even aware of what she is saying? That artwork should be categorized and presumably appreciated according to whether it represents a male or female, black or white perspective? Whether she likes it or not, Buckley is setting up this basic standard: women gain more from art produced by women, Jews from work created by Jews, African-Americans from “African-American art,” etc.

The *Times* columnist categorizes the world in terms of race, ethnicity and gender. She assumes that perspective is framed by race and proceeds to elevate that to the level of a worldview. It is no exaggeration to point out that, in ideological terms, Buckley and others, in their obsession with race, are spouting a conception of society and art identified historically with the extreme right.

The Nazis asserted the existence of distinct “Aryan” and “Jewish [Bolshevik, liberal, degenerate]” cultures, separated out “Aryan music” from “Jewish music,” and so forth. They classified human beings collectively as “races,” with inherited characteristics, as one commentator notes, “related not only to outward appearance and

physical structure, but also shaped internal mental life, ways of thinking, creative and organizational abilities, intelligence, taste and appreciation of culture, physical strength, and military prowess.”

Whether they like it or not, those who view art and culture in racial (or gender) terms and make race (or gender) the basis for a theory of aesthetics give credence to and encourage this type of filth.

Serious artwork has an objectively truthful, relatively universal character. None of the great works of art from which men and women, of every national or ethnic origin, learn and gain were created on the basis of racial or gender exclusivism. Such a vile, self-obsessed outlook, shared by the *New York Times* critics and the upper-middle class advocates of identity politics, is antithetical to genuine artistic creation. Racial, gender and sexual politics have done immeasurable damage to filmmaking and art generally over the past 40 years. Not a single major work or figure has emerged from this subjective, self-centered crowd.

A truly great film performance involves powerfully expressing—through an individual characterization—something profound and concrete about the reality of the times and the nature of the social relationships that shape human psychology. Such a work or performance raises feelings and moods beyond the limitations of the circumstances under which the work was created.

This gives rise to the viewer’s heightened sense of the universal and intensely meaningful quality of a work. It entails an aesthetic-intellectual process on the part of both the artist and the viewer, “reading the secret code inherent in things, people and events” (Vorsky), that is the opposite of self-centeredness and racial or gender restrictiveness.

One can think of many such performances in global cinema, from Anna Magnani in *Open City*, Jean Gabin in *Grand Illusion* and Henry Fonda in *The Grapes of Wrath*, to performances in the work of Eisenstein, Kurosawa, Welles, Chaplin, Ray, Fassbinder, Hitchcock, Hawks, Murnau, Keaton, Pasolini and many others.

American filmmaking at present does a generally miserable job of portraying American life. The well-heeled African-American petty-bourgeoisie in Hollywood does not speak for or artistically represent African-American working class life, the life of the overwhelming majority of the black population. The black nouveau riche elements are consumed with hostility and contempt for the “great unwashed.” Nothing would compel such people, who have “made it big,” to direct their attention to conditions of exploitation and social misery.

As we argued in a previous article, the solution to American filmmaking’s “diversity problem” will not come from the entry of directors who differ from the current crop only in their ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. That would simply represent more of the same—more complacency, more self-absorption, more trivia.

To “diversify,” in fact, to revolutionize film and art in our day means, first and foremost, the introduction of great historical and social themes.



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