

Eighty-eighth Academy Awards: Hopeful signs amidst reactionary “diversity” campaign

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The Oscar awards ceremony Sunday night included some welcome notes and surprises, especially considering the disorienting and reactionary campaign that has been waged for more than a month, under the Twitter hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, targeting the “institutional racism” allegedly reflected in the lack of African-American and other minority nominees in the major categories for the past two years.

One had the sense that the actors, directors, producers, composers, technicians and other members of the Hollywood fraternity in the audience felt themselves under siege and were looking for a way to respond in a principled manner to what was an unprincipled campaign. In different ways, the comments of some of the presenters and award winners reflected a more humane and thoughtful side of Hollywood.

The film industry, for all its weaknesses and strengths, is part of and reflects the general contradictions and problems of society—and that certainly extends to the contradiction between mounting concern over very real social problems, including within some privileged layers, and the lack of a clear political and historical perspective.

Comedian Chris Rock hosted the show, as he had back in 2005. His role, as far as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was concerned, was to combine humor with a bit of gravity while offending as few people as possible, and it must be said that he navigated the identity politics minefield with a certain degree of skill.

There were gags and statements made on both sides of the issue. While Rock briefly joked that “if they nominated hosts, I wouldn’t even have this job,” he also—indirectly exposing the gulf between the democratic goals of the civil rights movement and the concerns of the self-absorbed upper-middle class reflected in the Oscars protest—acidly commented that Oscars diversity was not an issue 50 and 60 years ago, when there were “real things to protest... We were too busy being raped and lynched to care about who won best cinematographer.”

The major awards, including for acting, directing and screenplay, were split between at least six of the eight films nominated for best picture of the year. *The Revenant*, a misanthropic and historically misguided film inspired by the experiences of an American fur trapper and frontiersman in the 1820s, won both for director Alejandro Iñárritu and for Leonardo DiCaprio as best actor.

DiCaprio, six times a nominee but never before a winner, was heavily favored for the Oscar, despite the outstanding performance by Bryan Cranston in the title role in *Trumbo*, the story of the anti-communist witch-hunt as told through the life of screenwriter Dalton Trumbo.

In the closing moments of the ceremony, as the audience awaited the expected award for *The Revenant* as best picture of the year following its wins in the directing and acting categories, *Spotlight*, the accurate and hard-hitting movie based on the work of investigative journalists in the 2002 exposure of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, scored something of an upset, beating out the favored Iñárritu film.

Spotlight, directed by Tom McCarthy, also won for best original screenplay, by McCarthy along with Josh Singer. The award for best adapted screenplay went to Adam McKay and Charles Randolph for *The Big Short*, which tells the story of the Wall Street fraud and outright criminality that led to the collapse of the housing bubble in 2007-2008, which in turn precipitated the financial collapse and its devastating consequences, still ongoing, for the working class. *The Big Short* was another of the eight nominated films for best picture. These two movies, winners for the original and adapted screenplay respectively, were without doubt the most deserving of the best picture award this year.

In the evening’s other modest and welcome surprise, Mark Rylance won for supporting actor over Sylvester Stallone, who was favored for his role in *Creed*. Rylance portrayed Soviet spy Rudolf Abel in Steven Spielberg’s *Bridge of Spies*, based on the Cold War spy swap of Abel for U-2 spy plane pilot Gary Powers in 1962. The *World Socialist Web Site* review noted: “Rylance is truly excellent at conveying Abel’s intelligence and steadfastness. The film is most substantive and least trite in scenes where he is present.”

Other awards in the acting categories went to Brie Larson for best actress for her role in *Room*, and Alicia Viskander for supporting actress in *The Danish Girl*.

The biggest winner among the nominated films, with six Oscars, though all in technical categories, was *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the fourth in a series of dystopian action films by Australian director George Miller. *Fury Road*, which appeared 30 years after the last work in this franchise, is another gratuitously violent and misanthropic effort, this time with a feminist perspective.

There were two other worthy films rewarded with Oscars. *Son Saul*, an excellent work by Hungarian filmmaker László Nemes dealing with the horrifying role assigned to the *Sondercommando* units at Auschwitz, won for the best foreign film. And *Amy*, a serious effort on the brief life and career of the British pop singer Amy Winehouse, which ended with her tragic death in 2011 at the age of 27, won for best documentary. It was a positive sign that *Winter on Fire*, a whitewash of the right-wing, US-orchestrated Maidan coup that toppled the pro-Russian government in Ukraine, did not get the award.

The presence of films dealing with important historical and social questions among the nominees and winners on Sunday is all the more significant in light of the narrow and backward focus on identity politics, calling in essence for some kind of quota system in the film industry.

The #OscarsSoWhite campaign, promoted relentlessly and uncritically in the media, reached almost hysterical proportions in recent weeks, with detailed “studies” including statistics, bar graphs and other data, online or in the pages of the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Huffington Post*, *USA Today* and elsewhere. In one article it was explained that Peter Dinklage, who plays Tyrion Lannister in HBO's *Game of Thrones*, could not be included in the “diversity” list because the dwarfism with which he was born does not appear as a category in US census statistics!

To say that this campaign is a diversion would be a gross understatement. It has absolutely nothing to do with issues of discrimination, equality or democratic rights. It falls under the rubric of the attacks on “white privilege”—attempts to obscure the fundamental class divide in society, to secure a bigger piece of the wealth of the super-rich for the most grasping and privileged layers of the middle class, and especially to divide the population and above all the working class on racial and ethnic lines.

Veteran black filmmaker Spike Lee, who first made a splash with *Do the Right Thing* (1989), is a prime spokesman for this layer. At an earlier ceremony where he received an honorary Oscar, which was rebroadcast last Sunday, he made the revealing comment that “it’s easier to be the president of the United States as a black person than to be the head of a studio.” Lee, a multimillionaire himself, is a champion of 21st century American capitalism and all of its crimes. He demands only the same kind of entrée into the ranks of the powerful Hollywood billionaires that Barack Obama secured as the leading spokesman of imperialism.

Several of Chris Rock’s jabs, whatever their intention, hit home against this smug layer of the upper-middle class. At one point Rock suggested jokingly that perhaps the solution was to have a category of “Black Oscars,” alongside those for women and men. A bit later he tweaked actor Will Smith, who joined his wife Jada Pinkett-Smith’s call to boycott the ceremony, remarking that Smith received \$20 million for his latest film. The couple has a reported net worth of more than \$200 million.

Remarks by Oscar winner Iñárritu must also be noted in connection with the “diversity” obsession. The 52-year-old Mexican director, who won for the second year in a row, urged society to “liberate ourselves from all prejudice”—and to make sure the “color of our skin becomes as irrelevant as the length of our hair.” After the ceremony, he elaborated, warning about

“tribalism” and, as reported in the *Guardian*, “criticizing the #OscarsSoWhite movement for not ‘observing the complexity and beauty’ of ‘a multi-mixed country.’”

This more humane approach undoubtedly had other supporters at the Academy Awards ceremony. The promoters of identity politics represent a very narrow and privileged social layer. Confusion persists, however, as issues of race, gender and sexual orientation are divorced from the central social and historical questions. This is bound up with an orientation toward, and political and financial support for, the Democratic Party, specifically its nominal “liberal” wing.

Gun control did not get any mentions this year, but climate change did, most notably in the acceptance speech of DiCaprio, who used his time to stress the urgency of action on climate change.

While there was little or no overt reference to social inequality in America, remarks by the comedian Louis C. K., who presented the award for best short documentary, were heartfelt and incisive. Saying this award was his favorite, he noted that its recipient would not make any money from its production. Those who made such films, he stressed, did so out of conviction and commitment, not for mercenary reasons. The winner would drive the Oscar home in a Honda Civic.

Louis C. K.’s observations evoked loud applause. Many in the audience are somewhat embarrassed by their own wealth and privilege and have doubts that they are justified. At the same time, they, for the most part, truly believe in their projects, even if the outcomes more often than not do not merit such belief, and there is a vast amount of talent and craft that goes into making their films.

The connection between identity politics and support for the Democrats was most clearly revealed in the standing ovation for Vice President Joe Biden, who appeared onstage to introduce Lady Gaga, who sang the Oscar-nominated song “Til It Happens to You,” from *The Hunting Ground*, a documentary about campus sexual assault.

One would never know that Biden represents a government that carries out mass killings and drone assassinations and defends torturers—things many in the audience find abhorrent. Yet this man was given a platform to posture as the enemy of sexual predators and the spokesman for enlightened policies.

There is yet to emerge within this milieu those individuals who will succeed in elevating moral and social concerns to the level of conscious, historically informed political thought, which will play a critical role in the creation of great art. But that will happen, spurred on by the deepening crisis and sudden convulsions of capitalist society and the emergence of the working class as an independent and revolutionary force.



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