

2017 Academy Award nominations: Hollywood’s “sigh of relief” over racial “diversity”

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The nominees for the 89th Academy Awards were announced Tuesday morning. Damien Chazelle’s quasi-musical *La La Land* received 14 nominations, tying a record. *Moonlight*, directed by Barry Jenkins, about a gay black youth growing up in Miami, and the science fiction film *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve) were both named in eight categories.

Lion, directed by Australian Garth Davis, about an adopted Indian man looking for his biological family, took another six nominations, along with Mel Gibson’s World War II drama, *Hacksaw Ridge*, and *Manchester by the Sea*, a tale of personal and social tragedy written and directed by Kenneth Lonergan.

Fences (four nominations), dealing with black working class life in Pittsburgh in the 1950s, directed by and featuring Denzel Washington, David Mackenzie’s *Hell or High Water* (also four nominations), a heist film touching on social inequality in the US, and Theodore Melfi’s *Hidden Figures* (three nominations), about African American women scientists working for NASA, also did well.

Three of the most honest and socially provocative films released in the US in 2016, Gary Ross’s *Free State of Jones*, Oliver Stone’s *Snowden* and Jeff Nichols’s *Loving*, received one solitary nomination between them, for Ruth Negga as best actress in the last-named work.

The awards ceremony will be held on February 26, at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood.

The American media is now so conditioned to treat every major (and not so major) social and cultural phenomenon in racial, ethnic or gender terms that questions of artistic quality or social truthfulness barely receive a mention or a consideration.

The general reaction of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the film industry’s upper echelons was summed up by the *Hollywood Reporter*: a “sigh of relief over that fact that it [the Academy] retired, at least for this year, the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite.” As the *Washington Post*

commented, “Redemption—or at least a whiff of it—was in the air on Tuesday when nominations for the 89th Academy Awards were announced.” All’s right with the world!

The nominees in the acting categories include African Americans Washington and Viola Davis (*Fences*), Mahershala Ali and Naomie Harris (*Moonlight*) and Octavia Spencer (*Hidden Figures*), along with Negga (Irish-Ethiopian) and Dev Patel (*Lion*), born in England to Indian parents.

In addition, as the *Hollywood Reporter* noted, Jenkins, an African American, “received writing and directing nominations for *Moonlight*; Bradford Young, for his work on *Arrival*, became the first black cinematographer to be nominated; Joi McMillon, nominated along with Nat Sanders for *Moonlight*, became the first black woman to be nominated for film editing; and Kimberly Steward (*Manchester by the Sea*) became only the second black female producer, following Oprah Winfrey’s nomination for *Selma*, to be nominated for best picture.”

The *Post* pointed out as well, “Four out of the five films nominated for best documentary were made by filmmakers of color, including Roger Ross Williams’s *Life, Animated*, Raoul Peck’s *I Am Not Your Negro*, about James Baldwin, and Ezra Edelman’s *O.J.: Made in America*, a sprawling, 7 1/2-hour film about O.J. Simpson.”

The Academy came under sharp criticism in 2016 for its failure to nominate a single non-white performer for the second year in a row. In response, the film body announced in June that it had invited a record 683 new members to join its ranks, 46 percent of whom were women and 43 percent “people of color.” The number of invitees was more than twice as many as the highest previous total.

The broadening of the Academy’s membership may be welcome, but the racialization of the film award process has nothing progressive about it whatsoever. Almost every media account of the nomination announcement Tuesday brushed past the question of artistic merit and proceeded to

the real matter at hand, race and, to a lesser extent, gender. Whatever the opinions of Academy voters, it now seems taken for granted by the industry and the media that race and gender are the leading, if not the principal factors to be taken into account when nominations and awards are at stake. A de facto quota system has been put in place that will have dire consequences if it is enforced in the coming years.

A number of the films and performances nominated are deserving, to one degree or another. Whatever may be their failings, *Manchester by the Sea*, *Fences*, *Moonlight* and *Hell or High Water* are serious efforts. *Hidden Figures* has moving moments, as does *Lion*. Negga in *Loving*, Washington and Davis in *Fences*, Casey Affleck and Michelle Williams in *Manchester by the Sea*, Ali and Harris in *Moonlight* and Spencer in *Hidden Figures* are certainly worthy of recognition.

Fire at Sea (Gianfranco Rosi) from Italy, devoted to the horrifying refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, nominated for best documentary, is also deserving.

On the other hand, *La La Land* is an essentially trivial work, with a few bright or charming elements, while the nominations for *Arrival* and *Hacksaw Ridge* are simply inappropriate. *Rogue One*, the latest empty-headed *Star Wars* entry, along with two animated films, *Moana* and *Kubo and the Two Strings*, gained more nominations than *Loving*.

In any event, in the cases where worthwhile work has been recognized, the race or ethnicity of the artists involved was not a determining factor. To the extent that the social questions break through, including the struggle against racism, in *Manchester by the Sea*, *Loving*, *Hell or High Water*, *Fences* or *Moonlight*, the films gain whatever power they have.

The “sighs of relief,” from wealthy, insulated figures in the film world, over the “diversity” of the Academy Award nominations deserve the scorn of anyone serious about truth and reality in art. This “relief” reflects the immediate, perhaps temporarily improved state of the corrupt relationship between the film studios and various upper-middle-class outfits and individuals. Other groups were not so pleased, including organizations claiming to speak for Latinos, Asians, gays and others.

According to *USA Today*, Daniel Mayeda, chair of the Asian Pacific American Media Coalition, “applauded” the number of black actors and actresses in the nominations list, but deplored the few opportunities for Asians in Hollywood and the lack of Latinos among the nominees this year. “He [Mayeda] said it’s ‘obvious’ that studio heads need more help in diversifying the industry, and should work more closely with multi-ethnic coalitions such as his to achieve that.” Precisely. Affluent layers of African Americans,

Latinos and gays would like to pry a portion of profits and privileges away from the current studio officialdom and film celebrities. The cause of artistic truth and social progress does not stand to gain one jot by this.

In response to Tuesday’s nominations announcement, *Washington Post* film critic Ann Hornaday wrote, “It’s clear that, unlike recent years when the red carpet looked lily white, this year’s Oscars will resemble the outside world much more vibrantly.”

But this is not true, or true only in a secondary or superficial sense (a greater range of skin tones).

For filmmaking truly to “resemble the outside world much more vibrantly,” or simply accurately, is not a racial or ethnic question, but a social one. Films would first of all need to take on, through artistic means, the realities confronted by tens of millions of people: the sharp decline in conditions of life and growing social wretchedness, the bleak future facing young people, the growing and immense danger of war and dictatorship. They would have to reflect life in general “more vibrantly,” and not simply the concerns of self-centered layers of every ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation.

More than 40 million people in the US work in the 25 occupations with the largest employment. Those occupations range from clerks and nurses to truck drivers and teachers, sales representatives and carpenters to team assemblers and receptionists. Is the artistic representation of their lives, the exploration of their thoughts and feelings, a worthy undertaking? At present, they are almost totally excluded from filmmaking and art generally.

The self-satisfaction of the film world is entirely out of place. The *Los Angeles Times* reports, “But with a crowd-pleasing Hollywood confection like *La La Land* dominating the nominations and the #OscarsSoWhite controversy abated for now, the awards themselves promise a return in many ways to the old-school and the feel-good.

“‘We want to inspire people with memories of what a best friend the movies have been over the course of their life, and we want to have a lot of laughs,’ Oscar telecast producer Michael De Luca told the *Times* in November. ‘Get in, get out. No homework. All joy.’”

Racial-gender quotas plus “no [mental] homework.” Hollywood in 2017.



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