

90th Academy Awards: Banal, conformist and 10,000 miles from reality

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The 90th Academy Awards ceremony Sunday night, as one media commentator observed, “passed off without a hitch.” How unfortunate.

No award presenter or recipient spoke “off-message.” No one had anything trenchant to say about American society or culture. Indeed, hardly a word was spoken that might have generated a single critical thought or even a minor controversy. Banality and complacency were very much the order of the day, often wrapped in the language and style of upper-middle-class gender and racial politics. And as a final touch, a filthy, heaping dose of militarism!

At a time when—largely thanks to American government action—the world has moved perilously close to nuclear war, when three individuals in the US possess the same wealth as the bottom half of the populations, when Washington is embroiled in an unprecedented and ferocious political crisis...the official representatives of the film industry, in control of a still powerful medium, thought almost exclusively of themselves and their petty concerns.

Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water*, a decent, compassionate film, won a number of important awards, including best director and best picture. For his characterization of Winston Churchill in *Darkest Hour*, Gary Oldman took the best actor award. Frances McDormand received the best actress award for her role in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. For the same film, Sam Rockwell collected the best supporting actor honors, and Allison Janney won best supporting actress for *I, Tonya*.

Oldman, McDormand, Rockwell and Janney are immensely talented, veteran performers, but that is not an endorsement of either their roles or their films. McDormand in particular is insufferable as a self-righteous, would-be vigilante in Martin McDonagh’s disoriented, identity politics-driven work. To the extent that Rockwell is allowed to take over the film in its latter portions and demonstrate some degree of humanity, he rescues *Three Billboards* from being nearly unbearable to watch.

Needless to say, the #MeToo culture oozed out of every open pore during the Oscars ceremony.

Host comic Jimmy Kimmel set the tone from the start, telling his global audience that “the Academy, as you are no doubt aware, took action last year to expel [producer] Harvey Weinstein from their ranks. There were a lot of great nominees, but Harvey deserved it the most... But what happened with Harvey, and what’s happening all over, was long overdue. We can’t let bad behavior slide anymore. The world is watching us.”

Weinstein, who until his disgrace was numerous times a much lionized figure at such ceremonies because of the fame and income his films brought to many of those seated in the crowd on Sunday, has not been convicted of any crime. As we have noted previously, the attitude toward democratic and legal norms of the #MeToo crusaders resembles that of an expensively dressed lynch mob.

Kimmel acted the hypocrite and buffoon throughout. He went on, “Over the course of this evening, I hope you will listen to many brave and outspoken supporters of movements like ‘Me Too’ and ‘Time’s Up’ and ‘Never Again,’ because what they’re doing is important. Things are

changing for the better. They’re making sure of that. It is positive change. This is a night for positivity and our plan is to shine a light on a group of outstanding and inspiring films.”

What was particularly “brave” or “outspoken” about appearing before an audience primed to cheer one’s every piety?

Kimmel proceeded to include the empty-headed action films *Black Panther* and *Wonder Woman* in the category of this year’s “positive stories.”

He also made a great point of telling the presenters and winners to be brief. The late night talk show host semi-joked, “I will be timing you. I have a stopwatch. The moment you are handed that Oscar, the clock will start ticking. So, get up here, grab it and go.”

Kimmel needn’t have worried. No one in this crowd was going to rock the boat, even to the extent of going thirty seconds over his or her allotted time in the spotlight.

The various special presentations, musical numbers and video clips were peppered with references to “inclusion” and “diversity,” some of them more sincere than others. There were a number of Spanish-speaking personalities in particular who spoke, somewhat obliquely, in defense of immigrants, under ferocious attack by both the Trump administration and the Democrats in Congress.

Del Toro, accepting the award for best director, commented, “I am an immigrant like [fellow Mexican directors] Alfonso [Cuarón] and Alejandro [G. Iñárritu], my compadres. Like Gael [García Bernal], like Salma [Hayek] and like many, many of you.

“In the last 25 years I’ve been living in a country all of our own. Part of it is here, part of it is in Europe, part of it is everywhere. Because I think that the greatest thing our art does and our industry does is to erase the lines in the sand. We should continue doing that when the world tells us to make them deeper.”

The media made much of various Oscar gender and racial “firsts,” but not every nominee or winner was prepared to go along. Kazuhiro Tsuji, who came out of retirement to do hair and makeup on *Darkest Hour*, rejected any discussion of his being the “first Asian individual” to win an Academy Award in that category. The makeup artist told the media backstage, “I don’t want to think about [being] Asian. I’m just doing what I love to do. As soon as we start to think about the race we are, it’s not good. It doesn’t work well.”

But such elementally decent and democratic views, representative of both working film artists and the population at large, were honorable exceptions at the Dolby Theatre Sunday night. By and large, the wealthy, complacent and self-involved held sway.

(Speaking of wealth, one of the advertisements run during the Oscars broadcast is worth taking note of. The spot from Swiss luxury watchmaker Rolex celebrated “masters of cinema,” Academy Award-winning directors James Cameron, Martin Scorsese, Kathryn Bigelow and Alejandro G. Iñárritu. That the dull technocrat Cameron, CIA accomplice Bigelow and the hysterical, misanthropic Scorsese and Iñárritu chose to

associate themselves with a product identified with the super-rich tells us a good deal about the character of their “cinema.” One of the more affordable Rolex watches, the Oyster Perpetual Datejust 41, goes for \$12,700.)

In any event, the high point of the dominance of feminism and racialism occurred during the special segment set aside for the #MeToo campaign, a wing of the Democratic Party.

Actresses Ashley Judd, Annabella Sciorra and Salma Hayek, all of whom have accused Weinstein of sexual misconduct, appeared jointly on stage to thunderous applause. Sciorra insisted that “a new path has emerged.” Judd, who seriously considered running as a Democrat for the US Senate seat from Kentucky in 2014, asserted, “The changes we are witnessing are being driven by the powerful sound of new voices, of different voices, of *our* voices, joining together in a mighty chorus that is finally saying Time’s Up.” Hayek added, “So we salute those unstoppable spirits who kicked ass and broke through the biased perceptions against their gender, their race and ethnicity to tell their stories.”

Judd then claimed they would work “to make sure that the next 90 years empower these limitless possibilities of equality, diversity, inclusion, intersectionality. That’s what this year has promised us.”

The trio’s introduction was followed by a video featuring Weinstein accuser Mira Sorvino (who recently stabbed Woody Allen in the back), directors Greta Gerwig (*Lady Bird*), Jordan Peele (*Get Out*), Lee Daniels (*Precious*), Dee Rees (*Mudbound*), Ava DuVernay (*Selma*), Barry Jenkins (*Moonlight*), actress Geena Davis (*Thelma and Louise*), comic Sarah Silverman and others. The various talking heads once again extolled the virtues of “diversity” and what they referred to as “equality.” Hayek pontificated emptily about getting to the “heart of real human stories,” while Sorvino, utterly unconvincingly, spoke about upsetting the “status quo.”

Pakistani-born Kumail Nanjiani (*The Big Sick*) explained condescendingly, “Some of my favorite movies are movies by straight white dudes about straight white dudes. Now straight white dudes can watch movies starring me, and you relate to that. It’s not that hard, I’ve done it my whole life.” Thinking he was being awfully clever, but in the process letting the cat out of the bag, Nanjiani continued, “There are so many movies from different points of view that are making a ton of money. Don’t do it because it’s better for society and representation, even though it is, do it because you’ll get rich.”

Indeed. This was really a central theme of the evening’s proceedings, addressed to the studio and corporate hierarchies: “Look, *Wonder Woman* and *Black Panther* prove that a focus on gender and race is no obstacle to making bundles of cash at the box office!”

Frances McDormand’s acceptance speech was seriously off. Toward the end of her remarks, she declared she would be “so honored to have all the female nominees in every category stand with me in this room tonight, the actors...the filmmakers, the producers, the directors, the writers, the cinematographer, the composers, the songwriters, the designers. C’mon! Okay, look around everybody. Look around, ladies and gentlemen, because we all have stories to tell and projects we need financed.”

What does this possibly have to do with anything progressive?

Hand in hand with an obsession with race and gender goes support for American imperialist interests abroad. In an unprecedented move, the Academy Awards offered a tribute to the US military, currently carrying out murderous operations in dozens of countries. Native American actor and Vietnam veteran Wes Studi told the crowd, “As a veteran, I am always appreciative when filmmakers bring to the screen stories of those who have served. Over 90 years of the Academy Awards, a number of movies with military themes have been honored at the Oscars. Let’s take a moment to pay tribute to these powerful films that shine a great spotlight on those who have fought for freedom around the world.”

However, cynically smuggled into the montage of pro-war and patriotic films, including Clint Eastwood’s *American Sniper*, Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* and Christopher Nolan’s *Dunkirk*, were clips from a number of films that took a distinctly critical attitude toward the American military and its claims to be “fighting for freedom,” including William Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Fred Zinnemann’s *From Here to Eternity*, Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter*, Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*, Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* and Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*!

It was mostly rather foul. When the awards program wasn’t politically retrograde on Sunday, it was excruciatingly tedious. Money, money, money...me, me, me!

For example, it would never have entered the brain of Judd, who spent part of her youth in the region, to mention the tens of thousands of striking West Virginia teachers. Indeed, to the extent that the film celebrities’ wealth depends on a booming stock market, a “wages push” and more by the working class can only arouse their hostility. They live in a different and opposed social universe.

The various phrases about “breaking down barriers” and “inclusiveness” need to be scrutinized. There are no doubt individuals sincerely committed to broadening the subject matter of cinema and its personnel—all to the good. But a good deal of this verbiage merely serves to confuse, especially when millionaire actors or directors are dishing it out.

There is a certain historical irony at work here.

For all the chatter about *inclusion*, this identity politics trend paradoxically represents, in fact, a *narrowing* in filmmaking, away from general, broad interests, to the extent that they were represented in Hollywood, toward an exclusive concentration on an upper-middle class layer, including a section of affluent women, gays and African-Americans. It is not surprising, then, that viewership for this year’s Academy Awards fell by 19 percent from the previous year, hitting an all-time low.

Even in Hollywood’s best period there were social and historical limits on what writers and directors could say and do, imposed both by the censors and by the studios themselves. There is no need to idealize the work done within those limits. However, it could certainly be argued that the finest films spoke to the democratic and, again, with definite limits, progressive social aspirations of wide layers of the population, *including* women, African-Americans and significant portions of the working-class population.

Films such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Modern Times*, *Citizen Kane*, *High Sierra*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Double Indemnity*, *Mildred Pierce*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Monsieur Verdoux*, *Body and Soul*, *Force of Evil*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Ruthless*, *They Live by Night*, *White Heat*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, *The Breaking Point*, *A Place in the Sun* and *From Here to Eternity* offered important pictures of American life.

By contrast, many of the new “intersectional,” “diverse” films speak primarily to the selfish concerns of perhaps five to seven percent of the population. This helps account for their triviality and insubstantiality. The real problem with those earlier films, from the point of view of the identity politics promoters, was not their “whiteness” or “maleness,” but their orientation toward the overall problems of American society.

The resurgence of social struggle in the US will create more favorable conditions for richer, more nuanced, deeper-going movies. Many of those involved in Sunday night’s ceremony will disappear without leaving much of a trace.



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