

The 2019 Academy Award nominations: Filmmaking, money and identity politics

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The nominees for the 2019 Academy Awards were announced Tuesday morning at the Samuel Goldwyn Theater in Beverly Hills, California by actors Kumail Nanjiani and Tracee Ellis Ross. The awards ceremony will be held February 24 at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, Los Angeles.

Roma, directed by Alfonso Cuarón, and *The Favourite*, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, each received 10 nominations. *Roma*, sensitively focused on a maid working for a middle-class family in Mexico City in the early 1970s, is deserving of recognition—while *The Favourite*, set during the reign of Britain’s Queen Anne, is “a quirky, postmodernist jumble, flippant and salacious,” in the words of the WSWs review.

Vice (Adam McKay), the devastating portrait of Dick Cheney and a worthy choice, was named in eight categories, as was *A Star is Born* (Bradley Cooper), which has little to say about its ostensible subject, stardom and the film or entertainment business.

Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther*, which, apart “from its racist theme ... is nothing more than a conventional Hollywood ‘blockbuster,’ chock full of action sequences, explosions and the rest” (WSWS), and Spike Lee’s latest work, *BlacKkKlansman*, which also sees the world “through the prism of race,” the WSWs review wrote, and “is a largely tedious and poorly constructed work,” received seven and six nominations, respectively.

Green Book (Peter Farrelly), a more sympathetic and humane—if somewhat simplified—tale of black and white relations, set in the South during the 1960s, and *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Bryan Singer and Dexter Fletcher), about the British band Queen, both collected five nominations, while *If Beale Street Could Talk* (Barry Jenkins), with three, and the remarkable *Isle of Dogs* (Wes Anderson), with two nominations, were also named in multiple

categories.

A number of very talented performers were nominated for the four acting awards, including Christian Bale, Amy Adams and Sam Rockwell for *Vice*, Yalitza Aparicio and Marina de Tavira in *Roma*, Willem Dafoe for *At Eternity’s Gate* (Julian Schnabel), Rami Malek in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Viggo Mortensen and Mahershala Ali for *Green Book*, Regina King in *If Beale Street Could Talk* and Melissa McCarthy and Richard E. Grant in *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* (Marielle Heller).

Cuarón and McKay are deserving nominees in the Best Director category, as are their films for Best Picture. Anderson’s *Isle of Dogs*, in my view, deserves to be in the running for Best Picture and not simply for Best Animated Feature Film.

Lifeboat (Skye Fitzgerald and Bryn Mooser), nominated for Best Documentary—Short Subject, is a heart wrenching 30-minute film about desperate refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean.

Capernaum from Lebanon is a hard-hitting work about social misery, directed by Nadine Labaki. Cuarón’s *Roma*, oddly, is nominated both for Best Picture and Best Foreign Language Film.

Icebox (Daniel Sawka), *Wildlife* (Paul Dano), *Submission* (Richard Levine) and *The Rider* (Chloé Zhao) are valuable US films that were entirely passed over.

Given the choices available, the nominations seem relatively reasonable. Of course, whether one of the weakest films nominated will sweep a number of awards remains to be seen.

The American film world has many deplorable features, but even more deplorable at the moment is the manner in which the US media presents and evaluates the nominations either within the framework of box office revenue or, even more prominently, race, gender and

sexual orientation.

In terms of commercial success, CNBC pointed out that Coogler's dreadful *Black Panther* "made Academy Award history on Tuesday, becoming the first superhero movie to earn a best picture nomination in the history of the prestigious Hollywood award show." The cable channel added, crassly, the film is "also the highest-grossing film of the eight nominees, and has actually earned more money at the U.S. box office than all seven fellow nominees combined." So, presumably, the others should make way for *Black Panther* ...

The Academy officialdom is anxiously attempting to pander to what it perceives to be popular taste. It even proposed adding a category this year for "Outstanding Achievement in Popular Film," which would have been a blatant celebration of money-making, but the outcry made the organization postpone the introduction of the new award.

Academy leaders are clearly open to suggestions as to how to stop the erosion of the annual ceremony's television viewership. Only 26.5 million people watched the 2018 telecast on ABC. In 2000, some 46.3 watched the Academy Awards, and 43.7 viewed it as recently as 2014.

The Academy's problems this year have been compounded by a difficulty in finding someone to host the 91st awards ceremony. Comic Kevin Hart was announced as the host in December, but withdrew three days later as "after homophobic tweets from his past resurfaced." Later on, after Hart's appearance on the Ellen Degeneres show, intended to officially "cleanse" him of his past sins, Academy officials apparently reconsidered and wanted him to host after all. But Hart turned them down. So, for the first time since 1989, this year's ceremony will not have a single host.

As the Hart episode reveals, the media's and, to a large extent, the Hollywood establishment's obsession with sex and race continues unabated. Nothing about the world, not wars or threats of war, not economic inequality, not unprecedented political crisis or the threat of dictatorship, is nearly so riveting to these circles as ascertaining whether "progress" is being made on the percentage of women, African Americans and gays gaining a foothold in the film business.

One website (Goldderby.com) asks, "How many women are nominated beside the 10 acting contenders? (Hint: still not enough)." It explains that at "last year's Oscars women represented 23.73% of the nominees in the 20 non-gender specific categories (i.e., those other than

acting). ... This year, 53 women other than actresses are nominated at the 91st Academy Awards. With 159 men in contention, this means that women make up 25% of the nominees in the non-gender specific categories. This uptick came despite women being shut out of five races this year."

The *New York Times*, of course, is among the leaders of the pack in its mania about racial and gender quotas.

"Compared with years past," the *Times* writes, "when academy voters came under repeated #OscarsSoWhite attack for failing to nominate films that focused on black characters, the best picture selections were remarkably diverse. Besides the foreign-language *Roma*, there was *Black Panther*, which celebrates black culture. Gay rights groups have praised *The Favourite* for its depiction of a lesbian love triangle. *A Star Is Born* is about a woman on the rise.

"Even so, the acting categories were less inclusive, with one black actor and one black actress among the 20 nominees. *Crazy Rich Asians* was overlooked completely. All of the directing, cinematography, editing and original score nominees were men. 'We must do better,' the actress Amber Tamblyn wrote on Twitter." (It is worth noting that many of the commenters on Tamblyn's tweet took her to task for her fixation on gender.)

What does any of this have to do with the merits or enduring value of a film? According to the *Times'* logic, only men have been nominated in the Best Director category, so, one supposes, African American Spike Lee *had better* take home that award.

This is revolting and reactionary and has nothing to do with genuine "diversity" or "inclusion." Adding a number of affluent, self-absorbed women or African Americans to the mix will not "diversify" filmmaking in any meaningful way. It will simply widen the circle of those making a great deal of money.

As we have pointed out before, the best American films in the past, especially in the 1930s and 1940s, although they were made by a narrow demographic, actually spoke to *far wider* social interests and concerns than current films—often because they were influenced or fueled by left-wing ideas. The primary challenge today in filmmaking is a turn toward the great *social* questions of our time.



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