

On the eve of the Academy Awards ceremony

New York Times' Wesley Morris complains that eight of the films nominated for Best Picture "are about white people"

David Walsh
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New York Times critic-at-large Wesley Morris published a column February 4 (“*Dear Oscars, I Love You. But We Need to Talk.*”) in which he indicates he has no problem with the crop of films nominated for this year’s Academy Awards (to be handed out Sunday night)—except for the ethnicity of their respective writers, directors and performers.

Morris writes that “the problem isn’t with the *particular* remaining movies—*1917*, *Ford v Ferrari*, *The Irishman*, *Jojo Rabbit*, *Joker* and *Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood*—or the white people in them.” Not for a long time, in fact, the *Times* correspondent continues, “have I despised so few nominees in this category. Most of them I love.”

The fatal flaw this year lies in the fact “that eight of the nine movies (minus *Parasite*) are about white people—and, excusing *Little Women*, and Scarlett Johansson in *Marriage Story* notwithstanding, about white men.”

This is a revealing business. Morris has no difficulty with the British national-patriotism of *1917*, the political disorientation and unseriousness of *Jojo Rabbit*, the glorification of gangsterism and backwardness in *The Irishman*, the middle class self-involvement of *Marriage Story* or the “nonconformist conformism” of *Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood*.

We, on the other hand, find most of the films nominated seriously objectionable, because of their social obliviousness (with the exception of *Parasite* from South Korea and possibly *Little Women* and *Ford v Ferrari*), their shallowness and their unreality. We are not in “love” with the Academy Awards, and never have been.

The great weakness of the vast majority of the films produced by the major film studios at present is, above all, a *social* one. They are works created by a small, upper middle class fraction of society who exist at a tremendous economic, cultural and emotional distance from the mass of the population, black, white, Latino and immigrant, male and female and of every sexual orientation. In fact, Morris’ blanket endorsement of the Awards and most of the nominated films reveals that he belongs to this *same* social caste economically and philosophically, but merely has an issue with how projects and finances and awards are

distributed.

This is the essential character of identity politics: a bitter struggle for wealth and power among the richest five, six and seven percent of the population.

Along with many of his colleagues at the *Times*, Morris, the ideological product of decades of identity politics and the sharp shift to the right in intellectual circles, promotes a thoroughly racist interpretation of history and culture. He can hardly perceive anything else aside from race. In the circles he travels in, the use of such terms and language as these have become appallingly pervasive: “old white voters,” “whiteness *is* part of that story,” “white American maleness,” “nonwhite people,” etc.

What does it mean to say that “that eight of the nine movies ... are about white people” and most of them “about white men”? As we once noted about *Times* columnist Charles Blow, Morris is not an extreme right-winger, but he thinks and writes like one.

The critic who discusses a serious film or novel and registers little more than—or subordinates its other qualities to—the ethnicity or nationality of the creator is closed off from what actually makes it a work of art, its relatively universal quality, its objectively truthful character. He or she has also embarked on a very dangerous course, which leads to the sinister politics of blood and nation.

Morris argues that “*Little Women* quietly dramatizes the freedom white women experience after the men have left to fight a war; a war to end the enslavement of black people. Sounds a little too ironic, and yet the movie means us to understand the irony. Those white ladies are better off than any black people. They’re just not equal to the women’s enlisted brothers, fathers and beaus. The border between their time and ours has a gusty permeability.”

Little Women, for whatever limitations it may have both as a work designed for young people and as an artistic effort created by Louisa May Alcott (and film director Greta Gerwig), is not principally or enduringly about “white women,” or “white ladies,” as Morris condescendingly writes, but rather the social and moral significance of the Civil War era for American society as a whole refracted through the experiences and perceptions of one lower middle class household in Massachusetts.

As we suggested in a review of Gerwig's film, the marked saturation of everyday life with the intensity and urgency of the epoch has helped provide the work its lasting qualities. What *Little Women* reveals, perhaps inadvertently, was that the entire socially conscious population of the North, fighting men or not, were engaged in the struggle to destroy slavery and bring about "a new birth of freedom." Its broader implications dominated their lives, including its most mundane aspects.

The Alcott family was strongly supportive of the Abolitionist and Northern cause, with Alcott endangering her life to nurse Union soldiers. However, all that comes through for Morris in regard to *Little Women* as a book and film are the unequal relations at the time between blacks and whites, men and women, because all that meaningfully counts for him *today* is his position relative to other racial or gender groupings and how that position might be improved.

It should be recalled that Morris was definitely not enamored with the film that earned the Academy Award as best picture last year. He was one of the voices, before and after the awards ceremony, loudly denouncing *Green Book*, directed by Peter Farrelly, in which an African American musician hires an Italian American to chauffeur him through the Jim Crow South in the early 1960s.

Morris published a foul piece in the *Times*, "Why Do the Oscars Keep Falling for Racial Reconciliation Fantasies?," in January a year ago, implying that understanding and solidarity between the races in America was a utopian fantasy because there was simply too much "bad blood." He sneered that *Green Book* symbolized "a style of American storytelling in which the wheels of interracial friendship are greased by employment, in which prolonged exposure to the black half of the duo enhances the humanity of his white, frequently racist counterpart."

The *Times* columnist dolled up his indictment of *Green Book* with "left" phrases and, as we noted at the time, took advantage of the somewhat clumsy character of Hollywood liberals' approach to race and a host of other problems. However, his attack on Farrelly's film and others like it, we argued, was in essence "a *right-wing* attack, from the standpoint of racialism, communalism and the strivings of a social layer 'on the make.' Whatever the failings of *Green Book*, for example, its elementary notion that people of varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds can overcome their differences and find common ground is in a different intellectual league from Morris's pernicious racialism."

One of the more deplorable features of Morris' new article is its suggestion that the absence of African American directors and performers among those nominated this year is the instinctive, presumably hostile response to previous advances by "nonwhites." This seems to be a not-so-distant echo of the malicious and false contention that Donald Trump came to power in 2016 as part of a wave of "white racist" reaction to Barack Obama.

Along these lines, Morris notes the fact that this year a number of the nominated works are historical films and concludes that "the convenient thing about the past is that you can solve the matter of race by pretending it doesn't exist." As though that was all there was to it! In fact, filmmaking *does* shy away from confronting the present in a lively and insightful manner—not because of a racial

bias but an incapacity or unwillingness to confront the burning and threatening problems of social inequality, the growth of political reaction, the danger of war. (One of the issues, incidentally, that filmmakers are especially nervous about taking on at present is the filthy role of racial and gender politics and its champions in American social life.)

Carrying on with his theme, Morris asserts that after all the "hash tags and threatened boycotts," the fates of various African American-directed films (such as *Get Out*, *Black Panther*, *BlacKkKlansman* and *Moonlight*), after "the touted diversification campaigns and calls for 'inclusion riders,'" the assembly of this year's nominated films "feels like a body's allergic reaction to its own efforts at rehabilitation." This is the type of right-wing opinion the *Times* inflicts upon the public on an almost daily basis.

What does Morris propose or envision? He rejects, he claims, subjecting the Academy Award nominees to vetting or "damage control ... the way the muckety-mucks who operate the Grammys are rumored to do. *Guys, too many whites! We got to get Queen & Slim in here,*" but there is a logic to ethno-centric positions.

Morris and the *Times* encourage this: the creation of a new category for Best Picture by a Black Director, or Best Picture about a Black Person, or Best Picture with a Nonwhite Actress in a Leading or Supporting Role, and so on. And there are more than a few ardent reactionaries in America who would like to see a Best Picture about a White Person category. There will be the White Awards and the Black Awards, and perhaps other ethnicities can establish their own versions of the Oscars. The Gay Oscars is a promising idea.

Instead, we propose a struggle against the narrowness, fearfulness and triviality of so much of contemporary filmmaking, in favor of "a definite and important feeling for the world," an artistic coming to terms with life as it is from the point of view of radically changing it.



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