

# 2020 Academy Awards: Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* from South Korea wins major awards

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11 February 2020

The South Korean film *Parasite*, directed by Bong Joon-ho, won four major awards at the 2020 Academy Awards Sunday night in Los Angeles. It earned both the best picture and best international feature film awards, an unprecedented event, and Bong won the prizes for best director and best original screenplay.

Sam Mendes' *1917* earned three awards (including veteran Roger Deakins for best cinematography), while Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood*, James Mangold's *Ford v Ferrari* and Todd Phillips' *Joker* each won two. Joaquin Phoenix (*Joker*) and Renee Zellweger (Rupert Goold's *Judy*) collected the best actor and best actress awards, with Brad Pitt (*Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood*) and Laura Dern (Noah Baumbach's *Marriage Story*) winning in the best supporting actor and actress categories.

As we noted in January, when the award nominations were announced: "Films that took a sharper look at American and global life, including Todd Haynes's *Dark Waters*, Steven Soderbergh's *The Laundromat*, Gavin Hood's *Official Secrets*, Dan Gilroy's *Velvet Buzzsaw* and Destin Daniel Cretton's *Just Mercy*, received no nominations."

Moreover, Roman Polanski's *J'accuse* (*An Officer and a Spy*), a dramatized account of the Dreyfus affair in France in the 1890s, one of the best films of the year, did not receive an award or a nomination because the #MeToo campaign has intimidated prospective distributors and prevented its distribution in the US. For that matter, Woody Allen's *A Rainy Day in New York* has not been able to find a distributor either. This new blacklisting goes virtually unreported in the American media.

*Parasite* deserved to win the most serious awards. It was markedly superior to every other film up for consideration. Bong's effort is a complex, troubling work about the social, economic and psychological disaster represented by the vast gap between rich and poor. Two families, the Kims and the Parks, who ordinarily live at the opposite ends of society, are suddenly brought into close proximity, with terrible consequences. The climactic scene culminates in an eruption of class anger.

As we noted in our original review, South Korea is one of the most socially unequal societies on the planet. Bong's film spells out, in a thoughtful and logical manner, the *inevitable* results of such a division: the impoverished will do almost anything to emerge from their nightmarish conditions, subsisting literally in the underworld. The pampered rich, living in a cocoon, are utterly unprepared for the envy, anger and violence their dominance and arrogance provokes.

Bong told the *Guardian* recently that "Korea, on the surface, seems like a very rich and glamorous country now, with K-pop, high-speed internet and IT technology ... but the relative wealth between rich and

poor is widening. The younger generation, in particular, feels a lot of despair."

The director, in the film's production notes, pointed to the fact that "in this sad world humane relationships ... cannot hold." *Parasite*, he explains, depicts "ordinary people" who descend into an "unavoidable" collision. The film is "a comedy without clowns, a tragedy without villains."

Bong told an interviewer last year, "I think all creators, all artists, and even just everyone, we are always interested in class, 24/7, I think it would actually be strange if we're not. ... I think we all have very sensitive antennae to class, in general." Unfortunately, as the vast majority of films nominated for Academy Awards this year indicates, this is not the case. The attention certainly of most American filmmakers is firmly on themselves and their ethnic, gender and sexual identities.

It is not clear that Bong, who describes his background and present circumstances as thoroughly middle class, is particularly left-wing in his thinking. He may merely be more observant and honest than most in the film world. (His lack of clarity found expression Sunday night in his friendly comments—to the extent they were not merely polite or diplomatic—directed toward fellow best director nominees Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino, by whom he claimed to have been inspired. In fact, *Parasite* is opposed in every significant way to the murky, misanthropic efforts of Scorsese and Tarantino.) Bong has been paying attention in his films to developments in South Korean society for two decades, with such works as *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000), *Memories of Murder* (2003), *Mother* (2009), *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Okja* (2017).

The sweeping triumph of a South Korean film about class resentment and conflict at the Academy Awards has a certain objective significance, no matter what the rest of the Awards program may have been like and no matter how the voters may slip back and delude themselves, as they are wont to do, in subsequent years. Despite all the efforts by the media, the Academy hierarchy and the political establishment generally to drown culture in race and gender, the social questions emerge.

And those efforts Sunday night were considerable. The organizers of the Awards ceremony were stung and disappointed by the outcome of the nominating process, which resulted in only one black performer nominated for an acting award (Cynthia Erivo in *Harriet*) and no female directors. The last weeks have been dominated by the subsequent media "furor."

The *New York Times*, inevitably, played a leading role. The *Times*, for example, referred in one recent article to "the Oscars' most noted offscreen controversy—the glaring whiteness and maleness of many of

the major categories and movies.” And another piece observed: “Going into the 92nd Academy Awards, the headlines were about what we wouldn’t see: no J. Lo [Jennifer Lopez for *Hustlers*], no female filmmakers of top films, almost no people of color in the acting categories.” And the relentless *Times* commented further: “Old Hollywood—and the way it is represented by the academy and its nominations—has been under the microscope for awhile now, whether because of #OscarsSoWhite or #MeToo or the lack of recognition of female directors.”

In our view, American filmmaking is truly deficient at this point in an objectively rooted social and moral compass, oriented to the problem of social inequality and class, as well as the great threats confronting the population, authoritarian rule and war. The filmmaker who is oblivious to these questions, whatever his or her gender, race or orientation, will have little of value to say to an audience.

This year, in response to the angry response to the nominations and the resulting pressures, the organizers of the Awards event did everything within their power to inject race and gender politics into their program Sunday night, to an obvious extent. Desperately overcompensating for their failure to nominate the “proper” number of “nonwhite” and “nonmale” personalities, the Academy made certain that there would be no such complaints when it came to the presenters, singers, comics and musicians, and their various comments about female or black “representation.”

This sort of campaign does not address the legitimate, democratic question of the cultural education and involvement of vast numbers of young people, of all colors and genders, who are excluded from participating in the film, television and music industry because of their social background and economic conditions. What’s involved in the Academy’s “diversity” program is the conformist acceptance of the cultural status quo and the mere redistribution of a portion of the existing positions and wealth to African American, female and gay individuals, already affluent in many cases.

This appeals only to a relatively thin layer of the population. No doubt various factors account for the continuing decline of the Academy Awards’ television audience, which reached its lowest level in history Sunday night, 23.6 million people, but the self-involved, often self-pitying emphasis on race and gender is not widely and popularly appealing.

For example, this moment, described by ABC News, was simply grating: “[Actresses] Sigourney Weaver, Gal Gadot and Brie Larson joined together on stage to introduce a groundbreaking performance of this year’s nominated best original scores.

“‘We want to celebrate the first time in the 92-[year] history of the Academy Awards—a female conductor will be leading the orchestra for this performance,’ Weaver said.

“With Gadot and Larson by her side, Weaver said, ‘all women are superheroes.’”

The *New York Times* took the unusual step of running an advertisement for their racist and discredited “The 1619 Project” during the Awards ceremony. The spot featured actress-singer Janelle Monáe (who actually opened the program with a musical number), as one publication described it, “standing alone on the Virginia shore. The water swirls behind her and the camera pulls in closer as she recites the following words: ‘In August 1619, a ship appeared on this horizon near Point Comfort, Virginia. It carried more than 20 enslaved Africans who were sold to the colonists. No aspect of the country we know today has been untouched by the slavery that followed. America was not America, but this was the moment it began.’”

*Times* ad concluded with this title: “The truth change how we see the world. The truth is worth it.”

Democratic Party politics dominate the Hollywood film world. In a reference to the recently concluded impeachment trial of Donald Trump, Brad Pitt, accepting his award for best supporting actor (for Quentin Tarantino’s *Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood*), quipped, “They told me I only had 45 seconds, and that’s 45 seconds more than the Senate gave John Bolton this week.” Bolton, of course, is the extreme reactionary and warmonger with whom the Democrats formed a de facto alliance after his claims about Trump and Ukraine in an upcoming book were leaked to the media.

The success of *Parasite* at the Academy Awards was generally praised by the American media. But not everyone was happy. Of course, an avowedly right-wing columnist last week headlined his comment, “Bong Joon-ho’s ‘Parasite’ Is Overrated, Implausible, Class-Struggle Nonsense.”

Aside from such reactionaries, however, a few other nervous voices were raised. Critic Ann Hornaday in the *Washington Post*, in particular, has made it known that the prominence of *Parasite* was not pleasing to her. Hornaday’s tack was to treat *Parasite* as though it were simply a variation on the Tarantino-style cinema of gratuitous violence and avoid its social content. “The techniques and tropes Bong repurposes so adroitly in *Parasite*,” she wrote, resorting to feminist jargon, “make the film feel both original and oddly familiar, the product of the male gaze that still holds sway in Hollywood.”

Speaking of the Awards ceremony, Hornaday asserted that “clips from the best picture nominees played out like so many boys-with-their-toys wish-fulfillment fantasies, complete with swagger, cars that go vroom and women who are either silenced or virtually absent.” How could Greta Gerwig’s *Little Women* compete “against so many films that mythologized Big Men?” Lumping in *Parasite* with the confused and even disoriented *Joker*, the *Post* critic described the two films as “derivative and insular, a self-referential grab bag of ‘cool’ visual style—often involving bloody violence—in service to narratives that were either flimsy or just plain shallow.”

The *Washington Post* is owned by Jeff Bezos, the richest man in the world, who was in the Academy Awards audience in Los Angeles the other night. He too might well agree that the unsettling ideas propelling *Parasite* are “either flimsy or just plain shallow.”



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