2021 Academy Awards nominations: Sticking their heads in the sand

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The nominations for this year's Academy Awards were announced Monday morning. The annual ceremony will be held April 25 at two locations, Union Station in downtown Los Angeles and Hollywood's Dolby Theatre. Due to the ongoing pandemic, only presenters, nominees and their guests will be allowed to attend the event.

Media coverage has concentrated largely on the greater "diversity" represented by this year's nominees. As *Variety* explained, with an audible sigh of relief, "Nine actors of color earned Academy Award nominations on Monday, setting an Oscar record for diversity in those categories. … The achievement comes after years of aggressive efforts by the Academy to diversify its membership in the wake of all-white acting nominees for the 2015 and 2016 ceremonies. … This year, thankfully, was quite different."

Along the same lines, the *Hollywood Reporter* took note of the fact, with the nominations in 2021, for the first time in the awards history, "more than one female director has been nominated in the best director category." Chloé Zhao (*Nomadland*) and Emerald Fennell (*Promising Young Woman*) were both nominated, "with Zhao also becoming the first non-white woman to be nominated."

In total, the nominations announced Monday included 70 women receiving 76 nominations, a record for a given year.

"With her fourth nomination," continued the *Hollywood Reporter*, "best actress nominee Viola Davis (*Ma Rainey's* [*Black Bottom*]) is now the most-nominated Black actress in Oscar history, and the only one with two lead acting nods." With six nominations, *Judas and the Black Messiah* "made history in multiple regards: The film's best picture nomination marks the first time an all-Black produced film was nominated in that category."

Variety also pointed out that " *Minari* star Steven Yeun became the first Asian American ever nominated for best actor; in the same category, *Sound of Metal* star Riz Ahmed became the first person of Pakistani descent ever nominated for any acting Oscar. And Yeun's *Minari* costar Yuh-Jung Youn, a supporting actress nominee, is the first Korean person ever nominated for an acting Oscar."

The pleased and the aggrieved vied for attention in the media on Tuesday. For every ethnic or gender category that registered an "advance," there was one that felt "snubbed." The division of the spoils always leaves some dissatisfied and resentful.

So, we read in the headlines, "Oscar nominations so-not-white this year" (*Los Angeles Times*), "Finally, More Than 1 Woman Was Nominated For Best Director In The Same Year" (*HuffPost*), "Oscar nominations 2021: Let's choose diversity to reflect America" (*Chicago Tribune*), "Can more diverse nominees save awards shows?" (*CBC News*)—but also, "People of colour and women make historic breakthroughs at the Oscars, but diversity still has a ways to go" (*Toronto Star*) and "2021 Oscar nominations snubs and surprises: Asian actors make history, Black directors miss out" (*Yahoo Entertainment*). And certain media outlets were even unhappier, for instance, "Oscars Snub LGBTQ+ Actors and Films Amid Other Wins in Representation" (*Advocate*).

Race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation are nearly everything. A de facto quota system has been implemented, where only the *quantities* of the proper ingredients count. No one thinks to ask about the artistic *qualities* of the works in question. Which of this year's films most successfully comes to terms with the way things are in the US or globally? Which sheds the most intense light on contemporary existence?

After a year of unparalleled crisis, in a country where more than half a million people have died due to government policy, in the aftermath of an attempted fascist coup, the film industry has decided to pretend that everything has gone back to "normal." Joe Biden is in the White House, and all's right with the world. The nominations suggest a deliberate, collective act of sticking of one's head in the sand, as much as anything else.

Mank, with Gary Oldman as screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz, a fictional account of the writing of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), received a surprising 10 nominations.

Six films received six nominations each: *The Father*, with

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Anthony Hopkins as a man stricken with dementia; *Judas and the Black Messiah*, about the killing of Black Panther Fred Hampton in December 1969; *Minari*, in which a Korean-American family tries farming in Arkansas in the 1980s; *Nomadland*, which focuses on mostly aging victims of economic conditions in the US; *Sound of Metal*, centered on a heavy metal drummer losing his hearing; and *The Trial of the Chicago 7*, about the trial of those accused of organizing a riot at the Democratic national convention in August 1968.

Netflix, with 35 nominations, came close to the record for a distributor set by United Artists in 1941, which garnered 45. None of the major studios were represented in this year's best picture category.

The most shameful and revealing omission was the failure of the Academy voters to nominate *The Mauritanian*, directed by Kevin Macdonald, in any category. The best film of the past 12 months by far takes an unsparing look at the treatment of Mohamedou Ould Salahi, incarcerated without charges at the Guantánamo detention camp for 14 years. The Hollywood Foreign Press Association at least managed to nominate Jodie Foster (who won) and Tahar Rahim for Golden Globe Awards as best supporting actress and best actor, respectively, for their roles in Macdonald's film.

It seems that Hollywood is far more well disposed toward films about torturers than ones about their victims. Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*, a falsified account of the killing of Osama bin Laden, which sympathetically treats the life and hard times of CIA and military torturers, was nominated for five awards in 2013, although, in the end, it only took home one. Bigelow had already received the best director award for *The Hurt Locker*, a pro-military whitewash of the US intervention in Iraq, in 2010.

One would not know it by reading the commentary surrounding the 2021 Academy Awards nominations, but filmmaking is an art form, a means by which the film artist potentially communicates important truth to other people in the form of concrete imagery. According to this way of thinking, the value of a work is measured by the significance of the thoughts and feelings it conveys, not by its ability to advance the political interests or enhance the economic opportunities of this or that race or gender.

The obsession with personal identity is a sign of advanced intellectual and artistic decline. Careerism and the striving for privileges play their definite role, but the identity politics mania also distracts and diverts susceptible social layers from paying attention to the pandemic, the threat of authoritarianism and Washington's relentless drive for war against Iran, Russia, China and other "national enemies."

In December, we wrote quite critically about *Mank* , which offers a seriously misleading, semi-falsified account of screenwriter Mankiewicz' role, or purported role, in the creation of *Citizen Kane*. As we pointed out, director David Fincher, working from a screenplay by his father, Jack Fincher, "turns [Orson] Welles … into Mankiewicz's enemy and oppressor. … Welles here is an abrasive pest, an interloper in the creative process."

Nonetheless, it may be necessary to defend Fincher and *Mank* from their identity politics critics, who are already grumbling about the film's ten nominations. Alyssa Rosenberg, for example, who writes about "the intersection of culture and politics" for the *Washington Post*, complains that the film's success Monday is "a perfect illustration of the depths of Hollywood's self-absorption."

Rosenberg unfavorably contrasts *Mank* with a number of this year's best picture nominations, including *Promising Young Woman*, "about a young woman seeking revenge for the rape—and eventual suicide—of her childhood best friend," a work that is "a genuine provocation, asking questions about the lines between justice and vengeance."

After praising several of the nominated films, including *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Judas and the Black Messiah*, Rosenberg urges her readers to "put *Mank* at the bottom of the queue. Let Hollywood obsess over its past, and focus on the films that will carry both the industry, and those of us watching at home, into the future." This is intellectually sinister advice.

It isn't simply a matter of *Hollywood's* past. *Mank*, as we argued, touches upon "intriguing and weighty historical and ideological questions," including the role of media mogul William Randolph Hearst, writer and reformer Upton Sinclair's quasi-socialist "End Poverty in California" (EPIC) movement in 1934, the radicalization produced by the Great Depression, the specific artistic contributions of Welles, Mankiewicz and others, and more.

One can disagree sharply with how Fincher's *Mank* treats these matters, but Rosenberg's approach is essentially a right-wing, anti-historical, identity politics critique, far more smug, insular and self-absorbed than *Mank* itself. The *Post* column and the general reaction to this year's nominations constitute further proof that the slogan of "diversity" under the present conditions often actually amounts to a *narrowing* of filmmaking's scope.

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