

The 93rd Academy Awards ceremony: Racial politics and other problems

David Walsh
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The Academy Awards ceremony Sunday night was distinctive both because it occurred in the midst of a catastrophic pandemic, which was barely mentioned, and because organizers made every effort to see to it—fortunately not always successfully—that race and gender dominated the affair from beginning to end. The latter element of the broadcast in particular left a distinctly unpleasant taste in one’s mouth. At the same time, a number of worthy or intriguing performances and films were also honored.

The American media now almost universally agrees that the success or failure of the annual event is directly tied to the number of black, female and Asian award-winners. This has created a deplorable, debased atmosphere. Artistic quality or social significance hardly merits a reference. In so far as academy voters resist the de facto race and gender quota system (soon to be codified), they are subject to sharp criticism and censure. More on this issue below.

The April 25 ceremony—produced by Steven Soderbergh, Jesse Collins and Stacey Sher and directed by Glenn Weiss—was held in two different locations in Los Angeles, with attendance limited to nominees and their guests. *Nomadland* took the best picture award and its director, Chinese-born Chloé Zhao, won for best directing, the second woman to collect the latter award and the first “woman of color.” Frances McDormand won her third best actress award for the same movie.

British actors Anthony Hopkins (*The Father*, Florian Zeller), 83, and Daniel Kaluuya (*Judas and the Black Messiah*, Shaka King) won for best actor and best supporting actor, respectively, while veteran South Korean actress Yuh-Jung Youn (*Minari*, Lee Isaac Chung), 73, earned the best supporting actress prize. The original screenplay honor went to Emerald Fennell for *Promising Young Woman* (also directed by Fennell). *Soul* (Pete Docter and Kemp Powers) took home awards for best animated feature and original score. *The Father* won for best adapted screenplay (Christopher Hampton and Zeller).

David Fincher’s *Mank*, about the writing of *Citizen Kane*, nominated in 10 categories, won in two, best production design and cinematography. Ma Rainey’s *Black Bottom* (George C. Wolfe) won for costume design and makeup-hairstyling, while

Sound of Metal (Darius Marder) took the awards for best film editing and sound. Denmark’s *Another Round* (Thomas Vinterberg) won in the international feature film category.

Nomadland, which follows a number of older Americans forced out in the road in their recreational vehicles by the crash of 2008, has decent and moving elements. In our review, we noted that the film “alternates between an implied criticism of the deplorable conditions it touches upon and an inappropriate celebration of the nomads’ resilience, ‘stick-to-it-iveness’ and ‘pioneer’ lifestyle, with the latter approach unhappily winning out.”

In the comments by Zhao and others connected with the film, one would not be able to discern any connection between the harsh economic conditions facing wide layers of the population and the finished product. *Nomadland* is the sort of generally well-intentioned, but relatively toothless work, containing a healthy dose of wishful thinking, that tends to appeal to academy voters.

The best film of last year by far, *The Mauritanian* (Kevin Macdonald), received no nominations at all. The most artistically successful film, *Minari*, lost out in the most important categories, as did the politically most hard-hitting, *Judas and the Black Messiah*. Nonetheless, both of those films earned some degree of recognition, as did, honorably enough, *Sound of Metal*, *The Father*, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, *Soul* and even *Mank*.

The atmosphere at the awards ceremony, in that sense, was for the most part worse than the films themselves (with the most prominent exception of the dreadful, sophomoric feminist-revenge fantasy, *Promising Young Woman*, the one sop to the #MeToo brigade).

Actress-director Regina King (*One Night in Miami*) began the evening by referring briefly to the COVID-19 pandemic and the incidence of police killings. In regard to police violence, she adopted the approach common to this upper-middle-class milieu, that this was a problem affecting only African Americans, asserting that “as a mother of a Black son, I know the fear that so many live with. No amount of fame or fortune changes that.”

Police murder would be raised several additional times in the course of the evening, but always in exclusively racial terms.

Accepting the award for best short film (live action) for *Two Distant Strangers*, the work's co-director Travon Free, for example, observed: "Today the police will kill three people. And tomorrow the police will kill three people and the day after that, the police will kill three people because on average, the police in America every day kill three people. Which amounts to about 1,000 people a year. And those people happen to disproportionately be black people." Logically then, those "people" must also include hundreds of white people and others, but Free did not care to discuss that.

A few of the award winners made decent, humane comments. Pete Docter, co-director of *Soul*, pointed out that the principal character of his film was "a music teacher. We want to thank music teachers and art teachers everywhere. You...make the world a better place. And my wish for all of us tonight is that we could follow the example of jazz musicians that wherever we are, whatever we have, we turn it into something beautiful." Zhao spoke with sincerity, arguing that "People at birth are inherently good. ... Even though sometimes it might seem like the opposite is true. But I have always found goodness in the people I met, everywhere I went in the world."

The best statement of the night was offered by Yuh-Jung Youn of South Korea, in her post-awards comments to the media. Responding to the incessant questions about the importance of her victory as an "Asian woman" and speaking in her limited English, Youn made her point clear enough. She suggested that "we should embrace each other" and that it was not a good idea to "divide" people. "Color doesn't matter. Gender doesn't matter. ... I don't know how to divide—divide like, you know, like this, man, woman, or black and white, yellow, brown, or the gender, you know, gay or straight or something like that. I don't want that kind of thing. So just we are equal human beings. We have the same warm heart."

This is certainly *not* how the *New York Times* sees things. Its review of the ceremony noted approvingly that, in many ways, "the 93rd Oscars amounted to a celebration of diversity, an issue that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has emphasized in wake of the #OscarsSoWhite protests of 2015 and 2016, when its acting nominees were all white. This year, nine of the 20 acting nominations went to people of color."

A *Hollywood Reporter* columnist observed a trifle nervously, however, that while the Oscars producers' effort on behalf of diversity was "admirable," he couldn't help "but wonder what middle-America made of the fact that only four of the 18 presenters—Bryan Cranston, Brad Pitt, Harrison Ford and Joaquin Phoenix—were white males."

One suspects, in fact, that a good deal of "middle-America" is sick and tired of the wealthy, self-satisfied, race and gender-fixated crowd that dominates the entertainment world. Although a number of factors are no doubt at work, the sharp decline in viewers unquestionably reflects a general hostility toward or lack of interest in the present movie industry.

This year's audience numbers, *Variety* according to "staggering low." Sunday's ceremony turned in "the lowest rated telecast in the show's history—by a sizable margin" (CNN). The awards show, commented the cable news network, "drew an average of 9.8 million viewers for ABC," 58 percent below the ratings from last year's show, "the previous lowest-rated Oscars, which brought in 23.6 million viewers." Among adults 18–49, the ratings fell by 64.2 percent. Only seven years ago, 40 million people watched the broadcast.

The award ceremony organizers judge the rest of the world, including academy voters, by their own standards and concerns. They were so convinced that the late Chadwick Bozeman, the fine African-American actor who died in August 2020, would win the best actor award for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* that they broke tradition and scheduled the latter award as the final segment of the broadcast. When Anthony Hopkins's name was read out, the ceremony collapsed in a dispirited whimper. With no disrespect to Bozeman, the organizers made fools of themselves and got precisely what they deserved.

The Academy Awards are always a peculiar, circumscribed business, mirroring the entertainment industry and the tastes, illusions and social interests of its different layers and professions. One would make a mistake treating the awards ceremony as a major social or even artistic event. The actor-celebrities on hand are often talented, appealing individuals, but they are not necessarily (or even often) gifted with tremendous social insight—at the best of times.

The element of self-involvement and self-congratulation (exhibited too by a number of the award winners) remains a debilitating handicap, as the overall quality of contemporary filmmaking reveals. As we suggested above, a deadly pandemic, responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths in the US and millions worldwide, hardly received a mention Sunday night. Not a word about the January 6 fascist coup attempt, an episode unprecedented in the history of the US. Nothing either about the ongoing jobs slaughter in the arts field and the film industry. Nothing about any of this.



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