The “safe,” “familiar” and “reassuring” 2023 Academy Awards: tedious, self-involved and distant from the population

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At the 95th Academy Awards ceremony Sunday night in Los Angeles, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* won seven awards, including for best picture, best director and original screenplay (Daniel Kwan, Daniel Scheinert), best lead actress (Michelle Yeoh), best supporting actress and actor (Jamie Lee Curtis and Ke Huy Quan) and best editing (Paul Rogers).

Four prizes went to the German anti-war film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Edward Berger), based on the 1929 World War I novel by Erich Maria Remarque: best cinematography (James Friend), best international feature film, best original score (Volker Bertelmann) and best production design.

The Whale, directed by Darren Aronofsky, earned two awards, including best lead actor for Brendan Fraser. Guillermo del Toro’s *Pinocchio* carried off the prize for best feature animated film.

On the whole, the ceremony Sunday night exuded insularity, self-satisfaction and social indifference. No one said a word about war, the pandemic or the fascist threat. To the extent that the broadcast’s producers could manage it, the world outside the Dolby Theatre might as well not have existed.

Of course, beneath that veneer, the reality is very different. The industry faces a tremendous financial crisis, bound up with the ongoing pandemic, growing recession, technological change and political and industrial uncertainties, including the threat this year of a writers’ strike. Moreover, the pressing, increasingly unbearable social and political dilemmas cannot leave the more thoughtful artists unaffected, even if they have few avenues at present where they might register more turbulent thoughts and feelings.

The annual Academy Awards ceremony is not a setting where turbulence, much less social opposition, is permitted. It is one of the most tightly scripted and policed of the public events through which official American society attempts to convince itself and others that everything is going well. What was not remarked upon March 12 was far more significant than any of the presentations or acceptance speeches. Different factors no doubt play a role in the current quiescence, including the intimidating reality of the official insistence on “no politics” (with censure or banishment as possible punishments), which all too often translates into self-censorship. Individuals involved with *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the exposure of the horrifying slaughter of World War I, were called to the stage four times and never opened their mouths about anything.

In other cases, award winners are prevented from speaking meaningfully, about the state of the world or even about their own artistic efforts, by a debilitating combination of wealth, extreme self-involvement and the simple inability or unwillingness to make sense of complex events.

The complacent media press commented on the uneventful character of the awards this year. *Variety*’s Owen Gleiberman noted approvingly that Sunday’s ceremony “was safe, it was familiar, it was tasteful, it was reassuring. It didn’t rock the boat …” Host Jimmy Kimmel “ruffled few feathers and avoided all edge.” High praise indeed. The *Hollywood Reporter* took note of the “positive and supportive vibe of this year’s telecast [that] was unmistakable” and “acceptance speeches that were almost all brief and gracious.”

The tedium of the event and its distance from the lives and concerns of wide layers of the population account in part for the sharp decade-long decline in viewership for the Academy Awards broadcast. This year’s event drew some 18.7 million viewers in the US, up slightly from 16.6 million in 2022, but still one of the least-watched ceremonies in history. As recently as 2014, the Oscars attracted 43.6 million viewers.

Everything Everywhere All at Once is an imaginative and energetic work. It focuses, at least initially, on a hard-pressed Asian-American family who live above the laundry they own and operate. Divorce, a confrontation with the IRS and other difficulties loom. At a certain point, the film explodes in an absurdist direction, as the “multiverse” (a traversable group of parallel universes) intervenes, as it were. As the WSWS noted, the film uses this as “a loose metaphor for the hyper-connectivity of the Information Age, as well as the mutability of the human personality.”

It was not, however, the most challenging film in competition. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which did receive recognition, and *Tár* (Todd Field) and *Triangle of Sadness* (Ruben Östlund), which did not, would qualify along those lines. Independent entries such as *Aftersun* and *To Leslie* were also shut out.

At the same time, the Academy voters, to their credit, largely ignored the bombast (or worse) of *Top Gun: Maverick*, James Cameron’s *Avatar: The Way of Water* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, along with the misanthropy of Martin

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McDonagh's *The Banshees of Inisherin*.

In a sop to the #MeToo campaign, Sarah Polley won an award for best adapted screenplay for *Women Talking* (the latter, along with *She Said*, was a decided failure with audiences). Offering a "subtle" criticism of Hollywood, Polley thanked the Academy "for not being mortally offended by the words 'women' and 'talking' being so close together like that." What world do these people live in?

The Academy doesn't allow politics, except for race and gender politics and right-wing positions that correspond to the needs of the American ruling elite. Accepting the award for best feature documentary, Daniel Roher, director of *Navalny*, on the subject of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, told the Dolby Theatre audience, "I would like to dedicate this award to Navalny, to all political prisoners around the world. Alexei, the world has not forgotten your vital message to us all. We cannot, we must not be afraid to oppose dictators and authoritarianism wherever it rears its head." Navalny's wife Yulia Navalnaya told the crowd that her husband was "in prison just for telling the truth. My husband is in prison just for defending democracy."

As the WSWS has repeatedly documented, Navalny is an extreme right-wing figure who has nothing to do with the struggle for democracy. "He speaks," we recently commented, "for sections of the same Russian oligarchy that [Vladimir] Putin represents. Far from ever having been a popular figure in Russia, he has been built up systematically by the imperialist powers as part of the preparations for a regime change operation in Russia." Navalny, who is on record supporting the mass deportation of Muslim immigrants, has well-established ties "to sections of the Russian elites as well as Russia's neo-fascist scene. He has participated several times in Russian March, an annual event organized and attended by neo-fascists, ultra-nationalists and monarchists."

The Academy, for the second year in a row, refused to provide a video platform for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, unlike the Golden Globes and Grammys. Whether the fascist and anti-Semitic history and connections of Ukrainian nationalism are too notorious for the Hollywood establishment to gloss over, or whether other motives come into play, the awards organizers resorted to their "no politics" argument to explain Zelensky's absence.

As various media outlets indicated, the Academy Awards this year took place in the shadow of economic dislocation and upheaval in the film industry. In its coverage of the event, *Variety* observed that the ceremony "unfolded at a tense time for Hollywood. As consumers have shifted away from cable and towards subscription streaming services, major studios and their corporate parents have spent a lot of time and coin launching their own in-house Netflix challengers."

The entertainment industry, *Variety* continued, "has also undergone a period of consolidation, with Discovery merging with WarnerMedia, Disney buying much of 21st Century Fox and Amazon snatching MGM, deals that in the first two cases left the purchaser with a lot of debt on their balance sheet." Large investors are "increasingly concerned that major media companies are over-leveraged and that the new ways that they are making money with streaming have failed to replace the old ways they once profited from such as cable subscriptions and movie ticket sales."

In one of the starkest comments, the *Financial Times* in early January contended that "Hollywood executives are bracing for a brutal 'year of turmoil' as the entertainment business faces the combined threat of an economic recession, slower streaming growth, a cinema industry on life support and a potential writers' strike."

In 2022, the *Financial Times* pointed out that, astonishingly, "the stock market wiped more than half a trillion dollars in value from the largest entertainment groups" and that executives and analysts "do not expect any relief from the bloodbath in the coming year." The largest US media conglomerates—Disney, Warner Bros Discovery, Paramount and NBCUniversal—"collectively lost more than $10bn in operating income in 2022 because of their push into streaming … Warner Bros Discovery, the owner of HBO, has laid off hundreds of staff in the past few months as it grapples with nearly $50bn in net debt. The company has also removed dozens of shows from its HBO Max streaming service to cut costs." Meanwhile, giant Disney "abruptly replaced its chief executive in November, shortly after the company revealed that it was losing billions of dollars on streaming."

Movie theater chains remain in deep financial distress, as the cinema audience has not returned to its pre-pandemic level. The second-largest cinema owner, Cineworld, filed for bankruptcy in September 2022.

The picture that the film world presented to the public Sunday night was not an appealing one. In a relatively subdued condition, with its glamor, spectacle and controversy (real or manipulated) pushed somewhat into the background, Hollywood revealed itself "in the light of day," as it were, to be at present a dull, self-centered, unenlightening place, with very limited people running things.

What is cinema without social opposition, without addressing and reflecting the lives, difficulties and movement of the broad population? What has it been historically without that presence? Not much.

A great deal depends on the outcome of great social struggles, both in the US and internationally. The ultimate direction of filmmaking, an end to the current stagnation, although writers, directors and actors are largely unaware of it, will be profoundly influenced by the development of the mass strikes in France and Britain, the bitter protests in Greece, the upheavals in Sri Lanka, as well as the battles of Dana and rail workers, autoworkers and teachers in the US. The most thoughtful artists will find their inspiration from that quarter in the coming period.

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