

Trump, Musk and fascism, the film industry and the Academy Awards

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The 97th Academy Awards will be held at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles on Sunday night. Big questions confront the performers, filmmakers and other artists involved, as well as the rest of the population.

After five weeks, it is clear what Donald Trump and his gang of vicious reactionaries have in mind. They intend to establish a police state dictatorship, fortified by concentration camps, which includes full-scale repression of immigrants and attacks on the democratic rights of the entire population, as well as preparations for new, more calamitous wars. Public health and public education are to be destroyed, and, indeed, any hindrance to the accumulation of corporate profit and personal wealth is considered an unacceptable “restriction” and “inefficient” by the oligarchs in charge. Meanwhile, the military, CIA, FBI and every other agency of repression will get all the money they demand.

Trump declared a new cultural “Golden Age” by putting himself in charge of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and, in essence, declaring a war on “degenerate art” in line with the precepts of Hitler and Goebbels. After naming a group of has-beens and imbeciles as his special ambassadors to the film and television industry, “a great but very troubled place, Hollywood,” Trump also threatened that the latter would experience, “like The United States of America itself, The Golden Age ...!”

Opposition is building to the Trump-Musk regime, among federal and postal workers and in every section of the working class, and will grow into a firestorm. But that resistance needs greater political clarity, depth and understanding. Artists must play a role in this.

The Academy Awards ceremony’s organizers are focused on assuring that “no politics” be the watchword on Sunday, that the event be as “uncontroversial” and embalmed as possible. Presenters and potential award-winners alike will have been warned about opening their mouths. Missteps along these lines, they will have been reminded, can be career-ending.

It is not encouraging that host Conan “O’Brien typically avoids political material and has lamented jokes about ... Donald Trump,” as *Forbes* remarked. Nothing terrifies the Hollywood establishment—most of whose leading figures are identified with the Democratic Party—more than the possibility of mass political turmoil, which would also inevitably call into question the legitimacy of their deadly stranglehold over film, television and music production.

As for the films themselves, only a few of the nominations can be endorsed wholeheartedly. In both the best picture and best international feature film categories, Walter Salles’ *I’m Still Here*, from Brazil, which the WSW reviewed in mid-February, is a “serious portrait of life under Brazil’s military dictatorship” that has reached “a mass audience.” Fernanda Torres received a nomination as best actress in a leading role for Salles’ film.

No Other Land, the film that exposes Zionist violence and oppression in the West Bank and that US audiences have largely been prevented from seeing, is up for a best documentary feature award. The WSW

described *Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat* (Johan Grimmonprez), dealing with the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first president of the newly independent Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1960, as containing “valuable and educative elements,” as well as serious weaknesses. It is also in the running for the best documentary feature prize.

The Apprentice (Ali Abassi), about Donald Trump’s early days and his relationship with arch-reactionary Roy Cohn, also struggled to find a distributor in the US, thanks to legal threats and efforts at intimidation by the current president, who described the film as a “disgusting hatchet job.” Sebastian Stan (as Trump) and Jeremy Strong (as Cohn) were nominated for actor in a leading role and actor in a supporting role, respectively.

According to the *Guardian*, Stan reported that

Hollywood was so intimidated by Trump that none of his peers would appear opposite him in *Variety*’s annual Actors on Actors series, in which awards contenders quiz one another on video. “We couldn’t get past the publicists or the people representing them because they were too afraid to talk about this movie,” he said. *Variety* verified his claims.

Various media outlets assert that the overwhelming majority of the best picture nominees evince “anti-Trumpism.” This is setting the bar too low, and often means mistaking upper-middle class identity politics in one of its forms for genuine opposition. The *Guardian*, for example, claims that

The smash-hit fantasy *Wicked* could be seen as an incisive critique of racism and fascism via a green-skinned witch and talking animals.

The latter film (directed by Jon M. Chu) is a tepid, convoluted, liberal exercise, with the only moments of amusement coming from Ariana Grande, Jeff Goldblum and a few others in smaller roles. The *Guardian* writer goes on to mention *Emilia Perez*, “a French musical about a trans Mexican gangster” and

The space opera *Dune: Part Two* [which] cautions against colonization; *The Brutalist* is scathing in its portrayal of the way the US treats immigrants. *Nickel Boys* addresses head-on the institutionalized murder of young Black men in the Jim Crow south. *Anora* examines sexual exploitation and the wealth divide; *The Substance* satirizes reality TV’s obsession with eternal youth ...

And, one might add, *Conclave* argues for “tolerance” and “uncertainty,” including the sexual variety, in the Catholic Church, also weakly and blandly.

It is true, however, that the logic of representing life honestly, which always involves the element of protest, objectively sets the substantive artists against the plans and ambitions of Trump and his Nazi-loving cohort. Major collisions are inevitable.

Studio executives, for their part, have predictably extended an olive branch to the would-be dictator in the White House. The question *Variety* posed in January hardly requires answering: “Many in show business are wondering just *how close* Hollywood will cozy up to Trump in this new era.” As the publication itself pointed out, “just as staggering as the town’s silence over the encroaching Trump effect is the procession of media moguls—from Amazon executive chairman [Jeff] Bezos to Disney CEO Bob Iger—making the pilgrimage to Mar-a-Lago, settling pesky lawsuits or donating to Trump’s inaugural fund.” There is nothing “staggering” about it. These are billionaire executives, and business is business.

The film establishment will not offer resistance, any more than will the Democratic Party or the trade unions, including the entertainment unions. Neither the Writers Guild, SAG-AFTRA, IATSE, Teamsters Local 399 nor any of the other Hollywood unions has issued a statement, much less organized an action, in the face of the greatest threat to the rights of the working class in modern American history.

Meanwhile, the jobs destruction in southern California and the entertainment field as a whole continues apace, a situation dramatically worsened by the recent wave of fires. The *New York Times* pointed out in late January that

Squeezed by studio cutbacks and competition from other states and countries, film and television production in the Los Angeles region had already fallen to a near-record low last year, imperiling the livelihoods of not just casts and crews but also the caterers, drivers and many others who depend on the entertainment industry. ...

Then the fires swept through, dealing yet another blow to a region, and an industry, that had been buffeted in recent years by a pandemic and then strikes that halted production amid a rapidly changing entertainment landscape.

The Academy Awards event is especially significant under these circumstances. Notwithstanding the ceremony’s decline in viewership and the many contradictions (or worse) embodied in its staging and the awards handed out themselves, it remains a cultural event of importance. Twenty million Americans or so will still watch, in addition to many millions more around the world.

The event ought to remind film artists of the need to live up to the *best*, democratic, radical traditions of American filmmaking, not its *worst*, most self-involved, trivial and nationalistic.

Filmmaking has a long and complex history in the US. The “Hollywood system” of concentrating production into factory-like studios, “and by vertically integrating all aspects of the business, from production to publicity to distribution to exhibition,” dominated the world by 1925, “from Britain to Bengal, from South Africa to Norway and Sweden.” (*The Oxford History of World Cinema*)

But filmmaking was never simply a money-making operation. It also brought drama and excitement to the lives of vast numbers of people—in the US, many of them immigrants crowded into cities and unfamiliar with English. By 1909, astonishingly, American cinema attendance was estimated at 45 million people per week.

Leon Trotsky argued brilliantly in 1923 that the global passion for the cinema was

rooted in the desire for distraction, the desire to see something new and improbable, to laugh and to cry, not at your own, but at other people’s misfortunes. The cinema satisfies these demands in a very direct, visual, picturesque, and vital way, requiring nothing from the audience; it does not even require them to be literate. That is why the audience bears such a grateful love to the cinema, that inexhaustible fount of impressions and emotions.

Comic-director Charlie Chaplin was estimated in the mid-1910s to be the most famous man in the world. And not for nothing.

In the 1910s and 20s Chaplin’s Tramp, combating a hostile and unrewarding world with cheek and gallantry, afforded a talisman and champion to the underprivileged millions who were the cinema’s first mass audience. (David Robinson)

As opposed to many European examples, the emergence of filmmaking in the US predated or coincided with many of the country’s most important cultural achievements. Moreover, frankly, despite the protestations of the writers and directors in question in many cases, much of the country’s artistic energy and imagination flowed into the new medium (and out of the theater, for example). It was possible, in general terms at least, to gauge the state of life in the US by paying attention to its most important movies.

Not only masterpieces such as *Modern Times*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Citizen Kane*, but countless smaller, less ambitious works in the fifteen years or so from the mid-1930s to the early 1950s in particular, pictured American life in an indelible fashion. The focus of the McCarthyite witch-hunters on film writers, directors and actors was not a mad act of paranoia. Along with the elimination of anti-capitalist influence in the unions, the virtual illegalization of left-wing thought in film and its prevention in the new television field was a top priority of the American political establishment.

It is true that art cannot save the world or even itself, but art and the artists have unique responsibilities. As the example of Chaplin and others demonstrates, to be blunt, film artists were not put on this earth simply to collect a check or look pretty. They are beholden to suffering humanity to see that their work does not serve merely as a toy for their own diversion or that of the ruling elite. The greatest figures in the history of filmmaking have oriented themselves toward the sufferings, hopes and struggles of broad layers of the population. Film and television are not a technical-organizational undertaking, an empty machine for showing off one’s skill, but a critical means of communicating important truths about life and reality.

Hollywood has been the scene of bitter political struggles virtually from its inception, from the battle of writers and other workers to unionize in the 1930s, to the postwar effort to create an industrial union ferociously combated by the studios with the aid of anti-communist union officials, to the Red Scare of the 1950s and beyond. The Academy Awards themselves have been the locale of important interventions. Marlon Brando, Michael Moore and, last year, Jonathan Glazer organized or registered protests in front of a global audience. Tilda Swinton, to her credit, recently denounced “State-perpetrated and internationally enabled mass murder [that] is actively terrorising more than one part of our world right now” at the Berlin film festival.

The most significant expression of political opposition in Academy Awards history emerged, appropriately and necessarily, from the Trotskyist movement, modern Marxism.

In April 1978, when actress Vanessa Redgrave was a member of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), then the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, she used the platform afforded by the Academy Awards to issue a strong political statement.

Honored by the Academy voters for her performance as an anti-fascist fighter eventually murdered by the Nazis in Fred Zinnemann's *Julia*, Redgrave came under attack in the weeks prior to the ceremony for featuring in a documentary, *The Palestinian*, produced by the WRP.

The fascist Jewish Defense League (JDL), led by notorious right-winger Meir Kahane, organized protests against Redgrave and showings of *The Palestinian* in Los Angeles, and set off a pipe bomb at the theater where the documentary was scheduled to be shown.

In her acceptance speech, Redgrave spoke of the lead characters in *Julia*

who gave their lives and were prepared to sacrifice everything in the fight against fascist and racist Nazi Germany. ... I think you should be very proud that in the last few weeks you've stood firm and you have refused to be intimidated by the threats of a small bunch of Zionist hoodlums whose behavior is an insult to the stature of Jews all over the world and to their great and heroic record of struggle against fascism and oppression.

Today it is not a matter of "a small bunch" of such sinister figures, but a powerful Israeli state led by Zionist mass murderers. Redgrave's great advantage, of course, was that she had a worked out, coherent political perspective.

Whatever is said and done or not said and done on Sunday night, film and television writers, directors, performers and crew members need to consider with the utmost seriousness how opposition to fascism and war can be built, and their role in that process.

The political stagnation of the past number of decades, which has played its part in the general artistic retrogression and the current deplorable state of Hollywood "blockbuster" operations in particular, is giving way explosively to a new period of radicalized mobility on the part of tens of millions of workers. That will create more favorable conditions for important and enduring film and television production, production that will work its way into and influence the thinking and feeling of those tens of millions. The WSWWS will do everything in our power to contribute to that process.



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