

# The tense, explosive conditions in which the 2026 Academy Awards are being held

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The 98th Academy Awards ceremony will take place on Sunday evening at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles. Awards will be handed out in 24 categories. Given the history and importance of filmmaking in the US, the ceremony retains political and cultural significance, even if audiences have fallen sharply in recent decades.

As usual, there is speculation and prediction as to which of the more widely nominated films, *One Battle After Another*, *Sinners*, *Sentimental Value*, *Marty Supreme* or *Frankenstein*, will dominate the awards.

Paul Thomas Anderson's uneven *One Battle After Another* contains strong scenes that lay bare the American establishment's drive to brutal authoritarian rule and indict the military and ICE-like forces. It has attracted considerable attention and interest largely on that basis. *The Secret Agent*, from Brazil, concerns itself with dictatorship and fascism, while *Bugonia*—before it goes off the rails—has sequences that point to the deprivation and despair afflicting a considerable portion of the US population.

On the other hand, this being Hollywood, identity politics has a strong gravitational pull, reflected in the record number of nominations for *Sinners* and the support for *Marty Supreme*. And there is always a constituency for dramas, loaded with self-absorption and even self-pity, that press for turning away from the world and insist that everything depends on private life or family relationships: e.g., *Sentimental Value* and *Hamnet*. (One might add here *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You*, for which Rose Byrne is nominated.) The visually intriguing *Frankenstein* has elements of that tendency too, while *FI* is all bombast and noise and *Song Sung Blue* largely trivia. *Train Dreams* is oblique, grim and aimless, with unfortunate hints of Terrence Malick and second-hand Heidegger, a muddleheaded “art” picture, like France's *Sir?t* (the latter nominated in the international feature category).

The most important work up for an award is *The Voice of Hind Rajab*, directed by Tunisia's Kaouther Ben Hania, about the Israeli military's cold-blooded murder of a five-year-old girl in Gaza in January 2024. The Zionist lobby did everything in its power to prevent distribution of the film in the US. *Deadline* noted in October 2025:

A timely subject, rave reviews (97% on Rotten Tomatoes), festival accolades, an acclaimed director, the longest ever festival ovation, and a host of A-list supporters would normally all-but guarantee a movie U.S. distribution. Plenty of films this year have found a home with less in their corners. And yet, *The Voice of Hind Rajab*, the Venice Film Festival Silver Lion winner directed by two-time Oscar nominee Kaouther Ben Hania, remains without a U.S. home...

One leading U.S. buyer, who expressed strong interest in the film, claimed: “Buyers are passing out of fear and/or they disagree with the film's politics. I am very surprised.”

*The Voice of Hind Rajab* finally found a distributor in December and was given a limited American release. Thousands of actors, writers and others worldwide have conveyed their horror at the genocide in Gaza and the conduct of their governments in justifying and sustaining the mass murder. The victory of *No Other Land*, also in the face of fierce pro-Israel opposition, in the best feature documentary category a year ago, was an expression of this powerful sentiment.

This year's Academy Awards ceremony takes place under extraordinary political and social global conditions. First and foremost, the Trump-Hegseth administration and its fascist allies in the Netanyahu regime have launched a war of extermination against an oppressed country, a conflict aimed at obliterating Iranian society. This is one of the most infamous political-military actions of our time, a “crime against peace,” as defined by the anti-Nazi Nuremberg Trials, a war of aggression against a nation that represented no threat whatsoever to the United States.

The prosecution of this illegal, bloody massacre has only been possible because of the complicity of Democratic Party scoundrels/accomplices and the American media, which lies with every breath that its leading pundits and spokespeople take. The onslaught began, fittingly, with a dastardly attack on an elementary school, murdering more than 150 small girls. This is contemporary bourgeois society, “wading in blood, dripping filth,” in Rosa Luxemburg's phrase.

Hollywood's upper echelons either agree with Trump or are intimidated by him, or both. The takeover of Warner Bros. Discovery by the extreme reactionary Ellisons places more and more of the "world of entertainment and news" in the hands of those directly involved in the conduct of CIA-Pentagon conspiracies.

Absurdly, the only impact of the Iran war permitted to filter through the media is the report that the FBI and Los Angeles Police Department have "significantly increased security" at the Dolby Theatre following an alert regarding a "potential retaliatory drone threat" from Iran targeting the West Coast. One can only shake one's head in disgust. The US and Israeli military barbarians are in the process of reducing Tehran to a heap of rubble, with thousands already dead, but the American authorities' principal concern is to frighten people about a "drone threat" that has a reality only in the workings of the police mind.

The war and the general crisis of US society are combining to produce economic disaster for broad layers of the population. The price of gas and every other necessity is on the rise, including housing and cars, but for the billionaires life has never been sweeter. It will surprise no one, but the obscene accumulation of private wealth at the top of the entertainment industry continues unabated despite (or because of) the 17,000 layoffs in the field, and the tens of thousands of more job losses to come through the Paramount-Warner Bros. merger and the increasing introduction of AI.

Disney's Bob Iger collected \$45.8 million and Fox Corp.'s Lachlan Murdoch \$33 million, while Paramount Global's Bob Bakish received \$69.3 million in a severance package. Paramount Global's Chris McCarthy, George Cheeks, and Brian Robbins each received packages in the \$20 million range. Ted Sarandos and Greg Peters of Netflix have consistently been paid \$60 million each in recent years.

Actors, writers, crew members scramble to stay afloat in Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, Toronto, Vancouver and other filmmaking centers. Studios, often up to their necks in debt (Paramount-Warner Bros. will be saddled with an estimated \$90 billion), are furiously cutting costs. One commentator told *Marketplace*, "People don't want to admit it, but AI is replacing below-the-line crew, it's replacing special effects houses, it's replacing the need for directors on a lot of shoots."

A CVL Economics study found that some 118,500 film, television and animation jobs would be consolidated, replaced or entirely eliminated by generative AI by the end of this year, more than 20 percent of the total workforce.

What are the various unions doing to answer this wholesale attack on jobs and living standards?

They have concentrated on obtaining the entirely meaningless right to grant or withhold "consent" to the use of a performer's features or voice. As though the cutthroat conglomerates will be blocked from saving tens of millions or even billions of dollars by a few promises on paper! In any event, only the top

strata of actors or other performers are in a position to withhold "consent." For everyone else, proving a hindrance to the AI plans of the studios will most likely mean the end of a career.

The other "strategy" pursued by the unions has been to line up with the giant corporations in efforts to "keep jobs in L.A.," a hopeless and parochial enterprise, which only weakens and divides the workforce.

SAG-AFTRA and the Writers Guild contracts are once again expiring, on June 30 and May 1, respectively. After lengthy militant strikes in 2023, which were ultimately betrayed by the union officialdoms, the unions will do all that they can to avoid strikes this year. Nothing will change for the better until rank-and-file writers, actors, technicians, directors and others begin to take matters into their hands and declare war on the corporate stranglehold and the financial oligarchy.

Ellison, Sarandos, Iger and company are nothing but a millstone around the neck of film production and cultural life. Much of what these parasites produce is rubbish and actually damages popular consciousness. The gap between what is technically possible and artistically valuable, on the one hand, and what is currently turned out becomes increasingly glaring and painful. There is no future for meaningful filmmaking and television under the profit system. The latter can only continue to exist by ridding itself of or impoverishing artists and film workers, censoring opposition and continuing to empty productions of serious content to the greatest extent possible.

However, the needs and concerns and increasingly, the thinking and feeling, of workers and artists lead in a diametrically opposed direction. That general trend is to the left, to protest, to resistance, to rejection of the entire rotten capitalist order. That trend may only shakily or very partially find reflection in the nominated films, much less in the final Academy voting, but it is the current with the greatest significance for the future of cultural and political life. It will persist and deepen whatever the outcome on Sunday.



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