

One Battle After Another wins the top Academy Awards; Javier Bardem shows courage amid a general mood of disquiet, opposition

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The film that came away with the best picture prize at the Academy Awards in Los Angeles Sunday night, Paul Thomas Anderson's *One Battle After Another*, opens with a scene of a left-wing group freeing immigrants from a government detention center.

It proceeds to ridicule a corrupt and cruel military officer, who colludes with white supremacist fascists; to dramatize the brutal hunting down and execution of would-be revolutionaries; and to depict a paramilitary, ICE-type operation, justified by claims about drug enforcement, in an American town. Images of undocumented men, women and children fleeing repression are the film's most acute and convincing.

As we suggested in a review:

In the most chilling and moving scenes, Anderson and his colleagues represent with great accuracy the drive to police-state rule currently under way. The brutality and fascistic character of the anti-immigrant hysteria and ICE raids in particular receives convincing expression in the film.

That *One Battle After Another* won six Academy Awards Sunday—best picture, directing, adapted screenplay, supporting actor, editing and casting—is likely the most telling indicator of changes taking place in the artistic world, a complex reflection of important shifts in popular consciousness more broadly.

Overt expressions of political opposition were not in abundance at the award ceremony, but there were some pointed ones. Spanish actor Javier Bardem, on hand to help give out the award for best international feature film, spoke to the audience of 20 million or so in the US and several hundred million around the world: “No to war. Free Palestine.” The Dolby Theatre crowd applauded loudly.

Bardem wore a pin that read, “No a la Guerra [No to war].” He explained afterward in an interview that the “genocide in Palestine is still going on.” Since the so-called ceasefire, Bardem pointed out, “600 people have been murdered, half of them children.” He referred to the new “illegal war [against Iran]. This is the same pin that I used in 2003 against the war in Iraq.” The US government is peddling the same kind of lies now as it did in 2003, he added, “it’s about the oil.”

Attendees representing *The Voice of Hind Rajab* (directed by

Kaouther Ben Hania), a fictional reworking of the cold-blooded Israeli murder of a five-year-old child and her family in January 2024 in Gaza, wore a red “Artists4Ceasefire” pin. The film was nominated for best international feature. “Our struggles are connected. So is our liberation. And we’re so, so honored to be here tonight,” Saja Kilani, one of the film’s performers, told the Associated Press on the red carpet.

However, another of the film’s actors, Motaz Malhees, explained on Instagram several days before the event:

Our film *The Voice of Hind Rajab* is nominated for an Academy Award. I had the honor of playing one of the lead roles in a story the world needed to hear. But I will not be there. I am not allowed to enter the United States because of my Palestinian citizenship. It hurts. But here is the truth. You can block a passport. You cannot block a voice. I am Palestinian, and I stand with pride and dignity. My spirit will be with *The Voice of Hind Rajab* that night. Good luck to all of you. Our story is bigger than any barrier, and it will be heard.

In the end, this important film lost out to Norway’s *Sentimental Value*, an insipid and unchallenging work.

Mr. Nobody Against Putin, about a Russian teacher who opposes his school’s transformation into a propaganda and war recruitment center, won the best feature documentary award. The film is presumably intended to be part of the US-NATO war drive against Russia. Nonetheless, its director David Borenstein, in his acceptance speech, was honest enough to inveigh against the Trump administration:

When we act complicit, when a government murders people on the streets of our major cities, when we don’t say anything, when oligarchs take over the media and control how we can produce it and consume, we all face a moral choice. But luckily, even a “nobody” is more powerful than you think.

Backstage, Borenstein asserted that Trump was “moving a lot

quicker” than Putin had in his early years to consolidate authoritarian rule.

A muted note of disquiet and opposition ran throughout the program. There is no need to overestimate it, but it would be wrong as well to ignore the changes in mood and sentiment in this particular social layer. Host Conan O’Brien spoke early on of these “very chaotic and frightening times.” He went on,

We pay tribute tonight, not just to film, but to the ideals of global artistry, collaboration, patience, resilience, and that rarest of qualities today—optimism. So, let us please celebrate the days ahead—not because we think all is well, but because we work and hope for better.

The emphasis on globalism and universality was a recurring theme and seemed sincerely meant.

O’Brien also referred to the sorry state of US healthcare: “In *Hamnet*, Shakespeare’s wife gives birth by herself in the woods—or, what we call in America, affordable healthcare.” As for the fact there were no British actors nominated for best actor or actress for the first time since 2012, the host passed on the supposed comment of a British spokesperson, “Yeah, but at least we arrest our pedophiles.”

Talk show host Jimmy Kimmel was brought out at a certain point in the ceremony, facetiously claiming to be taking over the hosting duties. Kimmel, of course, has become something of a *bête noire* to Trump and his administration. The television personality became the target of the fascist right and was suspended by ABC/Disney over comments on the assassination of right-wing Charlie Kirk.

Paul Thomas Anderson, as part of receiving three major awards, lamented the current state of world affairs:

I wrote this movie for my kids, to say sorry for the housekeeping mess that we left in this world we’re handing off to them. But also with the encouragement that they will hopefully be the generation that brings us some common sense and decency.

In general, Anderson has shied away from drawing any sharp political conclusions from his own artistic effort.

The awards ceremony also presented tributes to three personalities who died last year, Diane Keaton, Robert Redford and Rob Reiner.

It would be as wrong to exaggerate the degree of conscious political understanding and opposition demonstrated Sunday night as it would be to downplay it.

The failure to reward *The Voice of Hind Rajab* and inordinate acclaim for *Sinners*, *Hamnet* and *Sentimental Value* reflect the ongoing cultural and political problems. The awards ceremony was hardly free from complacency and self-congratulation. The 11,000 Academy voters are relatively privileged professionals, as membership often requires a body of work in major motion pictures. Actors are the largest single group (1,307), but executives, marketing and public relations and producers make up some of the most substantial branches, each of them outnumbering both the writers’ and cinematographers’ branches, for example.

A good portion of the Hollywood crowd remains susceptible to

identity politics and shallow, pragmatic responses to the deep problems of American and world society.

The recent almost doubling of the Academy membership, driven largely by racial and gender quotas, has not changed its social composition.

And the identity politics element remained present at the awards ceremony. *Sinners* won several awards, and each time the racist emphasis or implications pushed the event in a retrograde direction. Autumn Durald Arkapaw, the first woman to win the best cinematography award, may well have talent behind a camera, but her speech was deplorable. Arkapaw asked “all the women in the room to stand up because I feel like I don’t get here without you guys.”

I have felt so much love from all the women on this whole campaign and gotten to meet so many people, and I just feel like moments like this happen because of you guys, and I want to thank you for that.

Since men still make up 65-67 percent of the Academy membership, Arkapaw would have had to receive thousands of their votes to win the award.

The striving for privileges by already affluent layers is never attractive. *Sinners*’ Michael B. Jordan, a limited actor, and director Ryan Coogler also made largely unfavorable impressions in their comments. Coogler began his career by making the valuable *Fruitvale Station*, about the killing of Oscar Grant III by a transit policeman in the Bay Area. His subsequent work, much of it with Jordan, has consisted of tripe: the *Rocky* spinoff *Creed*, *Black Panther*, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* and now *Sinners*.

However, the dynamic of the awards ceremony has moved in a positive direction in the following sense. Starting in the mid-2010s, the grotesque emphasis on race and gender made simply viewing the Academy Awards painful at times. The events seemed to swoop from one elaborately staged, ecstatic celebration of identity politics to the next, with a related, intensely selfish mood dominating each event. There’s no doubt this played a role in the shrinking of the television audience for the ceremony.

Not so last year and this. There is no 180-degree turn, of course, but now the speeches of Arkapaw, Coogler, Jordan and, to a certain extent, Jessie Buckley (for best actress in *Hamnet*) are something of the exception. They stand out as false and backward. A great many in the film world rightly so have bigger, more pressing concerns.

After all, how does the race and gender obsession help anyone in a world where genocide is supported by every leading government or a country presided over by a would-be dictator, seeing to the fascist oppression of immigrants and murder of people on the streets of major cities, dragging the entire population into a catastrophic war? In its own limited and tentative manner, the Academy Awards provides clues about the direction social life is taking.



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