All About Oscar: An Introduction

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The Academy Awards ceremony is one of the biggest entertainment events of the year. Over 200 countries around the world broadcast the awards live as Hollywood's finest descend on the Dolby Theatre (as it's now known), parading down the red carpet to hundreds of journalists and a bleacher full of fans screaming in glee at the distant sighting of their screen idols. The media circus that surrounds this annual spectacular often shrouds the political, economic and cultural foundations on which this, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences as a whole, is built on.

The Oscars' influence on cultural consumption may not be entirely measurable, but it is estimated that a nomination can add over $30 million to a film's box office gross. Add ancillary markets and home entertainment, and the Academy Awards are not just a popularity contest, but a sound investment for any niche production. Over the last twenty years, smaller studios specialising in lower budget and independent films, usually owned by one of the major studios, have used the Academy Awards as a promotional springboard to propel their films into the spotlight. The Oscars provide a benchmark for quality on which many people evaluate their taste in movies; these films are what you should like, even if you don't, and nobody has tapped into the heart of the Academy Awards more successfully than the Weinstein brothers.

Harvey Weinstein, known as King of the Oscars, has produced and distributed his way to dozens of Academy Awards and hundreds more nominations. He has a reputation for ruthless campaign tactics - another aspect that often generates hoards of negative criticism. Weinstein uses the Oscars to promote his movies, exploiting its association with quality. In 'The Golden [Statuette] Age' (this issue), Sarah Martindale discusses this side of the awards, focusing on the age of Miramax and the year they took *Shakespeare in Love* to the top.

There are many myths surrounding the Oscars, but campaign tactics are not one of them. It is a sad reality that many studios, and even individual nominees, take it upon themselves to lobby hard for recognition. Some may argue they are just marketing their films like any studio markets any film, they just happen to have a much smaller target audience, and indeed the hardest part of any campaign is getting voters to watch your film in the first place. There's a laughable irony in that Academy members are notoriously slack when it comes to watching movies.

However, there are various examples of Oscar campaigns over the years that have been taken too far. The Academy have made a concerted effort to stamp out

excessive campaigning in recent years. Their rules are updated annually and posted online for all to see. Just this year, the Oscar nominated title song from *Alone Yet Not Alone* was disqualified from the race after one of the individuals involved emailed other voters to make them aware of the nomination. This is one of many forms of promotion that are heavily regulated during awards season. Despite these efforts, the costs of campaigns have rocketed, and a $5 million budget is now standard for any film that wishes to earn votes.

Publicity is a necessary evil in the film world, regardless of who or where you are targeting. Of course part of knowing where to sell is knowing where you can sell, and throughout the last few decades of Academy Awards a few trends have come and gone that have defined the awards. In the 50s and 60s it was all about musicals, but in recent years the genre has struggled to hit, with *Chicago*, *Moulin Rouge* and *Les Miserables* being three notable exceptions. Nowadays it's all about the biopic, the period drama and, most importantly, films about films or films about Hollywood.

In 2012 and 2013 *The Artist* and *Argo* won the Best Picture Oscars respectively. Both were great movies (in my own personal opinion), but both were also a horrendously shameless celebration of Hollywood in two very different ways. Could it possibly be that the Academy are narcissistic enough to enjoy movies more when they're about themselves? And does this mean the Academy are buying into their own definition of quality, or simply voting for the films that best represent the shared tastes and interests among the majority?

In this vein, Elizabeth Castaldo Lunden explores a little known 1966 film called *The Oscar*. Released by Paramount, it centres on an actor desperate for Academy gold. In 'No Oscar for The Oscar' (this issue), Lunden looks at the production process and publicity behind the film, despite efforts from the Academy to distance itself from a project so deliberately self-derisive. How times have changed, or maybe filmmakers are getting smarter.

The counter-argument to Hollywood's self-congratulation is not quite as understanding. Rather than being a genuine reflection of common markers of quality and personal taste among voters, many see the Academy Awards as a politically contrived event. Peter Biskind offers the best definition to date, calling it the 'perennial tug of war between art and commerce' (2004), and it is this desperation to hold up the Academy as a beacon of quality whilst also preserving their own selfish interest as the major stakeholder in a billion dollar commodity that makes this melting pot of interaction between producer and consumer so fascinating. On the one hand it's a celebration of an art, but on the other it's an advert, and a golden opportunity to sell, sell, sell.

Predicting the Oscars is itself a huge business, with betting shops cashing in on their share of the action from film fans eager to profit from a childhood of social

reclusiveness. So much energy is invested by those interested in the Oscars on who will win, that very little attention is delegated to the films that fail to appear at all. Yet for an award that is only eligible to approximately 200 – 300 films a year from tens of thousands produced, our focus is drastically disproportionate. Many highly acclaimed films are made each year that fail to make an impression on the Academy, even if they have the budget to campaign, which begs the question of what exactly constitutes quality.

Art house films build their entire genre on the basis of quality and breadth of audience – its art house because most people don't 'get it'. Yet for niche genres like this, which are self-defined and widely accepted as being markers of high quality content, they are almost entirely shunned by the Academy. Fatima Chinita examines this difficult relationship constantly juggled and publicly performed on Oscar night, as 'The Tricks of the Trade (Un)exposed' (this issue) asks how commercial is too commercial, and why some films are too serious or too artistic to win Academy Awards.

In fact, it is all too easy to distract ourselves by merely comparing the showcased films, when the telecast itself is equally significant. More people watch the telecast than the nominees, and so in terms of cultural value it can be argued that this show, or ad, or whatever one likes to call it, is more influential and more worthy of academic debate than the movies that make this programme possible. Oscar night is not just about the film industry but television, radio, fashion, technology, politics, and finance. The telecast interviews arriving stars about their inspiration, their stories and their emotional attachment to the films they're representing, all the while parading the latest outfit from a top designer, which is gloriously captured on state-of-the-art cameras. Then during the ceremony, Michelle Obama announces the Best Picture nominees, which just so happens to include a film about slavery and another about an international rescue mission between Hollywood and the CIA.

The Academy Awards telecast is rich with cultural and ideological connotations, and in 'An Educational and Inspirational Broadcast: The Oscars Red Carpet Pre-Show' (this issue), Lukasz Swiatek delves beneath the red carpet to unravel this complex cultural tapestry at the heart of the broadcast, but all too often ignored.

The contributions to this journal build on the sporadic and somewhat ignored literature that currently forms the backbone of Academy Awards scholarship. Emanuel Levy is perhaps the most authoritative figure in the field, with his book *Oscar Fever* still the core text since its publication in 2001. However, for a broad historical, albeit anecdotal, overview of the Academy, Anthony Holden's *Behind the Oscar: The Secret History of the Academy Awards* acts as a useful reference. Various statistical analyses of the Oscar results have also been undertaken, but beyond this the study of the Oscars remains more rooted in sensationalised

conspiracy theories designed for fan consumption rather than intellectual advancement.

This issue of *Networking Knowledge* aims to bring discussion and debate of the Academy Awards to the foreground of film studies. It is the biggest night in the film calendar, and as such the spotlight can detract from the event's complex cultural layering. The articles above demonstrate some of the many ways in which the Oscars can be understood, and as a long time fan of the awards and a champion of all things Hollywood, I greatly hope to kick-start a new burst of scholarship that acknowledges the importance of Oscar.

References:

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