

# The tricks of the trade (un)exposed

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## ABSTRACT

One of the genres which has been neglected by the Academy Award is the metacinema, which for practical purposes I will consider to be a cross between the complexities of self-reflexive cinema (highly connoted with modernism) and the Hollywood Film (the classical films about the urge to “make it” in Hollywood). Indeed, these films have always existed and some, as *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950, USA) and *Mulholland Dr.* (David Lynch, 2001, FRA/USA), have even made it to the ceremony, but were, predictably, defeated by other more serious or less reflexive products in the main categories. The United States has always insisted on not revealing the tricks of the trade at the same time that made films about it to cater to the curiosity of the cinema-inclined spectator. For this reason these films are usually about the universe of cinema but not its medium, at least not in a way that discloses the operations of the technical apparatus.

Why are these films not viewed as serious enough and artistic enough to be awarded Oscars by the Academy in the categories of Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Cinematography? Are they being discarded for the same reasons that comedy and musicals usually are? Or are they being punished for being too unveiling? Or is the industry going for commercial products that can easily be pushed on a global scale and make a profit?

## KEYWORDS

Metacinema; Metafilms; Hollywood on Hollywood Film; Metacinematic Allegories; *The Artist*.

### And the winner is... *not* a Hollywood on Hollywood Film

The Hollywood on Hollywood Film is a staple of American cinema and has been so practically from its inception (i.e. the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). No later than 1909 D.W. Griffith directed *Those Awful Hats*, a comedy about the obstruction of vision in movie screenings caused by the ostentatious ladies' hats of the era. The action is not set in Hollywood *per se* but the cinematic universe is already at stake here. Charlie Chaplin, the most popular comedian of the period and the most artistically inclined, also dwindled with this trend in four short films: *Kit Auto Races at Venice* (1914), *A Film Johnnie* (1914), *The Masquerader* (1914), *His New Job* (1915), of which he directed the last two. Again, the action is not quite set in Hollywood, but neither was the industry at that time. The East Coast was the main production center until the 1920's, when the relocation to California was finally complete<sup>1</sup>.

This cinematic trend was adopted in the beginning for comedies and romances, as it was prone to *slaspstick* and over the edge gesticulation of the silent acting, sentimental and exaggerated in nature. P.D. Anderson (1978,74-308) points out that the Hollywood Film of the 20's, 30s and 40's was usually made up of comedies following the narrative paradigm set by the first version of *Merton of the Movies* (James Cruze, 1924), where an ingénue, male or female, arrives in Hollywood with no notion of how to behave on studio sets and wreaks havoc during a shooting before being "discovered" as the very next big thing in comedy and put under contract by some company<sup>2</sup>. Prior to this film, and the deriving formula, however, there are a number of movies where naïve film viewers mistake the fiction on the screen for reality, denoting an obvious inexperience with the new medium. Later on, especially during the 50's, again according to Anderson, a new, and sour, variation of the American Dream in Hollywood emerged: the dark side of the dream, where the industry was exposed as a money-making machine responsible for the personal downfall of its own idols. These films were usually melodramas and sometimes dealt more with the social universe of cinema in the Hollywood community than with the filmic practice of actual filmmaking (as Robert Stam calls it). Still, they are generally considered to be Hollywood on Hollywood Films and as so included in the extraordinary compilation of films made by Paris, Pitts and Mank until 1977, the year the book was published.

It is interesting, and important for my argument, that the so-called Hollywood Film has its roots in the Hollywood myth and the magnetism that such a place held in the imagination of the American people. As expounded by Christopher Ames (1997, 2), Hollywood was a state of mind, i.e. a construct formulated by the public, a mythical occurrence that cannot be entirely defined but has a tremendous pull in the public opinion. Let us not forget that Hollywood is geographically situated in California, a state which has been, and still is, promoted as a paradise on Earth. On the other hand, the luxurious existence of the stars of the silent period helped to convey the idea of opulence and glamour, which ultimately is what the star system is all about. No wonder that people from all over the country, especially during the hard times of the Depression, would want to come to his haven where everything was wonderful. Many

<sup>1</sup> At least until the end of the Studio System, when cinematic activity began to reemerge in other places as well, namely New York, once more.

<sup>2</sup> There are minor variations to this formula, as when, for instance, the naïve character decides to go home and marry her/his faithful love interest, rather than staying in Hollywood.

tried, only a few succeeded, but the stories of success of those few grew rampant in the imagination of the entire country and were exploited by the unit publicists of each studio. This explains the importance of biopics and its place in the Hollywood on Hollywood Film. As success stories of people who “made it” in Hollywood, or anywhere else in the arts, they are wonderful marketing tools, if not the most reliable accounts of the lives of those they apparently portray.

With this un-artistic DNA it is no wonder the Hollywood on Hollywood Film would not fall into the category of Oscar material, which is supposed to be “good” (technically competent and original enough, one presumes). However, this preliminary conclusion is somewhat biased and undermined by the facts themselves. It could be argued that being a popular genre, the Hollywood Film wouldn’t cut it for the voters, but of the 507 films nominated in the most important category, that of Best Film, at least 17 were musicals and four of them won the major prize: *The Broadway Melody* (Harry Beaumont, 1928/29 edition), *The Great Ziegfeld* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1936 edition), *Gigi* (Vincente Minnelli, 1958 edition) and *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002 edition). Then, perhaps, one might say, these are films with a lot of production values, which is something that American Films of the classical period promoted. True, they are. But the exact same accountancy can be made for the western, which is not so laden with production values, a few exceptions aside.

Contrariwise, it cannot be argued that all Hollywood on Hollywood Films had/have no quality. *Show People* (King Vidor, 1928) could have been nominated for the first edition of the Academy Awards, if the organizers had willed it. The film is usually indicated as very important and the French academic Marc Cérésuelo, a notorious cinephile, goes as far as calling it the matrix of the metafilm, drawing a parallel between this opus and the French New Wave film *Contempt (Le Mépris)*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1963). Other notorious metafilms were also entirely left out of the main artistic categories of the Oscars: Best Film, Direction, Scriptwriting and Cinematography. Here follows a very short list of oversights by the Academy: *What Price Hollywood?* (George Cukor, 1932); *Sullivan’s Travels* (Preston Sturges, 1941); *A Star Is Born* (George Cukor, 1954); *Singin’ in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952); *The Barefoot Contessa* (Joseph L. Manckiewicz, 1954); *Barton Fink* (Joel Coen, 1991); *State and Main* (David Mamet, 2000).

In total honesty, a few Hollywood on Hollywood Films have been nominated and some of them even managed to win a golden statuette in one of the four above mentioned categories. Best Film nominees: *A Star is Born* (William A. Wellman, 1937); *Anchors Aweigh* (George Sidney, 1945); *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950); *The Aviator* (Martin Scorsese, 2004); *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011). Only the latter won, but the film is mainly a French film, co-produced with Belgium and the US, and is ostensibly interpreted, directed and written by French people, an irony that should not pass unnoticed. Best Director: *A Star Is Born* (1937), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), the foreigners *Fellini’s 8 ½ (Otto e mezzo)*, Federico Fellini, 1963) and *Day For Night (La Nuit américaine)*, François Truffaut, 1974); *The Stunt Man* (Richard Rush, 1980); *The Player* (Robert Altman, 1992); *Mulholland Dr.* (David Lynch, 2001); *The Aviator* (2004) and again *The Artist* (2011), the only one to win; prize given to French Michel Hazanavicius. There were a little above 400 statuettes up for grabs in this category over the years, only 9 films were nominated and only one was given the award. In the Best Cinematography category there were eight nominated films in the following editions of

the ceremony: *Sunset Boulevard*; *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952), *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962); *Star!* (1968); *The Day of the Locust* (1975); *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988); *The Aviator* and *The Artist*. Only Robert Richardson, for *The Aviator*, which is more a biopic of Howard Hughes than a film about the cinema industry, could take the Oscar home. There were 598 statuettes handed out in this category over the years. Last but not least, the Scriptwriting, which changed a lot in format and prizes over the years, delivering almost 900 awards in total (885 to be exact). There were 18 metafilms nominated<sup>3</sup> but only four won the award: *A Star is Born* (1937); *Sunset Boulevard* (1950); *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952); *Gods and Monsters* (1998, which is a biopic of the controversial film director James Whale). The numbers are overwhelmingly against the Hollywood on Hollywood Film.

### The tricks of the trade

I suppose it could be argued that not many films of this type are made, if one considers the Hollywood Film to be exclusively about filmmaking (including reception) and the personal universe of the filmmakers. But even so, this argument falls short of the mark, if one ponders the competition the nominated films were up against. In 1937 *A Star Is Born* lost the Best Film Oscar to *The Life of Emile Zola* (William Dieterle), a biopic of the well-known writer; in 1950 *Sunset Boulevard* was outweighed by *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Manckiewicz), which is undeniably a good film and one that also exposes the dirt behind it all, but it does so in the theatrical universe; in 1952 *The Greatest Show on Earth* (Cecil B. de Mille), a production-value laden-film about the universe of the circus passed over an exposé of Hollywood, *The Bad and the Beautiful*; in 2001 David Lynch had to contend with *A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard), another biopic, for the Oscar of Direction (not having been nominated for Best Film to begin with). It seems obvious that some of the choices are political rather artistic, which is not shocking news in itself. As a window to many countries, including the States, as well as an Association with specific membership rules, plus the ceremonies undergoing a process of selection heavily based on marketing, there is no denying the importance of exposure and preservation. Foremost, preservation of the commerce, through the ideologies (or “messages”) put forward by the films, which could help to maintain or obtain a good image in certain markets; but also preservation of one’s own status, since everyone and everything related to movies is attributed a certain financial value. Sometimes the Academy doesn’t want to rock the boat; other times it does exactly so with the argument that the industry needs new blood, hence the indie wave of the eighties in large measure carried out by the Weinstein Brothers via the Miramax.

One way to preserve the *status quo* is to not expose the tricks of the trade. Laurence Soroka (1983) mentions the horrified reaction of the mogul Louis B. Mayer upon seeing *Sunset Boulevard* on its premiere. Although the film was produced by Paramount Pictures, and not MGM, Mayer is claimed to have said the director (Billy Wilder) should be “run out of town” [*sic*]. Fortunately, Wilder was not expelled from the filmmaking community but the film he directed was, to a certain extent, punished on his behalf. Indeed, *Sunset Boulevard*, was nominated for 11 Oscars but went on to win

<sup>3</sup> The other nominated films were: *What Prize Hollywood?* (1931/32); *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954); *Federico Fellini’s 8 ½* (1963); *Day For Night* (*La Nuit américaine*, 1974); *The Front* (1976); *The Stunt Man* (1980); *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1981); *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985); *The Player* (1992); *Boogie Nights* (1997); *Adaptation* (2002); *The Artist* (2011). The dates refer to the Academy Awards edition.

only three of them: Best Art Direction, Best Music and Best Screenplay Written for the Screen. The latter statuette possibly felt like a vindication of the writers, since the film portrays a screenwriter (anti) hero conveyed by the story as an underdog, much as the industry itself treated all such professionals. In truth, the film hits too close to home, thus meriting the designation of *exposé*. Some things, however, according to Mayer, were not meant to be shown and least of all in an unfavorable light. The financial health of Hollywood and its film industry depended highly upon the Hollywood myth and the maintenance of the associated glamour as well as the general public ignorance of the technical proceedings. If filmmaking was portrayed in its technical operations, all the glamour associated with it would come tumbling down, since the shooting of a film is a laborious and boring task, as all the people who have made films well know. Also, self-reflexivity – the bearing of the apparatus (or ‘*dispositif*’) – would surely unmask the impression of ease which is the basis of spectatorial identification with the protagonists (the grammatical “transparency” of the classical American cinema as André Bazin baptized it) and the deriving immersion in the filmic universe.

In general, Hollywood has preserved its secrets well. The majority of Hollywood on Hollywood Films does not concentrate on the operations of filmmaking themselves. In the classical period (until the demise of the Studio System), the films would be set on studio lots and sound stages and would also depict the main gate, the central casting, the front office, the screenwriters bungalows, the star’s dressing-room, the studio commissary and the screening rooms (Anderson 1978), but this was more of a background than anything else. Despite the presence of an intradiegetic director, along with the camera, the lights and the crew, and/or the screen and the projector, the films focused mainly on the disturbances caused on the sets or the opinions given in the screening rooms. No outsider would learn how films were technically made or produced. There are some notable exceptions, but still exceptions they are: *Sherlock Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924); *Show People* (1928); *A Star Is Born* (1937); *Hellzapoppin’* (H.C. Potter, 1941); *The Bad and The Beautiful* (1952), *Two Weeks in Another Town* (Vincente Minnelli, 1962). After 1963 and the release of two European metafilms – Federico Fellini’s *8 ½* and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Contempt* things took a more revelatory turn. In Europe films became extremely self-reflexive and even the United States joined in the reflexivity, albeit through a nostalgic vein and more descriptive portrayal (Dennis Hopper’s *The Last Movie* (1971) is an exception. Still most of those films, such as *Nickelodeon* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1976); *Hearts of the West* (Howard Zieff, 1976); *The Front* (Martin Ritt, 1976); *The Last Tycoon* (Elia Kazan, 1976) never made it to the main categories of the Academy Awards. Even after the eighties – with the proliferation of such products as a result of the dissemination of making of documentaries, of which these films can be a sort of fictional substitute, and the phenomenon of crossover indie film, whose directors are, possibly, recognized film buffs reviewing their own experience either as spectators or film school students – these films continued to be disclaimed by the Academy and its golden statuettes.

Christopher Ames points out the ideological contradictions of the American cinema, living out a permanent tension between what is revealed/concealed and what is mystified/demystified (1997:12). No such thing happens in Europe, where from the onset of the French Nouvelle Vague self-reflexivity and the films explicitly about the cinema have thrived. Two of them have, ironically enough, made it to the Oscars, in the Best Director category: *8 ½* (Fellini, 1963) and *Day for Night* (Truffaut, 1973). None of them won, but their sheer presence alongside American directors in what is mainly an

American event attests to the preconceptions afflicting many members of the Academy and the institution itself, as responsible for the nominations to begin with. There is, by comparison, an underestimation of the American film made by Americans, and an overestimation of the European output. Is it fit to consider that the Hollywood on Hollywood Film has been handicapped in the Academy Awards ceremonies because of its potential to flaunt entertainment as such (the workings of the industry) and, concomitantly, because it is not artistic enough? Is it outside the borders of what can be considered “good”? Honestly, I think it is more complicated than that.

### The unexplored path

Let us consider exactly what is meant by ‘Hollywood on Hollywood Film’. According to most writers on the subject, this trend is a genre (Tarratt 1970, part I; Behlmer and Thomas 1975; Muscio 1981; Soroka 1983; Ciment 1984). P. D. Anderson is extremely specific about the narrative formulas (one for comedies, another one for dramas) and leitmotifs that make up for this cinematic paradigm. As a matter of fact, most of the features of this so-called genre can still be detected in the postmodernist metafilms. It seems that, just as, according to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, cinematic narrative in general has not undergone a radical change, approximately the same angles of metacinema live on in our present time. The streets of the city (including the Walk of Fame), the big mansions, the ironical and/or incompetent producers, the artsy and arrogant directors, the insecure and troubled actors, the glory and the downfall, the megalomania and the desire to succeed, the uprooting from an obscure little town usually in heart of America, the films in the film, *et cetera* are all still here with us. The new addition, absolutely compulsory nowadays, is the huge advertisement of the hill that reads H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D, which works as a sort of logo for the entire industry, of which the city would be a metonymic representation. What is *Mulholland Dr.* (David Lynch, 2001) if not a spin on this narrative and related motifs?

The book by Parish, Pitts and Mank is supposed to be an anthology of all the Hollywood on Hollywood films until 1977, but, in fact, many of the films it includes are only accidentally set in Hollywood (*The Studio Murder Mystery*, Frank Tuttle, 1929), have very loosely connected to the cinematic universe (*The Loved One*, Tony Richardson, 1965 or *The Last of Sheila*, Herbert Ross, 1973) or focus on the private lives of the characters rather than their profession (*In a Lonely Place*, Nicholas Ray, 1950). If one adopts a broader definition for metafilm, considering it to be a film about cinema in general, and not only Hollywood produced films, and if one accepts that the entire opus has to be thematically about the nature of cinema as an art form or a technical skill (and not a social community or a backdrop for personal problems) and that there must be a conscious discourse (an ideological position) about cinema in the theme and the story, running throughout the entire film, then the Hollywood on Hollywood Film becomes much more. In fact, it is now able to accommodate not only direct descriptions of the activity but also allegorical depictions, not easy to detect by everyone, since they come in the form of a running metaphor coexisting with a literal narrative meaning. A film such as *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), that possesses a strong subtext of spectatorship, is nowhere to be found in the aforementioned anthology, presumably because the authors had no such products in mind. An anthology of (meta) cinematic allegories is yet to be made.

I certainly don't propose to make it now, but taking into consideration this enlarged definition, what I do propose is to take a new look at the Oscar nominees and winners and see what comes up in order to ascertain if there are any significant changes. The answer is yes, there are many films which had previously flown under the radar and that now become notorious as hybrid metafilms of full blown metacinematic allegories. Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* collected three impressive statuettes in the 1977 edition of the Academy Awards, by winning the categories of Best Film, Best Director, and Best Scriptwriting originally written for the screen. The story is not set in Hollywood, taking place in New York instead; the main character is a stand-up comedian, not a film actor; there are no shootings, Hollywood mystique and the usual fare of leitmotifs. However, the protagonist is a passionate film viewer and there is an undercurrent discourse on cinema throughout. The scene in the movie theatre hall where Marshall MacLuhlan gets to make a cameo appearance is unforgettable. *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) also pops up with nine nominations and one win, in the Best Original Script. Considering the film is not eminently commercial, was under attack by Heart's press in general and Hollywood gossip columnist Louella Parson in particular, didn't have the theatrical release it should have, and arose much jealousy due to Welles charisma, young age and the nature of the contract he managed to sign with RKO (according to whose terms he had total artistic control of the film, including final cut), the balance is not too bad.

The broad definition of metacinema, instead of the more exotic and less serious Hollywood on Hollywood Film, reveals a taste for spectacle rather than just entertainment, a penchant for variety instead of narrative formulas, and a propensity for the eulogy of art and artists, connoting film with other artistic endeavors. That is also why so many musicals can be considered a form of enunciative *mise en abyme*, metonymically representing cinema production in general. Jane Feuer, for instance (1982), argues that the backstage musical, where dancing and singing artists took part in an institutional show, was already a way of using the apparatus as the more direct films about film did. The existence of a proscenium, the shot/reverse shot of the artists and the public, and the musical numbers having an innate logic and unrealistic nature proved the perfect diegetic counterpoint to the film watching experience. The effect was even more stressed when the dancing and the singing broke free of the constraints of the proscenium but the characters remained very much involved in show business. Films such as *The Band Wagon* (1953) and *An American in Paris* (1951), both directed by Vincente Minnelli and produced by Arthur Freed, are good examples of what Feuer calls the "art musical" (2001), set in the world of show business and/or art in whatever form.

With this new approach in mind, a lot of memorable metacinematic allegories (either allegories of spectatorship or creation) can be accounted for. The list that follows is not exhaustive <sup>4</sup>. For Best Film: *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *All That Jazz* (Bob Fosse, 1979), *Inglorious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009), *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), *Hugo* (Martin Scorsese, 2011); for Best Directing: *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944), *A Double Life* (George Cukor, 1947), *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Manckiewicz, 1950) \*,

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<sup>4</sup> Although some of these films accumulated nominations in several categories, I will proceed to list them only in one of them, that which presumably carries more weight, artistically and financially. Once more, the dates refer to the Academy Awards edition. The names in brackets refer to the director of the film, notwithstanding the actual technicians/artists who were nominated. The asterisk indicates the films that actually won the Oscar.

*Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *8 ½* (Federico Fellini, 1963), *Blow-up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), *Day for Night* (François Truffaut, 1974), *The Elephant Man* (David Lynch, 1980), *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999), *Talk to Her (Hable con ella)*, Pedro Almodóvar, 2002) \*, *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010); Best Screenplay: *Children of Paradise (Les Enfants du Paradis)*, Marcel Carné, 1945), *The Barefoot Contessa* (Joseph L. Manckiewicz, 1954), *Wild Strawberries (Smulltronstället)*, Ingmar Bergman, 1959), *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1960), *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1985), *American Splendor* (Robert Pulcini and Shari Springer Berman, 2003), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004) \*; Best Cinematography: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Albert Lewin, 1945), *Zelig* (Woody Allen, 1988).

As for the musicals, either backstage or art musicals, which can also be allegories in their own right, there are a few more memorable titles to join to the list. In the years that followed the introduction of sound, many were nominated, but as the years went by the genre dwindled in nominations. Again the list is not exhaustive. Best Film: *The Broadway Melody* (Harry Beaumont, 1928/29) \*, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (Lloyd Bacon, 1932/33), *Top Hat* (Mark Sandrich, 1935), *The Great Ziegfeld* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1936) \*, *Stage Door* (Gregory La Cava, 1937), *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1948), *An American in Paris* (Vincente Minnelli, 1951) \*, *Gigi* (Vincente Minnelli, 1958) \*, *Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrman, 2001), *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002) \*; Best Directing: *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972) \*; Best Screenplay: *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1953), *The Country Girl* (George Seaton, 1954) \*, *Interrupted Melody* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1955) \*, *It's Always Fair Weather* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly (1955), *The Producers* (Mel Brooks, 1968) \*, *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney Furie, 1972), *Fame* (Alan Parker, 1980), *Victor/Victoria* (Blake Edwards, 1982),

All in all, there are almost 200 nominations, in the above mentioned four categories, for what I now propose to call metafilms. Still, this number falls way short of the approximately 2,400 nominations in the same categories since the beginning of the Academy Awards ceremony. The disparity is made even more blatant by the fact that many films made from the inception of cinema to this day could be considered metacinema by my parameters. Therefore, even with this theoretical addition, the numbers do not favor the films about cinema, which have been more disregarded by the Academy than they should have.

### **Where an Oscar had never gone before**

Metacinema is not concerned with reality, but is not synonymous with escapism as well. This alone, could prove reason enough to consider that the American public is not the right public for it. And yet, as mentioned before, it was the Hollywood myth that helped to spread it once the slapstick period was over and/or the films became longer. The Merton of the Movies (comedy) and The Dark Side of the Dream (drama) narrative typologies, as coined by P.D. Anderson, are intrinsically American, even if they were later employed by other countries in their commercial products. Maybe the operative word here is “commercial”. Could this be related to the intellectual preconception that I’ve mentioned earlier? After all, some European films of the art-house variety were nominated for the Oscars. I do not wish to undermine these choices, mind you; simply



to say that this points to a surreptitious desire to validate “art” and difference, equating it with quality. If this is the case, complexity becomes the key word for many choices made.

This could very well be the reason that *Citizen Kane* won the Oscar for Best Screenplay, being a story that Louella Parson considered all disjointed, as, in fact, the film is told in flashbacks from different points of view. So is *All About Eve* (1950), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), who all won the statuette and are not immediately connoted with a filmic universe. The convoluted narratives of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (Karel Reisz, screenplay by Harold Pinter, 1981), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Woody Allen, 1989), *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and *Adaptation* (2002), both directed by Spike Jonze and written specifically for the screen by Charlie Kaufman, were also nominated but didn’t win, probably because they are immediately perceived as related to cinema, even if they are not straightforward Hollywood on Hollywood Films.

Conversely, the most commercial metacinematic products are also nominated for the Oscars, but in this case they usually belong to the musical comedy and biopic genres (with the added interest that some of the nominated musicals are also biopics of artists). Since most of these products are not set in Hollywood, they are not immediately associated with metacinema. That is probably the reason why *Singin’ in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952) was gravely omitted but *The Band Wagon* and *An American in Paris*, whose action set in Broadway, were not. The same could be said for *Stage Door* (1937), the all-star revue extravaganzas and the stage musicals adapted to screen (as *Cabaret*, 1972). Least one thinks this has anything to do with the directors, let me remind you that the same team Donen/Kelly had another film nominated in the Best Screenplay category: *It’s Always Fair Weather* (1955, written by Betty Comden and Adolph Green). In this story the action is set in New York but far from Broadway, as the film is an integrated musical. Also, considering that quite a few biopics of stars or artistic entrepreneurs were nominated for Oscars<sup>5</sup> one wonders why *Ed Wood* (Tim Burton, 1994) was left out of the major categories in an year where *Wyatt Earp* (Lawrence Kasdan) was nominated for Best Cinematography, the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski was put up for *Red (Rouge)* as Best Directing, the British romantic comedy *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell) was nominated for Best Film and *Heavenly Creatures* (directed by a yet-unknown Peter Jackson) was contemplated as choice for Best Screenwriting. It could be argued the problem resides in the fact that the portrayed Ed Wood was a director and that Hollywood always prefers the stars. True, but then why nominate films based on the lives of James Whale and Howard Hughes, who not only were directors but were also considered disreputable in their times. Probably because they were/are considered “good” directors who made a commercial imprint in the industry. Edward D. Wood Jr., on the other hand, was the lowest of the low as far as “art” is considered and his films, weird and poorly manufactured as they were, never made money, although *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959) became a cult classic and a must-see for sci-fi film buffs. The Academy couldn’t accept an homage paid to such a man, even if Burton’s film itself is artistically worthy and extremely original. But then again, eccentric as he is, Burton himself is not Oscar material, plus he commits the sin of exposing too much and too well the tricks of the trade of the so-called world’s worst director” of all times, soiling the image of

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<sup>5</sup> Among the personalities on focus are Florenz Ziegfeld, Marjorie Lawrence, Vincent van Gogh, Marilyn Monroe, Billie Holliday, James Whale, Harvey Pekar, Howard Hughes and George M. Cohan.

Hollywood in general and the aura of the star in particular. Here is another man who probably who probably would have made Louis B. Mayer shiver with rage.

And then came 2011, truly a year to remember as far as the relationship of metacinema and the Academy Awards is concerned. Not only did Martin Scorsese, Professor at the Columbia University as well as renowned American film director, decided to pay a much deserved tribute to the French Georges Méliès, the most important forerunner of all anti-illusionist films, of which metacinema is a part, but a French crew of artists actually came to Hollywood with a film that portrays the Hollywood myth as usually depicted in the Hollywood on Hollywood Film Genre. I'm obviously referring to *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius), whose title assumes both the homage to the American traditional metafilm and the artistic nature of the project. Indeed, the film falls right into what Soroka (1983) designates as Hollywood Modernism, a hybrid form of commercial and modern/creative cinema that manifests in a self-reflexive opus about Hollywood<sup>6</sup>. If Cerisuelo considered the American metafilm as a forerunner for all European films about the cinema, then all we can say is that the Europeans came back with a vengeance and, in the process, taught a lesson to Hollywood. Undeniably, *The Artist* has a strong discourse on film and it makes the enunciation (i.e. the technical resources of the film) serve the story (the narrative storyline about Hollywood). It does expose a lot of technical tricks of the trade as well as Anderson's the narrative formula(s), but it cannot be considered a film *against* Hollywood, as Giuliana Muscio (1981) sees the exposés of the 50's.

In its own right, *The Artist* is the most complete film about Hollywood and, for once, the Academy didn't hold it against it. Quite the contrary, the film was a smash hit, winning five Oscars, including that of Best Motion Picture of the Year, and was nominated for five more (10 nominations in all). One of the most important accomplishments of the film is that it mixes the positive side of success with the downfall caused by the industry. It is a reenactment of the crossed destinies narrative prompted by David O'Selznick for *What Price Hollywood?* (George Cukor, 1931) - in which the fate of one character on the rise meets that of another character on the way down. Thus, in only one film, Selznick succeeded in making the story more complex and more generically hybrid (fusing the comedy streak with the dramatic one). In *The Artist*, set in the upcoming of sound (the plot actually starts in 1927), this intersection is made very obvious by a scene shot a three-leveled staircase. In the fictitious Kinograph Studios, the characters meet again on this staircase, but the man is going down and actually stands a few stairs beneath the woman, who is on her way up the stairs and headed for stardom.

Hazanavicius' film improves on Selznick's formula in that it manages not to be overly melodramatic, neither too comedic. The balance of tone is just right and, unlike Selznick's Hollywood trilogy (*What Price Hollywood?*, 1932, and *A Star Is Born*, 1937 and 1954 versions), this opus presents us with a happy ending. The reason seems to be its other original source. In fact, if one considers the entire plot and the intertextuality it holds, then it must be admitted that the film is also a graft of the Hollywood on Hollywood musical *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), from which it takes the theme of the conversion to sound and the career renewal of a matinee action idol with the looks of a

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<sup>6</sup> In his PhD. thesis Soroka exemplifies extensively with three films – *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and *The Last Movie* (Dennis Hopper, 1971). The latter two were never nominated for the Academy Awards.

Douglas Fairbanks, who ends up doing musicals. The grinning of the protagonist and his physical resemblance to Gene Kelly both point that way. *The Artist* starts with a premiere, as did *Singin' in the Rain*, and shows a lot of microphones throughout, but, unlike that musical, the transition of Hazanavius' film is not made by the characters, through the plot, it is made by the plot, through the characters. In other words – and the pun is intended – it is the film that learns to speak and converts to sound, via the authorial *mise-en-scène* (in the script and the direction, both belonging to Hazanavius), not the industry, via the story. Thus, *The Artist*, which is the narrative of a silent 'artist' (as the character Valentin sees himself) refusing to let go of his artistic principles, is made Oscar-worthy.

Not only that, but the film is also considered by the Academy Awards own database as being 'competitive' (it is one of the films with 5 or more competitive awards listed on that site), contradicting Andy Klein's notion that "Movies about moviemaking don't make money" (1991:54)<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, for a production budget of \$16,000,000, *The Artist* did very well in the box office, attaining the mark of \$44,667,095 domestically and \$83,589,617 internationally (\$128,256,712 worldwide for movie theatre distribution).

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<sup>7</sup> The opposite opinion was held not only by David O' Selznick, as can be perceived by some memos we wrote, but also by American historian Theodore Huff, who in 1953, made the commercial and artistic eulogy of the Hollywood on *Hollywood Film* (1953:171). He claimed: "Authors almost always do their best work when they write about people and locales they know intimately, and Hollywood has invariably been successful (and/or interesting) when it has made films about itself".

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## Biography

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