

The 2012 Academy Awards

By David Walsh
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At the 84th Academy Awards ceremony Sunday in Los Angeles, the nearly silent French film, *The Artist*, and *Hugo*, Martin Scorsese's adaptation of a children's book, each won five awards. *The Iron Lady*, the misguidedly sympathetic biography of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, was the only other film to earn multiple awards.

The Artist won as best picture, and its director (Michel Hazanavicius) and leading actor (Jean Dujardin) took home major prizes for their efforts. Meryl Streep won her third best actress award for her performance as Thatcher, and Octavia Spencer (*The Help*) and 82-year-old Christopher Plummer (*Beginners*) received the awards for best supporting actress and actor, respectively.

Most of the films that won top prizes are slight, or worse. *The Artist* is a clever but simplistic reworking of a theme, the dilemma produced by the transition from silent to talking pictures, that has been much better developed in other films. *Hugo* is another confused and disappointing effort from Scorsese. *The Help* reduces the drama of the civil rights era in the South to very small change.

In the best picture category, there was not a great deal to choose from among the nine films. The amiable *Moneyball*, with an appealing Brad Pitt (also nominated), and Alexander Payne's rather tepid *The Descendants* (which won Payne an award for best adapted screenplay along with two co-writers) were perhaps the least offensive choices. Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* contains some stunning imagery, but is a seriously and morbidly disoriented work.

There was no shortage of talented performers to choose from, including Glenn Close and Janet McTeer in *Albert Nobbs*, among the worthiest, Viola Davis and Jessica Chastain in *The Help*, Michelle Williams in *My Week With Marilyn*, Demián Bichir in *A Better Life*, George Clooney in *The Descendants* and Gary Oldman in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*.

In the best original screenplay category, the deserving J.C. Chandor, for *Margin Call*, and Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi, for *A Separation*, were passed over in

favor of Woody Allen (who was not in attendance), for the latest in a recent series of flat and unsuccessful films, *Midnight in Paris*.

Farhadi's film, however, did win as best foreign feature. The work deals sensitively with social tension and conflict in contemporary Iran. The highlight of the evening was undoubtedly Farhadi's acceptance speech, which included these words: "At this time many Iranians all over the world are watching us and I imagine them to be very happy. They are happy not just because of an important award or a film or a filmmaker, but because at the time when talk of war, intimidation, and aggression is exchanged between politicians, the name of their country, Iran, is spoken here through her glorious culture, a rich and ancient culture that has been hidden under the heavy dust of politics. I proudly offer this award to the people of my country, the people who respect all cultures and civilizations and despise hostility and resentment. Thank you so much."

In the midst of the unrelenting effort by the Obama administration and the US military to find a pretext for an assault on Iran, the bestowing of the award on Farhadi, whether the academy voters perceived him as a "dissident" or not, has undoubted significance. The director-producer's presentation was dignified and moving.

Comparing Academy Awards ceremonies one year to the next is essentially a fruitless task. All sorts of arbitrary and essentially accidental factors enter into the quality of a given event.

However, in my view, the 2012 broadcast, hosted by comic Billy Crystal, was less painful to watch than some of the recent editions. The attempts over the past number of years to reach a wider audience through more youthful or supposedly popular figures—Chris Rock, Jon Stewart, Ellen DeGeneres, Hugh Jackman, the pairing of James Franco and Anne Hathaway—all failed, sometimes glaringly, from both the demographic and entertainment points of view.

Crystal's humor and style are somewhat predictable,

but he seems to be genuinely amused by life and the vagaries of the entertainment industry, and that communicates itself. His remark early in the evening that the viewing audience should enjoy itself, “because nothing can take the sting out of the world's economic problems like watching millionaires present each other with golden statues” set a certain valuable tone. As did his comment that the awards ceremony was being staged “at the beautiful Chapter 11 Theater,” a reference to the venue formerly named for now-bankrupt Kodak.

It may not be saying all that much, but the ceremony proceeded without either patriotic posturing or, fortunately, an “Obama moment” of any kind. One suspects that the Occupy movement has had something of an impact on this social layer, at least to the extent Sunday night of restraining some of their most celebratory and self-congratulatory impulses. Most of those on stage managed to keep their narcissism under control.

Streep and Plummer were gracious as winners, as were Colin Firth, Sandra Bullock and Christian Bale as presenters, while Emma Stone was delightful. A mock 1939 focus group responding to *The Wizard of Oz*, with Christopher Guest, Fred Willard, Catherine O’Hara, Bob Balaban and Eugene Levy, was amusing.

Of course, no one, other than Farhadi, had a word to say about the situation in the US or the world, including the great question of social inequality. This central problem puts everything else in perspective.

There are many skilled individuals in the film industry, and many appealing personalities. As we’ve suggested many times before, that is not where the problem lies. The performers, technicians and crew members are generally more talented and remarkable than the material they are given to work with. Each year the choices in the best picture, best director and best screenplay categories tend to be the bleakest.

The dominance of a handful of conglomerates and, even more fundamentally, the absence of important and penetrating ideas about life results at present in a dearth of honest and compelling films.

A survey of the Academy Award best picture winners over the last two decades provides some idea of the problems. The poorest (in some cases, genuinely dreadful) award winners included *Unforgiven*, *Forrest Gump*, *Braveheart*, *Titanic*, *Gladiator*, *The Departed*, *The Hurt Locker* and *No Country for Old Men*. Very weak choices as well were *American Beauty*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Chicago*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *The English Patient*, *The*

King’s and *The Lord of the Rings* ~~SpeEbbk~~ *Ret* *the King*. *Crash* and *Slumdog Millionaire* were perhaps better intentioned, if seriously flawed. *Shakespeare in Love* was likeable, if not taken all that seriously. Only *Schindler’s List*, at least certain portions of it, was a genuine artistic success.

The conditions are inevitably ripening for a change in cinema. Reality will eventually see to that. The relative unpretentiousness and lack of bombast at this year’s awards ceremony are signs, *very modest* signs, of that process.

Here are WSWs reviews of the major nominated films:

Sydney Film Festival 2011—Part 1: Social complexity versus the trivial [22 July 2011]

The Artist: An amiable gimmick [7 January 2012]

Martin Scorsese’s *Hugo*: A rather drab and disjointed fairytale [15 December 2011]

Alexander Payne’s digestible *The Descendants* [21 February 2012]

The Iron Lady: What were they thinking? [10 January 2012]

Moneyball, and the uneven playing field of professional sports [28 October 2011]

David Fincher’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* [6 January 2012]

The Help: A civil rights era film that ignores the civil rights movement [27 August 2011]

Albert Nobbs: A model of repression [15 February 2012]

Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris*: No style, no substance [3 June 2011]

Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*: A world of confusion [20 June 2011]

Stephen Daldry’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*: Not really a movie about 9/11, whatever else it might be [25 February 2012]

The Adventures of Tintin: A generic boy scout travels a computer-generated world [30 January 2012]

My Week With Marilyn: Another look at the postwar American film icon [10 December 2011]

Margin Call: A look at the parasitical one percent [4 November 2011]

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