

89th Academy Awards: What does Hollywood offer today?

By David Walsh
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The 89th Academy Awards ceremony, held Sunday at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, was an even more complex and peculiar affair than usual. At such an event, in a quite striking and almost brutal fashion, genuine artistic talent and personal decency cross paths with banality, cynical commercial interest and triviality.

This year, the coming to power of Donald Trump little more than five weeks ago inevitably added an element of heightened tension and anxiety. A number of award presenters and recipients expressed opposition to Trump's extreme right-wing administration, but the opposition of these circles—despite sincerity in many cases—tends to be distorted by their wealth and distance from the burning problems of the mass of the population.

After an embarrassing mix-up, *Moonlight* was announced as the winner of the best picture award. The film, about a black youth growing up in Miami in the 1980s and 1990s, also gained honors for best supporting actor (Mahershala Ali) and best adapted screenplay (Barry Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney).

Damien Chazelle's *La La Land*, about love and music in contemporary Los Angeles, collected six awards, including best director (Chazelle), best actress (Emma Stone), best original score and best original song (Justin Hurwitz) and best cinematography (Linus Sandgren). The film had been nominated in 14 categories.

Casey Affleck won the best actor award for his performance in *Manchester by the Sea*, written and directed by Kenneth Lonergan, who won for best original screenplay. The film looks at a working-class man in the Boston area responsible for a terrible personal tragedy.

Viola Davis earned the best actress award for *Fences*, a film based on the August Wilson play, directed by Denzel Washington, which treats a Pittsburgh sanitation worker and his family in the 1950s.

The best foreign language film award went to Iranian writer-director Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman*. Farhadi was not present, but issued a strong statement, which we will reproduce below, denouncing Trump's proposed travel ban. Farhadi's *A Separation* won the same prize in 2012.

The best feature documentary award went to Ezra Edelman (the son of children's rights activist Marian Wright Edelman) and Caroline Waterlow for *O.J.: Made in America*, a nearly eight-hour miniseries tracing the life and fate of American professional football player O.J. Simpson, accused of murdering his ex-wife and her friend in 1994.

The British film, *The White Helmets*, directed by Orlando von Einsiedel and produced by Joanna Natasegara, won in the short documentary category. The White Helmets is a dubious organization supposedly carrying out humanitarian efforts in Syria. However, it was created in collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), notorious for its overseas operations on behalf of American imperialist interests. The White Helmets pushes US intervention in Syria and regime change.

Moonlight, *Manchester by the Sea* and *Fences* are intelligently and sensitively made films, whose characters face real economic and moral

difficulties. The writers and directors involved accord human beings a considerable degree of respect and sympathy, even if the latter make serious mistakes and act unwisely or thoughtlessly.

At the same time, each of the three films (and the other better ones honored Sunday night) suffers from the limited perspective and outlook that dominates contemporary cultural life. In each case, the viewer is largely restricted to what the given character or characters know and feel. There is no consistent effort to investigate and dramatize the bigger social impulses that lie behind the immediate motives.

Chazelle's *La La Land* has a few intriguing moments, and some engaging performances, but it is essentially a poor and insubstantial effort, which largely plays on the more complacent and shallow instincts of viewers.

The four performers honored Sunday night are all extremely gifted, although Emma Stone was not seriously challenged by her role in *La La Land*.

The February 26 ceremony was not simply a cultural event, however. The election of Trump has triggered an immense political and social crisis. It marks and ushers in a new, advanced stage in the disintegration of American democracy. That unquestionably overshadows every significant public occasion at present.

Trump and his supporters have launched numerous vicious attacks on the media and any signs of opposition, including from Hollywood liberals like actress Meryl Streep. Extreme right-wing elements urged a "boycott" of Sunday night's program on ABC, denouncing the "socialist perverts" who would be gathering at the Dolby Theatre.

It is safe to say that the vast majority of those present at the Academy Awards opposed Trump's brutal measures on immigration, the proposed wall along the Mexican border and his general policy of extreme chauvinism and nationalism.

The host of the awards ceremony, late-night talk show host Jimmy Kimmel, opened his monologue by noting, "This broadcast is being watched live by millions of Americans and around the world in more than 225 countries that now hate us." He quipped later, "I want to say, maybe this is not a popular thing to say, but I want to say thank you to President Trump. I mean, remember last year when it seemed like the Oscars were racist? That's gone, thanks to him."

Kimmel pointed to the presence of French actress Isabelle Huppert, nominated for Paul Verhoeven's *Elle*, and added: "You were amazing in that film, and I'm glad Homeland Security let you in tonight, I really am." Underscoring in its own way the astonishingly foul and degraded character of the current political atmosphere, the awards host said, "Some of you will get to come up here on this stage tonight and give a speech that the president of the United States will tweet about in all caps during his 5 a.m. bowel movement tomorrow."

As noted above, Iranian director Asghar Farhadi made the strongest statement on the present situation. At the time of the introduction of Trump's ban on travel from seven Muslim-majority countries, as well as

his temporary ban on the entry of refugees from any country, Farhadi announced he would not attend the Academy Awards, whether an exception was made for him or not.

On Sunday night, astronaut Anousheh Ansari and former NASA scientist Firouz Naderi accepted the award on Farhadi's behalf in a speech that evoked strong applause. Ansari read Farhadi's statement, which first thanked those involved in the production of *The Salesman* and then continued:

"I'm sorry I'm not with you tonight. My absence is out of respect for people of my country and those of other six nations who have been disrespected by the inhumane law that bans entry of immigrants to the US. Dividing the world into the us and the enemy categories creates fear, a deceitful justification for regression and war. These wars prevent democracy and human rights in countries in which have themselves have been victims of aggression.

"Filmmakers can turn their cameras to capture shared human qualities and break stereotypes of various nationalities and religions. They create empathy between us and others. An empathy we need today more than ever."

Backstage, Naderi explained why he and Ansari had been asked to accept the award: "She's an astronaut. She has gone to the space station. I work for NASA ... I think the reason is that if you go away from the Earth and look back at the Earth you don't see any of the borders, any of the lines. You just see one whole beautiful Earth."

Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal, on hand to present an award for best animated feature film, spoke out against the Trump administration's plans to build a wall on the US-Mexico border: "As a Mexican, as a Latin-American, as a migrant worker, as a human being, I'm against any form of wall that separates us." Bernal played a central role in *Desierto* (2015), directed by Jonás Cuarón, as an immigrant worker from Mexico being hunted on the border by a ruthless vigilante (Jeffrey Dean Morgan).

In highly emotional remarks, Viola Davis paid tribute to the people now in their graves who never experienced satisfaction in their lives. She explained that she wanted to tell the "stories of the people who dreamed big and never saw those dreams to fruition. People who fell in love and lost. I became an artist--and thank God I did--because we are the only profession that celebrates what it means to live a life. So, here's to August Wilson [who wrote *Fences*, the play on which the film is based], who exhumed and exalted the ordinary people."

There were several other moving and generous moments, including the introduction of 98-year-old Katherine Johnson, the African American physicist and mathematician and former NASA employee whose life-story was one of the inspirations for *Hidden Figures*.

In the ceremony's final moments, when it became apparent that *Moonlight* and not *La La Land*, as had first been announced by presenter Faye Dunaway, was the winner of the best picture award, the response of the latter's producers and actors was very gracious. The producers and actors of *Moonlight* were equally gracious in victory.

There were, naturally, many banal and empty-headed moments Sunday night. A good number of Kimmel's antics misfired or simply wasted time. Nine-tenths of the introductions of the various categories were trite and dull. The set was ugly, and musical numbers at the Academy Awards rarely fail to convey tawdriness.

In its tone and substance, the special presentation "highlighting the benefits of film and diversity," delivered by Cheryl Boone Isaacs, president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) and a public relations executive, reflected the conservative and establishment character of the film industry hierarchy.

The surprise "gag" in which a busload of unsuspecting sightseers were let in to the Dolby Theatre and led through an "impromptu meet and greet with Hollywood's A-list" was as distasteful as it was revealing. The "ordinary people" behaved with dignity and so, for the most part, did the

actors, but the episode had the character of commoners being permitted a brief audience with royalty. The isolation and insulation of American "celebrities" is not of their doing or necessarily of their choosing, but one had the uncanny and unhappy feeling that this was truly as close to "average" men and women as the star performers ever get.

The consequences of that remoteness are immense and debilitating. In that sense, there was something sad and a little pathetic about the fleeting and surreal encounter, because a sustained encounter with everyday life *ought to be* the center of the actors' artistic existence.

One was struck again Sunday night by the fact that, as things presently stand, the American film industry's greatest strengths lie at two ends of the spectrum—on the one hand, in acting and, on the other, in the technology of image and sound making. The largest and most damaging weakness emerges in the processes of writing and directing, those activities most closely associated with carrying out a rational analysis of the social and historical process and transforming that into something dramatically meaningful.

At its weakest, therefore, decency and good will in Hollywood merely trail off into trivia, the wringing of one's hands ineffectually about the ills of the world or into the political lowest common denominator, which at this moment happens to be the upper middle class obsession with race. The opposition to things as they are remains at a low level, historically and socially uninformed to a large extent.

The African Americans honored February 26 were certainly deserving of their awards, but the contrasting attitude toward class, revealed inadvertently through the "sightseer-commoner" gag, and race, expressed in the endless hymns to diversity and the rather desperate efforts to ensure that there would be black nominees and award-winners, is instructive.

One could also not help but take note of the fact that several of the more creditable films produced by the American film industry this year, *Free State of Jones* (Gary Ross), *Loving* (Jeff Nichols) and *Snowden* (Oliver Stone), were all but snubbed. Ruth Negga, the Ethiopian-Irish actress, was nominated as best actress for *Loving*, but lost to Stone. All three films included white male characters who resisted oppression or injustice. That thought, and what it might imply about wide layers of the American population, was apparently too much for the academy voters.

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