

## "THE ENVELOPE PLEASE": THE OSCARS

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Seminar: The Dream Factory

[Assignment: Choose an aspect of film that has changed over the decades and show how those changes either reflected or affected society.]

(1) Toward the end of his career, King of the Screen, Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. saw fit to dignify what he had come to think of as the Art of Motion Pictures. Fairbanks went to his colleagues, Louis B. Mayer and Cecil B. DeMille and told them there ought to be in Hollywood, a respectable and dignified institution symbolizing the existence of movies as an art form. His ideas were thought well of, and in 1927 the founding of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was announced to the world. Fairbanks became the first President of the Academy.

(2) The elders of the industry, Mayer, DeMille, Fairbanks, Schenk, and Hays formed the Academy with the serious purpose of raising money to establish and operate a center for the study of the cinema as an art form, and to further all phases of motion picture literature, technical research and development. It was also hoped the Academy would add dignity, prestige, and luster to the film industry. These same elders decided that an award should be given to honor each year's best actor, actress, picture, director, and screenplay. Fairbanks declared the need for an award that would be durable, so it would last forever. Thus, the eight-and-one-half pound, thirteen-and-one-half inch faceless crusader, holding a sword was created, the heftiest award of its kind--a britannium and gold plated statuette. This award has become one of the the most highly coveted, because it represents the approval of the recipient's peers for excellence in the craft of film-making.

(3) In the days of the great movie mogul, studios took turns winning for best picture, but those days are gone. The intent is now supposed to be for the Academy to vote on artistic merit, whether or not the films are successful at the box-office. The Academy's method for selecting Oscar winners is by a nomination from all actors in Hollywood. The final choice from these nominees is made by the entire membership of the Academy. The results inevitably reflect a mixture of professional judgement, personal popularity, chance, and pressure, with the controlling factor being personal popularity. Because of this method, many excellent performances have been overlooked through the years. This unfortunate fact has brought about what is referred to as the Obligatory Award--given to stars for performances, though highly creditable, not their best. They are also given for various other reasons such as, sentimental and apolo-

getic, or for courageous acts.

(4) In 1945, one such award was given to Joan Crawford for Mildred Pierce. Her performance was probably one of her best, but what won the award for her was her courage to defy Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Warner Brothers by staying off the screen for two years at the threat of never returning, to secure a story that would extend her life as a box-office star. In the fifties, Ingrid Bergman won, probably because the Academy wanted to make amends for the condemnation the press heaped upon her years earlier, when she abandoned her husband and ran off to Italy to live with Roberto Rossellini. Liz Taylor won the award in 1960, primarily because she didn't win for her three past nominations.

(5) Bette Davis, perhaps won the most notorious of the consolation prizes in 1935 for having been denied the year before for Of Human Bondage, which she had been loaned to RKO Pictures from Warner Brothers to do. She lost to a "sleeper" film--It Happened One Night. Jack Warner of Warner Brothers, had pressured his employees not to vote for her that year, because he couldn't have his star win with another studio. He told his employees that if she won she would expect a higher salary. When she lost, he told her she was very good playing a bitch-heroine, but she shouldn't win awards for playing herself. Warner won, but also lost, because the Academy received hundreds of angry letters protesting Davis's not winning. This all led to a reform of the nominating and voting procedures. The accounting firm of Price-Waterhouse was hired to ensure fairness in the future.

(6) There are many film greats who never won an award. The list includes Charlie Chaplin, Greta Garbo, John Barrymore, Cary Grant, Edward G. Robinson, John Garfield, Charles Boyer, Marlene Dietrich, Leslie Howard, Richard Burton, Rosalind Russell, Barbara Stanwyck, and Judy Garland. These past oversights brought about the so-called Special Awards--a catch-all category to honor unclassified achievement, and rectify past injustices. Director-Producer David W. Griffith received one such award for distinguished creative achievements as a director and producer, and for his invaluable initiative and lasting contribution to the motion picture arts. At the time he won he hadn't made a film in four years, nor in spite of the award did he ever make one again. Chaplin and Garbo were also recipients of Special Awards. During their careers they snubbed the rest. They paid the price for the self-chosen status as outsiders. They were snubbed when their opportunities arose for best actor or actress. They ended up where they belonged, in a category apart--the Special Awards.

(7) The children of the film era were not properly awarded as best this or that, but received Special Awards. Shirley Temple, Deanna Durbin, Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, Margaret O'Brien, and Hayley Mills were

just a few of this group. Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. had suggested early on that the best actors and actresses were children and animals, and to let a child actor under the wire, might one day mean giving the award to the likes of Lassie. So, up to the 1960s children never won.

(8) Through the years there have been many firsts for Oscar. The first actor failing to show up and collect his award was also the first recipient for Best Actor--Emil Jannings. This was also during the first Academy Banquet in 1929. Jannings, convinced that his poor English wouldn't survive the forthcoming sound films, left for his home in Germany. Jannings was reached the next day at Union Station just as his train was departing. Lester Cowan of the Academy raced alongside the train and handed Jannings the Oscar through a window.

(9) In 1932 the first tie occurred for Best Actor. Wallace Beery and Frederic March shared the honors. In the year 1937, Austrian Luise Rainer became the first to win the top award two years in a row. In 1942, songwriter Irving Berlin became the first presenter to open an envelope and discover he was the winner. He won that year for "White Christmas." The most unusual first occurred in 1946, when a non-professional, Harold Russell, won in his first movie, The Best Years of Our Lives. He played a paraplegic veteran. He was a real-life paraplegic. The first televised awards came to us in 1953. At that time there were forty-three million viewers. Recently, there have been nearly five hundred million viewers in twenty countries via satellite.

(10) Glamorous as they are, the Oscars have not been without their controversies, political or otherwise. As far back as 1936, well-known screen writer Dudley Nichols refused to show up to accept his award for the screenplay of The Informer. He was protesting the studio's refusal to recognize certain craft unions. Thirty-five years later several stars, for both political and personal reasons, boycotted the ceremonies and refused awards. George C. Scott was the first to refuse, because he felt the awards were a competition, destructive to actors. In 1971, Jane Fonda won as Best Actress for Klute and was greeted with boos amongst the cheers for her controversial involvement in Vietnam war protests. She accepted her award dressed in a pair of black pajamas of the Viet Cong. In 1973, Marlon Brando refused to accept his award for The Godfather. He sent a proxy--an actress, Maria Cruz, dressed as an Indian girl to protest against Hollywood's characterization of American Indians. In 1974 a streaker ran across the stage just as David Niven was introducing Liz Taylor. Niven's quick comment was one of the better moments of the Academy Awards, when he quipped, "That's probably the only laugh that man will ever get in his life--stripping his clothes off and showing us his shortcomings." ("I Remember . . . Hollywood and Its Oscars," Time 11 April 1983: 54.) Back to the political arena came Vanessa Redgrave in 1978. In her

acceptance speech she ranted and raved about "Zionist Thugs." She hailed her award as being a "final victory" for PLO causes. Paddy Chayefsky immediately contested her remarks and reminded her that in the course of history, an actress winning a prize was not an event of world importance.

(11) In 1983 it became apparent that during the awards anything goes--anything anti-American, that is. The film Missing received four major nominations. The director and co-scriptwriter for the film was a career long communist sympathizer. As actors and actresses read the announcements written for them by an Academy writer, they may not have been aware of what it was they were actually representing. Did John Travolta realize the "evil system" he spoke of when he read that Missing was a film of a man struggling against an "evil system" was his own U.S. government? Did Carol Burnett know that when reading about the search for truth and freedom in a land where they no longer exist that she was endorsing the thesis of the film Missing, that of anti-American beliefs? Later that same evening, Canadian citizen and director-producer of If You Love This Planet, Terri Nash, accepted her award jeering at the U.S. Justice Department in her speech. This taunting was not greeted with great applause, but was moderately applauded; yet there was not a hint of protest against her remarks, making it seem acceptable for foreigners to jeer at the U.S. during the awards.

(12) Through it all, behind the spectacle of the Academy Award ceremony, the glitter and jokes, the controversies, and carnival atmosphere, there is a serious purpose--and an accomplishment achieved. Most of the major developments in the manufacture of motion picture cameras, of films and tapes, sound and lights, action and special effects, have been inspired by the artists and technicians sponsored or financed by the Academy. Most of the profits from the ceremonies have indeed been used to further the Arts and Sciences of Motion Pictures.

#### Works Cited

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