

## **No Ceremony for Older Women: Some Observations on the 2008 Academy Awards Broadcast.**

By Robert Goff

### **Part 1: Rerunning History**

*...on April 17, (1972) the former movie actor and then governor of California, Ronald Reagan, told reporters that although Chaplin may have been a “genius” filmmaker, American officials acted correctly in 1952 when they revoked his reentry permit.<sup>1</sup>*

A feeling of déjà vu came on me as I watched this year’s broadcast of the Academy Awards hosted by Jon Stewart. The spectacular opening sequence with its animated special effects ride through downtown Los Angeles reminded me of a similar CGI-dominated opening ride two years ago when, as it happened, Jon Stewart made his first appearance as host. The gargantuan glitzy stage set of the Kodak Theatre seemed unchanged from last year, although the out-of-scale impersonality of contemporary set design has become standard for recent award shows and it is difficult to distinguish among them. Jack Nicholson, with his sunglasses and Cheshire cat grin, was seated yet again in the front row of the Kodak Theater and the camera, as usual, kept cutting to him. As prime time TV had been awash in reruns for the three long months of the writers’ strike, I was at first almost convinced that panicked producers of the Academy Awards show, with little time to prepare for this year’s event as the strike ended, had decided to run a previous broadcast at the last moment. This year’s Academy Awards show, however, turned out not to be a rerun although it continued to seem like one throughout the broadcast. This was partly because it was the eightieth anniversary of the ceremony and the producers’ main idea for celebrating this occasion was to bombard the viewer with myriad clips from previous shows, including several very familiar moments from the last few years.

Ellen DeGeneres from last year’s broadcast was seen once again vacuuming the front row and Jon Stewart appeared in bed with George Clooney as the dream sequence from the

opening of the 2006 ceremony was repeated. Early into the broadcast, George Clooney in person came out to officially commemorate the eightieth anniversary by introducing a montage of edited clips. The montage opened with a newsreel of Shirley Temple from the 1930s and ended with Charlie Chaplin thanking the Academy for his special Oscar in 1972 but in between came a chaotic assortment of rapidly edited visuals from past ceremonies. If the clips had been more carefully chosen, arranged in a meaningful order, with each “highlight” lasting more than a second or two of screen time, the montage might have prompted some reflection, however superficial, on aspects of the history of the ceremony. Instead, the editing made the montage almost incoherent and the viewer was reduced to passively registering recognition of famous faces as they relentlessly flashed onto the TV screen. It was basically a frenetic slide show with very brief video clips alternating with a series of still photographs of stars accepting awards or several one-second clips freeze-framing into stills. Images of famous stars of the past, such as John Wayne and Katherine Hepburn, were mixed in with shots of contemporary stars, such as Halle Berry and Kevin Spacey, to form a rather meaningless iconography of Hollywood stardom in which the past became interchangeable with the present. Extremely brief clips of big production numbers and comedy routines from past ceremonies were also part of the image overload and flashed by on the screen just as rapidly.

A sublime performance, such as septuagenarian Stanley Donen gracefully dancing with his lifetime achievement Oscar, was reduced to a second or two of what must have seemed to an uninformed viewer a bad comedy routine. Without hearing his acceptance speech, a shot of the late Jack Palance doing press-ups registered as just another hyperkinetic visual. A glimpse of the streaker over the shoulder of David Niven was not even funny although Niven’s response at the time had been. A sound bite of his ad-lib, “Isn’t it fascinating to think that probably the only laugh that man will ever get in his life is by stripping off his clothes and showing his shortcomings?”<sup>2</sup> would have been, I assume, far too long for this montage. More clips from previous award ceremonies continued to be shown relentlessly throughout the evening. Each segment of the broadcast usually ended with a short montage of “highlights” from previous broadcasts and, occasionally, some

new film footage of previous Oscar winners, such as Barbra Streisand, Michael Douglas and Elton John, reminiscing about past triumphs was shown. The evening's homage to the history of the Academy Awards, with its countless montages of clips, was neither informative nor engaging. Instead, it became a meaningless visual spectacle, like the CGI display that opened the evening's broadcast.

The opening montage focused on the journey of a truck carrying the Oscar statues to the theater—a more extended trip of a space ship opened the Academy Awards broadcast in 2006, but it was obvious the same animators must have been behind it. Here is what I wrote of the opening two years earlier:

*I find the Academy Award ceremony an increasingly telling indicator of postmodern trends in American society—and, in turn, an influential promoter of these trends. The simulated is replacing the authentic, style is becoming far more important than substance and history is reduced to what has been captured on film. The digital special effects of the opening sequence—an eerie journey through fantasy landscapes of real and imaginary buildings populated by Hollywood stars in famous roles—set the tone of the evening. It was an ingenious CGI extravaganza, suggesting what it must feel like walking around Las Vegas or Universal studio's theme park after taking a peyote button, but it was hardly an invitation to a live event. The random juxtaposition of animated cut-out figures from famous movies past and present, all mingling with comic book heroes and movie monsters and the occasional overheard utterance of a line of movie dialogue, was more of a nightmarish vision of theme park America than some kind of tribute to Hollywood as a dream factory.<sup>3</sup>*

The ceremony, now as then, could be something more than a postmodern spectacle. Rather than overloading the viewer with images without context and expecting that frenetic glimpses of stars past and present somehow expressed eighty years of a culturally significant ceremony, the Academy could have acknowledged a few of the realities of its own history and celebrated some of the real achievements of its members. Shirley Temple, who received a “juvenile” Oscar in 1935, also turns eighty this year. This year's ceremony would have been the perfect occasion to give her a lifetime achievement Oscar, especially in a year when a woman is running for president. Shirley Temple Black had appointments in the Nixon, Ford and Bush senior administrations and her deep involvement in Republican politics (she unsuccessfully ran for Congress in 1967) is a

reminder that “liberal Hollywood” is also the home to many conservatives.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, it would also have been an occasion to look back at how liberals and radicals in the industry were once ostracized in Hollywood. Instead of merely showing a gracious Charlie Chaplin telling the audience in 1972 that they are wonderful, the host could also have explained that the liberal Chaplin had just returned after being expelled from the country and Hollywood for twenty years.

## **Part II: Film Families**

*The Bardems are a legendary acting dynasty, sort of the Barrymores of Spain, although actors here are not quite treated as royalty. La Bardem, as she is often called, is also a proud mom and a pistol of a woman whose well-lived life has been one of adversity, trail-blazing, politics and superstition.*<sup>5</sup>

The Academy Awards ceremony has often included some interesting tributes and in the years since 1982, when I first started watching, the television broadcasts have occasionally provided me glimpses--beyond the spectacle and the hype--of the real workings and achievements of the film industry in the United States, and in film industries in other parts of the world. The 2008 ceremony was no exception. The most informative part of the show is often the lifetime achievement award. This year's award went to a male production designer, rather than to Shirley Temple Black. The choice of Robert F. Boyle for this award turned out to be a moving reminder of actual Hollywood history during the evening. Introduced by Nicole Kidman, the ninety-eight-year-old had started out in Hollywood on a Hitchcock film in the 1940s and went on to win an Oscar for his design of *North by Northwest*. His speech looked back on a very long career, including first being hired by legendary art director, Hans Dreier, who headed design at Paramount. He paid concise tribute to directors he had worked with: “To Norman Jewison who made moviemaking fun and much laughter while dealing with real subjects. And to Don Siegel, who cut to the chase and gave us truth.”<sup>6</sup> He had previously been nominated for his work on Jewison's *Fiddler on the Roof* and Siegel's *The Shootist*.<sup>7</sup> With his frail body dwarfed by the giant Oscar statues on the stage behind him, one wished he had been asked to give some suggestions for improving the sets at the Kodak Theater.

The craft of production design was again praised later in the evening when Robert Elswit, who won for Best Cinematography on *There Will Be Blood*, complimented the film's production designer, Jack Fisk: "John Toll won this a number of years ago [and] said [of] the production designer on his movie, that 50% of it belonged to him. Well, 80% belongs to Jack Fisk and his production crew." Fisk was actually nominated this year for *There Will Be Blood* but lost to the designer of *Sweeney Todd*. I observed that Fisk sat in the audience next to his wife, Sissy Spacek, and I was reminded of the less publicized marriages within Hollywood. Francis McDormand was also shown eagerly cheering her husband Joel Coen and his brother Ethan as they picked up the major awards of the evening. (The very high-profile marriage of Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones was highlighted during the evening with film of them talking about their respective Oscar wins.)

Ruby Dee, who is four years older than Shirley Temple, was nominated for best supporting actress for her role in *American Gangster* and I was reminded not only of one of the longest marriages in the entertainment world (her husband of fifty-seven years, Ossie Davis died a few years ago) but of one of the longest female careers on stage, television and in film.<sup>8</sup> It was a pity that she did not win for best supporting actress. Both Davis and Dee were very active in the civil rights movement. The evening abounded in reminders of the connections between politics and Hollywood, and especially political women in Hollywood. Robert Boyle had spoken of his marriage to Bess Taffel, a screenwriter who died in 2000; their children and grandchildren were shown in the theater box reserved for the family of special award honorees. But he didn't mention that his wife had refused to name names during the investigation of communist influence in Hollywood and was blacklisted in 1951, thereupon ending her career as a screenwriter.<sup>9</sup>

The Academy Awards ceremony has still not honored those who were blacklisted in the 1940s and 1950s, although it has honored those who named names--and there were protests at the ceremony when Elia Kazan received a lifetime achievement award in 1999. One blacklisted screenwriter, Bernard Gordon, was mentioned during the evening

in the montage of the people in the film industry who had died in the past year. Gordon, who has written at length about being blacklisted, had organized the protests against Kazan in 1999.<sup>10</sup> It is unconscionable that the mention of his death has been the only time that the Academy has acknowledged Gordon.<sup>11</sup>

While the blacklist period continued to go unnoted in this pseudo-historical anniversary ceremony, winners from outside the Hollywood community, however, were eager to mention other political aspects of the industry's history. Reflecting a rare knowledge of Hollywood ancestry during the evening, Stefan Ruzowitzky, the Austrian director of the Best Foreign Language Film, *The Counterfeiters*, paid tribute to the Austrian influence in Hollywood: "There have been some great Austrian filmmakers working here. Thinking of Billy Wilder, Fred Zinnemann, Otto Preminger, most of them had to leave my country because of the Nazis, so it sort of makes sense that the first Austrian movie to win an Oscar is about the Nazis' crimes."

Viewers were given a glimpse of the background of another country's film industry when Javier Bardem won for Best Supporting Actor for his role in *No Country for Old Men*. The actor comes from several generations of actors and had brought his mother, Pilar Bardem, who is a leading actress in Spain, as a guest. He dedicated his Oscar to her in Spanish. Jon Stewart, later jokingly boasting of his own high school Spanish, gave an absurd translation. I later found a more approximate translation and Bardem's speech turned out to be an impassioned dedication: "Mom, this is for you, for your grandparents, for your parents, Rafael and Matilde, for the comedians of Spain who, like you, have brought dignity and pride to our profession. This is for Spain and this is for all of you." His grandparents, Rafael Bardem and Matilde Munoz Sanpedro, were actors in the Spanish film industry from the 1940s. His late uncle, Juan Antonio Bardem, was an important director in post-WWII Spain and his mother, as well as being a renowned Spanish actress, is also politically outspoken. I learned that she, along with her son, had opposed the Spanish government's decision to send troops to Iraq in 2003.<sup>12</sup>

### **Part III: Dedications to Fathers and to Males who Rock**

*To my husband Matthew Syrett, who took care of our children and held down a full-time job so that we could make this film.*  
**Cynthia Wade accepting an Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject, 2008**

No winners but Bardem thanked their mothers with such pride and emotion during the evening. Fathers and men in general seemed to be the ones mentioned in the more passionate acceptance speeches. Earlier in the evening, Christopher Rouse, who won for Best Editor on *The Bourne Ultimatum*, acknowledged his father, Russell, who won an Oscar in 1959 as the writer of *Pillow Talk*. The Best Actress award was given to a young French woman who played Édith Piaf in *La Vie en Rose*. Marion Cotillard, who deservedly won for a memorable portrayal of the famous singer, was completely overcome with surprise and did not really know what to say. I'm not sure if she had prepared a speech and forgot it or hadn't bothered to prepare one at all. She could only babble on about her director while revealing that she had already picked up the language of American show business: "Oh -- thank you so much. Olivier, what you did to me, Maestro Olivier Dahan, you rocked my life. You truly rocked my life ." It would have been appropriate to mention Piaf but she ended up thanking the angels in Los Angeles. There was something, nevertheless, charming and guileless about her speech.

*La Vie en Rose* was not the most political of films of the last year and it glossed over Piaf's collaboration with the Vichy regime during WWII. *Michael Clayton* was more political although its sexual politics seemed questionable, as the leading female role was a ruthless professional woman. However, this role won a Best Supporting Actress award for a British actress. Tilda Swinton seemed as amazed as Cotillard that she had won. Her hastily improvised speech was one of the oddest of the evening. Perhaps she had had too many pre-Oscar cocktails, but her attempts at humor seemed to me to be insulting to the people she mentioned. After comparing the bald head and buttocks of the statue to her American agent, she concluded with a riff on her costar: "and George Clooney, you know, the seriousness and the dedication to your art, seeing you climb into that rubber bat suit from 'Batman & Robin,' the one with the nipples, every morning under your costume, on the set, off the set, hanging upside-down at lunch, you rock, man ." I'm not

sure what Clooney made of this but it came across as patronizing, unfunny, and downright strange for an acceptance speech.

It was no surprise to anyone that Daniel Day-Lewis won the Best Actor award for his role in *There Will Be Blood*. It also seemed probable that Day-Lewis himself was very sure of winning as his responses showed all the signs of his legendary acting preparations. His performance on stage came across as carefully rehearsed as he knelt before last year's nominated Queen,<sup>13</sup> Helen Mirren, and received his honorary "knighthood." As a poet's son, his speech fell to a rather baroque turn of phrase ending with praise for his director: "My deepest thanks to the members of the Academy for whacking me with the handsomest bludgeon in town. I'm looking at this gorgeous thing you've given me and I'm thinking back to the first devilish whisper of an idea that came to him and everything since and it seems to me that this sprang like a golden sapling out of the mad, beautiful head of Paul Thomas Anderson." In an evening when the biggest winners were the laconic Coen Brothers, I suppose the audience felt grateful for this colorful outpouring of well-crafted Irish blarney.

It continued to be a night for honoring fathers. As well as fulsomely praising his young male director, Day-Lewis was intent on acknowledging his patriarchal lineage and dedicated the award not only to his poet father but to his grandfather, Sir Michael Balcon, a great producer in the British film industry. He thanked his wife, Rebecca Miller, but he neglected to point out she is a film director. He also did not mention his mother, Jill Balcon, who was an actress in the British film industry. Day-Lewis concluded with these words, "I've been thinking a lot about fathers and sons in the course of this, and I'd like to accept this in the memory of my grandfather, Michael Balcon, my father, Cecil Day-Lewis, and my three fine boys, Gabriel, Ronan and Cashel."

Alex Gibney, the director of the Best Documentary Feature, had a more political message when he mentioned *his* father: "This is dedicated to two people who are no longer with us, Dilawar, the young Afghan taxi driver, and my father, a navy interrogator who urged me to make this film because of his fury about what was being done to the rule of law.



Let's hope we can turn this country around, move away from the dark side and back to the light. Thank you very much.” Gibney’s film, *Taxi to the Dark Side*, was obviously critical of the present administration and it seemed appropriate that the director got to make a brief political statement. In contrast to last year’s ceremony when Al Gore won for *An Inconvenient Truth* and received an enthusiastic reception, the Academy’s treatment of the Best Documentary Feature category this year was subdued and somewhat rushed. Tom Hanks read out the nominations but only very brief scenes of the five documentaries were shown and there were no shots of the directors in the auditorium. Michael Moore had been nominated for *Sicko*, a documentary about health care that included a visit by the filmmaker to Cuba, but there was no sign of him throughout the evening. He has become an important celebrity and had previously won the Best Documentary award in 2003. I guessed that a producer had believed his claim that he was bringing Castro, who had recently announced his retirement, as his guest for the evening and ordered the camera operators to avoid Moore altogether. The satirical filmmaker joked that he might allow Castro to deliver his acceptance speech, “As long as he keeps it under five hours. I’m telling you, that’s got to be a ratings grabber.”<sup>14</sup>

Tom Hanks had first come on stage to present the nominations for Best Documentary Short Subject. He had seemed much more enthusiastic in this earlier role, although, as a major star and Oscar winner, Hanks would not normally be expected to introduce such a minor Academy Award. However, he was on stage to add his status—and also probably because of the association of his role in *Saving Private Ryan*-- to talking by live satellite link with the military personnel in an important outpost of the American empire, Iraq. He introduced the televised connection to “Camp Victory” in Baghdad by speaking to an officer in charge of a group of soldiers. Onscreen, a number of men and one woman serving in the military were lined up to introduce themselves and read the nominations for Best Documentary Short Subject. As each service person read out the nomination, we were shown reaction shots of the nominees in the auditorium, who seemed surprised and amused by the situation. The winning film short was *Freeheld*, a film about a female police detective in New Jersey who, after being diagnosed with cancer, fights to have her pension transferred to her female companion. I’m not sure what the military in Baghdad

thought about the theme of gay rights in this Oscar-winning film or, if they were still listening in, about the nominations for Best Documentary Feature, which also included the film, *No End in Sight*, a critical examination of decision-making in the early months of the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

Audiences were certainly being given contradictory political messages with both the presentation and acceptance of these two awards for documentaries. The Academy was clearly aligning itself with current U.S. foreign policy by connecting the broadcast of the award ceremony to Camp Victory in Iraq. The producers of the show also seemed to be deliberately marginalizing any criticisms of the present administration with its perfunctory treatment of the nominees for Best Documentary Feature. Yet it was clear that the members who nominated and voted for the winners in both documentary categories must have had more critical and progressive views than the members running the show. Whether there were any advance provisions for censoring the speeches of the winners, they at least got the opportunity to make some brief critical remarks, as with Gibney's comments mentioned above. And one of the two young female filmmakers who accepted for Best Documentary Short Subject said this: "It was Lieutenant Laurel Hester's dying wish that her fight for [*sic*] against discrimination would make a difference for all the same sex couples across the country that face discrimination every day. Discrimination that I don't face as a married woman." She went on to dedicate the award to her husband, as quoted in the epigraph to this section. It was unique during the evening to hear a dedication to a male that at the same time implied a feminist sense of gender equality.

#### **Part IV: No Ceremony for Older Women**

*With older women relegated to asexual motherhood, unattractiveness, genderlessness, or the grotesque, the female cinematic sexual body remains young, pure and fecund for the male voyeuristic gaze and as female role model.*<sup>15</sup>

It became clearer as the evening wore on that younger women, like the two filmmakers who won for Best Documentary Short Subject and upcoming stars like Marion Cotillard,

were the most likely to win, so I guessed that a twenty-nine-year-old ex-exotic dancer had a real good chance of winning that night. With a name like Diablo Cody and a fashion style similar to that of Cher, she could hardly fail in Hollywood. She won for the best original screenplay for *Juno*, a very successful comedy film about a pregnant teenager wanting to give up her baby for adoption. Her walk on stage with a dress cut dangerously close to the crotch was one of the most suspenseful moments of the evening. She had previously published a memoir called *Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper*, but *Juno* was her first screenplay. Cody had good words in her acceptance speech for screenwriters who probably needed the boost coming out of the strike: “This is for the writers, and I want to thank all the writers. I especially want to thank my fellow nominees because I worship you guys and I’m learning from you every day, so thank you very much.” I’m sure she endeared herself to many of her fellow screenwriters although Joe Eszterhas, the famous screenwriter of *Showgirls*, a big budget movie about strippers, and *Basic Instinct*, along with its sequel, might have been given pause by his rising younger rival’s remarks. One of his books on Hollywood demonstrates he keeps a close watch on the Academy Awards ceremony.<sup>16</sup>

Joe Eszterhas might not have been the only one worried about young up and coming talent during the evening. Seasoned Hollywood songwriters failed to win against newcomers. Three songs from the Disney film, *Enchanted*, dominated the best song category but the well-established songwriters Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz lost to the young writers and performers of the song from *Once*. (Both the older songwriters, however, had previously won for the music for other Disney films.)<sup>17</sup> There were some interesting gender dynamics when songwriters Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova came on stage to accept the award. I’m sure they were both excited and surprised but Hansard managed to do all the talking and Irglova was drowned out by the music. To be fair, this had happened a few other times during the night when there were several winners accepting the award. To me, Hansard’s unthinking behavior on stage came across as a form of entitlement, typical in male chauvinism. Jon Stewart, I think, saw Hansard’s behavior as stemming from youthful excitement and only jokingly accused him of arrogance. Stewart, after the next commercial break, brought back Irglova and gave her

time on stage to make a speech. That was a nice gesture on Stewart's part but it nevertheless suggested that a more chivalrous male was helping out a passive and powerless woman.

Last year, I noted that many of the nominated films were about children. This year, the title, *No Country for Old Men*, was continually being announced throughout the broadcast as the film was nominated in several different award categories. Although this particular film is not exactly about old men, old age was a significant theme in several of the nominated films and a number of older members of the film community appeared throughout the broadcast. As mentioned, Marion Cotillard won the Best Actress award for her remarkable impersonation of Édith Piaf in *La Vie En Rose*. The film cuts back and forth between scenes of the renowned French singer as a young woman and ones of Piaf in her later years, when she is pictured as a prematurely aging and sickly woman. The images from these last years provide one of the most convincing portraits of bodily decline and aging in any film I've seen (the film also won for Best Makeup but I believe Cotillard's performance did not rely on this alone). I was even more impressed by *Away from Her*. Of all the nominated films, this was the one most focused on aging. (*The Savages*, nominated for Best Original Screenplay and Best Actress awards, is more about sibling relations than about the plight of an old and mentally incapacitated parent.) However, Sarah Polley's *Away from Her* lost to the Coen brothers in the Best Adapted Screenplay category and Julie Christie, in the leading role of a woman with Alzheimer's disease, also failed to win in the Best Actress category. However, as well as giving an award to the nonagenarian Robert Boyle, the Academy also acknowledged Ruby Dee and Hal Holbrook. Holbrook is the oldest male actor ever nominated for an Academy Award and Dee is the second oldest actress nominated (Gloria Stuart, who was nominated for *Titanic* has the distinction of being the oldest).<sup>18</sup>

Despite the worthy nominations mentioned above, I have sometimes suspected that chronological tokenism plays a role in the nomination process, rather than a committed policy of assessing all performances of merit equally, regardless of the age of the actors. A combination of sexism and ageism tends to make young, female nominees, as noted

above, more likely to win than older women. Ageist humor, moreover, has frequently been expressed during the awards ceremony in regards to older actresses. I'm not sure why Judi Dench has become the most recent target of ageist jokes but for the last few years the hosts have taken pot shots at her. Dench became the subject of several ageist jokes by Ellen DeGeneres throughout the ceremony last year. This year, two new comic actors, Jonah Hill and Seth Rogan, pretended to be Judi Dench and Halle Berry in their announcement of an award and, of course, they fought over who would play Berry. It was a lame sketch and one of the award recipients actually had the best line when he asked "Do I get to kiss Halle Berry?" The implication of the sketch was that Dench was old and ugly.

Perhaps it was Dench's appearance in last year's *Scenes from a Scandal*, for which she got nominated for Best Actress but did not win, that has associated the actress with the familiar stereotype of older women lacking attractiveness. She was also nominated in 2001 for Best Actress in another brave performance as Iris Murdoch, the novelist diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, in the film *Iris*. Dench and Christie follow in a tradition of British actresses tackling roles about mentally unstable older characters. The renowned Dame Edith Evans was nominated for Best Actress in her late seventies for her role as an older woman suffering from hallucinations in the 1967 film, *The Whisperers*. It seems significant that playing such roles has never actually led to winning Oscars.

Older actresses, on the whole, are much more courageous than men in taking on less glamorous or unflattering roles in films. Older male actors tend to play loveable old codgers, such as the roles played by Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman in the recent *The Bucket List*. Christie's performance in *Away from Her* is very daring and probably more nuanced and skilled than her performance in 1965's *Darling*, for which she won the Best Actress Oscar. Sarah Polley's film was surprisingly subtle, even Bergmanesque, in its probing examination of a marriage and the pains and joys of old age. Ingmar Bergman, of course, sadly died during the last year and his death was noted in the evening's montage of recent deaths (apparently, his passing did not warrant a special tribute. Michelangelo Antonioni, who died within a week of Bergman, also did not

receive any tribute beyond a mention in the montage). I was reminded of the Swedish director's gift in getting remarkable performances from actresses. Bergman coaxed a great performance from the aging Ingrid Bergman in *Autumn Sonata*. As with the nominations for *Away from Her*, the actress and the director's screenplay for the film were both nominated for Oscars in 1978. Neither won, but Ingrid Bergman won Oscars for other, inferior, films such as *Murder on the Orient Express*.

Like last year's Best Picture, *The Departed*, the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men* had several large roles for male stars but no significant parts for women. Along with Bardem, both Josh Brolin and Tommy Lee Jones had important roles. However, Kelly McDonald, who plays Brolin's character's downtrodden wife, has a lesser part than those of the above-mentioned male actors; and Tess Harper, who plays the little-seen wife of Jones, mainly listens to her husband telling stories. The part of the one very old woman in the film—the role of McDonald's character's mother-- came close to caricature.

Before the award for Best Director was announced, a montage of clips of previous winners of the award was shown. Viewers could actually learn something from this montage as it showed a succession of male directors receiving awards. Watching these clips provided a strong visual reminder that no female director has ever won this award, and also that very few women have even been nominated for Best Director—I only spotted Jane Campion, nominated for *The Piano*, in the audience before Spielberg was shown accepting for *Schindler's List*.

#### **Part V: Conclusion: a Ceremony for One Older Man?**

*We live in a time where fictitious election results give us a fictitious president. We are now fighting a war for fictitious reasons.*

*Michael Moore, accepting an Academy award in 2003.<sup>19</sup>*

The montage of award-winning male directors of the past culminated in a clip from last year's ceremony when Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Francis Ford Coppola gave the Best Director award to Martin Scorsese. Last year I commented, "Termed 'movie brats' in the 1970s, these four directors, along with (Clint) Eastwood, who was also very

visible during the evening, now constitute the contemporary Hollywood establishment.”<sup>20</sup> Scorsese, as last year’s winner, presented the award this year to Joel and Ethan Coen for *No Country for Old Men*. If the Coen Brothers have enjoyed a reputation as quirky independent directors, the number of awards they won during the evening for their latest film confirms that this team is now a serious branch of the Hollywood establishment. From a younger generation than the “movie brats,” the Coens first emerged in the 1980s. Since then, their films have increasingly commanded bigger budgets and major stars. Tommy Lee Jones starred in the evening’s award-winning film and George Clooney has appeared in some of their earlier films and is also starring in their next film. I thought they summed it up well when Ethan Coen said, “...we're very thankful to all of you out there for letting us continue to play in our corner of the sandbox...”

I complained in my commentary on last year’s broadcast that Scorsese’s *The Departed* was very violent and that the script overloaded with sexist and racist language. The language of *No Country for Old Men* is more subdued but the film also has many violent scenes and Javier Bardem’s award-winning role is of either an evil spirit or psychopathic killer. Last year’s commentary connected the Scorsese film to life in America today: “The success of the bleak vision of *The Departed* probably reflects a culture that continues to tolerate a macho government that is mired in a senseless war, uses ‘extraordinary rendition’ and torture against its enemies, and is insensitive towards other nations.”<sup>21</sup> The Coens’ film is as bleak as Scorsese’s vision of Boston’s gang warfare. As David Denby put it, “Civilization, it seems, has come to an end, petering out in the yellow-brown fields of West Texas.”<sup>22</sup> The stories told by Tommy Lee Jones suggest some moral weight to counter the decline but *New Yorker* critic Denby was not convinced: “If you consider how little the sheriff bestirs himself, his philosophical resignation, however beautifully spoken by Tommy Lee Jones, feels self-pitying, even fake.”<sup>23</sup>

At some point in the evening, Jack Nicholson had introduced a montage marking the eightieth anniversary of the Best Picture award. The montage of the seventy-nine best pictures revealed that many of the winning films, in retrospect, had actually not been the

best, and I'm sure a list of the films released for any given year would probably reveal better films that were either nominated and did not win or films that had been completely ignored by the Academy. *Crash* (the Best Picture of 2006), *The Departed* and *No Country for Old Men* are three well-crafted films, but none of them broke out of the typical mold of the majority of past Best Pictures. The three films heavily depended on star performances, genre conventions, and the strong evocation of the sensations of either sex or violence, or both. *Crash* might have had more characters and plot lines than usual, but it relied on crime film conventions, as well as Hollywood clichés about urban life. I was not only skeptical, like David Denby, of the sincerity behind the script of the Coens' film but unconvinced that *No Country for Old Men*—along with the two previous Best Picture winners--had anything meaningful to say about our society. All three were merely successful vehicles for updating tired Hollywood conventions in the crime genre. The amoral stance of all three films and their fascination with violence, nevertheless, reflect the political culture of contemporary America where real violence and torture in Iraq is tolerated and the consequences of militarism are ignored.

Throughout the evening, Jon Stewart's wisecracks reminded viewers that it is an election year. One joke touched upon how science fiction conventions have sometimes portrayed the presidency. He joked, "Normally, when a black man or woman is president an asteroid is about to hit the statue of Liberty." A reaction shot after this line showed Spike Lee and Wesley Snipes in the audience exchanging smiles. (They were both unaccountably dressed in flamboyant outfits, as though they had come off the set of an African-American version of *Guys and Dolls*. As there were so few black nominees this year, I wondered if they wanted to draw attention to themselves). There could indeed be either an African American or a woman elected president this year and perhaps this would prove that some liberal Hollywood screenwriters of the past were not writing fantasy. Stewart went on to make a silly joke about Barack Obama's name that does not bear repeating. One of his jokes about Hilary Clinton happened to invoke *Away from Her*. Stewart described the film as being about "a woman who forgets her husband" and went on to suggest it was Hilary Clinton's "feel-good movie of the year." To me, these jokes trivialize both politics and the culture of film but I suppose they were in keeping



with the usual clever patter of late night television comedians and Stewart's own comedy show. Another political joke referenced the candidate from the opposing party. The comedian stated, "Oscar is eighty, which makes him now automatically the front runner for the Republican nomination."

Leaving aside any ageist implications, the latter joke suggested to me that the Academy Award ceremony is quite likely to steer the country more in the direction of voting for John McCain than whoever becomes the Democratic candidate, especially if large numbers of Americans have been watching their Best Picture winners the last few years. Canadians are exposed to U.S. movies but their citizens are probably more skeptical of their messages. *Away from Her* is a Canadian film and at one point Julie Christie's character expresses hostility towards Hollywood, "We don't go much to the movies any more. All those multiplexes showing the same American garbage." This line probably didn't help Christie's chances in the Best Actress category. Another of her lines, however, makes a simple but resounding point, especially as the film implies that it expressed one of the last moments of sanity experienced by this character. The screen shows American soldiers in Iraq, and the voice of President Bush is heard talking about freedom. Fiona, played by Julie Christie, is silently watching television in a nursing home but suddenly and distinctly says, "How could they forget Vietnam?"

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Maland, Charles J. *Chaplin and American Culture*. Princeton, Princeton University Press: 1989, p. 344

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Steve Pond *The Big Show: High Times and Dirty Dealing Backstage at the Academy Awards*. New York, Faber & Faber: 2005, p.27

<sup>3</sup> Goff, Robert, "March of the Pimps: Reflections on the 2006 Academy Award Ceremony." Unpublished manuscript

<sup>4</sup> For information on this child star and her later political career see Patsy Guy Hammontree, *Shirley Temple Black: A Bio-Biography*. Westport CT, Greenwood Press:1998.

<sup>5</sup> *Los Angeles Times* article: <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-bardem22feb22,0,5186625.story>

<sup>6</sup> Transcripts of the 2008 Academy Awards speeches can be found on *The Oscars* website, <http://oscar.com/>

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<sup>7</sup> On the work of Boyle and Drier, see Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press: 1995.

<sup>8</sup> See Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together*. New York, William Morrow: 1998.

<sup>9</sup> See an interview with Bess Taffel in Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist*. New York, St. Martin Griffin: 1997.

<sup>10</sup> See Damien Bona, *Inside Oscar 2*. New York, Ballantine Books: 2002. pp. 243-244.

<sup>11</sup> See Bernard Gordon, *Hollywood Exile or How I Learned to Love the Blacklist*. Austin, University of Texas Press:1999, and *The Gordon File: A Screenwriter Recalls Twenty Years of FBI Surveillance*. Austin, University of Texas Press: 2004. An interview with Gordon is also in McGilligan and Buhle.

<sup>12</sup> See *Los Angeles Times*, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-bardem22feb22,0,5186625.story>

<sup>13</sup> Helen Mirren won the Best Actress Oscar in 2007 for her role as Elizabeth II in *The Queen*.

<sup>14</sup> Fox News online: <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,331557,00.html>

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth W. Markson, "The Female Aging Body Through Film" in *Aging Bodies: Images and Everyday Experience*, edited by Christopher A. Faircloth. New York, Altimira Press: 2003, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> See Joe Eszterhas, *The Devil's Guide to Hollywood: The Screen Writer as God*. New York, St. Martin Griffin: 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Strangely, it appeared that if nominees were nominated more than once for awards, then they did not win at all. Roger Deakins was nominated for best cinematography for two films but he did not win. Cate Blanchett, who had nominations for both best actress and best supporting actress, also did not win.

<sup>18</sup> Information on the history of the ceremony can be found on the databases at the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences' website, <http://www.oscars.org/>

<sup>19</sup> *American Rhetoric* on-line speech bank:

[http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/michaelmo\\_oreoscaracceptance.htm](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/michaelmo_oreoscaracceptance.htm)

<sup>20</sup> Goff, Robert, "Convenient Truths: A Commentary on the 2007 Academy Awards Ceremony as a Global Event." *Nebula* 4.2. June 2007

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Denby, David, "Killing Joke: The Coen Brothers' Twists and Turns." *The New Yorker*, February 25, 2008. p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.