

AND THE LOSER IS ...

A History of Oscar Oversights

Aubrey Malone

Vernon Series in Cinema and Culture



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Everybody is a critic. We can all be our own Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. We may not get to vote for who wins what but we can lay down our views. In that way we keep the debate going about who should have won what when. And who got the fuzzy end of the lollipop. Again.

Preface

It's February 2017, the 89th year of the Oscar ceremonies. A 79-year old man comes out on the stage of the Dolby Theater to read the name of the Best Picture of the Year. He opens the envelope and takes out a card. When he looks at it he puts on a face. He doesn't speak. The name written on the card is Emma Stone.

He hands it to his co-presenter, a woman of a similar age who has appeared with him in a famous film years and years ago. She doesn't put on a face. She looks at the name Emma Stone. Then she looks under it. She sees the name of the film Emma Stone has been in. She is more interested in this. It is what she has expected to see.

She reads out the words that are written under Emma Stone. The words she reads out are "*La La Land*." It's the film everyone expected to win. There was no question about it. It was going to win everything. You could put your house on it. A few moments later the stage is stormed by the people who produced the film. They're full of excitement as they clutch their Oscars.

Then another man comes on stage. His name is Jordan Horowitz. He's a producer. He looks distressed. "Guys, I'm sorry," he says, "*Moonlight* won Best Picture. This is not a joke. There's been a mistake."

A mistake.

It's not the first one that's ever been made on Oscar night...

Prologue

For many thinking people the Oscar ceremonies aren't very much superior to a cattle mart in artistic terms. Sean Penn believes the people behind them "can't find their butt with their hand." He adds, "So what does their opinion mean? It's just an opportunity to be an extra in a TV show – twenty minutes more than that if you win." Maybe this is why George C. Scott refused the Academy's highest accolade when it was awarded to him in 1970. So did Marlon Brando two years later for different reasons.

"I'm fed up of these bleeding-hearted liberals who grow fat on the capitalism they profess to despise," one person remarked after Brando refused his Oscar. Brando himself revealed, "I know people who plan what they're going to wear to the ceremonies six months in advance. If there's any chance they'll be nominated they begin memorizing their acceptance speech. If they win they pretend their words are spontaneous, but they've lain awake for months mumbling to the ceiling what they're going to say."

How does one win an Oscar? According to Marlene Dietrich, who didn't, the best way to do so is to make sure one plays either "Biblical characters, priests, or victims of tragic disabilities such as blindness, deafness, muteness or different varieties thereof, or alcoholism, insanity, schizophrenia and other mental disorders." The experiences of people like Ernest Borgnine (*Marty*) and Cliff Robertson (*Charly*), as well as countless others, would appear to confirm her theory. The more serious the malady, the Academy have implied, right up to Daniel Day-Lewis for *My Left Foot* and Anthony Hopkins for *The Silence of the Lambs*, the better one's chances. Why? Billy Wilder gave one theory: "Anyone who plays a hunchback has a better chance of an Oscar than a leading man. That's the revenge of the voters. They don't get the girls either."

In 1985, as if to prove the truth of Dietrich's dictum, the five Best Actor nominees - Michael Caine, Albert Finney, Robert Duvall, Tom Conti and Tom Courtenay - were all playing drunks of some description. Seven years later, as Michael Medved noted, of the five nominees for Best Actor, three played deranged and sadistic killers (Warren Beatty, Robert de Niro and Anthony Hopkins), one was a homeless and delusional psychotic (Robin Williams) and one played a depressed, unemployed and ultimately adulterous husband (Nick Nolte). Medved observed that ever since Jack Nicholson won for playing The Joker in *Batman*, evil, not love, is what the Oscars are about.

In 1988 a virtually unknown actress called Marlee Matlin won the Best Actress Award for playing a deaf-mute in the film *Children of a Lesser God*. A lot of people claimed this was a kind of collective sympathy vote doled out by a confraternity of people who may have had their hearts in the right place but not their critical faculties. They were accused of confusing the performance with the cause.

Similar objections were raised the year Dustin Hoffman won the coveted statuette for playing an autistic savant in *Rain Man*. "Hollywood is going soft at the center," the cynics proclaimed. The unctuous, on the other hand, dripped crocodile tears down their rented tuxedos. Then Al Pacino went blind in *Scent of a Woman*. He won the Oscar on his seventh attempt.

Jodie Foster, a winner in 1988 and 1991, couldn't resist telling everyone that "As much as I like the Oscar night pageantry, it's a silly bingo game. It's like five names in a hat and one gets pulled out. If they don't call your name it's not like you say: I wish I did that scene another way."

Woody Allen made a related point. "I can't abide by the judgment of other people," he said, "because if you accept it when they say you deserve an award then you have to accept it when they say you don't. It's nice at the time because it means more money for your films but as soon as you let yourself start thinking that way something happens to the quality of the work." Allen concluded, "When it's your time they give it to you."

George Burns would know all about that. He won one at the age of 80. Melvyn Douglas was just two years younger than that when he won a Best Supporting Actor for *Being There* in 1979, edging out the 8-year-old Justin Henry for *Kramer Versus Kramer*. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on him. "If Justin loses again next year," Dustin Hoffman mused, "We'll have to give him a Lifetime Achievement Award." An even more acerbic remark was made by Allen when he refused to attend the 1978 ceremonies: "I am not interested in an inanimate statue of a little bald man. I like something with long, blonde curls."

Allen abjured the entire thinking behind the idea of favoring one film over another at the Oscars. "Who's to say which is better?" he argued, "I think it would be better if the film industry met each year and in a dignified way just said, 'These are our favorite films of the year. Not the best film, because all the films nominated are so different.'" Allen thought the Academy Awards were "grubby" because "Films and candidates are campaigned for and ads are taken... There's no integrity or credibility."¹

Oscar winners have been known to go downhill every fast after their time in the sun. This can be due to getting too big for their boots. Or it can be due to demanding excessive pay rises, being unable to find material as good as what

they've just starred in, or being typecast in identikit roles to what they won for. In each case they've found it harder to stay at the top than to get there.

Luise Rainer won two Oscars in a row in 1936 and 1937 but did little of note for the remainder of her time in movies. Her case is exceptional but many stars failed to reprise the high-water mark of their careers on Oscar night. After Marlon Brando won for *On the Waterfront* in 1954, thereby capping four years of Oscar-nominated roles, he had a stop-go career for the next decade and a half before his renaissance in *The Godfather*. This resulted in an Oscar he refused. Apart from *Last Tango in Paris*, which he made the following year, and a few other oases in the artistic desert in future years, his career plummeted from this time onwards as he descended into various levels of self-parody, most notably in *The Freshman* which was a comic retread of *The Godfather*. An uneven fusillade of high-priced cameos followed as Brando sought new ways to make himself more unrecognizable (and often incomprehensible).

Bob Hope used to say that the best acting one can witness on Oscar night isn't from the clips shown on the screen to announce the winners but rather the benign expressions on the faces of the losers as someone else's name is called out in the category for which they've been nominated. This may be so but there's always that split second of shock apparent before the brain clicks into gear and one realizes a smile is in order, and maybe a slight shake of the head in commendation - as opposed to a shriek of disbelief. Or the expression of a wish to throttle the winner. Or mow them down with a chainsaw.

Montgomery Clift was nominated four times without success. Kirk Douglas got three nominations. Charlie Chaplin and Peter Sellers earned two each. Richard Burton was cited a staggering seven times in his career, as was Peter O'Toole. None of these people ever won. Many stars seem to have taken to drink either to take their minds off this or to drown their sorrows. Joan Rivers joked, "Next year they're going to give Peter O'Toole's liver a Life Achievement Award." If there were Oscars for drinking he would have been a multiple winner. "Life, for me," he said, "has been either a wake or a wedding." What was the difference? "One less drunk."

Chaplin received an Honorary Award in 1928 and another one 43 years later in 1971. Similar awards were conferred upon Cary Grant, Kirk Douglas and Barbara Stanwyck. Alfred Hitchcock was given the Irving G. Thalberg Award for outstanding achievements in film in 1967. Why did he not win an "actual" Oscar? He had his own explanation: "I don't look like an artist. I don't look like I've starved in a garret."

Walt Disney was the recipient of an Honorary Oscar in 1938 for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the dwarfs receiving seven miniature statuettes as well,

as if to further the idea of levity. All of these testimonials were warmly appreciated but they couldn't disguise the obvious fact that they were consolation prizes for the fact that the people in question hadn't landed "the big one."

Many other stars were electoral outcasts for one reason or another, or maybe no reason at all. People like Dirk Bogarde, Robert Shaw, Lee J. Cobb, Robert Mitchum, James Mason, John Garfield and countless others never held an Oscar in their hands.



Screen siren Rita Hayworth never received an Oscar nomination in her entire career.

Stars who didn't even receive a nomination in their careers included Tyrone Power, Maureen O'Hara, Eli Wallach, Marilyn Monroe, Fred MacMurray, Ida Lupino, Joseph Cotton, Glenn Ford, Lauren Bacall, Veronica Lake, Alan Ladd, W.C. Fields, Errol Flynn, Claire Bloom, Lucille Ball, Rita Hayworth and Al Jolson. Deborah Kerr was nominated six times without success. So was Thelma Ritter. Irene Dunne and Agnes Moorehead got five nominations each but no award. Greta Garbo and Barbara Stanwyck received four nominations each but that was it. Did they care? Perhaps more than they admitted. Frank Capra used to say, "It's become real fashionable to scoff at Oscars but these jesters would kill to win one." Maybe he was right.



Peekaboo girl Veronica Lake never received a nomination either.

"The Oscar," Marion Davies declared, "is a cruel joke hatched up by a cruel town and handed out in a cruel ceremony." Maybe she was right too. All too often the rightful winners were outpolled by those who "knew the right people", who sailed their way to success by sycophancy and the Almighty Dollar. Economy ruled art. In 1986 Murray Weissmann declared, "No picture can be a serious contender in the Oscar race for under \$100,000." This kind of economic prostitution was one of the reasons George C. Scott engineered his famous snub to the whole razzmatazz. "Actors are the world's oldest minority," Scott maintained, "looked upon as nothing but buffoons, one step above thieves and charlatans. These award ceremonies simply compound the image for me."²

There's also a pecking order of competitiveness. Joyce Haber wrote in *The Users*: "Like everything else in Hollywood, the Oscars were categorized by A and B. Who wanted the Oscar for Best Score? Best Picture added a million dollars to the box office gross, Best Actor or Best Actress half a million. Beyond that, forget it. From Best Director down, the awards mean nothing."³

Francis Ford Coppola agreed with her. When he was looking for a cast for *Apocalypse Now* he was constantly rebuffed. Not many people wished to

spend four months in the Philippines no matter how good the film was. He went up to his house in Napa Valley one day. When he got there, he took all his Oscars out to the backyard and broke every one of them. They weren't much use to him for the job in hand. Not even these golden men could get a star to sign along that dotted line. They had no currency for him so he destroyed them. It had a kind of logic to it.

Katharine Hepburn claimed she didn't believe in the worth of any prize except the three-legged race. She was a whizz in that. Michael Douglas says the award he won for Petrol Pump Attendant of the Month as a young man is equally important to him as his Oscar for *Wall Street*.

Three days after Anjelica Huston won an Oscar for *Prizzi's Honor* she was rejected for a part in *The Witches of Eastwick*. (It went to Cher instead). Often, as a winner once said, all an award means is that you don't work for eighteen months... because nobody feels they can afford you.

This makes it all the more incomprehensible that people crave Oscars so much, regarding them as the highlight of their careers when all too often they're the beginning of the end. Do people who win them deserve them? Sometimes. Do they know how to deal with them? Rarely.

If this book were to attempt some kind of conclusion it would be to suggest that the Academy makes valid decisions only now and again and even then not always for the purest of motives. Maybe its entire system of voting needs to be dismantled before a better one can be put in place.

Barry Norman made a good point when he said it works well up until the nomination stage but then it takes off in all the wrong directions: "The nominations are decided by people's peer groups. Actors vote for actors, directors for directors, cinematographers for cinematographers and so on. After that it's just a crapshoot with everyone, no matter how old, senile or inactive, free to vote in every category."⁴

Norman once attended a showing of a film that had been nominated for Best Picture only to see that within fifteen minutes over three-quarters of the audience ("By God they were old") had fallen asleep. He suspected many voters didn't even bother turning up to the showings. He thought it more likely that some kind of consensus prevailed along the lines of, "I see Tom Hanks has been nominated. Good ol' boy, Tom. And then there's this Nigel whatsisname. Who the hell is he? Never heard of him, I'll vote for Tom."⁵ Norman was referring to Hanks win for *Forrest Gump* over Nigel Cawthorne. He thought Cawthorne gave a better performance in *The Madness of King George* in 1994.

There's been interference in voting since the Oscars began. All that's changed is the way it's done. In the old days it was carried on by covert

means, by glad handing and “gentle persuasion” at functions and dinners. With the collapse of the studios the onus for campaigning shifted to the publicists, the production companies, sometimes even to the stars themselves. If they were wealthy enough they could bankroll their own campaigns. They could “big up” their product even if they knew, at base, it was worthless. Victory on Oscar night sometimes resulted from the simple fact that - as in politics - the longest purse won.

Hollywood is estimated to spend between \$100 million and \$500 million in its Oscar campaigns each year. A conservative estimate of the money needed to run a successful campaign for a given film is \$10 million. This is to fund billboards, ads in the traded magazines, media interviews, etc. Is such an outlay justified by the revenue an Oscar-winning film is expected to generate? Hardly.

A Best Picture Oscar is said to add less than \$3 million to its box office takings, as opposed to the extra \$14 million a Golden Globe-winning film is expected to earn. The discrepancy is caused by the fact that the Oscars come at the end of a long awards season. If a film has been on release prior to the ceremonies and people have seen it - unlike the Globes - they can't be expected to go to it again. Timing affects the voting too. Around 700 members of AMPAS vote but final voting takes place just two weeks before the ceremonies so a lot rests of who's hot at the time.

Gender is a factor too. An Oscar is estimated to boost a male star's earnings by up to \$4 million but that of an actress by less than \$500,000. It's also a fact that the average age of Best Actresses is ten years younger than that of Best Actors.

Nor should one discount the element of bribery. We've gone beyond the payola/brown paper bag culture but there's more than one way to solicit votes by charm offensives. Voters frequently tell us they're swamped by (mostly useless) gifts in the run-up to the Oscars. One of them revealed, “I've got everything short of Lincoln condoms.” More subtle bribers schmooze Academy members at functions and parties. The flipside of this coin is the number of smear campaigns that take place each year.

In the heyday of the Oscars the studios held sway. Of the 102 Best Picture nominees in the first twelve years of the ceremonies, 28 were produced by MGM, 17 by Paramount, 10 by Twentieth Century Fox, 15 by Warner Brothers, 8 by Columbia, 7 by RKO and 4 each by United Artists and Universal. A sea-change came in 1946 when independent producer Samuel Goldwyn swept the boards with *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Three Best Picture winners were made outside the mainstream in the fifties: *Marty*, *Around the World in Eighty Days* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. In 1967 Mike Nichols won Best Director for

The Graduate. It was the first time an American-made film took the award without any help from the major studios. Two years later *Easy Rider* became one of the most financially successful films of all time. It was made on a shoe-string outside the “system.”

In 1985 the winner of Best Picture Award was *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. It was made by an unknown company called Island Alive. The following year all five of the Best Picture nominees came from outside the Hollywood mainstream: *Platoon*, *The Mission*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, *A Room with a View* and *Children of a Lesser God*. In 1989 Steven Soderbergh’s *sex, lies and videotape* won an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay and it also won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes film Festival. It cost \$1 million to make but grossed over \$25 million, making it one of the most profitable films of the decade.

Three independent films from 1992, *The Player*, *The Crying Game* and *Howard’s End*, earned more Oscar nominations than the major studio releases that year. Neil Jordan also won an Oscar that year for Best Original Screenplay for *The Crying Game*. Quentin Tarantino won the same award the following year for *Pulp Fiction*. Three years later Tim Robbins’ *Dead Man Walking* earned a slew of nominations as well as a Best Actress award for Susan Sarandon. Bryan Singer’s *The Usual Suspects* also created a sensation that year and won a Best Original Screenplay award for Christopher McQuarrie. The following year four of the five Best Picture nominees were “indies”: *Fargo*, *Shine*, *Secrets & Lies* and *The English Patient*.

Do we regard Oscars too seriously? Maybe we should take a leaf out of a book called *Movielists* written some years ago by two gentlemen who advised us of ten things to look out for on the average Oscar night: ‘Cher’s outfit will reveal even more than it did the previous year. Woody Allen won’t turn up. Someone very old indeed will shuffle on to a standing ovation. Steven Spielberg won’t win anything. Someone will make an embarrassing political speech. Nobody will have heard of the Best Foreign Language film. Every winner will thank at least three people. Every loser will smile and clap vigorously when the winners are announced. Britain will be able to claim some link with the Special Effects award. And there’ll be a special tribute to someone whose films appear only on BBC2 on Saturday afternoons.”⁶

Introduction

I'm sometimes asked to suggest a way of exploring more than a century of movies other than just picking titles at random from the library or some online streaming service. The implied question is whether there's a way to select movies that will increase the likelihood of seeing great or even good ones as opposed to spending an evening with *Ishtar* or *Won Ton Ton, The Dog Who Saved Hollywood*.

Often, I'll suggest selecting a director or actor and focusing on them. Few, if any, can boast of perfect records, but watching the collected works of Alfred Hitchcock or Stanley Kubrick or William Holden or Katharine Hepburn - or classic westerns or examples of *film noir* - will likely score more hits than misses, especially if done in tandem with a book or two on the subject for guidance. There's much to be said for watching a group of movies through a particular filter. Think of looking at a Jean Renoir painting as an example of French impressionism, or a history of the nude in art. Each is a legitimate way of examining it. You pick up on different things depending on your angle.

With movies there's another way to generate lists of films to see. One of these is looking at Oscar winners. Films selected by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences are a special group. One could certainly do worse than watching the films that won Best Picture of a given year, or the performances - lead or supporting - noted as the best of that year. Of course, there are odd quirks that are immediately apparent. In 1972, for example, *The Godfather* won Best Picture. It is, without question, a masterpiece and a film that rewards repeated viewings. Yet the award for Best Director that year went to Bob Fosse for *Cabaret* rather than to Francis Ford Coppola for *The Godfather*. If *Cabaret* was the best directed film, why wasn't it the best film, period? Did *The Godfather* direct itself? There are years when the director of a Best Picture nominee doesn't even get nominated for Best Director.

This gets to the nub of the problem with all awards: they're not the ultimate arbiters of value. It's nice to receive one so that you can have it forever on your CV. When someone asks me to provide my own bio I always mention that my book *The Fourth Network*, a history of Fox Broadcasting, won the Cable Center Book Award. Don't worry if you haven't heard of this. Until I won it I hadn't heard of it either.

All such awards reflect a variety of inputs, from who's doing the deciding to the year the decision was made and other factors having little to do with the award itself. In the case of the Oscars, the focus of this book, there are times

when the Academy gets it wonderfully right. When you look at, say, Julia Roberts' career, the movie of hers that deserved special recognition for me was *Erin Brockovich*. She won for that. Francois Truffaut was honored with the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film for his love letter to the cinema, *Day For Night*. Francis Ford Coppola may not have got an Oscar for *The Godfather*, as mentioned above, but he did get one for *The Godfather, Part 11*. This is such a towering achievement it's still hailed as the exception to the rule that "Sequels never equal." And so on.

Such decisions aren't the focus of the present book. It emphasizes the times when Oscars were given for a variety of other reasons than merit. John Wayne winning best actor for *True Grit* was widely perceived as a Life Achievement award. Elizabeth Taylor, who'd missed out on a Best Actress nod for *Suddenly, Last Summer*, won the following year for *Butterfield 8* after becoming deathly ill and requiring a tracheotomy. She bested Shirley MacLaine for a superior performance in *The Apartment*, leading MacLaine's director, the acerbic Billy Wilder, to wire her with the message: "Dear Shirley, You may not have a hole in your windpipe but we love you anyway."

Let's face it. Not every person or film deemed the "best" at the Oscars deserves that accolade. As a film critic now in his fourth decade of reviewing, there have been years I've been thrilled with the choices and years I've been horrified. *Out of Africa*? *The English Patient*? *Slumdog Millionaire*? You must be joking.

That's true of the opinions expressed in this volume as well. There were times when I disagreed with Aubrey Malone. That's okay because the job of the film critic isn't so much to validate the reader's opinions as to express his or her own, along with evidence – and hopefully compelling analyses – to support that view. As with the best books of criticism, the author isn't telling you what to think. He's opening conversations.

Take 1952, for example. The nominees for Best Picture included *High Noon*, *The Quiet Man* and *Moulin Rouge*. Not even making the finals were such lasting achievements as *Singin' in the Rain*, *The Lavender Hill Mob* and *Rashomon*. What did the Academy voters deem the best film of 1952? *The Greatest Show on Earth*, Cecil B. DeMille's circus potboiler. This is a film that isn't thought much of today, even with the curiosity of co-star James Stewart spending the entire movie in clown make-up.

Watching Oscar winners can provide many evenings of entertainment. Viewing the losers isn't only instructive but gratifying as well. The way the nominees are selected is an important filter. For many of the categories, these are selected by their peers. Actors nominate actors, writers nominate writers and so forth. All the members then get to vote on the final ballot. That's why

you sometimes get odd moments when the director of a Best Picture nominee doesn't make the final cut.

For those of us who love Hollywood lore, the reason why a film lost can be as fascinating as why it won. Investigating such a loss may lead us to rediscover a worthy movie that was unjustly forgotten. *Citizen Kane* was an Oscar winner for Best Original Screenplay but nothing else. It suffered many years of neglect until it was rediscovered in the 1950s when the RKO library of films started appearing on television. *It's a Wonderful Life* was re-discovered in the 1970s when the film fell into public domain and it seemed every television station made a point of showing it around Christmas.

As many winners - and losers - have noted, the competition for the Oscar isn't really fair. We can safely predict, for example, that at some stage an old-time actor who's never won has a good shot at the Best Supporting actor Oscar. Take Jack Palance in *City Slickers*, Alan Arkin in *Little Miss Sunshine*, Martin Landau in *Ed Wood*, Sean Connery in *The Untouchables*, George Burns in *The Sunshine Boys*, etc. Were these awards deserved? It's like asking, "Which tastes best: chocolate ice cream, a T-bone steak or a Waldorf salad?"

Humphrey Bogart, a popular winner of the best actor Oscar for *The African Queen* in 1951, was competing against Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift and Frederic March. Bogart commented, "The only honest way to find the best actor of any year would be to let everybody play *Hamlet* and let the best man win."

Fortunately, we can look at the Oscars not as the final word on what's worth seeing but as a menu with a variety of choices where we're not locked into what the Academy voters of a given year decided. So, let's join Aubrey Malone in looking at the losing nominees who had to keep smiles pasted on their faces as another person's name was announced on the night. Or who chose to skip the whole thing entirely. There's some great movies ahead.

Daniel M. Kimmel

Somerville, Massachusetts

September, 2017

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