

## Convenient Truths: A Commentary on the 2007 Academy Awards Ceremony as a Global Event.

By Robert Goff

### Introduction: Hollywood and Improving the World

“...So many of you have causes that you are equally passionate about. That is really what is so wonderful about the movie industry -- not only do we get to make films that matter, but we also work in a culture where we are encouraged to speak out. We may not always agree, but we do always care.”  
Sherry Lansing receiving the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award, 2007.

I'm not sure if it was due to the Democrats coming back to power in Congress a few months before, but “liberal Hollywood” seemed to be more confidently on display throughout the television broadcast of the 2007 Academy Award ceremony, much more so than had been the case in the last few years. The prominent presence of Al Gore during the evening seemed to confirm the suspicion of many conservative Americans that there is a close association between Hollywood and the Democratic Party. *An Inconvenient Truth*, which documents Gore's case against global warming, won the Oscar for best documentary and Melissa Etheridge's song, “I Need to Wake Up,” from the same film won in the best song category. Early on in the evening, the former Vice President announced that the Academy Awards ceremony had “gone green,” (although what this actually meant in practice was never really explained).

As if to counter the decline of America in world opinion since the Bush administration went to war in Iraq, the evening's host, Ellen DeGeneres, announced “this is the most international Oscar night ever.” The ceremony also celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of awards given to foreign language films, and there did, indeed, seem to be a wider variety of international films and stars from several nations up for nomination. The prominent appearance in particular of non-American musicians seemed to confirm that film, as well as music, was an international language. Ennio Morricone, an Italian composer, was given a special Oscar during the evening and his acceptance speech was delivered in Italian. In another acceptance speech, Gustavo Santaolalla, an Argentinean musician and composer,

espoused a universal vision: “In our soul rests, I think, our own true identity, beyond languages, countries, races and religions.”

Were the audience members in the Kodak Theatre and viewers at home stirred by these transcendent words? And did Al Gore’s more pragmatic exhortation to fight global warming have an impact? (His acceptance speech concluded with these words: “We have everything we need to get started, with the possible exception of the will to act. That’s a renewable resource. Let’s renew it.”) Was it possible that some of this globally transmitted broadcast--watched by a billion people, according to the host--“made a difference” that night? It would be good to think that America, along with the rest of the world, had been set on a new course during the evening, with protection of the planet mandated, multiculturalism championed, gender equality taken for granted (Sherry Lansing, a woman executive who had once headed two Hollywood studios, was given a humanitarian award during the evening) and the invisibility of sexual minorities finally ended (DeGeneres and Etheridge are both openly gay women).

The American television ratings are the most important measure taken of the broadcast and 39.9 million American watched the broadcast-- up by three percent or one million more viewers than the previous year and, according to Nielsen, 75 million American watched at least six minutes of the nearly four-hour telecast. Polling viewers after the broadcast might have provided some evidence of the impact of the broadcast. Drawing upon social scientific methods, communications scholar Michael R. Real detailed the findings of a telephone survey from the early 1980s which found the majority of viewers had “low involvement” in watching the broadcast with larger numbers viewing only to find out who would win, to watch celebrities or to enjoy the fashions on display.<sup>1</sup> While a majority agreed that “the Academy Awards are nothing more than a public relations event for the film industry,” a significant number said they were more likely to see movies that had won Academy awards and even those that were only nominated.

Calling the Academy Award telecast a hegemonic “media event,” Real claims the values and practices of the American film industry shape the messages delivered by this widely watched televised event:

The Academy Awards event surveys the film environment by presenting an array of almost exclusively Hollywood-based stars, films, songs, and attendant glitter as the approved frame of reference for film everywhere. The event correlates the parts by giving awards to those people and films that the Los Angeles-based film industry members consider the most worthy. And the event transmits social heritage by teaching celebrity-watching, filmgoing, humor, art, competition, commercialism and other values within the dominant hegemonic code of Hollywood.<sup>2</sup>

Real’s work is from the 1980s and was updated in 1995. The Academy Awards ceremony has not substantially changed in recent years, apart from attempts—usually unsuccessful—to increase the ratings by speeding up the production and hiring popular television personalities to host the proceedings. The broadcast is still determined by the “dominant hegemonic code of Hollywood,” whether hosted by Ellen DeGeneres, Jon Stewart, or Chris Rock. Nevertheless, for the observant viewer, counter-hegemonic elements can be detected throughout the broadcast and, despite an overwhelming emphasis on rewarding stars and films within “the approved frame of reference,” recognition of a more challenging film culture occasionally surfaces during the evening. Drawing upon Real’s critical theory approach and upon contemporary film scholarship, this paper will provide an observational and impressionistic commentary on some of the individual elements—the role of the host, the types of presenters, the content of the film montages, the winners and losers, etc.—of the most recent broadcast of the Academy Awards ceremony to discern elements of the hegemonic code shaping this year’s show—and to determine the degree to which counter-hegemonic elements provided an alternative message for viewers. In addition, this paper will attempt to assess how the Academy Awards broadcast on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007 reflects the art of film in a global context.

### **Part I: The Queen and King of TV Comedy**

“I think we’re carrying this foreign aid too far.”

Bob Hope, host of the 1958 Academy Awards ceremony<sup>3</sup>

A more satirical on-going commentary than that provided by this year's host could have perhaps drawn attention to some of the contradictions of an event sponsored by the American film industry trying to reach out to a global audience in a time when world opinion about the international role of the United States has never been lower. Satire, however, is not Ellen DeGeneres' strong point as a comedian. While her coming out as gay on her sitcom in 1997 was an American television milestone, Ellen's humor is in the Jerry Seinfeld sitcom tradition and about "nothing." Many of the hosts for the ceremony in recent years have been recruited from American television, a medium weak in any kind of satirical tradition and with a long history of self-censorship.<sup>4</sup> Even last year's host, Jon Stewart, who actually has a reputation for satire on his cable TV show, seemed reduced to bland humor, apparently unable to overcome the restraints of network television or merely blind to the comic potential of the ethnocentric biases of Hollywood. The Awards ceremony is, of course, designed as a television show and because "liveness" is so rare in this medium the producers work hard to minimize any uncontrollable or unpredictable aspects of such a broadcast. Since Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" at the 2004 Super Bowl broadcast, oversight of the smallest detail has presumably increased. Time constraints have been the excuse for the Academy's notorious use of music to drown out the acceptance speeches of the winners, although music has also been employed to cut short the rare political statement by an Oscar recipient, such as in 2003 when Michael Moore won for best documentary and his anti-Bush tirade was cut off after forty five seconds.<sup>5</sup>

Michael Moore has not been invited back but last year's winner of the best documentary award, Errol Morris, was allowed to film an opening montage for the ceremony. Morris employed his Interrotron (an invention that allows interviewees to look directly at the camera) to interview a significant number of nominees. If this probing lens revealed the militaristic psychology of Robert McNamara in Morris's award-winning *The Fog of War*, its more humorous employment for the show lacked Michael Moore's more pointed comedic interview style and the succession of sound bites from the nominees seemed more like TV commercials.<sup>6</sup> This specially commissioned interview montage seemed to be part of a new approach by the producers to turn the nominees into TV performers this year. If dressing well and looking happy to be on the show have usually been the only requirements of being a

nominee and an audience member, the style of TV talk shows or game shows with their more vociferous participation of studio audiences seemed to be mandated throughout the evening this year. After Morris's montage, the opening shots inside the spectacular Kodak auditorium featured all the nominees standing in the audience applauding themselves and shaking hands with each other. Ellen DeGeneres, as the current host of her own daytime talk show, was the ideal person to try to encourage a new level of audience participation within this large and imposing theatrical space. For the vast audience of viewers at home, this "female Seinfeld" would bring the casual informality of daytime TV to this formal ceremony and draw humor out of gossip and trivia.

Once the ceremony started, the nominees continued to be the theme of the show as DeGeneres' opening monologue was all about them. In previous years, nominees knew, of course, they would be on camera throughout the evening and a few could expect to be the butt of a passing joke by the presiding host but there was usually more focus on the nominated movies and the viewer had some sense that the ceremony celebrated films. This year's host hardly mentioned films and instead continually riffed on the competitive nature of the evening with jokes about winning and losing, even advising the winners to make their speeches more interesting as boring ones would be cut off. Celebrity-worship was the theme of her comedy routines throughout the evening with DeGeneres adopting the persona of an awe-struck fan or pandering to a female audience by, at one point, getting the camera to focus in on Leonardo DiCaprio for the women viewers to ogle. While paying lip service to diversity on the show with the bold statement that "without Blacks, Jews and Gays there would be no Oscars," DeGeneres went on to display American ethnocentrism with remarks that were supposedly celebrating the international composition of the audience. She undiplomatically declared that there were too many British nominees and then misidentified Penelope Cruz as being from Mexico, instead of Spain. She later corrected the mistake but continued to make tasteless and ageist jokes about the British nominee, Judi Dench, who was absent from the ceremony.

I found it significant that DeGeneres, when she later took her microphone into the audience, attempted to smooze only with major American nominees, like Martin Scorsese and Clint Eastwood, in what I am sure were well-rehearsed encounters. Eastwood and Scorsese, who

have not acted in their own films for some years, were, nevertheless, both put to the test on this live show, as they pretended amusement at her TV talk show antics. As a pushy fan, she tried to get Scorsese to read a screenplay she said she had written, and cajoled Steven Spielberg into operating her digital camera to take not one but two photographs of her with Eastwood as she was dissatisfied with the first shot taken by the great director. If celebrity worshippers at home laughed at her discomfiting real celebrities as their surrogate, I'm not sure they found her vacuuming the carpet in front of the first row amusing, and one can only speculate what the occupants of the row thought about this attempt at comedy. Pretending that this was one of her tasks as host, she seemed to have taken her "one of the guys" stunts too far.

Two comedians sang a song about the failure of comedians to win Academy Awards. Will Ferrell and Jack Black, joined by John C. O'Reilly, who recently starred with Ferrell in *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, seemed to amuse the audience in the theater although I'm not sure the dignity of presenting an award was preserved when they went on to give an Oscar for achievement in makeup. With comedians giving awards as well as hosting the show, it was no surprise to see Jerry Seinfeld walk on stage to present—of all the awards of the evening!—the one for best documentary feature. Apparently, he was there because he was once the subject of a nominated documentary. Adhering to this logic, can we expect other recent subjects of documentaries, such as Tammy Baker or Imelda Marcos, to present that award next year? The humor in Seinfeld's presentational monologue about him defiantly littering in movie theaters was completely lost on me as I didn't find it credible that this multi-millionaire comedian would, as he claimed, ever go near a theater. I even found his irresponsible boasting about littering not only un-amusing but juvenile and mildly offensive and I'm sure theater owners must also have been insulted by this lame routine. When he superciliously introduced the nominations as five "incredibly depressing movies" I wanted to throw something at him.

It's not that I believe humor has no role during the ceremony but I found that most of the jokes and comic routines throughout the evening were over-scripted, frequently patronizing and geared to what the show's large army of writers—sixteen were listed in the credits,

including DeGeneres for “supplementary material”—seem to believe prime-time American television audiences find funny. The broadcast was dominated by the values and practices of a television industry geared to the assembly line production of gags and comic spectacles for countless sitcoms and the monologues and skits for late night talk show hosts. Instead of allowing humor to arise spontaneously from the events of the evening, the producers and writers attempted to manufacture spontaneity and enthusiasm. For instance, after finishing her opening monologue, Ellen DeGeneres was tossed a tambourine and a gospel choir suddenly emerged from backstage enthusiastically singing a commissioned number in praise of the nominees. The choir made up of mainly African-American men and women ran down the aisles of the auditorium clapping and raising their arms as if trying to stir emotion—or perhaps even spiritual fervor—throughout the largely white audience. The raucous throng brought some of the very formally dressed audience members to their feet as though they were at a revival meeting in a Harlem church. If the “spontaneity” of this musical number was comically intended to favorably contrast black culture with a stodgy but sophisticated white culture, it not only seemed forced and bizarre but it also drew upon long-standing Hollywood stereotypes of black culture. The sight of these black choristers in white cassocks evoked movie images of African Americans as consumed by religiosity, musical fervor and unbridled emotion.<sup>7</sup> Paternalistic representations of such characterizations of black culture go back to Griffith and even earlier in American film history. Along with these characterizations, white male leaders have frequently been shown in films bringing order and rationality to control the behavior of these “primitive” peoples. Ellen DeGeneres did not look paternalistic in her red “lesbian chic” trouser suit as she led this disorderly scene, yet I couldn’t help thinking that this was the message she was conveying and, if I am right, reinforcing old stereotypes of African-American culture for a vast international audience. This was cultural hegemony in its most reactionary guise.

## **Part II: Hollywood Royalty on Display**

“The promotionally overheated culture, permeated by advertising, marketing, public relations, and every level of promotional activity and incentive, has come to be a central characteristic of the media culture of late capitalism.” Michael R. Real

The promotional role of the Academy Awards ceremony—in advertising stars, films, filmgoing and the Academy itself—is central to its hegemonic operations throughout the evening. Stars are the major vehicles for promoting films. Aside from the people winning for non-acting achievements and the obligatory appearance of the president of the Academy of Motion Pictures, movie stars made up the majority of the stage appearances throughout the evening at this year's ceremony. Reinforcing DeGeneres's emphasis on the nominees, rather than the films in which they acted, a pantheon of contemporary stars paraded onto the stage of the Kodak Theatre, singly or in pairs, to present various awards, to introduce performances of the songs, or to explain the various montages of film clips about to be shown on the screen. Introduced usually by an off-stage announcer and cued in with music from the orchestra, well-groomed and impeccably dressed stars confidently strode towards their places on stage or towards a podium. The costumes of the female stars are, of course, central to creating the mystique of stardom throughout the ceremony and much of the journalistic commentary on the ceremony is devoted to assessing who are the winners and losers in the fashion stakes—and the various fashion houses now court the biggest stars to sign multi-million dollar contracts to wear their couture at what has become one of their most important showcases for high fashion.<sup>8</sup>

If the fashion industry was satirized in the nominated film, *The Devil Wears Prada*, interested viewers would, nevertheless, uncritically note what nominated best actress Meryl Streep wore during the evening and also take notice of the dresses of Emily Blunt and Ann Hathaway, two additional actresses from the *Prada* film, who presented, unsurprisingly, the award for best costume design. Several of those who introduced this year's awards had themselves won an award—sometimes the same award-- the previous year, such as Reese Witherspoon, George Clooney, and Philip Seymour Hoffman. Their appearance from previous years helps to keep them in the public eye and also to confirm their status within the Hollywood star system. Major stars are those who present awards alone: Tom Cruise presented the humanitarian award while Ben Affleck, Will Smith, Jodie Foster each presented montages. Jennifer Lopez presented music performances. Some pairings of the evening, however, signaled very high status. When Helen Mirren, nominee for *The Queen*, and Tom Hanks came on stage together to present an award it seemed as though their pairing symbolized they were the Queen and

King of their respective national cinemas. Later in the evening the pairing of Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton, while reminding audiences of their pairing in films, seemed symbolically to represent the titular heads of the previous generation of stars.

Perhaps representing the newest generation of potential stars were the two very young child stars chosen to present awards for “short” films—Abigail Breslin, nominated for *Little Miss Sunshine*, and Jaden Smith, who appears in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (sic) with his father, Will Smith, a nominated best actor in the same film. It was an image of racial integration and on the surface, harmless and cute, but in the context of the history of race relations and their representation in Hollywood film it was hardly innocent. The older white girl, evoking images of Shirley Temple, seemed in charge of the situation and reminded viewers that the Depression-era child superstar was often in command of African-American actors, young and old, in her many films during the 1930s when most African-American actors were relegated to playing servant roles.<sup>9</sup>

There were more nominations for African-American actors this year than in many previous years.<sup>10</sup> Will Smith, as one of the most highly paid U.S. actors, has considerable power in Hollywood and was able to produce *The Pursuit of Happyness*, (sic) a film celebrating fatherhood and the hard work of achieving the American dream. Yet it is his charm and unthreatening demeanor that have enabled him to become a star and one cannot help speculating that it is these traits which have made him an acceptable nominee in a industry with such a long history of paternalism towards African-American talent.<sup>11</sup> Another very likeable African-American star won the best actor award. Who could not appreciate Forest Whitaker’s performance or question that as *The Last King of Scotland* he deserved to win? The role evoked some of those played by the great Paul Robeson. However, Robeson’s roles were largely written and directed by white professionals in Hollywood and some British studios, in an era when there were few parts for black actors and those that existed were tainted by the racial conceptions of his time period. The politically conscious Robeson fought against racist stereotyping but he was sometimes unaware of how films depicted him until after they were released. Whitaker’s performance as the flamboyant but monstrous Idi Amin recalled Robeson in the title role of the film version of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*

and as the African tribal chief in *Sanders of the River*. Robeson brought great skill to such parts but these roles suggested a colonial conception of black leaders as “primitive”—a characteristic based on racial essentialism.<sup>12</sup> Whitaker gives Idi Amin psychological complexity, but the Ugandan ruler’s atrocities are presented as barbaric. Idi Amin was indeed a monster but one created by colonialism, a theme that could have been brought out in a more nuanced and political film than *The Last King of Scotland*. I think it was unfortunate that Whitaker’s acceptance speech somehow confirmed the image of black culture introduced by the gospel choir at the beginning of the evening. He evoked his humble beginnings and emphasized a mystical religious faith by thanking God and his ancestors, along with many white professionals, including his Scottish director.

Jennifer Hudson, a former *American Idol* contestant who won the best supporting actor award, also gave one of the most emotional speeches of the evening. One of the people she thanked was Jennifer Holliday who had played the same role in *Dreamgirls* on Broadway. Holliday was closely identified with the part and was disappointed that she was not even offered a cameo in the film. TV popularity has more box office potential than success in the theatre for obtaining film roles. The film and the stage version of *Dreamgirls* had largely black casts but the people who produced and directed them were white. It is an unfortunate fact that white professionals still dominate in both Broadway and Hollywood, and African-American actors can come across as somewhat obsequious in thanking their more privileged white colleagues. Hudson called her white director a “genius.”

The obituary montage later in the evening reminded me of the recent deaths of Gordon Parks and Tamara Dobson, who were both leading figures in the cycle of “blaxploitation” films of the 1970s. Many of the films in the so-called blaxploitation cycle may not have been Academy Award material but at least for a time they put more control of filmmaking into the hands of African-American filmmakers.<sup>13</sup> Spike Lee is still a rare African-American director with some power in Hollywood although he has never won an Academy Award.

### Part III: Films about Children

*Personal loss, individual horror and mourning intersect in a network of films haunted by the spectre of children at risk from abuse, abduction, accident and illness. The issue of the missing child enables films to mobilize questions about the protection and innocence of children, about parenthood and the family, about the past (as childhood is constructed in retrospect as nostalgic space of safety) and about the future (as fears for children reflect anxiety about the inheritance left to future generations).*

Emma Wilson, *Cinema's Missing Children*<sup>14</sup>

Emma Wilson claims that films seriously focusing on children constituted an important trend in world cinema during the 1990s, a trend that seems to be continuing into the twenty-first century. In the 2007 acting nominations there were several actors in films about the exploitation of children and teenagers. In *Little Children*, a subplot concerns fears about a convicted child molester in an American suburban community, a role played by Jackie Earle Haley, a former child star. Cate Blanchett has an affair with one of her under-aged pupils in *Notes on a Scandal*. In *Venus*, Peter O'Toole plays a self-confessed dirty old man infatuated with a teenage girl. *Little Miss Sunshine* refers to the name of a beauty pageant for very young girls. Will Smith's young son, as mentioned earlier, appears in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (sic), a drama about social mobility in America. *Half Nelson* is about a flawed teacher who wants to rescue an African-American high school student from the drug culture surrounding her.

The least serious film in this group of American films about children, *Little Miss Sunshine*, won two awards during the evening. None of the other films in the group won an award. *Little Miss Sunshine*, which won awards for best original screenplay (Michael Arndt) and best supporting actor (Alan Arkin), is an "independent" film although it has a cast, as well as a large marketing campaign, more typical of mainstream movies. The film is a quirky comedy that includes satire of child beauty pageants but its social criticism is rather superficial and the film was hardly Oscar material. The Academy tends to give awards to less challenging American films like *Little Miss Sunshine* and only cursory attention to more complex independent films that deserve more recognition. *Half Nelson* was produced by the aptly titled THINKfilm and was recognized by the Academy with a best actor nomination for Ryan Gosling who was predictably unsuccessful in winning the award. This unusual film tries to

illustrate Marxist dialectics in its classroom scenes, but the whole film was dialectical in exploring the urban conditions threatening contemporary teenagers and revealing the heart-breaking difficulties of confronting these dangers. The realistic style of the film is reminiscent of a tradition of filmmaking that the Academy once recognized by bestowing very early honorary awards on the foreign language films, *Shoeshine* and *The Bicycle Thief* in 1948 and 1950, respectively.

Scenes from these two Italian neorealist films about children appeared on screen this year when Catherine Deneuve and Ken Watanabe introduced a montage of clips to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the best foreign film award. The two films were the work of one of the greatest collaborations in film history, that of Vittorio De Sica, the director and Cesare Zavattini, the screenwriter. De Sica and Zavattini were early pioneers of the tradition of neorealism in Italian cinema.<sup>15</sup> Several of the nominated international films of 2007 seemed to recall the serious cinematic concern of these Italian filmmakers with the suffering of children. *Water*, about child widows in India and directed by Deepa Mehta, an Indian woman now living in Canada, is a very moving historical epic. The making of the film in India was extremely difficult and Hindu extremists burned down the set as the film crew was filming there.<sup>16</sup> Susanne Bier's *After the Wedding* from Denmark also focuses to some extent on children in India—specifically on the poverty of orphans—but the film also intriguingly dramatizes the plight of a care worker in India who discovers he has a daughter who had been raised without his knowledge in Denmark. *Babel*, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, tells a series of interconnected stories, each involving young children or adolescents caught up in dramatic circumstance in different parts of the world. *Pan's Labyrinth*, directed by Guillermo del Toro, has an adolescent girl as its protagonist who lives out a fantasy existence that intersects with the harsh realities of the Spanish Civil War.

The fervor of the people who won awards for their work on *Babel* and *Pan's Labyrinth*, two of the films directed by Mexican directors, was palpable during the evening. Gustavo Santaolalla, the composer of the score for *Babel*, touched upon the ambition of this film: "I'm so proud to work in *Babel*, a film that helped us understand better who we are and why and what are we here for." *Pan's Labyrinth* deservedly won three awards: for makeup, best set

design and for cinematography. The cinematographer said in his acceptance speech: “This award is a recognition for the collective effort to support the vision of the genius of Guillermo del Toro.” Another very talented Mexican director, Alfonso Cuarón, received three nominations for *Children of Men*, a futuristic story of a society without children, but failed to win any awards. There might even have been more enthusiasm if a woman director had won a major award during the evening. The Academy’s neglect of women directors is scandalous. Nevertheless, women directors were responsible for two of the films nominated for best foreign language film. (*The Lives of Others*, a German film on the activities of the Stasi in East Germany, won for best foreign language film.)

A UNICEF report came out in the same week as the Academy Awards ceremony and it contained some startling inconvenient truths about children in wealthy countries like the United States and Great Britain. *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries*<sup>17</sup> found that children in Britain and the United States have the worst quality of life among twenty-one wealthy nations. The U.S. has the highest rate of teenage motherhood and Britain has the highest rate of bad family and peer relationships, as well as such at-risk behaviors as smoking, drinking and unprotected sex. In an editorial, *The Nation* suggested these statistics are the result of pursuing militaristic policies while neglecting domestic problems.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Part IV: Conclusion: the Big Winners**

*Combining television performance, musical numbers, film clips, and other forms of entertainment, the evening provides an opportunity for the spectacle to celebrate itself and promote its myriad forms, values, and significance. The Academy Awards are also a celebration of victory, the primal US and global capitalist passion play. Indeed, the prize-garnering films make millions more in revenue from the prestige and position of being Oscar winners, which allows the winning studios and players to make a big score in the next deal. This is, after all, what media spectacle is all about.*

Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle*<sup>19</sup>

It was a foregone conclusion that *The Departed* would scoop up the major awards of the evening. As if to reinforce the idea that Hollywood is a male bastion, Francis Ford Coppola appeared with Steven Spielberg and George Lucas (by the way, did they by chance know in

advance about the identity of the winner?) to give the best director award to Martin Scorsese. Termed “movie brats” in the 1970s, these four directors, along with Eastwood, who was also very visible during the evening, now constitute the contemporary Hollywood establishment. They can all command big budget productions and employ huge marketing and public relations resources to keep their work in the public eye. *The Departed* went on to win for the best picture of 2007.

While Scorsese’s renowned editor, Thelma Schoonmaker, won for best editor, *The Departed* seemed little influenced by women. The film gives free reign to having its characters, particularly Jack Nicholson, spout racist and sexist epithets in a film lacking leading roles for non-white characters and having no major female star. There were, however, plenty of roles for leading white male stars, with Nicholson in a major role. The combination of Nicholson and Scorsese seems to have overwhelmed critical responses. Comparable with, and related to, the status of *The Sopranos* in American media culture, it is impossible to find any critical voices raised against it. Nicholson, of course, is meant to be a vile and psychopathic character but there is no character to counter his diatribes or even to point out how disgusting they are. *The Departed* is also, it seems hardly necessary to point out, an extremely violent film.

Scorsese as an Italian American is very aware of Italian film traditions, and he has even made a long documentary on Italian film. However, *The Departed* owes nothing to Italian neo-realism in the tradition of Vittorio De Sica. The film is nothing more than a big budgeted and star-studded exploitation movie, based on a 2002 movie, *Infernal Affairs*, from Hong Kong. The expropriation of the creative work of other nations is a common practice in transnational Hollywood today. Many modestly successful foreign language productions are Americanized in the hope of turning them into blockbusters. *The Departed* also won for “best adapted screenplay” and I realized that this means you can actually win an Oscar for writing a screenplay based on another screenplay. I guess it did take some creativity to pump up the obscenity level of what, I imagine, was more restrained dialogue in the Hong Kong version. William Monahan, a native of Boston where the film was shot, was the writer of *The Departed*. In sharp contrast to the eloquent speeches on artistry by Latino professionals during the evening, Monahan’s acceptance speech was complacent and bland, finishing with these

words: “You know, everyone who worked on *The Departed* was, you know, it's easy to say was at the top of their game before they started, and under Marty's direction it only got higher after that. Thank you very much.”

Leonardo DiCaprio, who was nominated for best actor in *Blood Diamond*, appeared alongside of Al Gore to announce that the ceremony had “gone green.” DiCaprio was also one of the stars of *The Departed*, and it is to be hoped that his appearance did not lead viewers to associate liberal Hollywood’s tolerance of extreme violence with the mainstream liberalism of the Democratic Party. The uniting of a famous Hollywood actor with a prominent politician would have more likely reminded viewers of how political power and celebrity power are intertwined and how acting for television, particularly comic acting, is the most important requirement for today’s politicians. The writers behind the ceremony had come up with a routine that had DiCaprio urging the presidential candidate from an earlier election to declare his candidacy in the next election. The punch line of the routine had Gore feign consternation in mid-sentence as music drowned out his supposed announcement. Viewers would recall the candidate’s appearances on late night TV shows, and even *Saturday Night Live*, during the 2000 presidential race in an attempt to overcome his alleged “stiffness.” It was evident then, and again throughout this ceremony, that Al Gore will never win an acting award. Part of the Republicans’ success since the 1980s has been in fielding professional actors as candidates. Arnold Schwarzenegger’s success in California is the most recent example, and he is also, ironically, proving to be a more convincing spokesperson than Gore on the environment, according to a recent survey.<sup>20</sup>

So what impact did the 79<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards broadcast have? As Ronald Brownstein in his study of Hollywood and national politics states: “Without major changes in personal behavior, the Hollywood environmental activists, among others, run the risk of embodying one of liberalism’s most damaging stereotypes: the wealthy do-gooder who tells everyone else to tighten belts for the common good.”<sup>21</sup> In general, many viewers would have found it difficult to imagine self-sacrifice being practiced by the bejeweled and over-dressed audience of Hollywood employees and their relatives who were on televised display during the evening. Some of the earnest environmental injunctions flashing on a screen behind Melissa Etheridge

as she sang “I Need to Wake Up” probably had little impact on the metaphorically slumbering members of the audience. One just couldn’t see, for instance, any of the crowd inside the Kodak Theatre queuing for a bus outside after the show. “Going green” probably meant for most of these people hiring a slightly downsized limo.

Yet if we don’t completely give in to the cynicism aroused by the broadcast nor believe that the ceremony was all about stars and fashion, some of the films recognized by the Academy can actually teach us something. If Al Gore is stiff on television and an unconvincing comedian, he is a compelling presence in his documentary film. As Pat Aufderheide points out in her review of *An Inconvenient Truth*, “His demeanor is that of a friendly professor, not afraid to be smart and well-informed, and also completely comfortable in the knowledge that you want to and can learn this too. And he manages to invest us all in the terrible urgency of the situation. At the end of the explanation, this is no longer Gore’s issue but our problem.”<sup>22</sup> The award of the Oscar for best documentary can only put more people in contact with this more convincing Gore persona.

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. Audiences didn’t need the Academy’s approval to go to see *The Departed* (or *Miss Little Sunshine*, for that matter) but the recognition of less popular films during the broadcast might have moved some viewers who seek alternatives to the status quo. The standing ovation for Scorsese in the Kodak auditorium seemed obligatory but the films by the Mexican directors elicited genuine excitement. While the nominated women directors got little attention during the evening they have much to offer in understanding today’s world. *Water* instructs about religious intolerance and sexism, and *After the Wedding* is a moving meditation on parenting and the needs of orphans in a poor country and the privileged children of a wealthy one. *Half Nelson* is far more realistic than *To Sir with Love* (1967), *Dangerous Minds* (1995) and other Hollywood stories of heroic high school teachers and actually tells us something about race relations in America today and the relationship between teacher and pupil. It is to be hoped that the

seriousness of these films was not completely overlooked during a ceremony that emphasized comedy about nothing.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See “Empirical Analysis: The Academy Awards,” pp. 80-105, Michael R. Real, *Super Media: A Cultural Studies Approach*. Newbury Park, California, Sage Publications Ltd.: 1989.

<sup>2</sup> See “Production/Hegemony: ‘And the Winner is...Hollywood!’” in Michael R. Real, *Exploring Media Culture: A Guide*. Thousand Oaks, California, Sage Publications, Inc.: 1996. pp.148-170.

<sup>3</sup> Emanuel Levy, *All About Oscar: The History and Politics of the Academy Awards*. New York, Continuum: 2003. p. 209.

<sup>4</sup> See Douglas Kellner, *Television and the Crisis of Democracy*. Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, Inc: 1990, for an overview of American television history up through the 1980s from a critical theory perspective.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of that year’s show from a backstage perspective see Steve Pond, *The Big Show: High Times and Dirty Dealings Backstage at the Academy Awards*. New York, Faber & Faber Inc: 2005. pp. 318-355.

<sup>6</sup> The device was actually originally designed for TV commercials see Shawn Rosenheim, “Interrotroning History: Errol Morris and the Documentary of the Future” in Vivian Sobcheck, ed., *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*. New York, Routledge: 1996.

<sup>7</sup> For a very recent discussion of early Hollywood’s treatment of African-American religion see Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949*. Berkeley, University of California Press: 2007.

<sup>8</sup> See Bronwyn Cosgrave, *Made for Each Other: Fashion and the Academy Awards*. New York, Bloomsbury USA: 2007.

<sup>9</sup> See Karen Orr Vered, “White and Black in Black and White: Management of Race and Sexuality in the Coupling of Child-Star Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson” in *The Velvet Light Trap* (39), Spring, 1997. p.52.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Mapp’s *African Americans and the Oscar: Seven Decades of Struggle and Achievement*. Lanham, Maryland, Scarecrow Press, Inc: 2003 had a breakdown of all African-American nominees and winners up to 2002 and some information about their nominations but the book is brief and provides only a limited overview of its subject.

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of Smith's star "persona" see Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. New York, Columbia University Press: 2002. pp. 163-177.

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Dyer's essay, "Paul Robeson: Crossing Over," in his *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. New York, St. Martin's Press Inc: 1986.

<sup>13</sup> See the chapter on "Black Action Film" in Mark A. Reid's *Redefining Black Film*. Berkeley, University of California Press: 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Emma Wilson, *Cinema's Missing Children*. London, Wallflower Press: 2003. p.2.

<sup>15</sup> For important writing by and on De Sica and Zavattini see Howard Curle & Stephen Snyder, (eds). *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press Incorporated: 2000. For a discussion of Italian Neorealism and its influence on Italian film see Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*. Princeton University Press, 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Jasmine Yuen-Carrucan, "The Politics of Deepa Mehta's *Water*," in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, April 2000. <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/28/water.html>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/ChildPovertyReport.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Editorial, "Home Truths," *The Nation*, March 12, 2007  
<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070312/editors>

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle*. New York, Routledge: 2003. p.27.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.slate.com/id/2165591?nav=ais>

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Brownstein, *The Power and the Glitter: The Hollywood-Washington Connection*. New York, Pantheon Books: 1991. p. 387.

<sup>22</sup> Pat Aufderheid, review of *An Inconvenient Truth* in *Cineaste*, Vol. XXXII, No.1. (Winter 2006), p. 50.