

How to Waste an Oscar

by Jameson Simmons

Thursday morning, well before most of us wake up, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences will announce the nominees for this year's Oscars. Three types of people pay attention to this: journalists (assuming they've recovered from their Inaugural Ball hangovers), the nominees themselves (including entourages), and film nerds (whose lives will never be affected by the outcome, but who still care more than the other two groups combined). I'm in the third group – and I'm pissed.

It's been a lackluster year for "important" movies – I mean, *Tropic Thunder* was awesome, but Best Picture it's not – so Academy voters have less to choose from. Still, that's no excuse for showering their affection upon movies that, by their design and their release schedules, stomp their feet and demand Oscar consideration. We'll see some surprises Thursday – there's always one or two – but the awards season pack mentality guarantees that most of the following films will scoop up the armload of nominations that are forecast. Here's why I'm hoping they won't.

(I should add that in most cases I haven't seen these movies, mainly because I didn't want to. In this regard, I am like most Academy voters.)

Gran Torino

Unforgiven was a fantastic and thoughtful Clint Eastwood movie with a remarkable cast and awe-inspiring performances. Since then, its director has receded further and further into a dark and somber exploration of misanthropy and pain. His characters (usually played by Clint himself) are loners, most often bitter and spiteful, but Eastwood apparently finds something heroic in this state of being. Granted, in *A Perfect World*, it was pretty cool – but lately it's just morose and uninteresting. With *Gran Torino*, it reaches a point that Clint is a grumpy old racist, snarling at punks to "get off my lawn." (Literally.) There's meant to be something profound about his hateful screeds, but in reality hateful and profound don't overlap all that often. Still, Eastwood keeps churning this stuff out, and it's time the Academy started watching his movies rather than simply nominating them for tradition's sake.

The same adulation could go to a better movie, even a better movie about a cranky and morbid protagonist, like *Synecdoche, New York* – which, despite its flaws, is about something. Snub Clint once or twice and maybe he'll go away; or better yet, maybe he and his seething, isolated stoics will retreat to the westerns where they belong, and he'll return with something amazing.

Frost/Nixon

Just what we needed more of in 2008: politics! The cable networks have proved over the last few years that people won't watch two people sitting across from each other and talking about government unless you at least throw in a news ticker – but surely the missing element was a discussion of national events from 30 years ago. I get that the horrors of unchecked executive power have been revisited upon us, and that adds relevance to the whole enterprise. It's a "Crucible" for our times. And I'm sure it's a good movie; if its predicted nominations were in writing and acting alone, I probably wouldn't even notice. But it's been touted as a Best Picture "lock" for weeks, and that's just impossible to understand since it seems so charmless and dated. Is this the movie we want 2008 to be remembered by? I don't think so. (Not that I expect it to win Best Picture even if it's nominated – nobody does, which is yet another reason not to nominate it.)

Running a solid sixth or seventh in many Oscar predictions is *Doubt*, another talky play adapted for the big screen. Put *Doubt* in fourth and *Frost/Nixon* in seventh, and the world starts to look a lot more sane. The events of *Doubt* also take place decades ago, but it's another movie about ideas more than events. In the case of *Frost/Nixon* the take-away is "Don't vote for Bush." Thanks, but too late for that! *Doubt* leaves the audience thinking about larger and more interesting topics, and that's what a Best Picture contender should do.

Slumdog Millionaire

For people like me who rail against the Academy's weakness for stodgy, boring movies, the lively and enjoyable *Slumdog Millionaire* is exactly the sort of film that should be nominated for a bunch of Oscars – except for all the ways it isn't. It's an inventive story, with spectacular child performances and many heartwarming moments (so many they begin to overstay their welcome), but it loses its focus toward the end and gets bogged down in a familiar tale of forbidden love versus a mustache-twirling villain. And the vastly overrated Danny Boyle gets crazy with the camerawork and thrumming music, draining realism from key moments by dressing them up like something out of *Moulin Rouge*. None of these things would be so out of place in the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* should have been: a fun and frolicky mid-spring confection. But suddenly it's inches away from being crowned Best Picture – what gives?

To answer that, answer this: would it be where it is if it were about a couple of towheaded American kids from the wrong side of the tracks? I think *Slumdog Millionaire* has captured the hearts of Hollywood limousine liberals precisely because it bears the faces of street urchins from India, the very kind their type are adopting in droves these days. An otherwise pleasant but pedestrian movie is somehow "important" because of its setting. I've heard it referred to as "poverty porn," and that's a perfect fit. People have seized onto it because it makes them feel socially conscious to do so (or

maybe they're just clinging to the idea that in this economy, someone has it worse than us). Of the films on this list, it's the only one lacking any sign of having been created specifically to win Oscars, and for that it deserves every award it snatches away from its greedy competitors. But if you look at it honestly, it isn't a Best Picture movie. For a crowd-pleasing, morally redemptive story with a protagonist who lives on a trash heap, you can't beat *WALL-E*. Make that your Best Picture. *Slumdog Millionaire* won't hold up to history, and it doesn't need the weight on its shoulders, anyway.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

Brad Pitt's great, Cate Blanchett could make a night-vision sex tape and it'd win Oscars, and David Fincher... well, he sure does make long movies. Of the movies out last year, the Best Picture nomination of *Benjamin Button* was foretold earliest of all, possibly because we anticipated it the longest – it spent forever in post-production, compositing computer-generated versions of Pitt into all his scenes. That strikes me as the kind of intricate detail that either elevates a great movie into a grand one, or simply doubles the budget of a mediocre movie. From the trailer, it looks like *Benjamin Button* could be a sweet and transcendent love story on an epic scale, or a ponderous bore. (With a running time near three hours, I skipped it because the alternative would've required a catheter.) I hope it's a transcendent love story, but the critical response seems to indicate the presence of at least a dash of "ponderous bore." There's something about the look of it that has me imagining Fincher and his team skipping their way to work each day, chucking one another on the shoulder and crowing, "We're gonna win Oscars! Oscars for everyone!" Which isn't very generous of me, but the movie is based on a *short story* for crying out loud! It weighs in below 10,000 words and Fincher can't trim it to two hours? It seems like maybe Eric Roth already had *Forrest Gump* open on his laptop, and seeing as how he won an Oscar for that, maybe all that skipping and crowing was closer to the mark than I thought.

Some say *Button*'s fellow visual effects contender *The Dark Knight* is sure to earn a Best Picture nod as well, but if it doesn't make the cut and *Benjamin Button* does, that'll be a travesty. Crowd-pleasers like *Chicago* and even *Titanic* have made the cut before, and neither had anything near the intellectual prestige of *The Dark Knight*. It's not a perfect film – far from it – nor a brief one, either. But it's distinctively its own, doesn't hew to any "Oscar bait" traditions, and we desperately need to weed out films that do.

Milk

I just can't stand Sean Penn in anything, and *Milk* seems like the kind of movie that dares you not to like it – especially

Penn's performance. It's another one that everyone says will earn a Best Picture nomination but no one thinks will win the award, so why put it in there? Just to take up space? Put in something like *Rachel Getting Married* or *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* which will at least seem memorable in five years. Can you imagine anyone ever saying, "Well, the cable's out. Let's pop in the *Milk* DVD!" – I mean, other than people who use movies like it to validate their politics (when the whole point of it is to march to your own drum and validate your own damn politics)? Maybe if he hadn't humorlessly defended Jude Law's honor against an imagined sleight by Oscar host Chris Rock a few years back, I could be more objective about him, but every time Sean Penn says something I feel like I have to immediately believe the opposite.

Okay, I haven't exactly provided any ironclad reasons why *Milk* should go home nominationless – forgive me, I just got a little worked up. The point of this list is to reject films that pre-suppose their own Oscar-worthiness, and a movie like *Milk*: period story, charged politics, Sean Penn – it's the kind of movie that seems purposely designed to earn \$50,000 at the box office and then win nine Oscars. Banish it.

The Wrestler

Mickey Rourke, who has only ever turned in a worthwhile performance by hiding his dick in a bag of movie popcorn, had washed out of movies. He was gone, returning only to portray a slab of meat in the Sin City movies where making an actual slab of meat look appropriately gross would have required too much makeup. But then ferret-faced hipster Darren Aronofsky goes and pulls him out of his spider hole and tosses him into a role as a similarly beat-down washout. He shoots it all "gritty" and "raw" and brings in surefire movie-classer-upper Marisa Tomei, and somehow convinces audiences that his scuzzy protagonist is worth their attention because he's got a heart of gold. Fine, whatever. People like all kinds of movies. But just because Rourke wins some acclaim for channeling his wrecked physique into a role that happens to call for it, suddenly he's a genius and all the quirks and fried brain cells that made him a washout in the first place now make him wise and soulful? Sorry, I call bullshit. Academy voters, if Mickey Rourke had showed up on your doorstep two years ago and asked to borrow so much as a paperclip, you would've called the cops. Now, you hang on his every word? No, no, no. If you want to give an Oscar to a guy who hasn't had a lot of lead roles lately, give it to Richard Jenkins in *The Visitor* – he came by his part the old-fashioned way, acting his ass off for years and years, rather than mutilating himself and then answering the call when casting directors started combing the gutters for a guy who looked kind of mutilated.

Revolutionary Road

POOP READING

I was pleased when the critical response to *Revolutionary Road* was somewhat dismissive, because it seemed finely tuned to Oscar's frequency, what with period settings, heavy melodrama, and perennial Oscar bridesmaid Kate Winslet. But that's not the only reason it doesn't deserve Oscars. The problem with *Revolutionary Road* was expertly dissected in a Wall Street Journal column a while back called "Why Does Hollywood Hate the Suburbs?" The film takes the position that people are imprisoned by their own choices, and then sympathizes with them rather than holding them accountable for making those choices in the first place. April marries Frank and yet she feels her destiny is to be a free spirit – needing to constantly reinvent herself or lose all sense of purpose. Well, in that case, marriage seems like a pretty stupid decision. Any character that wails "We're just like everybody else!" has already lost me. First of all, of course you're not. Just because you set your trash out at the same time doesn't mean you're identical. (For one, you're a shrill bitch. Not every woman on the block is like that!) And "individuality" – in the sense of being different just to be different – is much more boring than conformity anyway. Maybe it's because I believe in a "life of the mind," that reading and learning about ideas is more important than going to Paris, but I find Winslet's character overbearing and despicable and all I've seen is the trailer.

The Journal compared *Revolutionary Road* to director Sam Mendes's earlier film *American Beauty*, but I think *American Beauty* is much better, because even though it gets a little dour about the suburban ennui, it shows people who take responsibility for their own dissatisfaction. Lester quits his job, buys the car he wants, and starts living the life he prefers. Jane shrugs off her dumb, slutty friend and embraces the unpopular guy. Even Carolyn seizes what she wants; it doesn't totally make her happy, but life doesn't come with guarantees. I'd much rather watch that than Kate and Leo scowling at each other because they're too chickenshit to acknowledge what they already know: that the fact of being alive does not entitle us to the expectation of living out all of our dreams. Most of us are in fact "just like everybody else" (in the general sense), and it's what you do with the remaining 10% of your personality that makes the difference.

Of course, I'm probably wrong about all of this, and 2009 will be the first year in history that every Oscar nomination is richly deserved. But just in case we look back five years from now and say "Benjamin WHO??" – I'll be waiting right here, on the Internet, unwashed and unfed, to say: "Toldja so."
