

Ten Best Picture Nominees? Sure! Why Not?

by Joe Mulder

As you may have heard, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has announced that, starting next year, the Best Picture category will feature ten nominees instead of five.

My initial reaction, as it is to anything different or new, was "No! That's a terrible idea!" In a matter of minutes, though, I realized that for two particular reasons it's actually one of the better ideas the Academy has had in a while. Those two reasons:

1. While it seems at first as though doubling the Best Picture field will devalue the meaning of a Best Picture nomination, I would submit that it's impossible to devalue something that's essentially meaningless, and

2. For a movie to win Best Picture, it has to be nominated first. And if having ten nominees helps get movies like *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* – which pretty much everyone thought was the best movie of 2005, even though *Brokeback Mountain* was the Best Picture favorite and *Crash* actually won the award – into the mix, then I'm all for it. Oh, I know that some detractors will say that the Oscar telecast is long enough already, and that adding five more nominees will necessitate five more packages introducing them, which only adds to the plodding length of the ceremony and will be pointless anyway because the Best Director nominations, which will still be limited to five, will in effect tell us what the "real" Best Picture nominees are. The Oscars are too long as it is, is what I'm saying people are going to say.

Well, if I have to be the one to finally bring this up, then I guess I will: nobody (other than maybe the people forced to sit through the program live at the Kodak Theatre) gives a shit how long the Oscar telecast is. They could make it 45 minutes, and it would still be (in the best years, with the best hosts) maybe ten minutes of something mildly entertaining, followed by a bunch of pointless filler in between the presentations of awards that, but for a few marquee categories, nobody really even cares about. No one could possibly sit and just watch an Oscar telecast for even an hour-and-a-half, and just have that be what they're doing with their evening; either you're by yourself and you have the Oscars on in the background to see who wins, or – and this is the way I recommend doing it – you're having a big party with all of your friends, getting drunk, making off-color comments about the people on TV and gambling on the results. Either way, does it make a bit of difference whether the show clocks in at 100 or 300 minutes?

Anyway. Now that I've thoroughly destroyed any possible arguments against having ten Best Picture nominees (oh, come on, just pretend that's what I did...), I thought it might be interesting to go back and look at the last five years of Oscar history and see how things might have shaken out had

the Best Picture list included ten nominees during that time. I suppose one has to take it for granted that the five movies that actually *were* nominated for Best Picture would have been included in a ten-movie field as well, so we'll start from there and then try to see what the other five might have been.

This will be unscientific, highly subjective, hastily researched, and will no doubt contain several glaring omissions of movies that just didn't occur to me at the time. But as I've pointed out a few times in a few other pieces, the sole purpose of this website is to give you something to read when you're looking to kill ten or twenty minutes, so there's no point in doing too much complaining.

2008

Best Picture Nominees:

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button
Frost/Nixon
Milk
The Reader
Slumdog Millionaire (winner)

Other possibilities:

I think we can take *The Dark Knight* and *WALL-E* to the bank; plenty of people thought that those two movies were deserving of a Best Picture nomination even in a five-movie field, so we can assume they would have made the cut at ten (regardless of the fact that *The Dark Knight* really doesn't, at any point, make a damn bit of sense. I'm sorry; it just doesn't. I know it has a lot of fans, and I don't begrudge them their love for the movie, but I just watched it again like a week ago, and it's kind of a mess. A highly, *highly* enjoyable mess for which Heath Ledger deserved to win an Oscar, but a mess nonetheless).

I would also suspect that *The Wrestler* would have been an obvious choice, seeing as how it was a prominent Oscar-season movie that was better reviewed than three of the actual Best Picture nominees.

So that leaves us with only two more openings; I suggest that the Academy, with ten slots to fill, wouldn't have been able to ignore Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* as they did when they only had five, so we'll throw that in there.

The last one? Well, I think that the "Kate Winslet depressing downer Oscar-bait movie that nobody actually enjoyed" spot was taken by *The Reader*, so *Revolutionary Road* wouldn't have made the cut even in an expanded field. Now, perhaps I'm displaying far too much faith in the Oscars (though it would be difficult to show too little), but I think that a trend will develop in which one crowd-pleasing blockbuster – either an action movie or a comedy; you know, a movie that

POOP READING

lots of people actually saw and enjoyed – will be rewarded with a Best Picture nomination. I realize that we've already sort of got that spot covered with *The Dark Knight*, but that was highly-regarded enough by some folks that I think we can give another movie the Blockbuster Action and/or Comedy nomination that I just decided the Academy will unofficially create as an olive branch to the actual moviegoing public. So call me crazy, but last year I think that the "Throw the Unwashed Masses a Bone" nomination would have gone to... *Iron Man*. Which leaves us with:

Your 2008 Best Picture Nominees

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button
The Dark Knight
Frost/Nixon
Gran Torino
Iron Man
Milk
The Reader
Slumdog Millionaire
WALL-E
The Wrestler

2007

Best Picture Nominees:

Atonement
Juno
Michael Clayton
No Country For Old Men (winner)
There Will Be Blood

Yeesh. Just looking at the list, here, I don't know that there's a single Best Picture nominee that anybody's going to want to watch in ten years, with the probable exception of *Juno*. Surely we can round out the field with some more appealing stuff, no?

Other possibilities:

First of all, I'm not sure how *Into the Wild* got left off the list in a lean year. I had the pleasure of watching it a week or so ago, finally, and it's just excellent. Sean Penn might not be as good a director as he is an actor, but that's like saying Bo Jackson might not have been as good an outfielder as he was a running back. Sean Penn's quite a good director is what I'm saying, for those of you who don't follow sports. Do yourself a favor and see *Into the Wild*, if you haven't. I can't imagine it gets snubbed in a widened field.

American Gangster and *Charlie Wilson's War* are just the kind of middling Oscar-bait that the Academy will be able to nominate now that they have ten spots, and I just don't know how they'll be able to justify leaving Pixar movies off the list anymore, considering that they're almost always among any

year's best-reviewed films. As such, I think we can assume a nomination for *Ratatouille*.

And the final spot? The Throw the Masses a Bone nomination? Well, I'd submit that *Juno* took that spot in '07 (sometimes even the Oscars are willing to recognize a successful, interesting, universally lauded movie that lots of people saw). And since I recall a great deal of support for *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* director Julian Schnabel, I'm assuming that movie must have been good. Good enough to get that last nomination, even.

And it pains me to say it, but I'm afraid that even with five more Best Picture nominations to dole out, *Enchanted* wouldn't have gotten one. Which is a crying shame, because *Enchanted* is really an excellent movie. Maybe it's just that I have a three-year-old daughter and I've seen *Enchanted* so many times that I'm developing sort of a Stockholm syndrome thing, but, I doubt it; I thought it was great the first time I saw it.

Your 2007 Best Picture Nominees:

American Gangster
Atonement
Charlie Wilson's War
The Diving Bell and the Butterfly
Into the Wild
Juno
Michael Clayton
No Country For Old Men
Ratatouille
There Will Be Blood

2006

Best Picture Nominees:

Babel
The Departed (winner)
Letters from Iwo Jima
Little Miss Sunshine
The Queen

Other Possibilities:

I think we can assume that in a widened field *Dreamgirls* wouldn't possibly have been left of the list, since it actually got more nominations than any other movie that year but was denied a Best Picture nod. So that's an easy one out of the way.

Also, I'm not sure they could have ignored *United 93* in a more wide-open race. *United 93* was really an amazing achievement; dare I say it was even the movie that September 11th, 2001 deserved. I can understand the impulse to simply nominate its director and then just not deal with it,

POOP READING

but it's hard for me to imagine that it wouldn't have been in the mix with more nominations to throw around.

Flags of Our Fathers was a companion piece to *Letters From Iwo Jima*, but I suspect that only one was going to get nominated no matter what, and they made *Iwo Jima* their pick. So I'll leave *Flags of Our Fathers* off.

Pan's Labyrinth and *The Lives of Others* both had passionate support as well, but I just don't have a sense of how foreign films would fare even with more nominations to give out, so I'm sort of going to cop out and leave them off.

I do think *Casino Royale* would have made the cut, and would have been considered sophisticated and gritty enough not to even be the Unwashed Masses nominee. That probably would have been *The Devil Wears Prada*; with more Best Picture nods to give away, I don't think the Academy will be able to automatically discount anything that has the faintest whiff of mainstream studio comedy to it, the way they do now (am I saying that *The Hangover* might actually have a chance to be nominated for Best Picture next year? Hey, a guy can dream).

Finally, as crazy as it seems now, what with the character's shtick having aged faster (and less gracefully) than that guy who drank from the wrong holy grail in *Last Crusade*, I think that *Borat* would have slid in there and scored the final nomination. That's right; *Borat*. I said it.

Your 2006 Best Picture Nominees:

Babel

Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan

Casino Royale

The Departed

The Devil Wears Prada

Dreamgirls

Letters from Iwo Jima

Little Miss Sunshine

The Queen

United 93

2005

Best Picture Nominees:

Brokeback Mountain

Capote

Crash (winner)

Good Night, and Good Luck.

Munich

Other Possibilities:

A pretty weird year; none of your bigger blockbusters were

anywhere near good enough to even sniff a Best Picture nomination, except perhaps for *Batman Begins*. So let's put that in there.

Cinderella Man, though it underwhelmed with critics and at the box office, probably would have been nominated. As I've said before, I didn't see it but I get the impression that with a few tweaks of the score and a couple of different edits, it would have played like a Zucker Brothers parody of an Oscar-bait movie, as opposed to a real, earnest Oscar-bait movie. Still, I expect to see more Oscar-bait failures get nominated now, and if the Best Picture race had been ten deep when *Cinderella Man* came out I would have expected to see it then.

March of the Penguins might have had enough support to break through and score a rare (unheard of?) Best Picture nod for a documentary; I'm putting it on the list because that would have been cool.

Walk the Line I didn't personally care for one bit, but that sort of serious, plodding biopic is usually like catnip to Oscar voters, so that would have been in there.

Which brings us to the final nominee, and the entire reason I decided that having ten Best Picture nominations was a good idea in the first place: *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. I still remember *Entertainment Weekly's* annual survey of three actual Oscar voters the week before the awards; to the best of my recollection all – or at least most – of them said that *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* was actually the best movie of the year, and isn't it a pity that the Oscars don't recognize comedies. Well, they wouldn't have been able to avoid nominating *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* if they'd had ten spots (it also works as the Unwashed Masses nominee), and who knows? Maybe if it gets nominated, it wins.

[note: I know not everybody loves *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* as much as I do, and I know that in reality not *everyone* agreed that it was by far the best movie of 2005. I just like to pretend that they do, and they did. Because they should, and they should have]

Your 2005 Best Picture Nominees:

The 40-Year-Old Virgin

Batman Begins

Brokeback Mountain

Capote

Cinderella Man

Crash

Good Night, and Good Luck.

March of the Penguins

Munich

Walk the Line

2004

POOP READING

The Aviator
Finding Neverland
Million Dollar Baby (winner)
Ray
Sideways

Other Possibilities:

With ten nominations to go around, it would have been difficult to justify ignoring the worldwide phenomenon that was *The Passion of the Christ* (remember: at the time, we merely *suspected* that Mel Gibson hated Jews), so I'm relatively sure that would have been recognized.

I feel like *The Incredibles* would also have been impossible not to nominate, as good as it was.

The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind won a screenplay Oscar that year, and the screenplay Oscars are, as we've said many times, the consolation prize for Best Picture. So that's in.

Since I really can't pretend to keep my personal tastes out of the equation, I'll have to put *Collateral*, one of the most puzzlingly underrated movies in recent memory, on the list.

So what does that leave us? Well, it leaves us with a dilemma; would *Fahrenheit 9/11* have taken the final nomination, or would the Unwashed Masses been given *Spider-Man 2* or *The Bourne Supremacy*? Or would they have gone with something a little more Best Picture-y, like *Hotel Rwanda*?

I say if they were going to nominate *Fahrenheit 9/11* for Best Picture they would have done it in a field of five (would anyone have missed *Ray* or *Finding Neverland* on the list, really?), so let's say that even with as much buzz as it generated during the fall of '04, Michael Moore's movie wouldn't have made the cut.

And although *Hotel Rwanda* is probably the strongest candidate (two of its stars were nominated for acting Oscars, after all), for some reason I feel compelled to honor my Unwashed Masses rule and give the final nomination to a crowd-pleaser. I figure the comic book movie thing may have worked against *Spider-Man 2*, as much as everybody liked it, just enough so that *The Bourne Supremacy* gets in there and takes the last spot.

Your 2004 Best Picture Nominees:

The Aviator
The Bourne Supremacy
Collateral
The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
Finding Neverland
The Incredibles
Million Dollar Baby

The Passion of the Christ
Ray
Sideways
