

The Snubbies: Best Director

by Joe Mulder

There's an old story about Larry Bird walking into the locker room during an All-Star weekend about 25 years ago and, prior to the three-point shooting contest, announcing that everyone else was competing for second place.

I hate to spoil the suspense and I mean no disrespect to the four other fine Snubbie nominees when I say that if this metaphor were at all apt and there were actually a "second place," and if the "Snubbies" were in fact not just a thing I made up last week, Baz Luhrmann would be Larry Bird and all of the other guys would be, well, all of the other guys.

Best Director

Nominees:

Brad Bird, *The Incredibles*
Alfonso Cuaron, *Children of Men*
Baz Luhrmann, *Moulin Rouge*
Christopher Nolan, *Memento*
Sean Penn, *Into the Wild*

It kills me not to be able to give the Snubbie to Brad Bird for *The Incredibles*, it really does. And now that I think about it, leading this thing off with a story about another guy named Bird, and then not having Brad Bird be the guy I compared him to, was probably an unnecessary slight. But this Best Director category is no joke; I'd even say it's our strongest Snubbie field yet. Everyone's great, everyone deserves it, but there can be only one winner.

The Incredibles is a joy from start to finish, but for me the virtuosity of Bird's work is encapsulated mainly in the extended action/chase sequence that takes place approximately two-thirds of the way in. We've seen each member of the family exercise his or her powers before in isolated incidents, but in one glorious scene they all come together as the Parr clan attempts to fight its way off of villain Syndrome's deadly island lair. I could describe it in detail but I'd just be wasting my breath (or wasting my finger typing... um... power, or whatever); if you haven't seen it then you need to, and if you have then you know what I'm talking about. It's one of the best action sequences in any movie, ever; the type of pure fantastical escapism that film is uniquely equipped to offer.

And it's not like the rest of the movie isn't perfect, either.

Again, it kills me not to be able to give it to Brad Bird (although something tells me that he himself will persevere).

Children of Men is about a future in which all women worldwide become infertile over the course of a year or so, and what happens to society as a result (spoiler alert: nothing good). It also features a decent number of lengthy single-shot sequences in which the camera moves with the characters for minutes at a time without cutting. As such, both the story and the directorial choices could conceivably have come off as gimmicky.

But they don't, at all.

The world that Alfonso Cuaron and his team create seems plausible and immediate, and the single-shot sequences develop so organically that not only are they not distracting, they feel essential.

The production designers and editors probably deserve a ton of credit as well, but they'll just have to wait for someone else to start a fake Oscar snub awards bit that includes pee-break categories. And as for cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, whose contribution to the film was arguably as essential as Cuaron's, well, he *was* nominated for an Oscar for his *Children of Men* work, so we've got no time for him here at the Snubbies.

Also, the screenplay and editing Oscars for which Cuaron received nominations for *Children of Men* should soften the blow of his Snubbie loss considerably.

And now we come to our beloved Baz.

Moulin Rouge is one of my favorite movies, and regardless of whether you enjoyed it or not I think you'd have to be awfully contrarian not to concede that with it Baz Luhrmann not only revived the dead art of the movie musical (other than Woody Allen's *Everyone Says I Love You* and then *Evita* – which doesn't quite count because it's all singing and no dialogue, which is sort of a subgenre of its own – can you think of another 1990s movie musical off the top of your head? Because I can't) but practically invented a new kind of cinema.

Film is a collaborative medium, of course, but *Moulin Rouge* was directed, co-written and co-produced by Luhrmann. It's his. Yet *Moulin Rouge* received an Oscar nomination for Best Picture but not for Best Director, even though it's difficult to think of any movie whose greatness is a more direct result of its director's singular vision.

And, well, snubs like that are what we're here to put right. You didn't get the Best Director nomination you so richly deserved, Baz Luhrmann, but you can take solace in the fact that you're the only Snubbie-winning director in the history of the universe. Unless and until I get hard-up for ideas and decide to employ this gimmick again in a few years.

It couldn't have been easy finding just the right tone for *Memento*, a movie about an amnesiac that's told from back to front, but Christopher Nolan did it. We viewers needed to be confused to a degree in order to identify with Guy Pearce's main character, but we also needed to be a step or two ahead of him or we'd become bewildered and give up. In Nolan's hands we were right where we needed to be the entire time.

There are bound to be those, of course, who will argue that Nolan has actually been snubbed for a Snubbie, that he should have received this very nomination for *The Dark Knight* instead. I would point out that while *Memento* was tightly constructed and impeccably plotted, *The Dark Knight* – while enormously entertaining in parts – really didn't make a damn bit of sense.

So it's *Memento* over *The Dark Knight*, in this particular instance at least.

Deal with it, nerds.

Sean Penn is, it turns out, an immensely talented director, and *Into the Wild* may well be his masterwork. Not only that, but who would have thought that a cautionary tale about the dangers of unrestrained idealism, misplaced anti-authoritarian anger and stubborn intellectual arrogance would come from Sean Penn, of all people?

The man's well runs deep, my friends.

Into the Wild is far from didactic, simply dramatizing the story of young Christopher McCandless who, shortly after graduating from college, set off on a directionless wander through the United States that culminated in a spring excursion into the Alaskan wilderness from which he never returned. It *is* a cautionary tale, as I said, and not a sermon. Sean Penn comes not to praise nor to bury Christopher McCandless, but simply to demonstrate that if you let anger (coupled with an unshakeable belief in your own exceptionalism) get the better of you then the fate that befell McCandless is a possible one, made all the more tragic by being completely avoidable.

The [2008 Oscars](#) were positively loaded in the Best Director category, but I can't be convinced that there was no room for Sean Penn.

And the Snubbie goes to:

Baz Luhrmann, *Moulin Rouge*. If I could give two, I'd give another one to Brad Bird. But I can't. Well, I mean, I *could*, since this is my own made up thing and I can do whatever I

want...

But still. Sorry, Brad Bird. I really am.
