

The Snubbies: Best Picture

by Joe Mulder

For those of you who are joining us already in progress, the Snubbie awards have been, in the last couple of weeks, attempting (and succeeding!) to correct an entire decade's worth of oversights by the fine people at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Eligible for consideration were any particular performances from 2000 through 2009 that weren't recognized with an Oscar nomination. If you missed it, Snubbies have thus far been awarded in the following categories:

Best Supporting Actress: Irma P. Hall, *The Ladykillers*

Best Supporting Actor: John Michael Higgins, *Best in Show*

Best Actress: Amy Adams, *Enchanted*

Best Actor: Paul Giamatti, *Sideways*

Best Director: Baz Luhrmann, *Moulin Rouge*

And now, it's Best Picture time. Since the Academy decided to expand the category to ten nominees this year I've decided to follow suit. Good thing, too; I don't know how I'd possibly pare this list down to five.

Nominees:

The 40-Year-Old Virgin
Almost Famous
Children of Men
The Dark Knight
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
The Hangover
High Fidelity
The Incredibles
Memento
United 93

And by the way, right this second, before I get into doing a short write-up about each of these ten movies, I still don't know who's going to win. Suspense!

It's clear by now that the mainstream American studio comedy, however well done, has no place at the Oscars, and few movies exemplify this any better than *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. If you want to score a Best Picture nomination for your comedy, it better be independent (and, preferably, British). Everyone seemed to agree that *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* was the best movie of 2005 (not really, but that's how I choose to remember it), and yet there was never any suspicion that it would even sniff the Best Picture category. *Entertainment Weekly*, as you may know, interviews three or four Academy voters who share their choices in some of the

big categories on condition on anonymity, and back in early 2006 it seemed like every one of them said something like, "Well, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* was the best movie of the year, we all know that, but as for Best Picture I guess I'd vote for..."

Don't believe me? [Here's](#) exactly what *EW* printed back then:

There's one glaring omission on the list of nominations for the 78th Academy Awards: *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*. In which categories? How about Best Actor, Best Supporting Actress, Best Original Screenplay...and Best Picture. Says who? Three experienced over-40 Academy members – an actor, a screenwriter, and a producer – who offered to anonymously review their choices with *EW*.

"The Oscars should be renamed the Academy Indie Film Festival because the nominees are like a list of film-festival award winners," says the producer... "I am disappointed that *40 Year-Old Virgin* was shut out. I thought it was the best movie of the year. No kidding."

And...

Our producer was on location for much of the fall, so she watched nearly all of the nominated films in a three-week period, which caused "serious film" fatigue. "These movies are all trying very hard to say something, but I don't know that moviegoers will be talking about them 10 years from now," she says. "Then again, don't listen to me because *40 Year-Old Virgin* would be my vote for Best Picture."

So it's not just me.

Anyway, maybe I'm just an unsophisticated boob but I found *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* not only endlessly hilarious, but I thought the metaphor that the film used for the main character's semi-voluntary sexual isolation was quite apt and touching: he collects action figures, he loves them, but they sit on his shelf, year after year, because to open up the packages is to destroy their monetary value. So he has all of these action figures, many of them quite valuable... but that's all he does with them. He *has* them. When his girlfriend tries to convince him to sell them in order to open up his own business, he can't do it. They're meant to be played with, of course, but once you open them up they're no longer pristine, and never will be again.

Tennessee Williams does something like that with *Glass Menagerie* and they back a dump truck full of awards up his driveway, yet *Virgin's* Judd Apatow and Steve Carrel get *bubkes*. Hardly seems fair.

This isn't just *my* list of the best movies that weren't nominated for Best Picture between 2000 and 2009, it's *the* list of the best movies that weren't nominated for Best Picture between 2000 and 2009. As such, there might be a movie or two in here that I don't even particularly like but whose inclusion is necessary nonetheless. *Almost Famous* is definitely such a movie; I can't (and won't) argue that it's not extremely well done, but the subject matter couldn't possibly have interested me less and the story didn't engage me at all.

Now, once in a while, enough people whose opinions I respect and whose opinions often jibe with my own will like or even love a movie to the point where I end up saying, "Well, I guess I'm wrong." And not sarcastically, either. *Almost Famous* is one of those movies. I guess I'm just wrong.

Also, it merits a spot on this list simply because no less a pop culture authority than ESPN.com's Bill Simmons named it "The Movie of the Decade." I may not necessarily agree, but when Bill Simmons speaks, doofy white guys who write stuff on the internet listen.

Children of Men undoubtedly has something to say about contemporary geopolitical affairs, but if you're not interested in that aspect of it then at least you can still appreciate the movie as a top-notch action thriller. Set in a near-future in which all women (or maybe men; nobody seems sure) somehow became infertile almost twenty years earlier, it features some of the best action sequences you'll ever see – many of them executed in one long, continuous take, or at least appearing to have been, though tweaked a just a bit in the editing suite – and great performances from Clive Owen and Michael Caine, among others.

It probably qualifies as sci-fi, but if you don't like sci-fi, don't worry. I don't tend to like sci-fi, and I really liked *Children of Men*.

Oh, *The Dark Knight*. I can see why everybody thought it should have been nominated last year; would the world have spun off its axis if *The Reader* hadn't been represented in the Best Picture category, after all?

And *The Dark Knight* also deserves a place on this list, at it is undoubtedly once of the cinematic cultural touchstones of the decade.

Still, and I have to have to keep pointing this out: it didn't make a damn bit of sense. It really didn't. Heath Ledger's actual performance as the Joker deserved all of the attention and accolades it got, but the way the character operated in the film itself... nearly every single action the Joker takes does not hold up to any sort of logic, real-world, comic-book,

or otherwise. One loses count of how many times one things to oneself, "Well that's crazy; if that exact person hadn't done that exact thing at that exact time, and if any part of that incredibly detailed, elaborate and unpredictable plan hadn't gone exactly like it needed to, the Joker would have been completely screwed."

The Dark Knight was an awesome spectacle and a really fun watch; I even bothered to see it twice. It deserves a Snubbie nomination based on its impact, but can't seriously be considered a contender because of its plot.

In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* we have, once again, a movie that's not really one of my favorites, but belongs on the list because everyone else seems to think it does. I wasn't able to convince myself to buy into the movie's premise, but that's my fault, really, and not the movie's.

Nonetheless, I've taken a look at a few "Best Movies of the Decade" lists in the last couple of months, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* tends not only to show up on them, but tends to be at or near the top. Good enough for me.

I really thought that by expanding the Best Picture category to ten nominees, we'd have room for things like *The Hangover*. Apparently not.

I don't really want to spend too much time playing the "this movie should have been nominated instead of that movie" game, but I think in this instance it's instructive. *The Hangover* got an average overall score of 73 on Metacritic.com, a website that averages reviews from several sources and gives each movie an overall number that tends to reflect the prevailing critical opinion. Here are the scores for this year's ten Best Picture nominees:

The Hurt Locker: 94

Up: 88

An Education: 85

Avatar: 84

Up in the Air: 83

District 9: 81

Precious, Etc.: 79

A Serious Man: 79

Inglourious Basterds: 69

The Blind Side: 53

True, *The Hangover* only scores better than two Best Picture nominees on this not-quite-scientific scale. But if you factor in your typical movie critic's probable snobby disdain for anything that might be considered "gross-out" comedy and you factor in the "extra credit" that the Coen brothers (deservedly) get even when one of their movies doesn't quite

resonate like some of their others, then all of a sudden *The Hangover* is within spitting distance of the Top Five.

Another website, Rotten Tomatoes, has ratings by regular people as well as critics. The Rotten Tomatoes community gave *The Hangover* a 91...

Up: 95
The Blind Side: 92
The Hurt Locker: 92
An Education: 91
District 9: 90
Up in the Air: 90
Inglourious Basterds: 89
Precious, Etc.: 89
Avatar: 88
A Serious Man: 77

And not that box office should necessarily be much of a factor, but *The Hangover* did make more money than all but two of those nominees (*Avatar* and *Up*).

So critics liked it better than at least some of the existing Best Picture nominees, the sort of people who bother to rate movies on websites liked it better than at least half of the existing Best Picture nominees, and audiences chose it more often than all but two of the existing Best Picture nominees.

Never mind that it's absolutely hilarious or that its ingenious plot would actually work quite well as a thriller on its own; the simple math agrees with me that *The Hangover* should have gotten a Best Picture nod this year.

High Fidelity strikes me as nothing less than a time capsule for how young urban Americans went about their lives and loves at the turn of the century. And, really, all you even need as far as that goes is John Cusack standing outside of Catherine Zeta-Jones's window, mid-breakup, shouting, "You fucking bitch! Let's work it out!"

That's pretty much us, isn't it?

I touched on *The Incredibles* a bit in the Best Director section, and its merits will be discussed at length very soon on this website (so stay tuned!), so I won't belabor the point lest anyone get sick of hearing about it.

But: what makes you different makes you special, and can make you great. The world at large seems to have a bizarre compulsion to make you want to fit in, to round off your edges. But if you allow yourself to be your best self, chances are you will also be your happiest, most fulfilled self...

Not a bad message to take away from a superhero cartoon,

really.

Memento is largely predicated on a gimmick, but boy, what a gimmick. The story of an amnesiac trying to solve a murder is told backwards, leaving us viewers almost as confused as Guy Pearce's Leonard. There's not much more to it than that, but it's an original take on the mystery genre that really, really works.

I hate to end on a bummer, but it only makes sense to go alphabetically and *United 93* is last on my list.

Whether or not it was a particularly good idea to make a September 11th movie, they made one. They made two, actually; *United 93* and *World Trade Center*. Director Paul Greengrass was nominated for an Oscar for his work on *United 93*, but the movie itself was overlooked, and I kind of understand why. I don't really want to be writing about it right now, and undoubtedly nobody wanted to be thinking about it on Oscar night three years ago. I can't really blame anybody.

I think *United 93* is something that everybody should watch once, even if nobody would ever want to watch it twice. We've all seen the real 9/11 footage countless times, but unless we've got some direct connection to the events of the day it still seems a bit abstract, like something that happened on TV as opposed to something that happened. We who were not directly affected by the attacks that day can tell ourselves intellectually how horrific they must have been, but it's difficult to conceptualize the events of 9/11 as something that happened, for the most part, to ordinary Americans just like us. It's important to be able to conceptualize those events that way, though, even if I'm not sure to what end exactly.

And though it is quite an adeptly made work of cinema, the most important function of *United 93* may be that it allows us, more than even the raw footage of the actual events of the day, to wrap our minds around what occurred. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, as Picasso said, and nothing else I've seen has made me realize the truth of September 11th like *United 93* did.

And the Snubbie goes to:

The Incredibles. A very tough call; ultimately, I think the value of *United 93* may be more instructive than artistic (not that it's not a significant artistic achievement). *The Incredibles*, meanwhile, is gloriously original escapist entertainment, and is as close to perfect as movies get. And take it from somebody with little kids, who's seen it several dozen times: it never even comes close to losing its charm.