Oscar Picks 2009 (Jameson Edition)!
by Jameson Simmons

On Sunday, we'll be celebrating an Oscar ceremony in which the Best Picture race is so sewn up it's almost not worth having the show. At the same time, we've been teased with sketchy details about the revamping of the broadcast in ways that may make it irresistibly awesome, but seem equally likely to make it even more unwatchable than ever before. (And considering the show's plummeting ratings over the last few years, that's saying something). *[Don't forget to read Joe's picks, too!]*

Bill Condon and Laurence Mark (*Dreamgirls*) have been brought in to "spice up" the awards, and they've leaked multiple bizarre details – including a suggestion that the order in which Oscars will be presented will "tell a story" and that nominees should expect something different about the way winners are announced. (I'm hoping this takes the form of an "everyone who won Best Actress this year take one step forward; not you, Kate Winslet" kind of thing. That or they reveal the actual vote tallies while Anderson Cooper waves them around on a magic pie chart.) At first, I was offended and frustrated by all the hype about the show's retooling, but then I remembered the whole show is hype – so who cares?

The only thing to care about is the onebee.com Oscar pool. (And I mean the **only** thing to care about – not the only thing about the Oscars; the only thing in life.) We do get excited about our little Oscar pool. And in a year when the only nominees I personally care about are also-rans Robert Downey, Jr. and Amy Adams, I take comfort in shutting out the rest of the show and focusing only on the numbers. Here's the general manner in which I'll be filling out my Oscar ballot this Sunday: **Best Picture**: *Slumdog Millionaire*

Also nominated: *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *Frost/Nixon*, *Milk*, and *The Reader*.

When I first heard about *Slumdog Millionaire*, it sounded like soft-edged, uplifting garbage without much of a point. But people were going on and on about its Oscar prospects, so eventually I was curious enough to see it. It certainly exceeded my initial expectations – it's fun, sweet, and thrilling – but throughout it I couldn't help wondering, "People expect this to be nominated for Best Picture?!" It just seemed too simple, too straightforward, too repetitive. Then, about half an hour from the end, I thought: "Maybe they're going to do a *Usual Suspects*-style 'gotcha' ending, where all the flashback stories have been made up just to throw Hindu Chazz Palminteri off the track. Well played, silly movie – an Oscar you shall have." But then that didn't happen, and I became more stumped than ever. It's a fine movie and all – send it home with an armload of MTV Movie Awards – but Best Picture? Since then, it's not only been nominated, it's everyone's lock to win. So, I guess that

shows what I know about anything.

If there were any chance of another film winning – and I'm not saying there is – it seems like it would be *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, which exudes Oscar-movie pedigree from each of its many, many frames. The only reason I could even imagine this happening is the widely noted fact that the majority of AMPAS voters come from the acting branch, and maybe they'd bristle at the idea of a Best Picture in which the performances of everyone over the age of eight are completely inessential. *Slumdog Millionaire* is a writer's and director's film, and none of the actors do anything to screw it up, but nor do they particularly elevate it.

What Should Win: From this group, definitely *Slumdog Millionaire* – because a fun and vibrant film should win. I'd prefer it be fun, vibrant, and spectacularly well-made like *WALL-E*, but at least it will be nice not to have more weepy, "important" stuff on the Best Picture list. As Steve Martin described *Chicago* the year it won: "a really good movie everybody liked." Let's have more like that and less like *The Reader*. **Best Director**: Danny Boyle, *Slumdog Millionaire*

Also nominated: *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (David Fincher), *Frost/Nixon* (Ron Howard), *Milk* (Gus van Sant), and *The Reader* (Stephen Daldry).

If *Slumdog Millionaire* is anything more than hollow poverty porn with a tacked-on happy ending, it's because of Danny Boyle. He infused it with an energy and vitality that made it much more than the sum of its relatively uninspiring parts. He also infused it with bright colors, thrumming music, and jarring camerawork, which I think a lot of people really liked about the movie. I hated that stuff, and I'm convinced that if I could throw a switch in my brain and suddenly like it, I'd understand everyone's enthusiasm for *Slumdog*'s Best Picture win. So, it stands to reason that Boyle should get that credit.

Who Should Win: I'd go Woody Allen for *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* or Andrew Stanton for *WALL-E*, but if you're trying to win points in the Oscar pool, the only approach that guarantees failure more than making emotional bets is making emotional bets on people who weren't even nominated. So let's say Boyle because every other nominated movie makes me ill just thinking about it, which means either giving Fincher a make-up award for *The Game* or sticking with Boyle, and I'm dead set against make-up awards. **Best Actor**: Mickey Rourke, *The Wrestler*

Also nominated: Richard Jenkins in *The Visitor*, Frank Langella in *Frost/Nixon*, Sean Penn in *Milk*, and Brad Pitt in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*.

Way to go, Mickey Rourke. You have actually managed to get me to root for Sean Penn during Oscar season. I wouldn't have thought it could happen. You could've held my family at gunpoint and I probably would've still hoped for Penn to

lose. But he's our only shot to stop the juggernaut of Mickey Rourke fandom that is sweeping Hollywood, turning a gruesome burnout into some sort of Zen master just because someone put him in a film where he could reflect weepily on his gruesome burnoutiness on camera and it would seem to be in character. When you read about Oscar voters rushing to check Rourke's box because he mentioned his dogs in his Golden Globe speech (which you can, if you read Entertainment Weekly), you know that the awards have lost all meaning.

EW thinks Penn will pull this one out, because Rourke's support is stronger among international juries, but statistical prognostication wunderkind Nate Silver (of fivethirtyeight.com, the site that nailed the presidential election) says Penn's less likely because he won recently (for *Mystic River*). I reserve the right to change this vote at the last minute, but I'm taking Rourke for misery insurance.

Who Should Win: The only thing I like less than make-up awards is giving the award to someone you like, regardless of who delivered the best performance. Nevertheless, here we are: Richard Jenkins. **Best Actress**: Kate Winslet, *The Reader*

Also nominated: Anne Hathaway in *Rachel Getting Married*, Angelina Jolie in *Changeling*, Melissa Leo in *Frozen River*, and Meryl Streep in *Doubt*.

Last time Winslet was nominated, I said the same thing: she seems plenty good and I'm happy for her to get nominated, but I'm not going to root for her to win an Oscar until she turns in a performance that seems kind of impressive. She came close in *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, but since then she's been further and further off the mark. For her to finally win an award with an Oscar-bait role in a Holocaust movie that nobody liked but ended up with five nominations because Harvey Weinstein bought them? That sounds about right. Everyone says people will vote for her performance in *The Reader* because of how much they liked her in *Revolutionary Road*. That's how the system is supposed to work – turn in a kickass performance and win an award for an adjacent one.

Who Should Win: I haven't seen *Rachel Getting Married* yet, but everything I've heard about it makes me confident that Anne Hathaway should take this award, even over Meryl Streep who was terrific as always in *Doubt*. **Best Supporting Actor**: Heath Ledger, *The Dark Knight*

Also nominated: Josh Brolin in *Milk*, Robert Downey, Jr. in *Tropic Thunder*, Philip Seymour Hoffman in *Doubt*, and Michael Shannon in *Revolutionary Road*. (All of whom are still alive as of this writing.)

I wanted to be so mad about Heath Ledger's inevitable posthumous Oscar for *The Dark Knight*. It represents the kind of dopey Hollywood groupthink that let *The English*

Patient sweep the awards; it confuses sympathy with appreciation for craft; worse, it casts aside Robert Downey, Jr. in a once-in-a-lifetime tour-de-force performance so spectacular that it forced even the comedy-allergic Academy to sit up and take notice. But the problem is: Ledger's performance is the best of the year in any category – possibly the best of the decade. It is an absolutely fearless and total transformation, with tantalizing, giddy nuances and moving, thought-provoking broad strokes. Who knows why it worked, since he never turned in particularly notable work before – maybe he was turning a corner, or maybe it was just a perfect storm of director, script, character, and actor. We'll never know, which is pretty sad. Still, we'll have his Joker forever, to show us that you can win an acting Oscar for *acting* rather than just being cast in a movie that's destined to win a bunch of Oscars. (And *The Dark Knight* does not have that destiny, having been ridiculously overlooked in the Directing, Writing, and Best Picture categories. AMPAS voters will acknowledge that awesome performances happen in fun movies like *The Dark Knight* and *Tropic Thunder* – but could such great performances result in a finished film worthy of their attention? Perish the thought!)

Who Should Win: I want to see a tie between Ledger and Downey, Jr. – they were both so excellent in completely different ways. Plus, it would show that RDJ is strong enough to go toe-to-toe with the season's most unstoppable force (EW cites 28 posthumous wins for Ledger's performance so far). And my romantic little heart hopes that a statement like that would force Oscar voters to recognize the value of comedy. If that doesn't force them, I may have to resort to going door to door and harassing them physically. **Best Supporting Actress**: Penélope Cruz, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*

Also nominated: Amy Adams in *Doubt*, Viola Davis in *Doubt*, Taraji P. Henson in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, and Marisa Tomei in *The Wrestler*.

Everyone goes apeshit about how this category was blown wide open when Kate Winslet ended up nominated for Best Actress in *The Reader* instead of *Revolutionary Road*, pulling her *Reader* performance out of this category. As though Kate Winslet has ever won an Oscar. Seems to me, leaving Winslet out of this category opened up one slot, not five. Still, though there are reasons to give the Oscar to Marisa Tomei or Amy Adams (there are always reasons to give Adams an Oscar), Penélope Cruz seems to be the front runner. Praise has been pretty strong for Viola Davis and even Taraji P. Henson as the "emotional core" of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, but to my mind the only race here is between Tomei and Cruz, and Cruz gets the edge for playing a flashier character (though I understand Tomei does do some flashing).

If Taraji P. Henson wins this award, I think we basically have to hand over this country's nuclear launch codes to Nate Silver and put him in charge of everything from now on,

because clearly he is a wizard. (I don't think she will, though. I think Silver underestimates the differences between the minds of stupid, fickle Oscar voters and stupid, fickle voters in the presidential election.)

Who Should Win: If you know me at all, you know I'd give Amy Adams an Academy Award for bashing my face in and calling me a loser with a boring personality and a tiny penis. I'd give her an Academy Award for refusing to accept an Academy Award from me. And she was great in *Doubt* – she's great in positively everything. But Penélope Cruz deserves this one. *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* is rolling along as a nice, entertaining movie in which the familiar and beguiling Woody Allen *bons mots* are delivered by people far younger and hotter than he. (Scarlett Johansson, Rachel Hall, even Kevin Dunn.) For the first time ever, Javier Bardem plays a character I find likable, even cute. Things are just great. Then Penélope Cruz shows up and it's like a tornado has picked up an atomic bomb and dropped it on a convention of Bobcat Goldthwait impersonators. Shit goes haywire, and it's incredible. I like Cruz a lot, and I realize she's dreadfully underused in American films – still I was completely unprepared for the spectacular abilities on display in *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. It should be a crime for someone so hot to be so talented, because now how do we raise homely daughters? We can't tell them to just be the very best at something and they'll overcome society's superficialities, because there are people like Penélope Cruz out there doing all that and still being unspeakably sexy. Given equal acting ability, who do you cast: Penélope Cruz or Linda Hunt? I thought so. **Best Original Screenplay**: *Milk*

It's a shame *WALL-E* won't take this one, since the screenplay categories are often thought of as a make-up award for Best Picture, and someone owes *WALL-E* an apology for refusing to nominate it in that category. But, if anything, it seems that *WALL-E* was *too* well written, and that its unique approach makes it difficult for voters to accept it. Dustin Lance Black's tireless efforts to bring Harvey Milk's life to the screen make for a good story, so it stands to reason Academy voters would get excited about that. **Best Adapted Screenplay**: *Slumdog Millionaire*

Considering the giddy enthusiasm surrounding *Slumdog Millionaire*, it seems unlikely to lose in many of the categories in which it's nominated. Which is an interesting consequence of timing – I sense that if the voting were extended another 4-6 weeks, a lot of *Slumdog*'s awards would've gone to other films. **Best Foreign Language Film**: *Waltz with Bashir*

This can be a tough category to crack. *Waltz with Bashir* is one of those films you hear constant praise about, especially its groundbreaking visionary approach. When a film like that pops up in a generally sidelined category like this, it's tempting to see it as a shoo-in. But we thought that about *Pan's Labyrinth* and had our asses handed to us, so proceed

with caution.

 Best Art Direction: *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

Which would certainly take the award for *Most* Art Direction, and that can generally be said of many recent winners of this award. **Best Cinematography**: *Slumdog Millionaire*

This is a weird-looking category, especially because there's no movie in it with sweeping landscape vistas, which is usually how this award is won. You've got *Changeling*, a historical melodrama; *The Reader*, a nomination bought by Harvey Weinstein; *The Dark Knight*, an action movie (but a beautifully visualized action movie featuring the most impressive IMAX photography ever); and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, which seems to be nominated for its innovative discovery of multiple new shades of brown. So, while it's normally unusual for bright splashes of color to win this prize, they just might with *Slumdog Millionaire* which – as has been mentioned – a person would be foolish to bet against more than once or twice this Sunday. It's a shame nobody saw fit to put *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* in this category: it looked beautiful, including many shots of afternoon sunlight playing across gorgeous Spanish villas (i.e., the kinds of shots that ordinarily win Best Cinematography statuettes). **Best Film Editing**: *Slumdog Millionaire*

What is "great editing?" Is *Memento* better edited because it goes backwards? Is it any harder to edit a story with flashbacks? It seems like action scenes would be the most challenging to edit – ensuring that the viewer can tell what's happening, understand where the characters are, and see enough of each moment. Also comedy (especially physical comedy) where timing is critical. Followed by something like a play scene – very static and talky – because the editing really shapes the performance. It doesn't make sense why a person (such as EW's Dave Karger) would say *Slumdog Millionaire* has an edge because it has flashbacks. Why is it any harder to cut to a shot that takes place earlier in "story time" than a shot that takes place the next day? Maybe Karger is just saying this because he thinks we're idiots and he doesn't have a better way to describe *Slumdog*'s editing, but the film actually has some very noticeable editing – quick and kinetic – which was employed intentionally to support director Danny Boyle's invigorated style. People (except for me) loved that style about *Slumdog*, so why not mention that instead of the flashbacks?

It's tough because a film's editing is like its score: it's at its best when you never even notice it – but what does the Academy notice? Is there anything a person should do to win an editing Oscar other than happen to edit the film that wins Best Picture? Most years it doesn't seem like there is. So why bother analyzing it? We know *Slumdog Millionaire* will win Best Picture, so just bubble it in here as well. **Best Original Score**: *Slumdog Millionaire*

It's amazing how accurately a list of *Slumdog Millionaire*'s nominations aligns with a list of what grated on me most about the film. (Note that its child actors have not been nominated.) Thomas Newman's work on *WALL-E* is sensational, but let's not overthink things in the light of a *Slumdog* sweep. **Best Original Song**: "Down to Earth" from *WALL-E*

Okay, let's overthink things a little. EW wants you to pick "Jai Ho" from *Slumdog Millionaire* despite their usual hand-wringing about "vote-splitting" among the two Best Song nominees from that film. (As though voters, knowing nothing except which film they like the sound of, haplessly check the box of one of its nominated songs at random, resulting in 50-50 split. If voters are so dumb that they vote for the movie without noticing which song, wouldn't it stand to reason they'd just vote for the first one listed alphabetically?)

(The first one listed alphabetically happens to be "Jai Ho". Well played, Entertainment Weekly.)

Anyway, disregard all that, because again EW will be wrong and again it won't have anything to do with vote-splitting. "Down to Earth" is more like a normal song you might hear on the radio, and Oscar has been recognizing those songs almost exclusively the past few years. **Best Visual Effects**: *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

Oh, *The Dark Knight* deserves this award so much more – due in large part to its refusal to go all computery in accomplishing some of its more stunning visuals – but the flashy innovation of grafting a digitized Brad Pitt face onto a bunch of children, midgets, and old people in *Benjamin Button* seems to be a lock – if for no other reason than the film (this year's most nominated) is due to go home empty-handed in most of its other categories. **Best Sound Editing**: *WALL-E*

...and... **Best Sound Mixing**: *WALL-E*

EW thinks the more dramatic *Dark Knight* will take these prizes, and maybe it will. But we all thought *Transformers* would take them last year, and instead they went to *The Bourne Ultimatum*. The point is, voters may have been jarred from their slumber and started thinking about these categories beyond simply "What's the loudest movie?" and "Which movie made the most money?" If they're going to pick up on the nuances, they'll have a hard time overlooking the brilliant work Ben Burtt did for *WALL-E*, which literally gave a voice to the main character and underpins so much of what was groundbreaking about that film. **Best Costume Design**: *The Duchess*

Which was apparently a movie. **Best Makeup**: *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

This one's weird because a lot of what looks like old age makeup on Brad Pitt is actually a digitized version of a rubber maquette of Brad Pitt, aged by makeup artists and then scanned into a computer. (What am I saying? What are the chances an Academy voter bothers to figure any of this out?) **Best Animated Feature**: *WALL-E*

Kung-Fu Panda took top prize at the Annies, which has been a solid predictor in this category for a while (inasmuch as Pixar always wins there). I think it's possible to understand why a movie like *Kung-Fu Panda* would score well there but still fall to *WALL-E* at the Oscars. *WALL-E* is a transcendent achievement, but it's in many ways so unlike an animated film that to an academy of animators, it doesn't offer as much meat as something more traditional like *Kung-Fu Panda*, with bright colors and active characters. Now, if you ask me what animation is supposed to achieve, it's to breathe life into something inanimate, which Pixar did marvelously with WALL-E and the other robots. I'm not arguing with the Annie voters, but I think Oscar voters will take a different perspective, especially since *WALL-E* was at or near the top of so many critics' lists and took Best Picture from some of the major awards of the season. If not, if some other movie wins this category, I apologize in advance for my multi-city rampage of howling devastation. **Best Animated Short**: *Presto*

Pixar hasn't won a lot of these lately, so maybe you're better off picking *La Maison en Petits Cubes*. But *Presto* was so incredible, and such a throwback to the old style of animated shorts that used to screen before movies back when a lot of Academy voters were kids, so maybe this is Pixar's year. (Then again, when most Academy voters were kids, movies hadn't even been invented yet, so I may be off the mark on this one.) **Best Documentary Feature**: *Man on Wire*

In the documentary category, it's usually pretty easy to bet on the one you've heard about the most, because Oscar voters are probably doing the same. And this guy was a riot on *The Colbert Report*, for whatever that's worth. **Best Documentary Short**: *The Witness – From the Balcony of Room 306* **Best Live Action Short**: *Spielzeugland (Toyland)*

For all their excitement to rebuild the Oscar ceremony and win back its television audience, AMPAS still hasn't moved these categories to be presented at the pre-show luncheon alongside the scientific and technical awards. Which I am choosing to interpret as a personal "fuck you" to me because it means I have to worry about how to assign my points to them on my Oscar pool ballot.