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Which Issues Should We Expect Oscars to Address?

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, February 7th, 2018

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Ostensibly, the role of the Oscars is to give awards for great filmmaking to cast and crew. And ostensibly, that's what the Oscars are doing. This year's batch of best picture nominees is fantastic, with a groundbreaking sci-fi/fantasy romance from Guillermo del Toro, *The Shape of Water*, leading the pack at an astounding thirteen nominations.

As the film tells the story of a mute woman who falls in love with a sea creature, it addresses issues very pertinent to our current milieu. *The Shape of Water* tackles bigotry, toxic masculinity, homophobia, and humanity's penchant for cruelty towards creatures different than us.

Yet, according to Peter Bradshaw, critic for *The Guardian*, that's not good enough. This year's Oscar nominations comprise a "comfort-food list in Trumpian times." Great movies are supposed to take on the entire zeitgeist. Films must be the change we wish to see in the world. In this current climate of fascistic, racist politics, as well as sexual oppression and unadulterated gun violence, Hollywood should step up and give us films that speak to these issues head-on.

To be sure, none of the nominated films manage to address the gun violence/police brutality issue. Each year, guns kill more people than car accidents, and gun ownership is ubiquitous in a society prone to anger and aggression. There are 101.5 guns for every 100 hundred people in the US — the highest rate of gun ownership in the world. People commit over 11,000 homicides with guns each year, and that doesn't count the number of people wrongfully murdered by law enforcement.

Detroit (directed by Kathryn Bigelow and written by Mark Boal) didn't address endemic, racist police brutality very well, otherwise it probably would have gotten tipped for an Oscar nomination. And when it comes to the #MeToo movement and the rampant sexual harassment in Hollywood, none of the films nominated for best picture really summon the kind of accolades they would get for taking down Weinstein and the myriad other men on the notorious list of harassers.

Call Me By Your Name presents a sensual, gorgeous portrayal of gay love, but *The Guardian's* Bradshaw is waiting for "a repudiation of politeness, a confronting of the elephant in the Oval Office, a ferocious upsetting of the apple-cart—something to infuriate both the conservatives and the sensible liberals." He doesn't feel that *The Post*, which is bluntly anti-Trump, goes far enough. He feels that the Weinstein scandal has put Hollywood on its heels such that the popular movie institution can't properly confront Trump and all manners of Trumpism.

If movies were to tackle some of the main issues that Trump trumpeted in order to put himself in office, they would address the lack of jobs in the Rust Belt. They would address the perception from conservative Christians that abortion is legalized murder, a travesty akin to the Holocaust.

[Rust belt voters made Trump president](#) with the expectation that he would bring back their jobs. After Trump won, women's healthcare providers and pro-rights activists braced themselves for a [wave of anti-abortion legislation](#). Conservative Christians were giving Republicans the mandate to stop abortion. While critics of Hollywood want to see movies deal with the major issues we're seeing now — particularly sexual harassment and white supremacy — these weren't the issues that attracted many voters to Trump. Christian voters felt their views were suppressed and under-represented — a lot of them voted for Trump. Rust belt workers felt oppressed, unemployed, and under-represented — many of them voted for Trump.

Since #OscarsSoWhite, there's been a heightened sense that the awards ceremony, and Hollywood in general, needs to grow up. If movies are art, then movies need to be socially and politically responsible and committed to standing up for the oppressed minorities in this world. This opens up the broader question of the role of art, and the role of the art establishment. Should critics reward works of art that are particularly adept at political and social commentary, to the extent that they're revolutionary? Or should critics reward works of art because they're particularly good works of art, works that make you think, works that help you see the world through a new and extraordinary lens?

The famous existentialist Jean Paul Sartre, perhaps the defining philosopher of our time, had similar questions and he wasn't afraid to answer them. Sartre advocated for commitment. You must commit to standing up for a cause you believe is right. Sartre came to believe that, if there is a question of whose cause is right, it is always the cause of those who are most oppressed.

Who is most oppressed? America is resounding with the voices of the oppressed. Perhaps the voiceless Earth is the most oppressed of all.

In many ways, Peter Bradshaw's demand for a movie that really shocks the foundations of the Trumpian establishment is much like Sartre's demand that you commit to standing up for the people who are the most oppressed. But does great art approach issues head-on, standing against the oppressor like an activist at a rally? Or, like *The Shape of Water*, does it make the viewer see through the eyes of the oppressed? Whatever the answer is to these questions, it's clear that plenty of factions in America feel they are oppressed. There's not enough room at the Oscars to stand up for all of them.

Featured image/Flickr

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