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And the Oscar Goes to... Uncertainty in the Face of Change

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, August 16th, 2018

Since the Academy announced last week that they were changing the Oscars, I and many others in the film industry have been awaiting for clarifications. They haven't come yet. While the clarifications will certainly come, and soon, so people can plan their Academy Award release strategies and campaigns, I'm sure one reason the announcement was vague is because change is a difficult beast with which to grapple.

In case you missed it, last week Academy President John Bailey sent a missive to its members, declaring that the ceremony will be on February 9, 2019, two weeks earlier than previously announced; there will be a new category for Popular Film; some awards will be given off-air, during commercial breaks; and the time-limit for the ceremony will be three hours.

On the surface, this move is about ratings and relevance. Ratings for the Academy Awards telecast have plummeted in recent years. And, with the Oscars coming at the end of the interminable, three-month-long awards season, it's hard to sustain interest or suspense, much less have energy to be in a party mood. By the time the Academy Awards traditionally roll around, most movie people are deadened with limos, tuxes, and gowns, and most audience members have a serious case of awards fatigue.

More deeply, the change is about Change Itself. The century-old motion picture industry is in the throes of a fundamental shift in its business model, from the historic norm, in which content ownership was gold, to the new model, in which audience ownership is the new currency. Netflix, Apple, Google, and Amazon may not have a legit seat on the Academy Awards bench (yet) — Netflix was pointedly banned from Cannes this year — but their influence is felt, both in their multi-billion-dollar annual content spend, and, most importantly, in their ability to own and leverage audiences. In a world where hours of streaming content compete, successfully, for eyeballs and mindshare, the cinema experience can seem increasingly irrelevant and inconvenient.

I have no doubt the show can be three hours. It has seemed flabby for years, full of useless set-pieces and banter that tries too hard to be funny and entertaining. I will be sad to miss seeing the awards for the below-the-line artists who make movies spectacular; they deserve to be recognized for the full television audience, because their work is so remarkable and so inspiring for upcoming generations. (In fact, I would like to see more people get awards, such as casting directors, but that's another story.)

As to the "popular film" category, well, the Academy, as always, is caught in the vice-grip between art and commerce. Academy members consistently vote for the art of film, not big box office

success. But it's big box office that pays the bills, and gets ratings, especially when "popular" movies are nominated.

Therefore it's a question of what the Academy stands for. In the past year, they have increased membership and expanded diversity, but, as an organization, these important moves have not been coupled with clearer focus. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences notably doesn't have "Commerce" in its name, even though it was set up, at its inception, as a publicity tool for the motion picture industry. Now, beset by changing times, different audience desires, and new, digital competitors, the shift in awards-show rules comes late, and it is likely too little.

Image from Academy Awards, 2018.

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