

Treatment of “Selma” Film Highlights Racism in Film Awards Industry

Significance of major chapter in Civil Rights history minimized by Golden Globe and Academy

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One of the most significant feature films in recent years was released to a broad audience on Jan. 9 in the United States. The handling of the Paramount picture has generated controversy due to the apparent racism prevalent in the awards committees that determine which production gains the coveted prizes.

Selma, directed by Ava DuVernay and co-produced by Oprah Winfrey, only received nominations in two categories, best picture and soundtrack, for the upcoming Oscars or Academy Awards. The film tells the story of the Civil Rights Movement in Selma during early 1965, when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) created a crisis in Dallas County and the state capitol in Montgomery prompting the administration of President Lyndon Baines Johnson to introduce federal voting rights legislation.

Golden Globe awards rejected the film in all categories except the soundtrack by John Legend and Common.

The Selma marches represented a turning point in African American and broader U.S. social history. The film embodies contemporary relevance in light of the resurgent anti-racist movement sparked by the deaths at the hands of the police of Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice among others.

In a Washington Post blog on Jan. 15, writer Amy Argensinger said “You can’t say a movie that got nominated for Best Picture has been truly ‘snubbed.’ But there was a time, just a few weeks ago, when the smart money was on ‘Selma’ to run the table at the Oscars. Now that it is being unexpectedly shut out of major categories, getting a paltry two nominations, that’s obviously not going to happen.”

These sentiments were articulated in numerous ways over mainstream, alternative and social media sources. The response of the film’s audience prompted many to analyze the social composition and political outlook of the Academy Awards selection committee.

An opinion piece in the Jerusalem Post asked “Are the Oscars a Glorified White Boy’s Club?”

This article noted that “The Academy Awards’ glaring omission of Selma, the lack of any person of color in the four acting categories, and the directing and writing categories which have men gracing those lists, only reinforces the idea that the Academy Awards are an out-of-touch white boys’ club. For context, the last time this happened was in 1998, making this

year the “whitest” Academy Awards in over 15 years. Naturally, the outpouring of criticism was inevitable.” (Jan. 18)

This same Jerusalem Post opinion essay says directly that “Many critics point to a generally white, monolithic Academy voting body as part of the problem. ‘Why do we elect people who drift toward not the most talented, best and brightest we have in the country?’ Director George Lucas mused on CBS This Morning. ‘It’s a political campaign. It has nothing to do with artistic endeavor at all.’”

Compelled by the broad criticism and condemnation, the Academy president, who spoke for the white majority, although she is from an oppressed nation in the U.S., attempted to smooth over the glaring omissions in the 2015 category nominations. Her statement sounded hollow and defensive, as if it was totally divorced from the reality of the industry and society at large.

On Jan. 16, Academy president Cheryl Boone Isaacs attempted to defend the indefensible in an Associated Press interview saying

“In the last two years, we’ve made greater strides than we ever have in the past toward becoming a more diverse and inclusive organization through admitting new members and more inclusive classes of members,” said Isaacs – herself an African American woman. ‘Personally, I would love to see and look forward to see a greater cultural diversity among all our nominees in all of our categories.’”

Such proclamations will only fuel further anger towards the status-quo whether it uses black faces or not. It is quite obvious that the real decisions were being made by others who were not speaking in the midst of the firestorm.

‘Too White, Too Male’, Says Critics of ‘Critics’

The Agence France Press (AFP) reported as well that the results of the Oscars are “Too white and too male. That is the serious charge facing the elite Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in the aftermath of its unveiling of nominees for the 2015 Oscars contest.

Highlighting the social media response that lit up the internet on Jan. 15, the actual 86th birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the AFP continued noting “The phrase #OscarsSoWhite soared up the Twitter trending topics within minutes of Thursday’s nominations for the Oscars, the climax of Hollywood’s annual awards season. Not a single non-white actor or actress was shortlisted in any of the four main acting categories, although the Martin Luther King Jr. movie ‘Selma’ did make it into the best picture race. The drama, starring Oprah Winfrey and Britain’s David Oyelowo as the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Black civil rights leader, has been judged best film of the year by the Rotten Tomatoes review aggregator website.” (Jan. 18)

Others joined the chorus cited by AFP saying “To nominate (Selma) only for best movie and best song, that is disgraceful,” according to Tom O’Neil, the founder of the Goldderby.com website, that maintains tabulations related to all the major film industry awards. 2015 represented only the second time since 1998 where no African American actors were nominated . “It’s due to the lack of diversity of (Oscar) voters themselves, 93 percent of

whom are white, 77 percent male and with an average age of 63. This is not representative of the real world," O'Neil said.

A Reflection of Resistance to Civil Rights and Self-Determination

Actions taken by both the Golden Globe and Oscars represent the reactionary backlash among the U.S. ruling class that is attempting to maintain the reversals of social gains made as a result of the Civil Rights and Labor Movements of the 20th century. Over the last few years legislative and judicial actions have reinforced the growing polarization and divisions among the oppressed and the dominant elites which are Euro-American.

Most glaring is the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court nullification of the enforcement provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. This bill was the legislative outcome of the Selma Campaign of 1963-65, where the Justice Department was empowered to investigate voter suppression efforts which continue until today.

Affirmative Action programs in higher education and other sectors have been eviscerated through various statewide referendums and court decisions in California, Michigan and Texas, robbing millions of African American and Latino youth of opportunities to attend universities and colleges in the U.S. as well as to pursue careers in public service and private industry. Unemployment rates among the oppressed African American and Latino communities far outstrip those of whites and the gap between rich and poor is widening as local, state and federal legislative bodies along with executive administrations, pass laws that absolve the wealthy from meaningful taxation transferring public assets to the ruling class under the guise of fostering favorable climates for investment and "growth."

Objectively, the results of such policies are only creating the conditions for broader and deeper levels of discontent and unrest. What has transpired through the film industry mirrors the failure by the criminal justice system and corporate community to recognize that "Black Lives Matter."

Therefore, the mass demonstrations against racism and police violence must continue and extend into other areas of racist domination and exploitation. It is only with the destruction of national oppression and economic injustice that the culture of workers and the oppressed in the U.S. will gain its true expression and recognition.

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