

2013 Oscars

- Alex Kerai

The great film director Alfred Hitchcock in May of 1972 spoke to François Truffaut about the Oscars and remarked: “The awards would have to be given out every three months, which would be difficult. The disadvantage of the present formula is that the awards invariably go to pictures that were released between September and December 31st!” This year, that formula was most definitely in effect and, like Hitchcock, I believe that many films are at a disadvantage because of it. Last year I wrote that the awards season unofficially begins with the Cannes Film Festival in May, however this year was an exception. There were some incredible films at Cannes (including Oscar nominee *Nebraska* and one of my favorite films of the year *All is Lost*) but this year’s awards season began at the Sundance Film Festival. Three “spectacular” films premiered there – *The Way, Way Back*, *Fruitvale Station*, and *The Spectacular Now* – all of which were among the many films snubbed for awards this season. Although the Academy tried to rectify this problem in 2009 by changing the rules and increasing the number of Best Picture nominees, it did not matter this year for there was still a tenth slot open this year which was never filled.

Films at Sundance were not the only ones snubbed in one of the greatest recent years of film. The Sundance Kid himself was shut out of the Best Actor race after giving one of the most powerful performances on screen this year. Robert Redford was brilliant in *All is Lost*, a film with only Redford in it and minimal dialogue. The whole film was incredible and Redford’s performance was the anchor (if you see the movie or trailer, you’ll understand that terrible pun). J.C. Chandor, in his second film, wrote and directed this ambitious film which was based entirely in the open ocean; just for that I would nominate him! However, the entire film was well-crafted right up until the last frame (which I am still in awe over) and I am incredibly surprised that it received no nominations, in particular for Redford’s performance. The Golden Globes gave Alex Ebert, the film’s composer, the award for Best Original Score, which surprised me at the time. After viewing the film (and listening to the score as I write this article), I completely agree with their decision and am quite astonished that he did not score an Oscar nomination for score and original song (“Amen”)! Another film that was set on the water this year was Paul Greengrass’s *Captain Phillips*, which I thought was wonderfully shot in a documentary style (as is typical with Greengrass) and topped off with a powerhouse performance. Tom Hanks, who portrayed Captain Phillips, was unjustly robbed of what seemed like an assured nomination for Best Actor after the performance he gave. His performance, along with Redford’s in *All is Lost*, were two very surprising snubs from the Academy. Hanks gave the performance of a lifetime combining humanity, frailty, and authority in his interpretation of Captain Phillips – and that final scene was award-worthy in its own right. Greengrass was somewhat robbed. I say “somewhat” only because it wasn’t just Greengrass. Barry Ackroyd, his cinematographer, gave the film a documentary feel and contributed to the realism felt by the film, especially during the scenes in the lifeboat. His contributions went unrewarded as well. *The Way, Way Back* premiered at Sundance, was released in July (possibly falling victim to Hitchcock’s hypothesis), and was a funny, touching film that got no love during the awards season. What surprised me in particular was that Sam Rockwell’s supporting turn in the film went unrewarded. His work over the years

has always been subtle and scene-stealing, and it seemed like this would finally be the time he broke through with an Oscar nomination. *Fruitvale Station*, like *The Way, Way Back*, premiered at Sundance, was released in July, and was nominated for nothing. Michael B. Jordan is incredible in the lead role as Oscar Grant, and although the Best Actor field was crowded this year, he would have had a chance. Also, Ryan Coogler's script was riveting and deserved a Best Original Screenplay nomination. The whole story was told very well and made you feel for and understand Oscar Grant after the 24 hours you spend with him. Another film that was shut out of the awards was *Enough Said*, which has a great screenplay by Nicole Holofcener, and seemed like it was definitely going to garner a nomination. Adding to that was James Gandolfini in one of his final film roles. Gandolfini, along with Rockwell, deserved a Best Supporting Actor nomination but was sadly overlooked as well. For the second time since 2001, Pixar was not included in the Best Animated Feature category for *Monsters University*, a funny film that used the same characters first introduced in *Monsters Inc.*, and added in references to great college films. It was a touching film about how Mike and Sully first met and it seemed to me to be a shoo-in for Best Animated Feature. Its absence is one high-profile snub that helps set the tone for the 86th Annual Academy Awards: unpredictable.

After that whole long list of snubbed people and films, I think it's somewhat humorous that I can only find three films in the major categories that were shocks to me. Although I complained about the Best Supporting Actor category, all the actors who were nominated do deserve it, save for possibly Jonah Hill, but his performance was the edgier of the three. *Philomena* was the bombshell in the Best Picture race, and *Fruitvale Station* should be in the slot that is now occupied by *Philomena* in the Best Picture race (although it still could have been in the race regardless), however the Oscars are always full of surprises and *Philomena* was this year's *Amour*. Alexander Payne was an unexpected nominee for Best Director for *Nebraska*. I like Payne's work, but I do think that Paul Greengrass's direction in the tight confines of a lifeboat and the way he captured the suspense and tension of the hijacking was worthy of recognition. The Director's Guild recognized the same directors nominated for the Oscar, but with Greengrass in Payne's slot; I think, like last year, the Director's Guild was on to something. The Best Actor race was the final category where I was astounded: Leonardo DiCaprio. Don't get me wrong, DiCaprio is a great actor and his performance in *The Wolf of Wall Street* was great, but I really think that Robert Redford or, particularly, Tom Hanks deserved it more. Christian Bale was a surprise for some, but it makes perfect sense for me: he completely transformed himself into Irving Rosenfeld in *American Hustle* and he was barely recognizable; that, to me, is worthy of a nomination.

Since 2007, the Producers Guild Awards (PGA) has accurately predicted the Best Picture winner, even choosing *The King's Speech* over *The Social Network* in 2010. The PGA nominates ten films (instead of the nine that were nominated this year), and this year there were only two films missing on the Academy's list of Best Picture nominees and one new film. *Philomena* was, again, the surprising nominee from the Academy, while *Saving Mr. Banks* and *Blue Jasmine* were shut out of the race. That was not the only reason why the PGA were so startling this year. In the 25 years that the PGA has been around, never once has there been a tie for Best Theatrical Motion Picture...until now. The two frontrunners in the Best Picture race, *12 Years a Slave* and *Gravity*, tied for the award, making the Best Picture race even harder to predict. Adding to the

confusion is *American Hustle*, which won the award for Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture at the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) Awards. The award is not as great an indicator as the PGA Award, for in the past ten years only five of the winners went on to claim Best Picture. The SAG Awards did help to cement Cate Blanchett, Matthew McConaughey and Jared Leto's frontrunner status in the Best Actress, Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor races, respectively. The awards also made the Best Supporting Actress race murkier with Lupita Nyong'o winning after Jennifer Lawrence claimed a victory in the race at the Golden Globes. The Golden Globes have two categories, Drama and Comedy/Musical, for all the motion picture categories, except for Supporting Actor, Supporting Actress, Director, Score, Song, and Animated Film, however, they only have one category for Best Screenplay, while the Academy Awards divides it into Adapted and Original Screenplay. With the two categories at the Golden Globes, they were able to give awards to all the major players with *American Hustle* and *12 Years a Slave* winning Best Picture, Leonardo DiCaprio and Matthew McConaughey winning Best Actor, Amy Adams and Cate Blanchett winning Best Actress (for Comedy/Musical and Drama, respectively in all those races). Alfonso Cuarón (*Gravity*) has become the frontrunner for Best Director with his win at the Golden Globes and at the Directors Guild Awards, while Spike Jonze is the frontrunner for Best Original Screenplay, winning at both the Golden Globes and the Writers Guild. However the race for the Oscar turns, it definitely has been a competitive year. The Best Picture race is one of the most contentious races in recent memory, and even the various guilds don't seem able to predict it, thus leaving it up to the nearly 6,000 members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

After giving you all the backstory on the awards season this year – the surprises, the snubs and frontrunners – I am going to give my predictions in a few choice categories. The Best Picture race has been between *12 Years a Slave* and *Gravity*, with each winning their fair share of critical and guild award, but I believe that *12 Years a Slave* will win Best Picture and *Gravity*'s Alfonso Cuarón will take Best Director for his innovative film (much like Ang Lee did last year for *Life of Pi*). Cuarón's win is a near lock with only *12 Years a Slave*'s Steve McQueen on the periphery. Any one of the five actors nominated for Best Actor could walk away with a win Sunday night, but McConaughey's performance in *Dallas Buyer's Club* was incredible and his weight loss propels him ahead of close rival Leonardo DiCaprio – but don't put it past DiCaprio to get the upset and win the trophy for his no-holds-barred performance in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, where he does crazy things. On the topic of *Dallas Buyer's Club*, Jared Leto will also win a statuette for the film and claim Best Supporting Actor. His performance, like McConaughey's, was riveting and completely different for the actor. The only other person I see who could win in that category is Barkhad Abdi, who is rightfully nominated for his role as Abduwali Muse in *Captain Phillips*. He was fantastic and menacing, and he was able to compete, toe-to-toe with Tom Hanks, who played Captain Phillips. The tension between the two seemed real and Abdi had this raw performance that made him seem real and in-your-face. It was truly hypnotic, making me forget that I wasn't watching a trained actor; he was that good. *American Hustle*, a spectacular film with an incredible cast, has a very good chance of claiming quite a few statuettes. Amy Adams is the only person who can possibly upset Cate Blanchett in her powerhouse performance from *Blue Jasmine*. Spike Jonze's writing for his film *Her* should pull ahead of both *Blue Jasmine* and *American Hustle* for Best Original Screenplay since Jonze's film

is easily the most original film nominated. Its premise of futuristic love questions every conventional belief on the subject. *12 Years a Slave* will probably claim Best Adapted Screenplay for John Ridley's powerful adaption of Solomon Northup's memoir. Best Original Score, usually my favorite category, is a toss-up this year. The Golden Globes winner Alex Ebert sadly was not nominated for his breathtaking score from *All is Lost* (which probably would have won) and Hans Zimmer, a usual feature in this category, was also shut out for his *12 Years a Slave* score. My money is on Thomas Newman's score for Disney's *Saving Mr. Banks*; he already has twelve prior Oscar nominations and deserves a win. Another Disney film, *Frozen*, will undoubtedly claim Best Original Song for "Let It Go," however I personally prefer the subtlety of "The Moon Song" from *Her* and hope it wins instead.

Hitchcock did have a point in his idea for fixing the Oscars: usually, films released before September are forgotten during awards season. Look no further than *Fruitvale Station* and *The Way, Way Back*. But are awards truly the key to a movie's longevity? Sir Alfred Hitchcock, director of such films as *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, *Rear Window*, *Dial M for Murder* and *The Birds*, never won an Academy Award.

This year's nominees should be proud of the work they accomplished. Together, they made 2013 one of the most profitable, exciting, and innovative years in cinema. From Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* to Disney's animated comeback *Frozen*, the year had something for everyone. With Oscar Sunday bearing down upon us all, films have cemented their place in history. Like last year, this year promises to be exciting with many races having no clear front-runner and the tension building right up until that envelope is unsealed...

The 86th Annual Academy Awards will be broadcast on ABC on March 2 starting at 7 p.m. Go to oscar.go.com to see the full list of nominees.