



FACT SHEET

Week beginning 13 March 2006

Media and Technology The 78th Academy Awards

Once upon a time I just couldn't be bothered sitting through the telecast of the Academy Awards. It all seemed like too much schlock for too little purpose. And all those gushing acceptance speeches – reaching the utter depths in 1985 with Sally Field's embarrassing cry of "You like me...you really like me." Give me a break. I came to the conclusion that I had better things to do with an evening than to sit through that. And the whole ceremony seemed to be so artificially prolonged – it was like watching Eddie McGuire's "Who wants to be a Millionaire" in slow motion. A form of reality TV carefully designed to fill up four hours of air time and provide lots of advertisement breaks. Oh, the sheer boredom of it all.

But then, some years ago, my attitude changed and I became something of a devotee of this annual parade of Hollywood hokum. Perhaps I changed because I found out that a good friend of mine had become part of the unseen and unsung team of people who work behind the scenes on the night and in the months leading up to the presentation to enable it all to happen. Having a friend "out the back", as it were, gave me the feeling that I had a little more of a connection with this otherwise galactically remote world.

I think, too, that the ceremony has evolved into a somewhat slicker and tighter presentation. It still takes a long time but there seems to be less obvious time wasting than there was previously. Even when the movie star presenters swish out to centre stage to announce the winner in each category they seem to hit their marks faster and spend less time just basking in the spotlight than was once the norm. And so on. It's a better piece of TV than it once was and so, for me, besotted by the movies – as I'm sure many of you listeners are too - it's become an annual four hours of undemanding self-indulgence. A rather incredulous peep at the tip of the massive iceberg which is the motion picture industry. For me, ensconced on my sofa, the occasional glass of brandy and a Haigh's chocolate or two helps the evening drift by and even seems to bring a touch of ceremony right into my own lounge room.

Mind you, it's clear that not everyone agrees with my opinion that the Awards have become more watchable. According to the ratings surveys Australian audiences for the Oscars are much reduced compared with what they were six years ago. This year – in the same time slot – it seems that the Oscars were well outrated by "Desperate Housewives" and "Commander in Chief".

One of the things about the Academy Awards is that there are few real surprises. Despite all the regulation gasps of "Oh my God!" as each award is announced everyone – couch potatoes at home and glitterati in the Kodak Theatre alike – seems to have a pretty good idea about who is going to win a statuette.

This year it was different. When the award for Best Picture went to the movie "Crash" there seemed to be some quite genuine amazement amongst the audience. I'm not a betting man but I would have thought that most of the smart money would have been on "Brokeback Mountain" with "Capote" lurking close behind as a strong chance. But "Crash" – apparently a low-budget, independent flick came through, after getting barely a mention all evening. I have not yet seen the movie and I know very little about it but I will track it down and give you my opinion about it in my next review.

Unlike my backstage friend at the Oscars I am not handed a DVD of each of the movies nominated in all of the categories in the weeks leading up to the Big Night. However, I

have seen many of the movies which scored awards and I'll whizz through these quickly with a comment or two.

I have seen three of the five nominees for Best Picture – “Brokeback Mountain”, “Good Night and Good Luck” and “Munich” - and I must say that I did not think that any of these three really made the grade as the movie of the year. “Brokeback Mountain” has generated a lot of publicity because of what could be described as the Ultra Political Correctness of its now well-known subject matter. It also features terrific performances from all of the four major players, and Heath Ledger is a standout as the inarticulate, conflicted farmboy who finds himself drawn into a long-term gay relationship. The story is told with restrained directing by Ang Lee and some people have found it quite moving. My own reaction was that it was a good movie - but lacking that extra bit of spark that would carry it into another category and make it a great movie. Despite the fact that it was awarded Oscars for its screenplay and directing, I think it could have been better written and better directed. I did not think it was the best picture of the year so I was not disappointed when it failed to win the Oscar for best picture.

And I had similar feelings about “Good Night, and Good Luck”. The theme of this movie – free speech, freedom of the media, and political witch-hunting - was, once again, undeniably pertinent to our times. However, while the movie was unassailably worthy the clinical manner in which these issues were presented gives the movie the feel of a quasi documentary rather than a dramatic movie. I felt disconnected from the action because of an absence of tension and because of this I would have found it hard to give it the nod as the Best Picture of the year.

Steven Spielberg's “Munich” should not have even been in the top five. This is another dramatised movie which, rather dishonestly, gives the appearance of being a documentary taking as its theme the issue of vengeance . The main line of the plot follows the story of an Israeli death squad who are turned loose to track down and kill the Palestinians who were responsible for the kidnapping and deaths of Israeli athletes during the Munich Olympic Games. There is no James Bond-style simplicity about this story though , and Spielberg tries to weave-in another side to the story portraying the Palestinians, in some cases at least, as cultivated and civilised people who are prepared to give their lives in their struggle to gain a homeland.

Again, while these issues are perhaps worthy of consideration the movie itself has to work as a movie but it failed to engage me. There are some very well-staged sequences but there are also some rather peculiar sub-plots which befuddle the narrative. And, in the end, the whole thing is constructed on a story of what might have happened rather than what actually did happen. If one can believe the back-stories circulating about the issue of the Israeli death squads it seems that they all failed in their major objectives. The movie sidesteps this question and so leaves one wondering why bother? If it's not grounded in truth then it's not a good documentary and if it's not setting out to be a documentary then it really ought to be constructed much more rigorously and honestly as a drama.

In my opinion thrillers with themes of political intrigue work much better if they are presented as honest-to-goodness fiction like the “The Bourne Identity” and its sequel “The Bourne Supremacy”. These are tight-as-a-drum actioners with no purposeless sub-plots and no pretence at giving the audience anything other than edge-of-the-seat entertainment. When it comes down to it, isn't this a lot of what we expect of a movie? But movies like this will never win an Academy Award because their underlying themes are not regarded as weighty enough.

So, when it comes down to it, on Oscar night is it really the best picture that wins the top award or is it the most worthy theme? You be the judge.

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March 8, 2006