

Oscar Themes, Present and Past

Through the Years, Academy Award Nominees Tied Together by Themes

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By all accounts, "Slumdog Millionaire," with its 10 nominations, is set to sweep the Oscars this year. In fact, it's the front-runner to win best picture, which would make it the first film with a significant foreign language component to take the title.



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"This year definitely has a more global, more international flavor," Entertainment Weekly Oscar expert Dave Karger said. "But it's also a very upbeat film. Both those elements are sort of a sign of the times, I think, with the ushering in of the Obama regime and people hoping to maintain an optimism because of the change he hopes to bring with him."

"It's interesting to note that the first award 'Slumdog' won was the audience award at the Toronto film festival. That's not a critics prize -- that was a regular folks audience award," Karger said. "It's a magical, upbeat movie, a real crowd pleaser."

Do Oscar trends really reflect the mood of the nation? UCLA professor Richard Walter said he doesn't see pattern in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' picks.

"There are no trends," said Walter. "These are just things that happened in an arbitrary sequence with no rhyme or reason. We project upon the circumstances some sort of order because it's what we crave, but it simply doesn't apply. We can find some sort of 'meaning' in all of this, but it's an illusion."

But Karger, who's been studying the academy's annual decision-making for more than a decade, said he disagrees.

"Whether it's intentional or not, the best picture nominees oftentimes do reflect the mood of the country," Karger said. "In the last two years, with 'The Departed' and 'No Country for Old Men' winning, you really were noticing these films that were meditations on violence. So it's no coincidence that we were in a time where people were very frustrated with the wars we were fighting."

"This year, I don't think it's pushing it to say that you are seeing a glimmer of hope," he said. "'Slumdog Millionaire' and 'Milk' have that underlying upbeat thing happening at the end -- upswings of hope. I don't think it's a coincidence."

Below, read up on the trend dominating this year's ceremony, and ones that reigned in years past.

2009: The Year of the Director

Every film nominated for best picture this year is also nominated for best director.

"This is only the fifth time ever that has happened," said Karger, who writes the OscarWatch blog for EW.com. "I do think in the last couple of years, the Oscars have been about the directors. Two years ago, it was all about Martin Scorsese; last year it was all about the Coen Brothers. This year it's the Danny Boyle year. And assuming 'Slumdog Millionaire' wins best picture -- which it will -- the last three years' winners were really director-oriented movies."

Karger also points out that this year the category expanded to include some directors who had never been acknowledged by the academy -- including "Slumdog" helmer Boyle and David Fincher, who's nominated for "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button."

"So as much as it seems that the academy is locked in its ways," Karger said, "they are being a bit more open to talent they've neglected in the past."

2008: Villains Rule

"There was one shocking thing about the Oscars last year," said Tom O'Neil, who runs the Los Angeles Times blog TheEnvelope.com. "And that is that three of the four acting awards went to villains. It's very rare that you ever see a villainous role win, like Kathy Bates in 'Misery' or Anthony Hopkins in 'Silence of the Lambs.'"

Three of the best acting trophies went to villainous characters -- Tilda Swinton scored best supporting actress for "Michael Clayton," Javier Bardem scored best supporting actor for "No Country for Old Men" and Daniel Day Lewis scored best actor for "There Will Be Blood."

"For them to all win for these creepy, nasty roles was fascinating and highly unusual," O'Neil said. "And the movies were downbeat, too. They were all small movies that were dark and psychologically scary."

Considering the times, O'Neil sees the trend continuing.

"I think it peaked with Heath Ledger in 'The Dark Knight,' which earned him a nomination this year," he said. "We're reinventing villains -- they're not predictable Freddie Kruger slashers anymore. These aren't standard-issue villains straight from Central Casting. Look at Heath Ledger's complete reinvention of the Joker. And 'No Country for Old Men' was a slasher flick but in a very different way. There were new, inventive twists in a more inventive cinema."

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2008: Female Screenwriters Have Their Day

Another 2008 shocker? Four nods for female writers in the best screenplay and best adapted screenplay categories. Who could forget Diablo Cody's irreverent acceptance for her winning "Juno"?

"That's very rare -- that was certainly a breakthrough last year," O'Neil said. "Like directing, screenwriting is still a closed category that seems to shut out women. Very few women get nominations at all. But I don't see things changing anytime soon. Everyone thought that this year, Mandy Walker, the woman who shot 'Australia,' would be the first woman to get a nod of cinematography. But she didn't. So there's still a terrible gender bias against women in Hollywood."

Also of note: Only one woman -- "Frozen River" screenwriter Courtney Hunt -- received a nomination in either writing category this year. Still, Karger said, "for four out of 10 of those writers to be women, it was really exciting. And hopefully, it is a sign of things to come."

2007: The Grand Dame Reigns

Who says there are no parts for older women in Hollywood? If 2007's Oscar race for best actress is any indication, that old lament can be debunked. The category saw nods for Meryl Streep, then 57; Dame Judi Dench, then 72; and Helen Mirren, then 61, who took the trophy that year for her turn in "The Queen."

Walter said the trend reflected a real cultural moment for older woman. Hillary Clinton had just thrown her hat into the presidential ring, while cutesy Katie Couric had taken on a meatier move to hard news.

"It would be stretching it to say those were all interrelated, because I don't think they were," Karger said. "But I think that it was just a happy coincidence. And I'd love to tell you that it was a trend that has continued to this day, but really, with the exception of Meryl Streep, most older actresses these days don't have their pick of great, juicy roles."

According to a Boston University study, the trend could also be a throwback to Oscar's golden age. From 1927 to 1990, it seems the academy favored veteran actors. In fact, Dench has seen six nods and one win in the last decade of her career, while Mirren was 50 when she received the first of her three nominations.

This year, though, Streep, nominated best actress for her turn in "Doubt," is the only actress older than 50 in a race that includes for Angelina Jolie, Kate Winslet, Anne Hathaway and Melissa Leo.

"I would love to be proven wrong, and see Meryl Streep win for her best role since 'Sophie's Choice,'" O'Neil said. "But the babe factor, as I like to call it, comes into play here. It will be Kate Winslet for 'The Reader.' She's in a Holocaust movie, she ages dramatically, she has a foreign accent and she's always naked! The babe factor makes her invincible here."

He points to Oscar's more recent history to prove his point.

"In the past 15 years, only two women over the age of 40 had even won an Oscar in lead or supporting roles," he said. "And that was Judi Dench and Helen Mirren. To win that year, Helen Mirren really played up her sexier, bawdier side, showing off the assets on magazine covers, swearing like a longshoreman on late-night talk shows. It's what got the attention of the academy voters who judge these women as they do a beauty pageant -- shamelessly, and I think insultingly.

"It's usually a parade of lovelies -- Nicole Kidman, Halle Berry, Julia Roberts, Charlize Theron. Sure, they're good actresses, but come on," O'Neil added. "Last year, everyone was rooting for Julie Christie, but who won? It's the babe factor again. The youngest, prettiest one. It was suspiciously consistent of this trend perpetuated by an academy of mostly old guys who seem to be lusting after those young gals. It's perfectly OK for men with wrinkles all the time -- they do. But not for the women."

2006: Politics as Unusual

Hollywood's heavy hand played out at the 2006 Academy Awards, the year of the message movie.

Best picture winner "Crash" -- which took three Oscars -- tackled race relations and police brutality. The gay cowboy weeper "Brokeback Mountain" preached tolerance while taking three trophies (out of eight nominations), including best director and best adapted screenplay.

The war-torn "Syriana" -- which earned George Clooney a best actor award -- was all about foreign politics, while Clooney's government witch-hunting-themed Edward R. Murrow biopic, "Good Night, and Good Luck," earned him another three nods, including one for original screenplay.

It didn't win any awards, but the sexual harassment biopic "North Country" earned two nods, including a best actress nomination for Charlize Theron. And Steven Spielberg's anti-terrorism drama "Munich" received five nominations, but no wins.

"That was really the year of the political film," said EW's Karger. "I interviewed George Clooney that year, and I remember him telling me that Hollywood takes a good two years to catch up to what's really going on in the world because the movies take years to get made. So this crop of movies was really Hollywood's reaction to what was going on politically."

Perhaps the meaty, issue-laden nominations were the reason the academy chose politically charged comedian and "Daily Show" host Jon Stewart to shepherd the awards show.

"Jon Stewart was certainly the perfect host for that year's ceremony because he was in a great position to comment on all the politics at the movies," Karger said. "His presence really tied that theme together and solidified it."

2005: The Biopic

Nothing like playing a real person to bring out the Oscar winner in an actor. Or at least that seemed to be the academy's thinking in 2005, the year of the biopic.

In the five-time winner "The Aviator," Leonardo DiCaprio went method to play Howard Hughes, while Cate Blanchett took best actress for her turn as Katherine Hepburn.

In the best actor category, Johnny Depp was up for his role as "Peter Pan" writer J.M. Barrie in "Finding Neverland," while Don Cheadle took a nod for his turn as civil rights hero Paul Rusesabagina in "Finding Rwanda."

But of course, Jamie Fox stole the show with a best actor win for "Ray."

"The academy loves biopics -- more than a dozen have won best picture," O'Neil said. "They love to see actors bury their own larger-than-life personas in that of a real person."

Karger seconds that.

"The surest way to win an Oscar is to play a real person and to do it well," he said. "That year, Jamie Fox and Cate Blanchett won. And that's something you see all the time. The academy loves to recognize it, because I do think it's harder to play a real person. It's such a fine line to walk. You don't want to seem like a 'Saturday Night Live' impersonation. You want to seem like a real human being. And if you're playing someone who's well known, it's such a tough thing to pull off."

2002: The Black Actor

In Oscar history, 2002 was heralded as the year that actors of color were finally recognized, with Denzel Washington taking home the best actor trophy for "Training Day" in a category where Will Smith was also nominated for "Ali." Halle Berry's tearful best actress win for "Monster's Ball" cemented the label.

"The pressure was really being put on the academy that year about how stingy they had been to African-Americans," Karger said. "Only Sidney Poitier had ever won best actor, and that was in 1964. It was pretty shameful. That year, Russell Crowe was the front-runner, but he attacked a BAFTA producer and essentially put himself out of the race. And Hollywood got a case of the guilts and, there you go, a sudden breakthrough."

"I was at the ceremony and it was just electric to be in that auditorium when Denzel and Halle won," O'Neil said. "Everyone was just so excited that the barrier had finally been broken. That was an absolutely thrilling night."

With wins by Forest Whitaker in the best actor race ("The Last King of Scotland") and Jennifer Hudson in the best supporting actress category (for "Dreamgirls"), 2006 echoed the trend.

"I think the academy has finally broke past the color barrier," said O'Neil. "Black actors have done quite well at the Oscars since then. But the new issue is homophobia. 'Brokeback Mountain' should have taken best picture in 2006, but it didn't. Will they make up for it with 'Milk' this year?"