In The Center of It All - Hollywood

Gerald Early

Oscars: Bah, Humbug!

Categories: Hollywood

Correction appended.

I cannot understand why anyone watches the Academy Awards. TV seems like a strange place these days even to get entertained, trapped as it is between nonsensical punditry (never have so many talked so much about so little) and imbecilic sleaze (cable gives us porn without penetration or money shots, which is porn without the courage of its convictions). But why watch an industry — any industry — give itself awards? I have simply never fathomed why anyone would care who was voted the best fashion designer or who did the best art directing? I know that these deluxe edition DVD's makes everyone a film scholar these days, but I still don't think most people — except pedantic cineastes — really care who the cinematographer was.

I am aware that most don't watch for the lesser awards but rather for those given for acting. But these actors are commonplace these days. One sees them on TV all the time, plugging their movies or gassing inarticulately about their spiritual growth or some such nonsense. It is amazing that these people have become significant simply through the power of advertising.

When I was a kid, one didn’t see movie stars like Elizabeth Taylor or Robert Ryan or Charlton Heston or Paul Newman on TV much, so watching the Academy Awards had the appeal of seeing these people somewhere special, other than in a movie. It was also something like a reality show — when people lost and were disappointed, it showed. Reality shows were rare on TV then. Now, I expect my neighbors in Webster Groves, Mo., to be the next big stars on some show about life in a suburban town where, maybe, we all might experiment with homosexuality to see who really has a yen for it or maybe all of us will swap mates, houses, jobs and churches.

The last time I watched the Oscars all the way through, in 1972, Marlon Brando refused the award for best actor for "The Godfather" and sent a woman named Sacheen Littlefeather to diss Hollywood's treatment of Indians. That was the same year that Diana Ross was nominated for best actress for "Lady Sings the Blues." I kept thinking that perhaps it was just me but Diana Ross's performance was the worst I had ever seen this side of a high school. Berry Gordy tried to buy her the award but he ran out of money shots, which is porn without penetration or money shots. She wasn’t much better but she was better. Gezz, does standing up for your ethnic group mean you have to defend utter mediocrity?

The show has gotten no better over the years. Mediocrities continue to win, the occasional rich, dumb activist speaks out about something; in 2002 Halle Berry behaved as if her Oscar liberated black people. (It has failed to even liberate her career.)

But the big reason I don’t watch the Academy Awards, aside from the fact that in my middle age I almost never go the movies anymore, is that it is an awards show. Most of the time when you win an award, it is not merit or talent that gains the day. It is pure luck, absolute accident. Consider...
the literary award, which I know well: I have won a few and served on a
handful of literary juries. You win because the jury couldn’t agree on
anything else or people weren’t sure what they were voting on, or,
fortunately, no one read your work while the others got read or the best
part of yours got read and not the best parts of the others, or a friend
bullied it through, or yours came up when it was the year to give it to a
minority or yours came up in the year that giving something to a small,
independent publisher was the ticket, or you’re pretty old and never won,
or you’re so young that winning makes you seem like a wunderkind and
the jury seems prescient. (That the wunderkinds may fade into oblivion is
a great possibility.)

None of it makes any sense or serves much any purpose. When you win
you feel as if you have been struck by lightning and burdened with the
glow. And when you select somebody to win you feel as if you have been
struck by a car and burdened by the wreckage. And anyone who gets a
puffed-up ego because of it is absolutely insane or believes in fantasy
more than he or she should. People are the only animals that make
promises, I have been told. We are also the only animals that give awards.
That should tell you something.

Correction
An earlier version of this post contained three sentences about George C.
Scott that have since been deleted. In them, Mr. Early speculated that Mr.
Scott refused his best actor Oscar in 1970 for “Patton” because he was
upset about not winning the best supporting actor award for his role in
the 1961 film, “The Hustler.” In fact, Mr. Scott had declined his
nomination for “The Hustler.”