

## Hollywood Ain't No Place for the Radical Kind: Observations on the Academy Awards, 2010.

By Robert Goff

### Slumdogs and Englishmen: An Introduction

*...I come from a country and a civilization that given (sic) the universal word. That word is preceded by silence, followed by more silence. That word is "Om." So I dedicate this award to my country. Thank you, Academy, this is not just a sound award, this is history being handed over to me... Resul Pookutty, accepting the Award for Achievement in Sound Mixing (for *Slumdog Millionaire*).*<sup>1</sup>

*Slumdog Millionaire* won as Best Motion Picture and scooped up several other awards at the televised Academy Awards ceremony in 2009. Danny Boyle's film was significant in terms of Hollywood recognition of a Bollywood-style film without stars and also largely without Caucasian actors. The film drew attention to the "new" hi-tech India of computer programmers and westernized popular culture, while still acknowledging that country's continuing poverty. On that evening, along with the millions of TV viewers, I watched as the vast stage of the Shrine auditorium was suddenly filled by throngs of cute "slumdog" kids, along with dark-skinned and colorfully dressed adults, crowding out the usual legion of anonymous Caucasian producers in Armani suits. The visually chaotic sight of multicultural and unrehearsed rejoicing was unusual for American television—and quite extraordinary for the annual Oscar ceremony—making it very difficult to find fault with the film's success.<sup>2</sup>

I didn't think, however, that the film's success was historic or signaled any great change in the American film industry's hegemony over the rest of the world nor did it usher in any aesthetic or stylistic breakthrough. Like previous big winners, such as *Out of Africa* and *The English Patient*, *Slumdog Millionaire* with its exotic locale and romantic undertones had audience appeal at the time but has since created no lasting interest in Indian culture. I actually found this much-feted film dull and conventional and I could not muster the enthusiasm to write my annual commentary analyzing the televised ceremony.<sup>3</sup> I would have been more energized if I could have taken a very critical stance against the film and to voice some misgivings at the idea of bringing Hollywood and Bollywood together. While I could have easily commented on the

controversy over the post-film treatment of the Indian kids, and elaborated on my view of fellow Englishman, Danny Boyle, as a slick and opportunist director, I realized that it would have been churlish to do so in the face of the Academy's unmistakable endorsement and the evident worldwide popularity of *Slumdog Millionaire*. Also, Barack Obama had recently taken office and as a permanent resident in the United States since 1981 I was enthusiastic that the political climate was at last shifting in a progressive direction. It also seemed like a new era of global harmony could be beginning. Who would want to mess with that? I eventually dropped the idea of writing anything at all.

Things change in a year. The war in Afghanistan had expanded and American cultural hegemony returned with James Cameron re-crowned as "King of the World" with the new technological attraction of 3-D. Well, not quite! Although *Avatar* has outdone *Titanic* at the box office by far, *The Hurt Locker* actually won for Best Picture and this year's ceremony, unlike last year's monolithic triumph of a single film, aroused some of my slumbering critical faculties while confounding my prophetic intuitions. I had mistakenly expected *Avatar* to sweep up most of the awards. In fact, I only guessed thirteen out of twenty-three of the twenty-four categories (I abstained from voting in one category). This is not a very good average. But I'm less interested in the success of my predictions than in interpreting what happens on the broadcast from a political/cultural studies perspective and this year's show gave me more opportunity to be openly critical than 2009. Predicting winners is nevertheless part of trying to understand the cultural politics behind the awards.

### **Part I: Dramas Over Documentaries and Friendly Foreigners**

*I want to thank the Academy for not considering Na'vi a foreign language.*

**Juan José Campanella, director of Best Foreign Language Film.**

The Documentary Short win for *Music by Prudence* provided one of the memorable moments of the evening when a white middle-aged female producer who seemed to appear out of nowhere rudely interrupted the African-American male director during his acceptance speech. Producer Elinor Burkett just burst in on his speech saying "Let the woman talk ..." and then continued on with her own speech, one that highlighted the African band as the subject of the film. Apparently, as I found out later from a website, Burkett wanted the film to be about the

band while the director Roger Ross Williams focused on Prudence, a handicapped band member. Burkett had left the film but her name was still connected to it and she obviously got admitted to the ceremony. Williams managed not to lose his cool and pointed to Prudence who was shown in a wheelchair in the audience. In his backstage interview, he said this about Burkett: "I own the film. She has no claim whatsoever. She has nothing to do with the movie. She just ambushed me. I was sort of in shock."<sup>4</sup> This incident came early in the show and seemed a very visible sign that fundamental conflicts exist beneath the glittering surface of this televised ceremony.

The Documentary Feature winners also provided some spectacle when they got to the stage. Their film, *The Cove*, was about stopping the illegal hunting of dolphins in Japan, and Ric O'Barry, who appears in the film, dramatically held a large sign above his head that read "Text DOLPHIN to 44144" just behind the producer, Fisher Stevens, who gave the acceptance speech. Stevens praised O'Barry in his speech, grandiosely announcing: "...my hero, Ric O'Barry, who was not only a hero to this species, but to all species." O'Barry had trained the dolphins for the *Flipper* series and later became an advocate for dolphins held in captivity. His participation in the film may have attracted some of the many show business people who backed the film—Louie Psihoyos, the director, read a very long list, including several famous names, to the backstage camera and mentioned that the idea of the film began in producer Norman Lear's home. First-time director Psihoyos must have had the right connections to get the backing of so many rich Hollywood insiders and perhaps their influence also translated into Academy votes.

It was once rumored that the award for Documentary Feature was selected according to the whims of influential Hollywood voters, and, for instance, films related to the Holocaust—of whatever quality—often won because of the large Jewish presence in Hollywood.<sup>5</sup> This year, it seemed to me, the Documentary Feature award went to a director because he had Hollywood connections. For a few years recently this had not apparently been the case, when the Documentary Feature Oscar has been awarded for skill and also for tackling politically challenging subjects; veteran documentarians, Michael Moore and Errol Morris, had each won

the award in recent years. *Bowling for Columbine* and *The Fog of War* were more controversial films than many past winners in this category. This year, the choice seemed to be made neither on the basis of the director's skill (when compared with some of the other films nominated in this category) nor on the basis of the film's willingness to take on a contentious subject (as the plight of the dolphins seemed a less debatable cause than the subjects of some of the other nominated films). My choice for winner was *Food, Inc.*, a film about the shocking corporate practices of the American food industry. The director had extensive experience in making documentaries including four films for the PBS series *The American Experience*. I would also have liked *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers* to win. Its director had previously made a TV film about conscientious objectors in WWII. I was excited to see Ellsberg in the audience. An award for Best Documentary Feature for a film about this great peace activist would have joined two other important documentaries on Vietnam to win in this category: Peter Davis' *Hearts and Minds* won in 1974 and *The Fog of War*, Errol Morris's probing interview film with former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, in 2003. Instead, *The Cove* seemed to be selected not on its merits but upon the basis of the strength of the director's network of friends and acquaintances.

If the award for Best Documentary Feature was disappointing this year, the Oscar for Best Foreign Language film was not only disappointing but also, for the second year running, a seemingly inexplicable choice. The Japanese film *Departures* won last year but was judged by several movie critics as an inferior film and I, probably along with many, had not heard of it or its director. It was barely released after it won and lasted one week in Boston where I missed it. This year I had expected the French film, *The Class*, to be the winner as this film has already won Palme D'or at Cannes earlier in 2008 and was made by a director who, I thought, had made some great films. I've followed the career of Laurent Cantet since his first film, *Human Resources*, and felt that all of his work, including *The Class*, examines urgent contemporary issues, particularly in the work place. This year, *The White Ribbon* had won the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film and, with *A Prophet*, had won the top prizes at Cannes. Both of these lauded films were nominated by the Academy but ignored in favor of an obscure film from Argentina. *El Secreto de Sus Ojos* was only the second feature film of a director who has

mainly directed for television. Since 2000, Juan José Campanella has been behind seventeen episodes for the American *Law and Order* series. This information from the *Internet Movie Database* suggests a director with this background would make a film appealing to Academy voters. It also made me suspect that a director with good contacts in Hollywood will get more votes.

Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* and Jacques Audiard's *A Prophet* are important films and were made by serious directors with distinguished careers. Fortunately, the two films, because of their acclaim and previous awards, have had relatively wide distribution in the United States and an Oscar would probably not have made a huge difference for the box revenues for either film. Yet both directors would benefit nevertheless from the prestige of an Oscar, helping in the arduous task of raising money for difficult art films. *El Secreto de Sus Ojos* looks and feels like a TV movie. The director tried to blend romance, comedy, murder mystery and political thriller—but he did not succeed in making any of these genres interesting.

## **Part II: Southern Voices: Losers As Winners**

*And this ain't no place for the weary kind  
And this ain't no place to lose your mind  
And this ain't no place to fall behind  
Pick up your crazy heart and give it one more try*

**“The Weary Kind,” Ryan Bingham & T Bone Burnett from *Crazy Heart***

*Jesus is my friend  
America is my home  
Sweet iced tea and Jerry Lee  
Daytona Beach  
That's what gets to me  
I can feel it in my bones*

**“Southern Voice,” Tim McGraw from the soundtrack of *The Blind Side***

One of the surprises of last year's ceremony was its recognition of Sean Penn's brave performance as Harvey Milk with the Best Actor Award. This year the Academy nominated Colin Firth's equally courageous but very different performance as a gay man in *A Single Man*. Jeff Bridges playing a loveable macho country singer, however, won as Best Actor in a film

that firmly reinstated heterosexual norms for men who wear Stetsons (*Brokeback Mountain* had cast some doubt on the sexuality of cowboys and just missed winning the Best Picture award a few years ago). The Academy apparently decided it was time someone from the Bridges family won an Oscar. This is not to say that the award was undeserved or that Bridges gave a lazy performance, but the role is a familiar one in American cinema and the Academy had previously rewarded a similar performance when Robert Duvall, who appears in *Crazy Heart*, won Best Actor in *Tender Mercies* back in 1983. The portrayal of a fictionalized Merle Haggard type was more realistic in *Crazy Heart* yet the romantic myth of the washed-up and booze-ridden but talented country singer was hardly tarnished. The ballad from the film, “The Weary Kind,” won in the Best Original Song category and was written and sung by the 29-year-old Ryan Bingham. This “hard living”-sounding young man—his voice has been described as emanating from a “whisky and cigarette throat” --used to be a bull rider. When I first heard this occupation pronounced I thought they said he was a “bull writer.” His band is called “The Dead Horses.” I think he flogged a few proverbial dead horses in reviving this kind of bogus country and western imagery.<sup>6</sup>

In a very gracious but rambling speech, Bridges, channeling the Dude from *The Big Lebowski*, praised the major players behind the film, referring to his young director, Scott Cooper as “the Scott Man” and also paid tribute to the distributor, *Fox Searchlight* with his “Thank you guys for keeping us all together.” This hippyish diction and manner seemed even more incongruous when he went on to individually praise a list of those who support the anything but laid-back lifestyle of a top movie star: his business agent, entertainment lawyer, personal make-up woman, stunt man and even CAA, the corporate talent agency he belongs to. But his tribute to his showbiz parents was both endearing and comic: “Oh, my dad and my mom, they loved show biz so much. I remember my mom, getting all of us kids to entertain at her parties. You know, my dad sitting me on his bed and teaching me all of the basics of acting for a role in *Sea Hunt* .

Such speeches make watching the Oscar ceremony worthwhile. This is more than can be said for Sandra Bullock’s lengthy acceptance speech for Best Actress. Coming as it did after a long

segment of the show when an on-stage line-up of stars fulsomely praised her and her fellow nominees, the speech was hard to take. Miss Congeniality felt impelled first of all to give her praise to each of her four co-nominees--as if they hadn't listened to enough encomiums—and this winner was not good at acting “sincerity.” She ended her acceptance speech with a long peroration thanking her mother for making her a good liberal American but then, drawing upon Sarah Palin spiel, thanked all mothers: “...I would like to thank what this film is about for me which are the moms that take care of the babies and the children no matter where they come from.”

*The Blind Side* was as corny as her speech, showing how a compassionate rich conservative family can solve the problem of poverty in America and at the same time ease the nation's racial tensions. Although it was supposed to be based on fact, the film seemed to blend, like *Field of Dreams*, the sports genre with the fantasy movie. Bullock played Leigh Anne Tuohy, a rich Memphis housewife (the real Tuohys were in the audience) who invites a young homeless African American male into her home. The hulking but amiable “Big Mike,” with a lot of expensive coaching and tough love, becomes a high school football star and finally wins a National Football Association scholarship to the prestigious University of Mississippi. This “feel-good” movie seems to belong to a previous era of television sitcoms when endearing African American kids came to live with rich families, as in *Different Strokes*. The film depicted the prosperous New South with few reminders of the institutional racism of the Old South. One clue that the South has not changed much was that the many football coaches (who were playing themselves) appearing in the film were white. The film also had the country and western singer, Tim McGraw, playing Bullock's husband. His song, “Southern Voice” played over the final credits of *The Blind Side* and was a litany of incongruous cultural references intended to foster “Southern pride.” The glib and jaunty lyrics seemed intended to endorse the film's historical amnesia. African Americans are unable to help themselves and languish in the projects and, in the absence of a civil rights movement, only a rich white woman can rescue them. This view of African Americans immersed in their own pathologies is also endorsed by another widely nominated film.

### Part III: The Ghost of Hattie McDaniel

*I know that in my business popularity is a weedy ground—here today, gone tomorrow. I've learned by livin' and watchin' that there is only eighteen inches between a pat on the back and a kick in the seat of the pants. Hattie McDaniel, 1941*<sup>7</sup>

*Precious*: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire was an unlikely entry for the Oscar race but it ended up winning two of its six nominations. Despite the recognition by the Academy and its significant mainstream success, I couldn't help feeling that it reflects more of a divide than a rapprochement between African-American and white mainstream conceptions of popular cinema. *Precious* seems close to the so-called "race movies" that were produced by African Americans in competition with Hollywood after the success of *The Birth of a Nation*. Directed (by Lee Daniels) and produced by African Americans and with a largely African American cast, *Precious* focused on a overweight teen who has children by her own father and is living with a mother who makes Joan Crawford look like Florence Henderson, the perfect mother from the sitcom, *The Brady Bunch*.

Tyler Perry<sup>8</sup>, one of the executive producers of the film, has been making the modern-day version of "race movies" for some time, although he has been more successful in crossing over to a white audience than predecessors such as Oscar Micheaux.<sup>9</sup> Perry's extremely successful series of films starring himself as Madea, a comical matriarch, resonates more strongly with African Americans but his films have occasionally reached the number one box office position in the nation. During the evening, Perry was invited to introduce the award for editing and some of his comments and humor hinted at Hollywood's racial divide. After his name had been announced, Perry wistfully sighed: "They say my name at the Oscars. It will probably never happen again..." He also joked that backstage one of the show's co-hosts had said to him "I loved you in *The Blind Side*." This was a joke and not a true story but its humor touches upon how some white people see African Americans as types—Perry is tall and built like a quarterback--and the joke also suggests that Hollywood films like *The Blind Side* perpetuate certain stereotypes. Unfortunately, I think *Precious* also plays into some of these stereotypes and whatever serious intentions it had in exploring a pathological family the film's promotion into the mainstream revives the racially-inflected paternalism just under the surface of white



American culture. It seems to me to be entirely the wrong film to be a popular success in the age of Obama.

Oprah Winfrey, who was also an executive producer on *Precious*, has done much to promote the film. Winfrey is America's greatest crossover success and her talk show has also brought undreamed levels of success to her guests, particularly authors.<sup>10</sup> Her celebrity status as an African-American female does not necessarily mean that her massive media clout is always progressive in terms of both gender and racial politics: Sarah Palin recently appeared promoting her book on *Oprah*. The famous talk show host is also an actress and her most important role was in the film version of Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*. Nominated for Best Actress in a Supporting Role in Steven Spielberg's film, Winfrey—and the film—failed to win in 1986. She at last got the privilege of making a speech to the Academy Award's audience—and to a television audience even larger than the audience for her talk show—when she appeared in the lineup to praise those nominated for Best Actress. In her speech honoring Gabourey Sidibe, Winfrey could have been talking about her own career when she spoke of a “Hollywood fairy tale” and called Sidibe “an American Cinderella.”

Unfortunately, I think the talk show host is right that Sidibe's fame and the success of *Precious* exists solely on the level of a mass media fairy tale. The people behind the film are very much part of this fairy tale world and they perhaps even share similar fantasies as those shown as the dreams of Sidibe's character. The full title of the film heralds that it is “Based on the Novel *Push* by Sapphire.” Tyler Perry and Oprah Winfrey are not only listed as executive producers on *Precious* but also have the on-screen caption “Presented by Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry.” Such grandiosity fits in well with the contemporary culture of celebrity. Like several African-American sports heroes, Winfrey and Perry and now Sapphire are mega celebrities. I'm not sure, however, the promotional power of the three very prominent African Americans really contributes to the ideal behind the old “race movies” of “uplifting the race.”<sup>11</sup> To quote Pino, John Turturro's racist Italian American discussing his African-American celebrity heroes in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*: “I mean, they're Black but not really Black. They're more than Black. It's different.”

Academy recognition in the Best Actress category will probably ensure that the twenty-four-year-old British actress Carrie Mulligan will have a long and successful career. The star of *An Education* is also gifted, slim and white. The twenty-six-year-old Gabourey Sidibe and the forty-two-year-old Mo’Nique are both gifted but there are fewer film roles for African-American women in Hollywood and slimness is still mandatory for actresses. Mo’Nique will continue to have success with her talk show—on the Black Entertainment Network. The leading African-American magazine, *Ebony* has given over this month’s cover to a flattering photograph of Sidibe and several full-page photos inside. However, things are different in white mainstream media. *Vanity Fair*, for instance, blatantly omitted Sidibe from the group of nine young actresses—all Caucasians—photographed by Annie Liebovitch on its Hollywood issue cover with the blurb “A New Decade, A New Hollywood! Starring the Fresh Faces of 2010.” One of the “fresh faces” was Carey Mulligan, her fellow nominee for Best Actress. Inside, there were more photographs and write-ups about the nine svelte aspiring actresses. A Liebovitch photo of Sidibe with Mo’Nique and Lee Daniels over a two-page spread was the one reminder of this young African American Best Actress nominee. The copy on the cover of *Vanity Fair* should have read “The White Fresh Faces of 2010.” Such coverage only adds to the impression of continuing segregation in American mainstream culture.

So I am not convinced by Mo’Nique’s statement in her acceptance speech: “...I would like to thank the Academy for showing that it can be about the performance and not the politics.” The liberal reputation of Hollywood might make us believe that the Academy’s nominations and voting are solely about assessing talent but this has never been true, and never will be true as long as inequalities in the film industry continue to be addressed only by ceremonial gestures. Mo’Nique clearly knew something about Hollywood history and paid tribute to Hattie McDaniels, the first African-American actor to win an Academy Award, by dressing like her and wearing a gardenia. She also explicitly acknowledged the actress in her acceptance speech: “I want to thank Miss Hattie McDaniel for enduring all that she had to so that I would not have to.” While Mo’Nique and other African-American actors do not endure overt racism today, they are far from being fully integrated into the film industry and the tokenism behind

McDaniel's award as Best Supporting Actress for *Gone with the Wind* in 1940 is, unfortunately, only marginally different from the tokenism that led to the nominations for *Precious* in 2010.

#### Part IV: Lipstick Traces

*I made it (**The White Ribbon**) for adults, so it may not appeal to most of those who go to the cinema these days. Michael Haneke<sup>12</sup>*

The Golden Globes gave the Best Picture Award to *Avatar* rather than to the Academy's choice of *The Hurt Locker*. The Golden Globes also voted James Cameron as Best Director while the Academy chose Kathleen Bigelow for this award. But both of these influential institutions heavily nominated the two acclaimed films and the voting was probably close in each of these major categories. I predicted the Best Director Oscar for Bigelow but the Best Picture Oscar for *Avatar*. I guessed the Academy would finally give the director's award for the first time to a woman and the show's organizers also must have predicted correctly as they chose Barbra Streisand (one of the films she directed, *Prince of Tides* was nominated for Best Picture in 1992 but she had not been nominated for directing) to present it (this decision, like the choice of Coppola, Spielberg and Lucas to give the same award to Martin Scorsese in 2007 made it seem, as I noted at the time, as though the winner was known in advance).

As critics have pointed out, *The Hurt Locker* is a violent war film and Bigelow's work in the genre, however brilliant, focuses on three men—a theme that was emphasized by the three actors making macho gestures on a raised platform behind Bigelow as she accepted the Best Picture Award. It was as if the Academy would only acknowledge a woman director if she made male-oriented films and Bigelow, as everyone kept reminding us, was the ex-wife of Cameron; a repeated fact that seemed to undercut in some way her achievement. I was interested to observe that the TV cameras avoided shots of Bigelow's male companion during her speeches for both awards. There are usually many reaction shots of tearful females as their male companions who have won awards are on stage but very rarely vice versa. This practice by cameramen (I assume camera operators are still largely male) could change if the proportion of female film professionals increases but I doubt that any institutional change will result from the passing of this seemingly important award milestone.

The conservative populism in the country impacted many aspects of the ceremony. Katherine Bigelow chose not to make any statement that condemned war and her acceptance speech for Best Director was very conventional: “And I'd just like to dedicate this to the women and men in the military who risk their lives on a daily basis in Iraq and Afghanistan and around the world. And may they come home safe.” A few minutes later she made another, briefer speech when her film won for Best Picture: “Perhaps one more dedication, to men and women all over the world who... Sorry to reiterate, but wear a uniform, but even not just the military – HazMat, emergency, firemen. They're there for us and we're there for them.” This kind of knee-jerk endorsement of the military and uniformed authority is everywhere in American culture and another sign of its militarization.

The right wing has also made a big comeback in the last few months with the activities of the moronic Tea Party movement and increased membership in heavily-armed militias. I have mentioned Sandra Bullock parroting Sarah Palin sentiments in her speech. She also wore a lurid shade of lipstick during the evening. Was this a deliberate tribute to Sarah Palin, who recently spoke at the Tea Party's first convention, or an ironic joke?<sup>13</sup> I wish it was the latter, as I was reminded of the title of rock critic Greil Marcus's great book on the subversive acts of the punk movement.<sup>14</sup> And was Jeff Bridges undermining the mythology of country and western stars in *Crazy Heart* by resuscitating the Dude in his speech? I suppose I was on the lookout for any hint of rebelliousness as *The Blind Side* and *Crazy Heart* were hardly progressive films with their Southern settings and their respective veneration of the dedicated soccer mom and the wasted but talented Country musician.

*The Blind Side*, *Crazy Heart* and even the more formally adventurous *Precious*, are simplistic stories tapping into old cultural myths but the skill of the actors and directors make audiences believe these films are up-to-date dramas of today's society. *The Blind Side* parades the redemptive comfort of the American myth of success that is now propagated endlessly on talk shows and “reality” TV programs. The myth disguises the real inequalities of capitalism and justifies the rugged individualism and the day-to-day Social Darwinism of American life by

showing how those on the lowest rung can rise up. The Tuohys in *The Blind Side*, like the benevolent millionaires of the Horatio Alger stories, help out a hard-working and plucky kid who knows his place. Unlike the lazy, drug-addled members of his race hanging out in his neighborhood, Big Mike gets to stay with the rich white folks in their MacMansion and be courted by the corporate athletic establishment.<sup>15</sup> *Crazy Heart* draws upon the romantic artist myth laced with the mythology of the West and compels audience to identify with the struggles of a loveable, alcoholic rogue. The talent of this aging singer/songwriter keeps rising to the surface despite all his weaknesses. *Precious* is about how a vulnerable teenage girl is rescued from the pathologies of a grossly dysfunctional family by dedicated members of the caring professions. A teacher, a social worker and a male nurse, following the therapeutic nostrums of the talk show, give an abused young African American woman identity and new hope.

The Academy's endorsement of these so-called liberal films of triumphant, or at least dogged, individualism, does nothing to offset the right-wing tone of many mainstream media outlets that feed the ignorant politics and increasingly overt racism of the Tea Party movement. Like the policies of the besieged Obama administration, the liberal intentions of Hollywood filmmakers have recently become either obscured or discounted. The progressive ecological message of *Avatar*, for instance, has been eclipsed by the success of 3D technology that is now turning cinema into an even more immersive spectacle than the Disney Company ever achieved. The fad makes it even less likely that moviegoers will take a chance on watching uncompromising art films that discourage audience passivity by deviating from standard cinematic conventions; one reason perhaps why *The White Ribbon* did not win is that it is in black and white.

*The Hurt Locker* can also be read politically, particularly from a left wing perspective, but many critics neglected to consider it in this way and audiences were encouraged to focus more on the nail-biting drama of defusing bombs and on the spectacle of loud explosions. Colin Farrell, who sings the award-winning song in *Crazy Heart*, adopted lyrical but apolitical blarney to praise Jeremy Renner's leading role in the film: "Your work gloriously avoided political persuasion. For me it was lovely. It wasn't right or left...." In 2000, Farrell was in a

film called *Tigerland* that was more critical of the military and he has also starred in an epic directed by Oliver Stone. Did he forget all this? The so-called “liberal” Hollywood community, on the evidence of the 2010 Academy Awards, desperately needs to counter the growing right-wing climate of the country instead of mouthing the pieties of liberal neutrality or applauding stories of talk show uplift or continuing to retreat into 3D fantasyland.

Michael Haneke has stated that *The White Ribbon*, his long meditation on a feudal Protestant community in pre-WWI Germany, comments on the later rise of fascism. This connection is by no means obvious, but the film opens itself to all kinds of reflections which do not preclude a Freudian/Marxist political analysis. The viewer is plunged into an unknown past era that is fully realized without recourse to CGI and instead of being awed by the elaborate costumes of monarchs and aristocrats, the unadorned and expressive faces of Haneke’s characters invite us to think—in an almost scientific way--about humanity in the last century. Haneke has mentioned he was influenced by the photographs of August Sander and I was reminded of Walter Benjamin’s comparison of this German photographer’s work to the films of the great Soviet filmmakers: “August Sander has compiled a series of faces that is in no way inferior to the tremendous physiognomic gallery mounted by an Eisenstein or a Pudovkin, and he has done it from a scientific viewpoint.”<sup>16</sup> *The White Ribbon* rigorously explores a specific historical environment and Haneke’s images never make us feel comfortable or nostalgic about the distant past. The American film industry could learn from such a film. Audiences urgently need to be aware that the threat of fascism is not so safely buried in the past.

---

<sup>1</sup> The quote was taken from the 2009 winners page at “The Oscars” website. For this year’s speeches see <http://oscar.go.com/oscar/night/winners/>

<sup>2</sup> For a critical article on the film followed by readers’ posts see Soutik Biswas. “Why Slumdog Fails to Move Me” for the BBC at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/7843960.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7843960.stm)

<sup>3</sup> See my previously published commentaries: Robert Goff “No Ceremony for Older Women: Some Observations on the 2008 Academy Awards Broadcast *Nebula* 5.1, June 2008 and, “Convenient Truths: A Commentary on the 2007 Academy Awards Ceremony as a Global vent.” *Nebula* 4.2. June 2007

<sup>4</sup> Quotes from backstage interviews as well as from the acceptance speeches are taken from the “The Oscars” website mentioned in note 1.

<sup>5</sup> Steve Martin made a dubious joke about the Best Supporting Actor nominated for the role of a “Jew hunter” in *Inglorious Basterds*. He quipped that Jews were all around the actor who played the Nazi.)

- 
- <sup>6</sup> For a recent critical examination of the Country music industry see Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: the Rise of the Country Music Industry*. Durham, Duke University Press: 2007.
- <sup>7</sup> quoted in Jill Watts *Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood*. New York, Harper-Collins: 2005. p.180.
- <sup>8</sup> For a recent profile see Hilton Als, A Critic at Large, “Mama’s Gun,” *The New Yorker*, April 26, 2010, p. 68
- <sup>9</sup> See Patrick McGilligan, *Oscar Micheaux, the Great and Only: the Life of America's First Black Filmmaker*. New York, HarperCollins: 2007.
- <sup>10</sup> For essays on Winfrey’s popularity see Jennifer Harris and Elwood Watson (eds.) *The Oprah phenomenon*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky: 2007. For essays on her book club see Cecilia Konchar Farr & Jaime Harker (eds.), *The Oprah Effect: Critical Essays on Oprah's Book Club*, Albany, State University of New York Press: 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> See the interviews in George Alexander, *Why We Make Movies: Black Filmmakers Talk about the Magic of Cinema*. New York, Harlem Moon: 2003 for discussion of the motivation of African-American directors in different periods.
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in “The Revenge of Children” by Geoff Andrew, *Sight and Sound*, December, 2009.
- <sup>13</sup> During the election campaign, Palin made a joke about the difference between a hockey mom and pitball was lipstick. See Richard Kim and Betsy Reed (eds.) *Going Rouge: Sarah Palin, An American Nightmare*. New York, Health Communications: 2009. Sarah Palin’s own book is called *Going Rogue: An American Life*. New York, Harper: 2009.
- <sup>14</sup> Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 1989.
- <sup>15</sup> See Mark Yost, *Varsity Green: A Behind the Scenes Look at Culture and Corruption in College Athletics*. Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press: 2010.
- <sup>16</sup> “Little History of Photography” in Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (eds.) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol.2 Part 2, 1931-1934*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 1999. p. 520.