

*Drew Trotter is the Executive Director of the Consortium of Christian Studies Centers. Trained at Cambridge University as a theologian, his academic interests have laid the foundation for broader explorations of popular culture. For over fifteen years Trotter has been presenting a lecture called "The Movies and America" on how the Academy Award nominees for best picture function as both a barometer of, and an influence on, current American moral and intellectual standards. He recently presented at Upper|House, after which he spoke with Robert L. Kehoe III.*

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Upper|House (UH) – You're a theologian by training, but you've spent much of your professional life focused on film and popular culture. Besides the joy of the cinematic experience, what inspired you to give so much attention to the movies?

Drew Trotter (DT) – I began studying film more academically in the eighties when I started working in college ministry and saw what a powerful influence movies had on the lives of young people. With the mass marketing of videocassettes, students were buying movies, watching them over and over again, memorizing entire scripts, and sharing lines back and forth with their friends. This was unprecedented, and I felt it was worthy of more focused attention. Around the year two thousand I came up with the idea of lecturing on the Academy Award nominees for best picture as a way of analyzing what the film industry was communicating each year, and I've been doing that ever since.

UH – As you began developing this lecture series, how did you organize your interpretive lens, and why did you decide to focus on the nominees for best picture in particular?

DT – My view is that you approach film the same way you approach literature. I believe there is a didactic element to all art; an author or a filmmaker is always trying to say something. As a theologian I feel that the Christian tradition gives me the best lens to understand what a movie is saying and how that relates to the truth of the human experience. The controversy around this year's Academy Awards points to the reason I focus on them; the award for best picture is important to the general public and to public conversation. For better or worse, Hollywood is still best represented to our society by the voting of the membership of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

UH – On that note, how do you interpret what's been dubbed the "White Out" at this year's Oscars? What's behind it? What's at stake? And how do you think critics and moviegoers should respond?

DT – In this particular case it's hard because we're talking about an artistic award, not a public policy or business practice. But it's also important to recognize the clear social and economic benefits to being nominated for best picture, actor, or actress. Now, there doesn't seem to be any evidence to suggest that members of the

Academy are voting along racial lines in the same way that we see evidence for the suppression of minorities in other social spheres. This year, for example, “Straight Outta Compton,” is a very fine film that wasn’t nominated in any of the major categories, but can we say with certainty it was denied because of race? What if it was because the film’s violence or crude language made it less palatable to voters? There is of course no doubt that the Academy is mostly made up of older white men, but it does not follow that voters are conspiring to keep artists of color out of the awards. In fact nobody has made a clear accusation to that effect because the follow up response would be, “OK, name names.”

Having said that, I do nevertheless believe that all of us are susceptible to at least subconscious racial bias because of our fallen human nature. If that is true, we need to be vigilant in educating and working against racism at all times. Is it possible that a predominantly white voting population in the Academy could lean in the direction of films that are more reflective of their cultural backgrounds? Sure. This is all the more reason to strive for a more objective assessment of the year in movies by having a more balanced voting membership. Now, that doesn’t necessarily mean that “Straight Outta Compton” should have been nominated this year. I think there were fifteen films that could have been nominated for best picture in 2015, and it was certainly one of them. But I don’t think it was denied because of race.

UH – To follow up on that, you argued in your review of “12 Years A Slave” that the subliminal violence of racism still pulses through our nation. So you must be sympathetic to the symbolism and frustration many have voiced about the nominees in 2016.

DT – Yes, I am, and I think we need a deeper understanding and description of racial symbolism in our society. At the same time, we have to be very careful about where we ascribe meaning to symbolism, and where we have to be gracious with judgments that might not suit our preconceptions. This year, I thought Will Smith was terrific in “Concussion,” but should he have been nominated for best actor over, say, Matt Damon in “The Martian”? That’s as tough a call as you can make. Both were excellent in the roles they played. But the importance of the symbolism is undeniable. Another example would be the movie “Creed,” which was well written, and very well directed by a young, black writer/director, Ryan Coogler, and very well acted by Michael B. Jordan, who is a star on the rise. Since the nomination for Sylvester Stallone—the old white guy—for best supporting actor was the only nomination the movie received, it’s impossible to deny the power of that symbol.

UH – If you were an academy member, what films, performances, or production contributions were ignored that you would have voted for?

DT – Well, my favorite actor who I felt should have been nominated was a child, Jason Tremblay, in “Room” for best supporting actor. Besides that, I think that Will Smith did as fine a job as any of the others nominated for best actor with the

exception of Leonardo DiCaprio, who I think was head and shoulders above the others in that category. I also think Michael B. Jordan had to manage a high degree of difficulty in “Creed,” and very well could have been nominated. As far as best picture is concerned, both “Creed” and “Straight Outta Compton” were worthy of nomination, and I think it’s too bad they weren’t. But some have suggested they could have easily replaced “Brooklyn” and “Room,” and I think that’s going too far. Those were both excellent films. All in all, I’d definitely have nominated Will Smith for “Concussion.”

UH – You’ve argued that some of the driving themes of this year’s nominees for best picture are family, perseverance, individualism, and greed. Do you see a consistent use of those themes from film to film, or do you see competing visions at work?

DT – Those themes were packed and unpacked in a variety of ways. In “Room,” for example, family themes drive the narrative, particularly focusing on the issue of dependence and co-dependence between mother and son in a truly devastating situation. What’s significant to me is how many families are impacted by trauma, and “Room” shows a kind of insularity that can result from extreme circumstances. In this story, where a mother and son are in captivity, interesting questions emerge: What happens if and/or when they gain their freedom? Will they have the ability to see their co-dependence and deal with its effects on them? Being imprisoned physically may lead to psychological imprisonment, which might be even harder to escape.

UH – So if we were to place “Room” in conversation with the greed of “The Big Short,” or the elevation of science in “The Martian,” do you see similar kinds of imprisonment with respect to money or reason? Obviously each film tells a very different story, but they all seem to point to the possibility of idolatry. In other words, we find ourselves in situations where our allegiance to family, finance, or our rational ability renders those aspects of life too big to fail.

DT – I think the idea of idolatry is important here. Whether it’s the triumph of family, greed, or rationalistic individualism, in each instance there are clear limits to the needs finite entities can ultimately satisfy. In “The Martian,” we see the idolatry of reason and individualism through an underlying philosophy that suggests when Nature goes up against the rugged individual, especially one who is a scientist and an American, Nature is no match. In “The Big Short,” it’s very clear that no amount of money can satisfy pure greed. In “Room,” the film does conclude by recognizing the limits of family relationships in a very moving way. Whatever the case may be, idolatry is blinding.

UH – Coming back to your theological perspective, one of your interests is Christian narrative in film, which you don’t isolate to overtly Christian films or filmmakers. Can you offer a bit more on this?

DT – My view is that you can use the adjective “Christian” in reference to a lot of things, but the adjective doesn’t easily apply to film. In looking at movies, some of the questions I like to explore are: Does this movie tell stories that are reflective of Christian values? Does it have characters who are Christian and are they being depicted respectably or in a demeaning way? In “Concussion,” for example, Will Smith plays Bennett Amalu, a man of science and a deeply committed Catholic, who essentially prays over the bodies he examines in the morgue, attends mass, and manifests a very responsible sexual ethic. As a Christian theologian I take great pleasure in this sort of film, because it presents a faith that connects with a wider audience. Whether it’s a Christian or a non-Christian making those kinds of movies is irrelevant to me. Today, there are more and more films being made exclusively by Christians, and for Christians, but in many cases I find that those movies are so limited in their scope that they’re inscrutable to a non-Christian. If you combine that fact with production values that are of a lower standard, I’d rather see a movie like “Concussion,” because it tells a good story and tells it well.

UH – On that note, perhaps you’ve read Leon Wieseltier’s review of A.O. Scott’s latest book, in which he responds to Scott’s interpretation of Rilke’s suggestion that art must change our life (suggesting that Scott doesn’t quite get the point, or have the chops to get the point). How would you like to see film changing our lives these days?

DT – Generally speaking, I’d like to see more movies that are honest and truthful. I’d like to see them capture a vision of hope, love, and justice, in a context that acknowledges or, better, affirms the transcendent. I wish there were more movies that describe the interplay between human limitation and divine power, as compared to portrayals of the idea that man will simply prevail no matter what the problem. Movies don’t usually change our lives overnight (though even that can happen sometimes). They work on us, as all art does, slowly, but forcefully, sometimes consciously, sometimes subconsciously, but always powerfully.

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