

AMERICA AND THE MOVIES

WHAT THE ACADEMY AWARD NOMINEES FOR BEST PICTURE TELL US ABOUT OURSELVES

Since the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences changed its rules and started nominating many more pictures than it used to, I have had to be selective in which films and which topics I address in this lecture. Tonight, I want to look at three of the nominees in light of one question: What does American society think about race in 2019? The questions surrounding race and racism in this country are many; the answers espoused to those questions even more. We will not begin to tackle this issue in its entirety tonight, but that is also not our purpose. Most importantly for our purposes, we want to ask the question, "What are some of the questions and answers about the problem of race elucidated in the films Hollywood has set forth this year as its finest product?"

Before we delve deeply into the three films most closely associated with racial questions among this year's nominees, let me say a little bit about each of the others. I don't want anyone's favorite to be left out completely. And perhaps here is again the place to say that I have thought long and hard for many years about why I use these particular movies as a lens through which to view American culture and not the top ten box office winners or the highest rated critic's choices on Rotten Tomatoes. I felt in the interests of time I would not discuss those reasons this year in the body of my talk, but

as those of you who have heard me in the past will know, anything is fair game in the Q&A afterward.

You have the list before you, so let's look at the pictures nominated for Best Picture this year.

Briefly go over each film from the handout.

A Star Is Born—Bradley Cooper's passion project—he directed it, had a hand in writing this version of the story, and stars in it with Lady Gaga—is the familiar bittersweet story of a fading, alcoholic, music star, who takes a newcomer under his wing, helps make her a star, falls in love with her, and, as his own career and personal life spiral downward, chooses to end his life rather than bring her down with him. Released in October to a lot of fanfare and critical acclaim, the buzz just faded, when the first of the year came around.

Much more about ***Black Panther*** and ***BlackkKlansman*** later.

Bohemian Rhapsody—The biopic of the 70's and 80's rock band Queen, from its formation in 1970 to the famous Live Aid concert in July of 1985. A fine film, worthy of discussing because of its themes of teamwork, individual talent, and risk taking, but not germane to our discussion.

The Favourite—A critic's darling, this is a nasty, dark film. All three actresses, the only characters of any substance in the movie, were nominated for awards. It is lavishly well-done; the costuming, hair & make-up, etc. are second to none, as are those

recognized performances. But the film is relentlessly angry and mean, flowing from Yorgos Lanthimos's sad, anarchic soul.

Green Book – Again, more later.

Roma – People either loved or hated this film, though everyone respected its technical aspects. One critic called it a home movie on steroids; it is famously autobiographical as its writer and director Alphonso Cuarón told the story of a year in the life of his family's maid in Mexico in the early 70's. It is notable for the fact that it is the first streaming-service-produced nominee for best picture (Netflix).

Vice – This is another in the tongue-in-cheek list of movies by Andrew McKay, who spoofed business in *The Big Short* four years ago, gaining a nomination for best picture then as well. The film is about Dick Cheney and the impact he had on global politics during his tenure as vice-president under George W. Bush. Magnificent performances from Christian Bale, Amy Adams, Steve Carell and others suffer from McKay's penchant for sarcastic, biting humor in using the form of the movie to get across his political points.

The films I've chosen to look at tonight are ***Black Panther***, ***BlackKkKlansman***, and ***Green Book***. All three of these have a close relationship to black America. ***Black Panther*** is the Marvel comic book, action/adventure story of the king of Wakanda, a fictional African nation, which is so much further technologically developed than any other place on earth, it is able to hide its existence from the naked eye. The movie has all the glitz

and glamour of other big, action movies with one glaring exception: all the principal characters are black. The only white people in the film are a slightly behind the times, CIA agent played by Martin Freeman and a thoroughly evil villain played by Andy Serkis. There are many more Asians than whites but all in one scene in a bar in Korea, and they are completely without identity. Admittedly, the major villain in the film is also black, but he is redeemed at the end by the Wakandan sunset as well as having debatable motives, and so his villainy is tempered in the viewer's mind.

But I get ahead of myself. *BlackKkKlansman*, Spike Lee's latest addition to his considerable body of work, almost all dealing with the black experience in America, is a story based in a real-life police detective in Colorado Springs, CO, who broke the racial barrier there. As part of his regular duties, the detective contacted the KKK for information in response to an ad they ran in the paper, and to his surprise began an undercover investigation that resulted in another detective, standing in for him, joining the KKK. [Much of the movie is made up by Lee](#) in order to make the story more exciting, but the embarrassment of the Ku Klux Klan, and the opening and closing of the movie are not made up. Lee's advocacy of "power" as the approach to solving the problem of race is something we will have to discuss later.

The last movie, *Green Book*, also tells a story based in historical reality, but sticks much closer to the actual events. It portrays a concert tour by Dr. Don Shirley, a Black American concert pianist, who needed a bouncer/driver because the tour was to go

through the deep South just prior to Christmas in 1962. He hires an Italian-American bouncer from the Bronx named Tony Vallelonga, played beautifully in the film by Viggo Mortensen. The movie—a sort of reverse *Driving Miss Daisy*, the Academy Award winner of 1990, about an older Jewish woman and her black chauffeur in the South of the late 1940's—portrays the growth of the relationship, and particularly of understanding, between the two men.

Every movie tells a story. These three tell stories heavily involving race in America. However, there is no greater debate in the history of literature, i.e. the history of stories, than the debate about whether or not stories necessarily teach morality. I submit that every story more or less teaches moral lessons, but that raises a host of other questions. Is the writer/director conscious of the film's lessons or does the film teach its lessons quite unconsciously? How does one discern the lessons? Are they the same for every viewer? Perhaps most important of all, are the lessons in accord with reality as we know it or are they morally or in any other way deficient?

So what do these three films teach us about race in America? First, *Black Panther*. The Marvel comics movie is an action picture, a genre that is famous for its morals being very easy close to the surface and easily discerned. Clearly, this movie is about leadership, sharing with those less fortunate than us rather than building bigger barns to protect ourselves, growing to discover the complexity of life rather than living in a world of heroes and villains. There is a lot here about the maturation of a young man

into being a king, about the idolization of a father and discovering that he, too, had flaws, and about the importance of sharing knowledge in the world for the good of the whole human race and not just for segments of it.

Yes, this is not a story that teaches many lessons about race. It can be said that there are some subtle teachings in the film. For instance it has been suggested that the final, major battle between King T'Challa and Killmonger, played wonderfully by Michael B. Jordan, takes place on an underground railroad, a reference to the famous "underground railroad" of pre-Civil War days in America. But what the significance of that is, is lost on me. Perhaps that the struggle for racial equality is still largely at the underground level (the KKK operating in secret, systemic racism is largely unwitting, unconscious racism), but that may be, as the British put it, "too clever by half".

A second idea is that perhaps King T'Challa with his penchant for peaceful solutions to the world's problems is a cipher for Martin Luther King, while Killmonger with his desire to use power to institute progress is one for Malcolm X. But this fails to account for 1) T'Challa being a very skilled warrior, who fights a lot in the film; 2) that his defeat of Killmonger is accomplished by fighting him to the death (he plunges a knife into Killmonger's heart!); and 3) Ta-Nehisi Coates is one of the writers of *Black Panther* and a consultant on the film; he probably would have strongly reacted to this, if it were a stated literary device.

Even without claiming these ideas, *Black Panther* may still have been the most

important movie of the year for the discussion of race in America. Over and over again in preparing for this lecture, I read comments like this, found in the cover story on the Oscars of Entertainment Weekly: “**Read from story in EW (Feb 1/8, 2019, p. 29)**”. In the same article, Marc Bernadin says, **read p. 26**. This movie shows that Black Americans have finally arrived at every level of movie-making in the industry, but more importantly that they can make more and more movies that reverse the institutional racism of Hollywood and give black children universes they can prosper in.

The big question, however, is this: does the making of black universes, especially imaginary ones, really help the black child learn how to live in this universe? In an America that is still majority white, and, depending on how you understand “whiteness”, is likely to be so for a long time? Is *Black Panther* separatist? Is that the answer—for all the races to try to live in their own separate worlds and only come out of them when necessary? Nothing could be worse for our world. Certainly the point that it makes about giving Black children, Black heroes—and more than that, Black worlds—to look up to is to be applauded and even encouraged, but it will hardly be the solution to how we *all* live together in the world of the future.

So the benefit of *Black Panther* is real for the African-American community, but limited. *BlacKkKlansman* goes in a completely different direction. From its inflammatory opening to its inflammatory ending, *Klansman* does what most of Spike Lee’s films do, and that is try to show in the starkest of terms that dangerous, violent racism still exists

and that we must recognize its potential for evil and do whatever it takes to stamp it out entirely. The movie begins with the classic rail yard shot from *Gone With the Wind* in which the camera from a very high crane position pulls back and pulls back until a tattered Southern flag enters the picture, all the while to the strains of Max Steiner's emotional score engendering the beauty and grace, the goodness of the old south. Lee then cuts immediately to a cameo appearance of Alec Baldwin playing a racist Klan leader shooting a hate-spewing video apparently for promotional purposes. The point seems to be clear: the one is inextricably linked to the other, and this movie is going to show it, not to pun too greatly, in spades.

After this incendiary opening, the movie proper commences and tells the story of Ron Stallworth, the first black detective on the Colorado Springs police force, who was able to sting the Ku Klux Klan in Colorado Springs unmercifully, showing them for the ignorant, evil people they are. Though Stallworth triumphs, the story ends with a cross burning on a distant hillside with fifteen or so klansmen surrounding it. The cancer is not eradicated, only slowed.

But Spike Lee doesn't end there. He cuts from that fiery fictional footage (even that cross burning was not in Stallworth's account of what happened to him) into the very real fire of the white supremacist torches in Charlottesville in August, 2017, showing about three minutes of footage from the two events at the university and downtown, using as voiceover the famous press conference of President Trump, saying there were

very good people on both sides. Two things were notable about his ending. One: beside the picture of Heather Hyer, the girl killed in the rioting, is her name, her dates, and the epitaph: "Rest in Power". The second is that after the picture of Hyer, Lee portrays a red, white, and blue American flag upside down which fades until the colors are only black and white, starkly divided and upside down. That is the true ending of the film. It is inflammatory and combined with the prominence given the Black Power movement in the film, seems to promote a violent reaction to the violence coming from the whites. The longer the question of race is seen exclusively in terms of power, the more problematic racism will become in our society.

It could be argued that Stallworth, a wonderfully patient, middle of the road, see all points of view person, is the main character in the film and should be looked at as the prime model for action, but Lee's intent is at best ambiguous. It is not rocket science to note that while Lee is very good at reminding us all of the potential danger of white supremacy, he is not so good at portraying solutions. At the end of his most famous film, *Do the Right Thing*, he has quotations from Martin Luther King advocating non-violence and Malcolm X advocating violence in the civil rights movement of the sixties. Which is it? You can't really have both. Perhaps the ambiguity at the end of *Klansman* shows Lee has not really progressed very much in his thinking, but it's also true that he is pointing out we haven't progressed very much as a country either, and it is hard to dispute that.

The movie that I think has the most to say about what we continue to need in America to learn to live together is *Green Book*, the actual winner of the Best Picture Oscar (an award that Spike Lee pronounced "a bad call"). The movie portrays two very different people, hardly "typical" of their respective races, nevertheless one white, one black, learning to break down their stereotypes of each other, listen to one another, and eventually to grow so much in respect for each other that they become good friends.

Three activities effect this change. First, they talk a lot, and neither resorts to platitudes to paper over their differences. They speak honestly and forthrightly with each other from the start, Tony Lip accusing Don Shirley of not even being black because he knows so little of typical black culture, and Shirley, while restraining himself much more than Lip, making it clear to him that he is an uneducated oaf, who can't put two words together in a letter to his wife. The movie is filled with conversations about everything from fried chicken to Aretha Franklin to taking something that isn't yours no matter how small, and each of these conversations contributes something to the chipping away of the hard preconceived walls they had built between them. Talking is the first step in understanding and accepting.

The second thing they do is actually live together. Three months on the road is a long time, when you are with someone almost every minute of every day. By the end they were often sharing a room together, and Tony understands Don for the complex, broken, genius of a man he is. Don for his part finds a kind, honorable heart in Tony

underneath all his bluster and swagger, and appreciates his skills at negotiation as well as his willingness to stand up for him, no matter the circumstances. They see each other in the worst of situations and uncover dimensions of their lives that few others even know. Their life together sometimes even involves the need for repentance and forgiveness on both men's parts, and the growth of their friendship revolves around the growth of their respect for one another as they see each other operate in their spheres of excellence.

The third thing—perhaps the most important thing—they do is learn from each other a new way of seeing their own lives that is more, well, human. When Don comes back to his apartment after dropping Tony off, he sees his gaudy throne room for what it is, a place of pretension, and ultimately of deep, deep loneliness. Tony has accused him of living in an “ivory tower” (he lives above Carnegie Hall), and he knows its true. When Tony comes back to the extended family Christmas Eve dinner, he gets angry when his brothers use derogatory slang about Dr. Shirley, and when Don swallows his pride and takes Tony up on his invitation to that dinner, Tony visibly lightens up and invites him in as a member of the family. The significance of that invitation, and the following visible affection for Don in front of his Bronx, Italian family, cannot be overemphasized. With one fell swoop, in this person at least, all vestiges of the institutional racism that so characterized Tony are gone, as they are in Don. One cannot imagine Tony ever again throwing away two glasses just because black workmen have

drunk from them.

Let me make a few more comments, then throw it open for questions.

One might say there are three categories of racism: 1) Corporate – white supremacists, KKK. Organizations that exist in order to institutionalize racism. 2) Individual – Only segregationists publicly admit that anymore. But there are two forms of personal racism: intended and unwitting. 3) Systemic (also called “institutional”) – the trickiest and the most pervasive. Examples of systemic: lunch counters in restaurants to humor (hate speech), statues (environments), statistics in education, health care, criminal justice. Definition: Institutional racism was defined by [Sir William Macpherson](#) in the [1999 Lawrence report \(UK\)](#) as: "The collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people."

Movies are traditionally flawed when it comes to demonstrating abstractions like institutional racism, but all three of ours touch on it in one way or another. From the Birmingham country club in *Green Book* and the very racism of exclusion that derives from the title of the film, to the entire black world of Wakanda in *Black Panther*, to the obvious example of the Klan in *BlackKlansman*, each of the movies accepts institutional racism as real, and, I believe, so should we. The question is how do we eradicate it?

Central to that eradication are elements advocated in each of these films. We need to give black children fulsome role models, worlds of meaning, fictional as they may be, that say to them they mean something, that their lives matter, as *Black Panther* does. We need to understand that unless we do continue to work on this cancer, that the very real threat of white supremacy could take over our nation as it did in the 1930's in Hitler's Germany. You are a fool, if you don't believe it could happen here, and Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* reminds us of that. And last of all, to recognize that every human being is like and unlike every other human being, as the two men in *Green Book* come to see, is a lesson that we need to learn, and re-learn, and re-learn for the rest of our lives.

But none of these parts of the solution, and not even all of them together, will ultimately solve the problem of race in America. Until we take seriously the teaching of Scripture about ourselves, that we are all radically damaged by a selfish-, even self-centered-, ness, we will not really understand how racist each of us really is well below the conscious level. Until we factor into our lives a regular repentance, even for sins of which we are unaware, for our own contributions to the systemic racism that causes such grief for so many, we will stay far away from a golden age of true unity among the human race.

Far too many of us in the Christian community think of ourselves like the protagonist of "We are the Champions", perhaps Queen's best known song. Donald

Trump was introduced at the 2016 Republican National Convention with this song, prompting a letter of disavowal from the band itself. Anyway, do you know the lyrics?

Here is just the first stanza with the famous chorus:

I've paid my dues
Time after time
I've done my sentence
But committed no crime

And bad mistakes
I've made a few
I've had my share of sand kicked in my face
But I've come through

We are the champions, my friends
And we'll keep on fighting 'til the end
We are the champions
We are the champions
No time for losers
'Cause we are the champions of the world.

How many of us think of ourselves in this way—that “we made some bad mistakes”, sure, but, basically we are the champions even though others have “kicked sand in our faces”? How many of us feel that we are the victims of Affirmative Action, of the rise of opportunity for people of color all over our society? How many of us forget how long African-Americans, as well as Chinese, Latinos, and other peoples of color, suffered under laws that kept them from the advantages that those of us who were born white experience every day, much less the heart-felt prejudice that reigned so supreme in our churches for so long? And even though most of those laws have changed, our world is still filled with everything from statues to attitudes that cause whole segments of our society to feel left out at best and oppressed at worst.

I believe that the Christian response based in personal love, forgiveness, and humility, is crucial, but these three are the easy virtues to name. They will get you on NBC Nightly News and the talk shows the next morning; remember the great publicity the Charleston church members' reaction to the killings there got in the press. Love, forgiveness, and humility are very much a part of the solution to the problem, but there are two much more difficult, much less accepted, Christian teachings that are every bit as essential to a solution to racism in this country: original sin and repentance. And we must learn what it means to employ both in our own experience, or we are lost. Thank you.

TABLES OF INTEREST FOR MOVIE TALK, 2019

Recent Nominees for AA for Best Picture (Winner given first and in bold print)

- 1995: **Braveheart**; Apollo 13; Babe; Il Postino; Sense and Sensibility
1996: **The English Patient**; Fargo; Jerry Maguire; Secrets & Lies; Shine
1997: **Titanic**; As Good As It Gets; The Full Monty; Good Will Hunting; L.A. Confidential
1998: **Shakespeare In Love**; Elizabeth; Life Is Beautiful; Saving Private Ryan; The Thin Red Line
1999: **American Beauty**; The Cider House Rules; The Green Mile; The Insider; The Sixth Sense
2000: **Gladiator**; Chocolat ; Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon; Erin Brockovich; Traffic
2001: **A Beautiful Mind**; Gosford Park; In the Bedroom; The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring; Moulin Rouge
2002: **Chicago**; The Hours; The Pianist; The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers; Gangs of New York
2003: **The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King**; Lost in Translation; Master and Commander; Mystic River; Seabiscuit
2004: **Million Dollar Baby**; The Aviator; Finding Neverland; Ray; Sideways
2005: **Crash**; Brokeback Mountain; Capote; Good Night, and Good Luck; Munich
2006: **The Departed**; Babel; Letters from Iwo Jima; Little Miss Sunshine; The Queen
2007: **No Country for Old Men**; Atonement; Juno; Michael Clayton; There Will Be Blood
2008: **Slumdog Millionaire**; The Curious Case of Benjamin Button; Frost/Nixon; Milk; The Reader
2009: **The Hurt Locker**; Avatar; The Blind Side; District 9; An Education; Inglourious Basterds; Precious; A Serious Man; Up; Up in the Air
2010: **The King's Speech**; 127 Hours; Black Swan; The Fighter; Inception; The Kids Are All Right; The Social Network; Toy Story 3; True Grit; Winter's Bone
2011: **The Artist**; The Descendants; Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close; The Help; Hugo; Midnight in Paris; Moneyball; The Tree of Life; War Horse
2012: **Argo**; Amour; Beasts of the Southern Wild; Django Unchained; Les Misérables; Life of Pi; Lincoln; Silver Linings Playbook; Zero Dark Thirty
2013: **12 Years a Slave**; American Hustle; Captain Phillips; Dallas Buyers Club; Gravity; Her; Nebraska; Philomena; The Wolf of Wall Street
2014: **Birdman**; American Sniper; Boyhood; Grand Budapest Hotel; The Imitation Game; Selma; Theory of Everything; Whiplash
2015: **Spotlight**; The Big Short; Bridge of Spies; Brooklyn; Mad Max; The Martian; The Revenant; Room

2016: **Moonlight**; Arrival; Fences; Hacksaw Ridge; Hell or High Water; Hidden Figures; La La Land; Lion; Manchester by the Sea

2017: **The Shape of Water**; Call Me By Your Name; Darkest Hour; Dunkirk; Get Out; Lady Bird; Phantom Thread; The Post; Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri

2018: **Green Book**; A Star Is Born; BlacKkKlansman; Black Panther; Bohemian Rhapsody; The Favourite; Roma; Vice

2018 Nominees Domestic Box Office Stats per Box Office Mojo as of Feb 20, 2019. A rare occurrence, but not unknown, is that this year one is #1: *Black Panther*. Two more are in the top 15: *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *A Star Is Born* at #12 and #13, respectively. One of the many firsts for *Roma* is that it has no box office figures because Netflix does not release any financial information about its films.

TITLE	DOM GROSS	FOR GROSS	TOTAL GROSS	BUDGET
A Star Is Born #13	\$210M	\$214M	\$424M	\$36M
BlacKkKlansman #59	\$49M	\$42M	\$91M	\$15M
Black Panther #1	\$700M	\$647M	\$1,347M	N/A
Bohemian Rhapsody #12	\$212M	\$642M	\$854M	\$52M
Green Book #46	\$67M	\$61M	\$128M	\$23M
The Favourite #86	\$32M	\$46M	\$78M	N/A
Roma #DNA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Vice #63	\$46M	\$17M	\$63M	N/A

2018 DOMESTIC BOX OFFICE FIGURES (ROUNDED UP OR DOWN. AS OF FEB 20, 2019). These figures have gone up and down in recent years, the advances mostly being due to a rise in ticket prices and the existence or lack of sequels or series favorites, such as Avengers or Star Wars movies. Year before last, the overall domestic BO dipped slightly, rebounding in December from historic slides. 2017 BO receipts declined 2.7% from the previous year. Last year was very different, advancing a whopping 7.4% over 2017, \$11.9B to \$11.1B. More importantly, ticket went up for the first time in four years, a healthy 5.8%. No one knows what will happen in the future as Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO, Apple, and others continue to be new players in the movie making industry. One thing seems sure: ticket prices will continue to rise. The average ticket price continued its steady climb, going over \$9 for the first time: 2007=\$6.88; 2008=\$7.18; 2009=\$7.50; 2010=\$7.89; 2011=\$7.93; 2012=\$7.96; 2013=\$8.13; 2014=\$8.17; 2015=\$8.43; 2016=\$8.65; 2017=\$8.97; 2018=\$9.11.

TITLE	DOM GROSS	FOR GROSS	TOTAL GROSS	BUDGET
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Black Panther	\$700M	\$647M	\$1,347M	N/A
Avengers: Infinity War	\$679M	\$1,370M	\$2,049M	N/A
Incredibles 2	\$609M	\$634M	\$1,243M	N/A
Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom	\$418M	\$892M	\$1,310M	\$170M
Aquaman	\$332M	\$803M	\$1,135M	N/A
Deadpool 2	\$325M	\$460M	\$785M	\$110M
Dr. Seuss' The Grinch (2018)	\$271M	\$240M	\$511M	\$75M
Mission: Impossible – Fallout	\$220M	\$571M	\$791M	\$178M
Ant-Man and the Wasp	\$217M	\$406M	\$623M	N/A
Solo: A Star Wars Story	\$214M	\$179M	\$393M	\$275M
