

AMERICA AND THE MOVIES

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

Thank you for inviting me here to Ithaca; this is the third time I have come here to speak, though my first at New Life. You keep inviting me here in the winter, though; I guess you expect me to bring some of my southern warmth up with me. I hope today's high of ? will fulfill those expectations.

This is the ninth year in a row I have, in one form or another, looked at the five Academy Award nominees for best picture and opined on what they tell us about life in American society. Each year both the research and the talk itself have been treats. Who wouldn't want to have the job of going to the movies, leading a discussion with friends, and deducting it all as a business expense?! But, seriously, viewing and thinking about the five nominees is a deeply satisfying experience. The quality of the films is always extremely high, and the depth of the stories never fails to provoke thought at deep levels. Would that all the books I read and lectures I heard could be said to do the same. Then again, no one is spending an average of \$48.4M in developing them...

I have each year until this one offered an explanation for why I thought these five pictures were worth the effort, especially in light of the fact that they regularly run far behind in the Box Office race for the year. I still believe those arguments to be watertight, but I am afraid, if you are interested in hearing them, you will have to go to last year's lecture—downloadable from the Center's website, as this one is now—and listen to the first ten minutes or so. I simply found that I don't have the time to discuss this again, when I have gone over the ground so often. There is always the question and answer time to explore that, if we must. This year I would rather dive right in.

First, some general facts about the five films. The five Academy Award nominees for Best Picture are, in alphabetical order, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*; *Frost/Nixon*; *Milk*; *The Reader*; and this year's "little movie that could" *Slumdog Millionaire*. *Curious Case* stars Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett and is the fantastic story of a man who is born 80 years old and ages backwards. Reminiscent of 1994's *Forrest Gump*, the film does a creditable job of doing two things at once: building interesting characters and telling the intriguing story of their interactions, and, secondly, revealing an America that changes through the eight decades of Benjamin's life. The big difference between the two films is that *Gump* keeps the two in balance, remarking often on changes in American political and social culture as Forrest goes through them, whereas the primary intent of *Curious Case* is to tell the story of the maturation of Benjamin, mostly through his sexual experience. This film is by far the most successful of the five films at the Box Office, having raked in almost \$120M to date (as of Feb. 10).

Frost/Nixon is the dramatization of the famous 1977 interviews of the former President by the British journalist/talk show host David Frost. As with all great films, it has a superb cast throughout. Michael Sheen, as Frost, and Frank Langella, as Nixon, turn in outstanding performances, honed by years of doing the same roles on Broadway and in the West End, but the supporting cast, especially Oliver Platt, Matthew Macfadyen, and Sam Rockwell as Frost's advisors, are superb as well, and make the movie a film one can get lost in, even if one knows the story pretty well. More about the historical accuracy of the adaptation by writer Peter Morgan and director/producer Ron Howard in a moment, but as a film, it is a great piece of theater. Langella as Nixon is as memorable a rendition as one will find in this year's group of exceptionally fine performances among the Best Actor nominees.

Milk is the story of gay activist Harvey Milk's rise to power during the post 60's gay invasion of the Castro area of San Francisco. Based on the extraordinary audio tape Milk made of his accomplishments, since he feared assassination and was so desirous of his recollections of the story being preserved, the film, like all five of this year's nominees, also tries to hold a balance between personal relationship and social commentary. In an interview on-line, three of Harvey Milk's close friends (Anne Kronenberg, Cleve Jones and Danny Nicoletta), two of whom figure prominently in the movie, are quoted as singling out three different aspects of the film, all of which are true to the events. Kronenberg, Milk's campaign manager, speaks generally, especially in comparison to the bad scripts that have been circulating for years, and have never been made: "I think it was very historically accurate and I was nervous ahead of time when Cleve first called and said he knew this young man who wrote this script, because we read so many horrible scripts before that. But after meeting with Gus Van Sant and Lance Black [the script writer], and being able to read the script, my comfort level was great. Danny and I just saw the movie yesterday, and it is right on." Nicoletta, a photographer, who worked in Milk's camera shop, picks up on the atmosphere of the Castro at that time: "Yeah, I'd say there's a real tenderness for the period in terms of the art direction. They really loved working on this and it comes through." Cleve Jones, a political advisor to Milk, was impressed with the completeness of the recounting of the political activity Milk and his associates engaged in: "I think it's also remarkable and wonderful that the political storyline remained intact. For Hollywood -- and none of us come from the entertainment world, this is totally a new experience for all of us -- but for Hollywood films it's usually all about the personal relationships. And that's in the film, of course, but the political struggle is there. The campaign against Proposition 6, the campaign for the gay rights ordinance, Harvey's own campaigns, his efforts to build

coalitions with minority communities... even the desegregation of the police department is in there, so I'm really pleased the political content was not abandoned."

The film has an abundance of good performances in addition to Sean Penn's commanding interpretation of Milk, and the direction by Gus Van Sant is flawless, moving back and forth between long shots of San Francisco, marches through the streets, group shots of Milk and his advisors and close-ups of Penn and others when called for. As he did in *Good Will Hunting*, Van Sant recognizes that the story and the characters are enough, and don't need the enhancement of flashy camera angles and awkward pans. Though the depiction of gay sex in the film is understandably distasteful to any Christian watching it, the sex is not shot gratuitously but as a necessary part of telling the story.

The Reader is notable primarily for Kate Winslet's riveting performance as Hanna Schmitz, a middle-class German woman, who during WWII becomes a guard at a concentration camp. Her character is one of the most complex and conflicted I have ever witnessed onscreen. The story revolves around, and is shown through the eyes of a man, who, when he is fifteen, is seduced by Schmitz. The affair lasts little more than a summer, and the two really learn very little about each other, and, after the initial sexual attraction, much of their relationship is built around the fact that the boy reads to her, almost as a parent would to a child. Later, when he becomes a law student, he learns her full name by attending a Nazi war crimes trial and finding out that she is one of the accused. Of course he learns much more about her than that and discovers that he has a key piece of information, which could lighten her sentence, but his reticence to talk to her about it, keeps the secret hidden. The third time period in the film covers the latter years of her imprisonment, when he begins to send her tapes of the books he had read to her as a boy, and she learns to read herself. The film's director, Stephen Daldry,

has directed only three movies, but he has been nominated in all three for the Oscar for Achievement in Directing.

The Reader of course continues the Hollywood fascination with World War II, especially the holocaust. In a strange turn of events, Winslet had done an episode of the British television comedy "Extras" in which she joked that the only way she could ever win an Oscar was to do a holocaust film. But *The Reader* is not a holocaust film in the traditional sense, since it does not have a single scene during the war. Admittedly, lurking in the background is the fact of the horror of the holocaust and the unspoken assumption that anyone associated with the terrible acts committed during it has to be evil. The film explores just that assumption.

More than that, though, *The Reader* examines the intricate effects of a first sexual relationship on a young man, a relationship complicated by something that is almost unquestionably good—a love of reading, but a relationship that is tarnished by later revelations, which affect his psyche deeply. There are many layers of investigation in *The Reader*, and the viewer leaves the movie unsure what he or she has learned from it. For the Christian the difficulty of reconciling mankind as, on the one hand, bearer of the *imago dei* and, on the other hand, capable of the most unspeakable evil, perhaps without even realizing it at the time, has rarely, if ever, been so sensitively portrayed on film. The relationship between illiteracy and the willingness to follow orders, the obsession with simple black and white choices, and the lostness of knowing where to turn, when those choices remain logical even though morally corrupt, are only a few of the other themes found in this provocative film.

Perhaps the most important additional theme for the Christian is the complete hopelessness of the Hanna Schmitz character. Hanna is not offered any possibility of redemption for her crimes, and this is by design, both in the novel and in the screenplay

(read from Hare's introduction, pp. vi-vii). Nothing can save one who has perpetrated so heinous a crime as she did in the war by letting 300 hundred Jews die in the burning church and not unlocking the doors. The Christian cannot accept this. For us, the greatest crime against humanity was not committed in the camps sixty-five years ago, ugly as those crimes were, but on a cross 2,000 years ago, and all of humanity committed that crime, not just Nazi soldiers. No human being, no matter how degraded, is beyond the forgiveness that death bought for all of us. I found myself pitying poor Hanna during the whole film, most of all perhaps, when the Jewish survivor would not forgive her at the end of the film. How deep is the cruelty of the human heart. [orally: caveat: lots of nudity and sex].

The last film is the surprising *Slumdog Millionaire*. Everyone has been surprised by this movie, not least its producers, who seriously considered putting it out straight to DVD without a theatrical release. Set in India and made by Indian crews, directed by an Englishman, co-directed by an Indian, written by an Englishman, acted in by a native Indian who was born in England, and about a popular American game show, which came to America by way of Britain, *Slumdog* has been called the first truly globalized film product. That is at least a little hyperbolic, but it is true that no movie with as great a feel of being outside the British/American world, has won the Academy Award for Best Picture, and *Slumdog* is the odds-on favorite to do just that. Beginning in the slums of Mumbai, India, Jamal, the principal character of the film, and his brother, Salim, experience one despicable act of persecution, extortion, enslavement and physical attack after another, never losing the ability to get up off the floor and go on hoping. Jamal's hope is centered on reuniting with his childhood friend and adult love, Latika. The story of the underdog triumphing has never been told more grippingly, as Jamal's journey causes encounters with child slavers, bigoted religious mobs and gangsters of

all kinds before he lands on the Indian version of “So You Want to be a Millionaire” in hopes of finding his long lost love.

The movie is a simple story, but sometimes hard to follow, as a variety of characters go in and out of Jamal’s life, and he switches from venue to venue. But the basic theme of love triumphing over all is a theme as old as the hills, and the simple joy of the famous dance over which the credits roll at the end of the film is palpable and wide-spread enough even to be the object of Saturday Night Live parodies. While a few themes—destiny and choice; two brothers taking different roads—are introduced at times, they are not sustained through the non-stop action of the film, like its central theme of hope in love.

We have summarized the five films; now let’s make some general comments about them comparatively. Three of the movies’ screenplays are tied to pieces of literature: *Curious Case* to a short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Slumdog Millionaire* to an obscure novel entitled *Q & A*, and *The Reader* to the novel of the same name by German author Bernhard Schlink, a book that the Wikipedia entry for Schlink claims was the first work by a German author to reach number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list. *Frost/Nixon* is based on the play written by Peter Morgan, a play, which had long and award-winning runs both in the West End and on Broadway. *Milk* is heavily dependent for its content on the 1984 Oscar award-winning documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*, though not in a way that has given rise to accusation of plagiarism. It is the only one of this year’s scripts to be considered in the Original Screenplay category. The screenplays of the other four movies were also nominated for Oscars in the Adapted Screenplay category.

This year, two of the movies are very much historically grounded, *Frost/Nixon* and *Milk*. This brings the question of historical verisimilitude to the fore, much as it did

three years ago, when three of the five films—*Capote*, *Good Night and Good Luck*, and *Munich*—dealt with either historical personalities or actual events. This time there has not been a great deal of fuss about the accuracy, or lack thereof, of either of the movies. As I mentioned above, three of Harvey Milk's friends strongly support as accurate in detail the film's portrayal of the individual lives of the participants, the social and cultural atmosphere of the period, and the political timeline of Milk's career. Similarly, even though Elizabeth Drew wrote a lengthy article in the Huffington Post about how thoroughly inaccurate *Frost/Nixon* is compared to the actual events, the only thing that seems to be widely questioned is whether or not Nixon was actually as funny as he is portrayed in the film, hardly the stuff of major controversy.

There is something sad about this to me. In *Frost/Nixon*, Nixon is quoted as saying, "I...was involved in a 'cover-up,' as you call it." Howard and Morgan make this moment highly significant in the arc of the film; the viewer feels that finally Nixon has made his confession and accepted that what he did was wrong, not least because of the resignation and the pain in Langella's face, as he delivers the line.

Drew says in her article that this is a "blatant distortion of what Nixon actually said in the interviews." She writes, cryptically, that [quote] "The ellipsis is of course unknown to the audience, and is crucial: What Nixon actually said was, 'You're wanting me to say that I participated in an illegal cover-up. No!'" [end of quote] I am still unclear on whether or not Nixon said that he was involved in a cover-up of any kind—legal or illegal—and this is important: Nixon has already admitted in both the film and the original transcript that he believed that "Well, when the President does it, that means that it is not illegal." Nixon's logic, then, seems absolutely to move to the idea that any cover-up in which he was involved as President, as long as his motive was pure, and he really believed he was acting in the best interests of the American people,

is by definition legal, and so doesn't fit Frost's definition of the Watergate break-in and its subsequent cover-up.

Everyone else's notion of a "cover-up", however, is that it is wrong, that a cover-up—at least in this situation—cannot be defined as legal in any constitutional sense. If Nixon admitted to that, then the "gotcha" of the film is justifiable. If he didn't, it isn't. The point, though, is that Nixon himself never broke, never wavered, never came close to apologizing for having committed crimes. He certainly never became the sympathetic character of the film.

The reason this is important for our purposes is this: the film is probably going to be how most Americans will think about Nixon and Watergate in the future. Film's power to control how people think about an historical event is immense, and so we should ask the question, and be concerned, when a movie is portraying an historical personage, but that concern is evident less and less in our culture. We care less and less what actually happened, and more and more only with having our views justified and sensibilities affirmed. Nothing could be more dangerous for the future of America.

So what do we see about ourselves that these five movies display? This year, I do not find even one theme that can be seen in all five films. I do believe the answer to that question, which is most common, however, lies in the romanticism the movies portray about sex and its power to heal and to save. In four of the five films, the main character goes on a sexual journey, a journey that either articulates his or her entire life or dictates the way it will end. In *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, Benjamin's first real sign of awakening is when the Pygmy African takes him down to the red-light district of New Orleans. He is too "young" to enter into the activity going on there, and the only real step forward he has made is to leave the confines of the retirement home where he lives, but the question has to be asked: why there? Why lead him there and

not to a baseball game, a diner, or a clothing store? The answer comes in that Benjamin's key experiences from then on revolve mostly around sex—his first sexual experience in a brothel under the tutelage of Mike the boat captain, his first extended affair with Elizabeth Abbot, the bored Tilda Swinton character, and of course the “true love” he finds in Cate Blanchett's Daisy.

Interestingly, as in *Slumdog Millionaire*, Benjamin's love for Daisy begins when they are both “children”, and it never leaves him, his whole life through. Unlike *Slumdog*, however, sex is a very big part of their relationship. The first time they made love, the screenplay describes their first kiss as “the kiss that has waited for thirty years. The kiss that has waited a lifetime. And yes, there is passion... and need... but most particularly, the awkwardness of people discovering each other for the first time.” [scene 206]. This is not a description of the consummation of a relationship, so much as it is the beginning of one. The plot belies that interpretation of the script direction somewhat, in that they have known each other for thirty years, but, if you know the film, they have not spent a great deal of time together, and not any to speak of since childhood.

This is not a relationship grounded in the reality of day-in, day-out love; it is Hollywood through and through. Immediately upon sleeping with each other, they go on a sailing trip around the world, buy a suburban townhouse without any furniture, and spend most of their time on the mattress in the center of the living room floor, making love to Beatles' music. As Benjamin's voiceover says, “It was one of the happiest times of my life. We didn't have a stick of furniture. We lived right on the floor. We ate when we felt like it. Stayed up all night when we wanted. We vowed never to fall into a routine, to go to bed or wakeup at the same time. It was life on a mattress.” [scenes 227-229]

To the movie's credit, it does not end there. As Daisy gets pregnant, and they begin to realize the problems of Benjamin's "raising" a daughter who would soon be the same age he is, he leaves, and a montage shows him travelling the world, as Daisy grows older. They see each other one more time, before she "adopts" the child, who is now suffering from dementia, as he moves towards babyhood and death. Even with this "sad" ending, however, the film's lasting impressions are of the remarkable love they have for each other. If there is any concept of salvation in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, it is found in the life-giving power of sex.

A similar problem exists in *Milk*. While the primary focus in the movie is on politics, Milk's sordid sex life is not glossed over. He has two lovers during the period portrayed in the movie. One of them leaves him because Milk is too involved in politics and doesn't have any time for their relationship any more. The other is a demanding narcissist, who hangs himself, when one day Milk doesn't come home on time. The problem is not that these relationships are presented with a sugar coating; they are not. The problem is that they are simply presented as the only alternative, as something that is a given, and that needs to be survived, if possible, but not opposed. Quite apart from the rightness or wrongness of homosexual activity, it is often the support that Harvey feels from his sexual partners that helps him keep going in his political quest for the rights of oppressed minorities.

Motive is not a major theme in the film, and certainly Harvey is moved to political action originally by the death of a homosexual, beaten to death as he was walking home one night. And it is also true that Harvey feeds off the community action politics that he and his friends conduct in his camera shop in the Castro. But at the very least a major motivation, symbolically portrayed by his regular references to his hatred of getting older (a theme in *Curious Case* also, though not as pronounced), seems to be

his desire to be sexy and to be treated as normal, even though he is gay. A major part of that motivation is his need to have homosexual sex and not feel guilty.

The Reader and *Slumdog Millionaire* have radically different approaches to the same issue, but their very different perspectives still render, at least in *The Reader*, a view that opposes the Christian notion that sex, while a wonderful and deeply important part of human development, is nevertheless not the most important experience in life, still less the one that saves us from despair. *The Reader* is the most depressing of the five films, tying up in Hanna and Michael's relationship one person who kills herself and one who only at the age of 51 begins to understand why he fails at all relationships. In one very important sense, *The Reader* offers hope that one can overcome the despair of a failed life by owning up to, as David Hare puts it in the introduction to his screenplay, "truth and reconciliation." Michael is offered that, and seems to achieve it, at least with his daughter, in the graveyard at the end of the film, with the church dominating the frame, as he begins to tell his daughter his story.

The interesting thing to me is that, without ever stating it directly, what seems to be being said is that neither of these characters will enjoy the "real" means of salvation available to them, love with another human being through sex. So much of the film revolves around the initial sexual relationship. They cannot be saved by it because one of them cannot own up to the truth, and the other has committed the unforgiveable sin. Thus the seemingly idyllic sex that dominates the first third of the film, turns out to be a source of damnation for both of them, rather than their salvation.

Slumdog Millionaire may demonstrate the most complex relationship to Christian values of the five, especially in regard to sexual relations being the key to salvation. On the one hand, the two principal characters have a chaste relationship, and it is a beautiful thing to behold Jamal's purity and singleness of purpose in winning Latika

and rescuing her from the various enslavements she encounters during the film. Even at the end, when the big kiss is expected and given, the screenplay had called only for him to kiss the scar on her cheek. Of course the famous dance concludes the picture on as unsteamy a note as can be imagined. Lust plays no part in the portrayal of their love.

On the other hand, though there is the theme of destiny, about which Jamal and Latika speak several times, destiny is never concretized in any specific way, and certainly no higher power than human love has any place in the film. There is not a single sympathetic religious character unless one counts Salim's late and brief commitment to Islam. In fact the opposite is the case in that it is a crazed religious mob that kills Jamal's mother in the early moments of the film. There is no place of religious faith used as a symbol, or any indication that anything more than a vague sense of human destiny is at work in the filmmakers' minds.

Jamal's view of love also suffers the same problem that Benjamin's did in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*: it is so fairy-tale as to be dangerous. Jamal is too perfect: fame, money, freedom—none of those things even partly interest him. Saving Latika, that is all there is in life for him. And when they leave that train station platform, when the dance is over... what happens then?

The Academy Award nominees for 2008 are an excellent follow-up to the technically excellent, but frighteningly anarchic group of 2007 films. Hope, even if it is in the wrong thing, is better than despair, and all five films offer hope for at least some of their characters. Michael is on the road to reconciliation with his daughter in the last scene of *The Reader*. Harvey Milk achieved a number of his goals in his brief political career, and did offer hope for those he loved. Even though *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* ends with the water coming in to take away the clock that has run backwards throughout Benjamin's life, the montage reviewing Benjamin's and Daisy's life after her

death finishes with an appeal to beauty, as the voiceover softly intones: "And some people dance." *Frost/Nixon* dares to surmise that no matter how powerful you are, you cannot simply break the law of the land and ultimately get away with it. And *Slumdog Millionaire* wishes us all to persevere no matter how great the obstacles, always believing that your goal might be reached tomorrow. We could do worse for a set of values than these. Thank you.

TABLES OF INTEREST FOR MOVIE TALK, 2009

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: The Curious Case of Benjamin Button; Frost/Nixon; Milk; The Reader; Slumdog Millionaire

2008 Nominees Domestic Box Office Stats as of Mar 8, 2009 per Box Office Mojo. As of 3/8, four are in the top 100; all are in the top 150.

TITLE	GROSS	BUDGET	% PROFIT
The Curious Case of Benjamin Button (#19)	\$125,662,000	\$150,000,000	-16%
Slumdog Millionaire (#20)	\$120,491,000	\$15,000,000	+803%
Milk (#95)	\$30,529,000	\$20,000,000	+152%
The Reader (#99)	\$28,460,000	\$32,000,000	-11%
Frost/Nixon (#120)	\$18,019,000	\$25,000,000	-28%

2008 DOMESTIC BOX OFFICE FIGURES (ROUNDED UP OR DOWN. AS OF MAR 8, 2009). Last year top ten made \$2,691M. This year top ten made \$2,526M. But BO overall was down a miniscule amount (0.3%), though ticket sales were down 4.8%.

- | Rank | Gross | Movie |
|------|--------|--|
| 1. | \$533M | The Dark Knight |
| 2. | \$318M | Iron Man |
| 3. | \$317M | Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull |
| 4. | \$228M | Hancock |
| 5. | \$224M | WALL-E |
| 6. | \$215M | Kung Fu Panda |
| 7. | \$190M | Twilight |
| 8. | \$180M | Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa |
| 9. | \$168M | Quantum of Solace |
| 10. | \$155M | Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who! |