

AMERICA AND THE MOVIES

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

Let me begin by saying just a few words about each of the movies nominated for the Academy Award for best picture this year because I will not refer to them equally in the body of my talk. I don't want anyone's favorite to be left out completely. So you will know, I expect to speak for thirty to forty minutes with plenty of time for Q & A afterwards, and anything is fair game in that question and answer period. You have the list before you, so let's look at the pictures nominated this year.

First on the list is *American Sniper*. This is perhaps the best-known film because of the controversy surrounding it and because it has been seen by more people than all of the others combined, at least at the local movie theater. *Sniper* is one of no less than four "biopics" this year, that is, a movie made about an historical figure; the others are *The Imitation Game*, *Selma* and *The Theory of Everything*. It is the story of Chris Kyle, the Navy Seal who was the most successful sniper in American history. Of course there has been a lot of controversy over the movie's portrayal of Kyle. I will only say that the movie was so successful, I believe, because it did something that only *Saving Private Ryan* has done in Hollywood history: it simultaneously portrayed two truths that are in tension with one another in almost any war movie. The first is that it accurately portrays the fear, the horror and the misery of war. No one leaves the theater thinking that war is a good and noble thing, and certainly no one leaves wanting the experience for themselves. At the same time, though, the movie extols those who go to war, who put themselves in harm's way for the sake of their loved ones and the great cause of human freedom. So *American Sniper* is both anti-war and patriotic at the same time, and largely in equal measure, and I believe that is the key to its success. Of course the superb Clint

Eastwood directed it and Bradley Cooper gives an outstanding performance as Kyle. But Cooper was in other movies last year, and Eastwood even directed another movie that sank like a stone at the box office, the film version of the musical *Jersey Boys*, another biopic about Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons.

Birdman and *Boyhood*, I will say quite a bit about in the talk, so I'll skip them for now. *Grand Budapest Hotel* is the latest in a string of successful comedies by the imaginative writer / director Wes Anderson, who has brought us *Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, and *Moonrise Kingdom* among many others. *Hotel* is a quirky, edgy comedy. Its subject matter is grotesque but treated in an exceedingly slapstick way, so it is both really funny and squirmingly misshapen ethically. It won quite a few Academy Awards, actually, but all for costuming, makeup, etc.

The Imitation Game was an uneven picture in my opinion. It is the story of Alan Turing, one of the giants in the history of computer engineering. A Cambridge professor in the 40's, he puts together a team of mathematicians to crack the Nazi "Enigma Code" and immeasurably help the war effort. The movie, however, also tries to tell the story of Turing's later difficulties at the hands of the authorities in Britain because he is a homosexual. Similar to the un-nominated film *Unbroken*, the movie just can't handle so many moving parts well enough. Like *American Sniper* and our next film, *Selma*, *The Imitation Game* has also been roundly criticized for not accurately portraying history, too.

Selma we also will say more about, but we will only say here that the controversy over the lack of nominations for its lead actor, David Oyelowo, and its writer / director, Ava DuVernay, is a ridiculous tempest in a teacup. I would like to know whom you would replace in those two categories, were they to have been nominated. The members of the Academy were simply faced with very, very tough decisions deciding Best Actor

and Best Director this year. There is not a shred of evidence that anyone decided these categories on the basis of race.

Again, I will say more about *The Theory of Everything*, but the last movie on our list is *Whiplash*. The darling of last year's Sundance Film Festival, *Whiplash* is a high energy, independent film about a jazz drummer and his demonic instructor at a Jazz Conservatory in New York City. If you can stand the verbal brutality and stress that J.K. Simmons, who won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor, imposes on the student, played by a brilliant Miles Teller, then it may just be the best film of the lot. Superbly acted and shot, I have rarely seen a story take so many unexpected turns and remain coherent, and the viewer really doesn't know what is going to happen until the very last frames of the film. A superlative accomplishment, and it does raise an important question of how much is too much when a teacher is trying to push a student towards excellence.

OK. So much for the brief overview. Again, ask whatever questions you want in the Q&A time later. There is plenty to talk about.

In the fifteen years I have been delivering this lecture, the movie industry, which the talk is really about, has never been in such disarray. A huge dip in domestic box office revenue, a continued uncertainty with how to market movies in China, and the alarming hack of Sony Pictures by North Korea has people in the least efficient industry in America even more on edge and unsure of what the future holds. Even if those three things had not happened, the continued gain in the respectability, quality and marketability of what is known now as "long form" television might have reached a state where it threatens the movie industry's existence.

Of course movies will never die, just as opera and live theater are far from dead. But their demographic, their profits, and their broad significance in the culture—i.e.

those of the opera and of live theater—have changed dramatically since the movies so rapidly by-passed them in the early 20th century. The change has purified both in some ways, but no one would argue that these two art forms influence American society now like they once did. For instance, Abigail Adams once called the theater “the soul of America”. No one would say that now.

The application of that title to movies would have been a no-brainer even up into the 1970's, but it would be highly debatable today, as I've mentioned, in a contest with television. People right across the spectrum from working class laborers to big city news editors look forward to the advent of the next season of *Downton Abbey* or *Game of Thrones*, but the only highly awaited movie premier I know of right now is the next *Star Wars* movie. To move up the cultural scale, the spin-off from *Breaking Bad*, which many call the best television series of all time, the spin-off called *Better Call Saul*, was much more widely anticipated (and watched; it broke a number of records) than *Birdman* or even *Boyhood*, which moviegoers had twelve years to anticipate!

I mention all this because this year's nominees for Best Picture may just represent a change in Hollywood's strategy for regaining its status in our society. The Academy certainly did not go for its biggest Box Office winners, though it often doesn't do that. In fact of the ten highest grossing movies this year, only one—and it a total surprise—was in the Academy's list of nominees, and the pictures they did nominate had the lowest box office rankings since I have been doing this lecture. As you probably know by now, *American Sniper* is the movie that has done well. It in fact became the highest grossing movie released last year, passing up such movies as *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part One* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

The Box Office drop-off among the nominees after *American Sniper* is significant. *The Imitation Game* was the next highest grossing film of 2014, and it is 36th on the list.

One of last year's nominees, *Whiplash* (at #125), did not even make it into the top 100 Box Office films. As for the others, *Grand Budapest Hotel* stood at #55, *Selma* at #61, *Birdman* at #78, *The Theory of Everything* at #85, and *Boyhood* at #100, when the Box Office counting finished. As I mentioned, the cumulative earnings of these seven films is lower than any group since I've been following the Academy's nominations for Best Picture. That does not include rentals of course, and the nomination certainly boosted their earnings, but you get the point.

But what is the point? The point is this. Though it is true that Hollywood often ignores the Box Office in its voting for the Best Picture, this year they did so with a vengeance. They selected films with very definite political and social outlooks, and the Academy voters seemed to want to say, "Here, America; these are our best shot. Do some thinking about your life."

And not only is lifestyle a focus of this year's films, philosophy (such as it can be worked into the very concrete, story driven medium of film) is a major contributor in ways it has not been in years. Humanism, existentialism, scientism, absurdism are all given not only fair play but advocacy in this year's choices. There is no *Philomena*, with its Christian focus, among this year's nominees for Best Picture.

There have been other years in which a few thoughtful, low-budget, independent films dominated the landscape of the Oscars; 1999 comes to mind, when *American Beauty* won over *The Cider House Rules*; *The Green Mile*; *The Insider*; and *The Sixth Sense*. But never have so many what the industry calls "small" films with such a heady orientation been nominated as this year.

The Academy wants to be taken seriously, almost shouting at the public that all the defining of the Motion Picture industry only in terms of the big studio blockbuster is unfair, that here we have artists working who are producing serious works of art, and

we want to use the Oscar stage to show them to you. Support for that idea flowed from the opening number at the Oscars ceremony. At one point Jack Black interrupted the paean to the "Moving Pictures" Neil Patrick Harris and Anna Kendrick were singing together. Black began a comedy sketch that dissed the industry for all its faults, from being too Box Office happy to being run by "suits" out of touch with art of any kind. Kendrick threw her shoe at Black, yelling at him to "Beat it!" because, as Neil Patrick Harris then sings: "Moving Pictures: they may not be real life, but they'll show you what life really means. More than any one image, more than any one star, truly Moving Pictures shape who we are."

Whether it is the case that some unseen strategy is manifesting itself here or not, it is hard to deny that philosophy and ethics are at the heart of many of the films this year. Even *Grand Budapest Hotel* is the sort of absurdist comedy that tickles the funny-bone of the postmodern intellectual, and *American Sniper* carries a strong patriotic message in its story, and its emphasis on the hero, a theme we talked about in last year's lecture, certainly connects it to a philosophy of life emphasizing individual action.

And that takes us to perhaps the strongest message found in this year's films. It is a philosophy of life that was popular in the sixties, when I was growing up, the philosophy of existentialism. Existentialism is known best at the popular level as the theory that the only meaning one can find in life is by living authentically, i.e. passionately and sincerely, in the moment. The "now", not the "then" on either side of it on the timeline of existence, is the only part of reality that is relevant, and an existentialist is responsible for creating meaning in that now. That meaning, however, does not transcend the "now" but rather requires the doer to live in a series of disconnected moments as authentically as possible to achieve significance. All of this is predicated on the universe being meaningless, there being no God, and therefore no

revelation of where meaning for the human being is to be found.

The two movies appearing to have battled it out for best picture this year contain perhaps the clearest examples of an existential theme among this year's nominees. Those are *Boyhood*, the unique project of Richard Linklater, which was filmed over a twelve-year period, and *Birdman*, a movie, which is also innovative, if not unique, for its long, extended takes, giving the viewer the sense that the movie happens in one long, extended moment. But more about that in a moment, if I may be allowed the pun.

Boyhood is two hours and forty-five minutes long. For some it will be like watching paint dry. Nothing of major import happens—there are no deaths, no serious accidents, no life-changing events brought on from outside that alter the family's life dramatically. There is some tension: events take place, fueled by alcohol consumption, that threaten the safety of some of the main characters, but not in an overly serious way. All the events that can be considered major result from choices made by characters in the film. The father chooses to leave for Alaska and then come back and want to be a part of the kids' lives. The mother chooses to marry and divorce (three times, it turns out). Even the children choose to go to college, though alternatives do not really present themselves in their lives. Almost all the choices in the film are the small choices of "normal" life, as they really are. The movie portrays the mom and kids, for instance, pulling up in their car to drop the kids off for school four different times during the film. Hardly the stuff of *Iron-Man 3*.

And this is just why the film is so existential in its outlook. Nothing binds these moments together; they are simply moments in which the characters must choose to do one thing or the other to find meaning.

This is not to say, by the way, that the movie treats all moments of equal value. Certainly conversations between the Dad, Mason, Sr. (played by Ethan Hawke) and the

children, Mason, Jr., played by Ellar Coltrane, and Samantha, played by the director's daughter, Lorelei Linklater, which have to do with everything from dating to drinking, but also with subtler ideas of politics and social mores take a place of some prominence in the film. And the moves from town to town that the family has to make for job, schooling and sometimes simple financial reasons are crucial key notes in the film.

But mostly, the movie is made up of fights between brother and sister, notes being passed between desks at school, ball games with dad, chores the step-dads mete out, sneaking looks at underwear catalogues, etc., etc. These are the moments in which we create our meaning just as much as the "bigger" moments, which seem at the time so important for our understanding, and the movie portrays them as such.

One probably wouldn't think much of *Boyhood* intending to display larger philosophical import, if it weren't for the last scene, when Mason, Jr. is on a hike with new friends on his first day at college. There is an important setup to it, when Mason, Jr. is packing to go. Patricia Arquette, who plays the mother, Olivia, in a fit of rage because her baby is going off to college and doesn't seem to think it is any big deal, blurts out her frustration at how her life has simply been a series of moments: marriages, babies, divorces, sending her kids off to college and now the next moment is her funeral! The scene is played almost comically in its focus on the mom's narcissism, but turns suddenly quiet and empathetic, as she sinks her head into her hands in despair and declares, "I just thought there would be more." The movie cuts immediately to Mason on the road to college.

The conversation I mentioned, which shows how serious the movie is about its existentialism comprises the last scene in the film. It is the hike on Mason's first day of college. He has typically skipped orientation and has met a new girl, Nicole, in whom he seems quite interested. At a beautiful moment of sunset with the rocks glowing that

soft red they do in the Texas desert, Mason and Nicole are sitting together, enjoying a brief rest, haltingly trying to continue the conversation they've been having during the walk. They chuckle awkwardly, make small talk. Suddenly Mason's roommate, a crazy extrovert, yells out from down below: "This moment's having a [expletive deleted {falsieful whoregasm is what the subtitles say}] It's like as if all of time has unfolded before us so we could stand here and look out and scream, 'Fuck yeah!' Wooo!".

This juvenile moment prompts the much more thoughtful, yet still feeling-her-way Nicole to turn to Mason tentatively and volunteer, "You know how everyone is always saying, 'Seize the moment!?' I don't know. I'm kinda thinkin' it's the other way around, you know, like, the moment seizes us." Mason responds, "Yeah. Yeah, I know. It's constant. The moments. It's just, it's like it's always right now, you know?" She agrees. They look at each other, again in only that way two young people can, who aren't sure of the future, but are thinking, "I really like this girl/guy; do you think he/she is the one?", look away, then look back. And the movie cuts to black, ending.

As if this weren't enough, as the credits roll, a lone voice begins singing, "Here, at my place in time, and here in my own skin, I can finally begin. Let the century pass me by. Standing under my sky, tomorrow is nothin'." (Arcade Fire, "Deep Blue", *The Suburbs*).

One couldn't find in modern film a more existentialist way of viewing life. "It's like always right now, you know?" But *Boyhood* cheats because it ends hopefully. The viewer feels Mason has his whole life ahead of him and sees it as an adventure, filled with moments, some of joy, some of sadness, some of reward, some of punishment, but all to be embraced and simply lived until the next one comes. Classic existentialists could not get over the loss they felt at the knowledge that we create our own meaning. It made life absurd, random, without any ultimate significance. This popular form of it

simply chooses to ignore the consequences of the future, particularly the looming specter that so terrified Sartre, the early Camus, Becket and others: death.

That specter dominates, in some ways, the other movie, the one that won the big prize, *Birdman*. The film concerns the life of Riggan Thompson, played by Michael Keaton in the performance of his career, a popular but shallow super-hero actor who wants to be taken seriously, so he writes, directs and stars in a Broadway play based on a Raymond Carver short story. In the film references to death, particularly suicide, abound, as Thompson struggles with his celebrity, the emptiness of his power, his own hubris, the effect he is having on others.

[Spoiler alert!] Thompson decides to commit the meaning-creating act of his life by committing suicide on stage, but either messes that up by blowing off his own nose or by changing his mind at the last minute (or possibly, but I think unlikely, planning blowing off only his nose all along). What happens before that in two important scenes tells us what the filmmakers were intending.

First scene: in dressing room. In his last conversation with his ex-wife, Sylvia, played by Amy Ryan, just before the major moment in the movie, Riggan declares his love for her and brings together the themes of family and responsibility and what is actually real.

Riggan: I love you. ...And I love Sam.

Sylvia: I know.

Riggan: I really wish I wouldn't have videotaped her birth, though.

Sylvia: Why?

Riggan: 'Cause... (sighs) I just missed the moment, really. I don't have it. I should have just been there with the two of you. You know ... just the three of us. But I wasn't. I wasn't even present in my own life, and now I don't have it... and I'm never going to have it.

Sylvia: You have Sam.

Riggan: Not really, I don't. I mean, she's...

Sylvia: Oh, no, no, no, listen, she's just going through ...

Riggan: No, I get it, I understand. She needed a dad; instead she got this guy who was a ...three day viral sensation. It is so pathetic, I can't...

Sylvia: No, come on. There are things more pathetic than that.

Riggan: Yeah, like?

Sylvia: That moustache. (Both laugh.)

They kiss. He tells her to get back to her seat. He pulls down a real gun from a shelf, not the toy one he's been using. He checks and makes sure it's loaded.

In this scene the key is that he regrets actually living the moment of his daughter's birth rather than trying to do so vicariously through a videotape. Don't lose the clear note of irony that this is a movie about a play mentioning a videotape. The ironies are legion. Anyway, note how Riggan says, "I wasn't even present in my own life," a telling admission that he doesn't really believe he exists because he did not act authentically. He doesn't have that moment, and he's never going to.

Even more important is the penultimate scene in the film, when Riggan is on stage. In the play, he is Eddie, who has just broken into a motel room where he discovers his wife with her lover. He brandishes a gun at both of them. She admits she doesn't love him, and his answer forms the heart of the struggle of the "real" Riggan Thompson within the story of the movie: "Why? I just want you to tell me: why? ...What's the matter with me? Tell me what's the matter. Why do I always have to beg people to love me? ...I just wanted to be what *you* wanted. What *you* wanted. Now I spend every [expletive deleted {fucking}] minute trying to be something else. Something I'm not. ...I don't exist. I'm not even here. I'm not even here."

Riggan points the gun at the Norton character, goes "Bang!". Then he points the

gun at the audience and goes “Bang!” The terror is palpable; it looks like a real gun. It is a real gun! Riggan then shoots himself, blowing his nose off, but we don’t know that until later. It looks like he has committed Camus’s one authentic act: suicide. The audience of the play has a moment in which it stays silent. Then they wildly applaud, a thumping, rousing standing ovation. Only the critic for the *NYT* leaves, a development of a subplot we don’t have time to go into here.

Now, I am a Christian theologian, and I believe that Christianity spends a lot of energy encouraging us to realize that the present is the only moment we have in which to act responsibly. We share this in common with existentialism, this focus on the present in the journey of our own lives. We can do nothing about the past because we cannot alter it, and we can do nothing about the future because we do not know what challenges it will bring. Therefore, following the Good Shepherd in the moment is what we are called to do, and it is enough.

One does not have to look far in Christian teaching for support of this way of living. I think of Jesus’s statement in the Sermon on the Mount about not being anxious for anything: “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” (Mt 6.34 ESV) or the ancient wisdom of Prov 27.1: “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.” (ESV).

These two statements are about the future, but, similarly, the regrettable past is forgiven and forgotten in a very real sense for the Christian, and, while the memories of works of beauty and goodness that may have been done to us or by us, are great gifts, we cannot change those gifts, nor would we want to.

But—and it is a very large “but” indeed—all our understanding of both the past and the future takes place in a universe in which God oversees the past, the present and

the future from His eternal stance outside of time. He bestows meaning to our existential moments in the framework of an ethical structure based in the law, which in turn is based on His eternal character, and a metaphysical structure based in His revelation of Himself as creator, redeemer and sustainer. All meaning flows from Him, and provides us a rich and satisfying philosophy by which to live and in which to believe. He gives meaning to both the past and the future, and so we, His creatures, can rest assured about both the reality of, and the significance of, both the past and the future. We may not be able to change them, but we look at them with very different perspectives than do the existentialists.

[Perhaps a paragraph about *Boyhood* and *Birdman* both wanting to be about “love” but how that was impossible for existentialists because of the absence of meaning.]

But none of this is found in the films we are looking at, except one, and that should not be surprising. For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, *Selma* depicts real events that were done in the midst of a deep and sophisticated Christian theology of non-violent pacifism. I have changed my opinion about whether or not the movie portrays Martin Luther King as a serious Christian or not; it does. Not only does he call Mahalia Jackson early in the film in his words, “to hear the voice of the Lord”, and then she sings to him the hymn “Precious Lord”, but he also makes reference to Christ at a variety of points and preaches several times in the movie. One scene remarkably shows him defending his turning back on the Edmund Pettus bridge at the beginning of the second march, because he would “rather people be upset and hate me, than be bleeding or dead”, and a cross on the wall of the church rests prominently and symbolically over his left shoulder, as if Christ were blessing his self-sacrificial pacifism.

Perhaps the most important scene of all in this regard comes when King and

Ralph Abernathy are in jail. They are growing weary of the fight. When King gets really despondent, Abernathy quotes from the Sermon on the Mount, the King James Version of course: "Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your Heavenly Father doth feed them. Are you not worth much more than they? And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life?" King responds, "Matthew chapter 6, verse 27," and Abernathy responds, "All right." King simply says, "Yes, sir." Abernathy puts his hand on King's shoulder. Cut to new segment.

But with all this, the first time I saw the movie, I still got an impression of MLK as simply a very good man, a leader with a viewpoint, but not necessarily one that required the underpinnings of divine power. Perhaps I ask too much. There clearly are worship services depicted at which Martin Luther King preaches, and one of the most poignant moments in the movie is the event that so affected the nation, when four little girls, walking down the stairs after church become the victims of a powerful bomb that in slow motion dramatically depicts the horror of that particular incident.

And I am still struck that, while the filmmakers wanted to make sure to at least include one scene when King confesses his infidelities to his wife, Coretta, there is not a single one of what must have been many thousands in which he alone prayed or sought comfort from the Bible. In any case, when I had only seen the movie once, the scenes depicting Abernathy and King in jail and the other more spiritually directed scenes did not make a strong enough impression on me to last. It was only after viewing the DVD this summer that I noted the spiritual depth of the movie.

One could also bring up *The Theory of Everything* in which the Christian Jane Wilde marries the atheistic scientist Stephen Hawking. Much of the dialogue in the film, especially in the early parts, centers around her faith and his lack of it, and she is

portrayed in the film as something of an equal in the debate.

However, the triumphant philosophical statement in the movie comes near the end, when Hawking is making a speech on the book tour for his runaway bestseller, *A Brief History of Time*. Almost everyone at the event is portrayed in a worshipful mode; there are cuts to old friends smiling admiringly, and Hawking cracks a number of jokes. But then the tenor of the moment turns serious, as a man stands up and says, "Professor Hawking, you have said that you do not believe in God. Do you have a philosophy of life that helps you?" His answer comes in the strange robotic voice that his computerized wheelchair makes for him: "It is clear that we are just an advanced breed of primates on a minor planet, orbiting around a very average star in the outer suburb of one among a hundred billion galaxies. But ever since the dawn of civilization, people have prayed for an understanding of the underlying order of the world. There ought to be something very special about the boundary conditions of the universe and what can be more special than that there is no boundary. And there should be no boundary to human endeavor. We are all different. However bad life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at. While there is life, there is hope." This humanistic statement is followed by a rousing, weepy standing ovation. This is not the realism of the existentialism I was describing earlier, but it is not theism either, and certainly not a defense of Christianity. It is humanism, pure and simple, and it is shallow, again in keeping with the medium of film, which is not set up really to explore a philosophical theme in depth.

We could have talked about a lot more tonight; the view of the American family that is shown in these movies would have been a particularly interesting topic to investigate, as you have marriage and family as important themes in several of them. But as we think about how the movies might continue to be a force, challenging the

culture of this great land, and of the world, which still watches American films voraciously, I think we need to take seriously the sometimes despondent, sometimes shallow, sometimes both, philosophy Hollywood is offering us. We will be shaped by it, perhaps not as much as in former times, perhaps more than now in the future—who knows where the influence of this incredible medium will go—and that shaping needs to be understood and evaluated.

As I have discussed, I choose to do that evaluation from a Christian perspective, and I do so because I believe Christianity is the truth about reality in all its aspects.

Thank you.

TABLES OF INTEREST FOR MOVIE TALK, 2015

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

2014 Nominees Domestic Box Office Stats per Box Office Mojo as of Aug 10, 2015. One (*American Sniper*) is in the top 10 of all movies released in the last year; only two (*American Sniper*, *The Imitation Game*) of the eight are in the top 50!

TITLE	DOM GROSS	FOR GROSS	TOTAL GROSS	BUDGET
<i>American Sniper</i> (#1) R	\$350M	\$197M	\$547M	\$60M
<i>Birdman</i> (#78) R	\$42M	\$61M	\$103M	\$18M
<i>Boyhood</i> (#100) R	\$25M	\$19M	\$44M	\$4M
<i>Grand Budapest Hotel</i> (#55) R	\$59M	\$116M	\$175M	N/A
<i>The Imitation Game</i> (#36) PG-13	\$91M	\$129M	\$220M	N/A
<i>Selma</i> (#61) PG-13	\$52M	\$15M	\$67M	\$20M
<i>Theory of Everything</i> (#85) PG-13	\$36M	\$85M	\$121M	\$15M
<i>Whiplash</i> (#125) R	\$13M	\$1M	\$10M	\$3M

2014 DOMESTIC BOX OFFICE FIGURES (ROUNDED UP OR DOWN. AS OF FEB 5, 2015). Five years ago the top ten had made \$3.1B by now. Four years ago they had made only \$2.8B. Three years ago only \$2.5B. The downward trend, at least domestically, reversed itself dramatically two years ago, when the top ten made a robust \$3.3B. In 2013, they had made \$2.9B, less than the year before but only by the factor of the phenomenon that was *The Avengers*. Last year, they made a paltry \$2.6B, buoyed only by the phenomenon that was *American Sniper*. Overall domestic BO fell sharply, 5.2% with \$10.36B in receipts. Ticket sales were distressingly down 5.6% after the five year high of two years ago. Yet, the average ticket price continued its steady climb: 2007=\$6.88; 2008=\$7.18; 2009=\$7.50; 2010=\$7.89; 2011=\$7.93; 2012=\$7.96; 2013=\$8.13; 2014=\$8.17.

Rank	Gross	Movie
1.	\$350M	American Sniper (R)
2.	\$337M	The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1 (PG-13)
3.	\$333M	Guardians of the Galaxy (PG-13)
4.	\$260M	Captain America: The Winter Soldier (PG-13)
5.	\$258M	The Lego Movie (PG)
6.	\$255M	The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies (PG-13)
7.	\$245M	Transformers: Age of Extinction (PG-13)
8.	\$241M	Maleficent (PG)
9.	\$234M	X-Men: Days of Future Past (PG-13)
10.	\$223M	Big Hero 6 (PG)