

Politics at the Oscars

March 13, 2024



Artists for ceasefire pin worn by many at the Oscars.

Some 19.5 million viewers tuned in on Sunday, March 10 for the 96th annual Oscars to learn who won best movie, best actors, and best of the rest. It was quite a spectacle and very political.

Well, of course, it's primarily about money. American films dominate the world movie market and the Oscars, the awards presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences represent the pinnacle of both financial and artistic success in the industry. "Barbie" alone made almost 1.5 billion dollars, in an industry that makes hundreds of billions. And then too it's about fashion as women show off their fabulous gowns on the red carpet as men parade by like penguins in their identical tuxedos. But this year, more than others, the ceremony was not only a marvelous spectacle, but also an especially political event.

The best films nominees themselves were in many cases particularly political. In their very different ways, both "Barbie" and "Poor Things" were feminist films, the first contradictorily ridiculing and reinforcing feminine stereotypes and the second—a wonderfully weird combination of *Frankenstein* and *Pygmalion* (*My Fair Lady*)—portraying the struggle for and advocating women's right to independence from the control of men. "Oppenheimer" led us once again to focus on the threat of the atomic bomb with which we have lived for over three quarters of a century. "Maestro," the film about Leonard Bernstein, dealt with the difficulty—even for the rich and famous—of being gay in the mid-twentieth century (as did "Rustin" the movie about Bayar Rustin, the civil rights organizer, which was not nominated for best film). And "American Fiction," explored racism in literature and life from a Black point of view. And "Killers of the Flower Moon" portrayed white settlers' violent murders in order to fraudulently acquire Indian land in Oklahoma in the 1920s.

But let's turn to the Oscar event itself. As the ceremony opened, Jimmy Kimmel, the host of the "Jimmy Kimmel Live" show, also hosted the Oscars for his fourth time, and used the last several minutes of his introductory comic monologue to talk about the 148-day actors' and writers' strike and its issues. "At its heart," he said, Hollywood "is a union town."

In the in-memoriam section of the Oscars, the Academy honored Russian opposition leader Aleksei Navalny, who had been portrayed in the 2022 film "Navalny," which won an academy award for best documentary in 2023. This year's best documentary winner was "20 Days in Mariupol," the account of the Russian attack on that Ukrainian city. Accepting his Oscar, Mstyslav Chernov, the director said, "Probably I will be the first director on this stage who will say, I wish I had never made this film." He went on to say he wished Russia had never attacked Ukraine and occupied its cities and he called upon the Russian government to release the military and civilian prisoners in their jails.

Director Jonathan Glazer, whose German-language film "Zone of Interest" won best international feature film, a movie about a Nazi commandant and his wife living in a "zone of interest" to the Auschwitz concentration camp where over one million Jews died, took advantage of his time to talk about Palestine.

Our film shows where dehumanization leads at its worst. Right now, we stand here as men who refute their Jewishness and the Holocaust being hijacked by an occupation, which has led to conflict for so many people. Whether the victims of October the seventh in Israel or the ongoing attack on Gaza, all the victims of this dehumanization, how do we resist?

He dedicated his film to the girl in it who resisted. A good number of those at the ceremony wore "Artists for Ceasefire" pins.

Hollywood, known for its progressive politics, produces many fine political films and some Americans apparently have an appetite for such critical views of our country, though it's also true that Hollywood produces and Americans consume a lot of cine-crap.

Well, that's all. I'm off to the movies.