

{...}

*The color of money (2/1/16)*

The announcement of the Academy Award nominations for 2016 — which, the existence of deserving candidates notwithstanding, included no actor or director of (recent) African descent — prompted a number of prominent figures to express outrage at what they view as continuing systematic exclusion, and to declare their intention to boycott the presentation ceremonies.

Though sympathy for the principle at issue is widespread, and there is a general perception, if not of injustice, then of missed opportunity, there is little popular support for such a boycott, and indeed the gesture is pointless and certain to be ineffectual. The reasons are several.

First and most obvious, it is difficult to project malign, or indeed any, intent upon the choices of the Academy, which are always puzzling and frequently bizarre: best picture winners, in particular, are often so bad as to be embarrassing, and almost instantly forgotten. — Other nominees are less haphazardly chosen, but if Ridley Scott, for instance, snubbed once again this year, goes the rest of his brilliant career without collecting an Oscar for direction, he only follows the example of Hitchcock and Welles.

Second, complaints about the closed nature of the process notwithstanding, there is nothing uniquely perverse about investing such enormous power in a secret boys' club that meets in the world's highest treehouse. The politics of the Swedish Academy are equally opaque and capricious, and their kneejerk conservatism if anything more maddening — perhaps only now, for instance, with the detection of a burst of gravitational radiation which could only have been caused by the collision of two black holes, will they have to give up and admit that Roger Penrose

and Stephen Hawking are not science fiction writers, and give them the award in physics — but don't bet on it, and expect Kip Thorne to call them out on it when he gets his — still, for all that Nobel Prizes are rarely refused, and the ceremony is never boycotted. Instead tech billionaires ameliorate the guilt they feel for having sold out by inventing new prizes, and make sure that Hawking gets his first.

Third, it isn't who gets the awards but the very idea of them that is philosophically suspect: when George C. Scott (who elsewhere referred to the ceremonies as “a meat parade”) turned down his nomination as best supporting actor for his role in *The Hustler*, he stated, simply, that he didn't feel he had been in competition with the other actors. — Grigori Perelman, refusing the Fields medal for his proof of the Poincaré conjecture, was not more succinct.

Fourth, if complaining about a “lack of representation” is not meant to be an end in itself, then objective satisfaction must be sought. Maybe this could take some other form than imposing quotas, and maybe that wouldn't be a solution worse than the original problem, but I'm not the only one who doesn't see how.

Fifth, though we all enjoy pontificating about the recognition of excellence, the movies aren't about art. They're about money, and the most important people are the ones who make the most of it. Definitive accountings for producers and financiers have been buried at the bottom of the Marianas Trench with that evil Transformer, but the leading moneymakers among actors worldwide for the year just concluded are known, and were, sequentially, Robert Downey Jr., Jackie Chan, Vin Diesel, Bradley Cooper, Adam Sandler, Tom Cruise, Amitabh Bachchan, Salman Khan, Akshay Kumar, Mark Wahlberg, and Dwayne (The Rock) Johnson. — Among these we see a Chinese martial artist (who is, incidentally, the greatest physical comedian since Buster Keaton), a Jewish dude, three Indian heartthrobs, one or two

poster children for the theme of redemption, an alien convert to Scientology, and a couple of guys who, under the Jim Crow laws, would have been exiled to the back of the bus; a fairly diverse lot, in other words. In fact the really glaring omission here is the name of any woman.

Money means power. The question is then whether you have the will and the intelligence to exert it. Mr. Diesel lacks neither, and has used his formidable box office appeal to gain control of his signature franchise; in consequence the cast of the Fast/Furious movies are a meticulously constructed rainbow coalition, black, white, male, female, Latina, Japanese, even Israeli. The late lamented Paul Walker, who began as the nominal star, became instead the token white guy; and to his lasting credit not only accepted his demotion gracefully, but seems to have enjoyed every minute of it.

But, sixth, the example of Mr. Diesel raises the more interesting question: what is diversity? As Mandy Patinkin said to Wallace Shawn, I do not think it means what you think it means.

It is obvious, i.e., that to appeal to a global audience the cast of a motion picture must include persons with whom the natives of every continent can identify. But what makes Mr. Diesel himself a star? a man — to quote Stanley Cavell, quoting Emerson, trying to explain the appeal of Cary Grant — fit to stand the gaze of millions? His charm, his good looks, and his physical presence, certainly, but also — this is what is most interesting — what one might call his ethnic ambiguity: he is not exactly white, and not exactly black, but something indeterminate, both and neither. It is impossible to put an ethnic label on him, and clearly the audience is drawn to that, *because it does not want to have to care*.

This new ideal has been embraced in a variety of forms: in Mr. Diesel's costar The Rock, for instance, by now surely the world's

most famous half-Samoan; in the person of Jessica Alba, whose meteoric rise to stardom was propelled by an exotic beauty in various proportions Danish, Welsh, German, English, French Canadian, and Mexican; even in the figure of the president, who inspires such irrational hatred in his opponents precisely because of his biracial charisma.

But perhaps the best example is the actor who, so far as anyone can tell (rumors persist he never cashed his checks), holds the record for the largest single payday in movie history: the protagonist of the *Matrix* trilogy, a science fiction epic set in a dystopian future virtual reality created and ruled by malign computer intelligence; the definitive narrative synthesis of kung fu and Cartesian paranoia. In this the authors, the Wachowski siblings, took elaborate pains to code the oppressors, the servants of the machines, as white, and the revolutionaries, the real humans, as persons of color, and their original intention was to cast Will Smith in the lead. When he turned them down, however, they were led instead to what even Smith later admitted was the perfect choice: Keanu Reeves, a Canadian born in Lebanon of English, Hawaiian, and Chinese ancestry — the quintessential Polynesian.

It is not an accident that this is the actor the global audience embraced as the man of the future. For somehow the audience has grasped what the controversialists have not, the fundamental nonlinearity of genetic recombination: that sexual reproduction does not (the ancient fallacy) produce an average, but results in something novel and unpredictable, something more than the sum of its parts; and that it is precisely this nonlinearity that is the motor of evolution. Ethnic groupings reflect at best a tiny fraction of the variable tenth of a percent of the human genome, and obsessing over them represents an even smaller fraction of profitable discourse. The real question is not one of analysis, how to divide us up in such a way that every type is represented; it is rather one of synthesis, how the union of apparent opposites can

create individuals who are *sui generis*, and thus more completely human.

And if we ask, finally, whether a boycott can accomplish anything, the answer is no. It faces the problem, as Sartre would have put it, of perceiving the presence of an absence. (In some programming languages this becomes the problem of stating negative facts.) An expert bridge player can riffle through a deck of 51 cards and instantly identify the one that is missing, but the trick is much harder with a pack of several hundred celebrities; and even if you did notice, you'd forget as soon as Scarlett Johansson set foot on the red carpet. In a world filled with bright lights, no one sees who's standing in the shadows. — Instead what people notice are shocks and surprises: Brando sending a surrogate to denounce film portrayals of Native Americans, or the streaker who flashed Elizabeth Taylor.

In the spirit of guerrilla theater, then, I propose the following: actors of (recent) African descent who wish to lodge a protest should, indeed, show up for the ceremony, but made up in whiteface: the negative image of the old minstrel shows. — White actors wishing to express solidarity could not, unfortunately, appear in complementary blackface without causing offense (nor does the famous *Star Trek* compromise seem more acceptable), but they could, for instance, show up in fright wigs and clown makeup. (Extra points will be awarded to anyone who dresses as Harpo Marx and makes an acceptance speech by honking on a horn.)

The resultant spectacle would be hilarious. And no one would ever forget it.

As *Trumbo* has reminded us, the House Un-American Activities Committee was once the seat of a Reign of Terror: it destroyed people, it sent them to the guillotine and burned them at the

stake. But all that ended for good in 1967 when Jerry Rubin answered his subpoena in a Revolutionary War uniform, handed out copies of the Declaration of Independence to the audience, and blew giant gum bubbles while his hapless inquisitors attempted to convict him of sedition. — He might, of course, have written a few hundred tedious op-eds instead. But only ridicule could have so swiftly put the stake straight through the monster's heart.

Alas, this proposal is obviously impossible — not because there is some more effective way of making the point which is supposed to be at issue, but because it would violate the only real purpose of the Academy Awards: to validate the individual and institutional narcissism on which the industry is founded.

Nonetheless a geek can dream. — Need I point out that best of all, in keeping with the highest principles of Hollywood, it spells franchise, it leaves open the possibility of a killer sequel? since next year to protest gender inequality the female actors can wear black tie and the male actors dresses. — I don't know about you, but I look forward to seeing Clooney in Versace, showing off his legs on the red carpet. Who could walk out on that?