Academy Awards

Annual awards of merit in the U.S. presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The Academy was formed in 1927 by Louis B. Mayer and others to raise the standards of film production, and its first awards were presented in 1929. The awards (nicknamed Oscars) recognize excellence in acting, directing, screenwriting, and other activities related to film production.

Event: Academy Awards

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The Academy Awards, nicknamed the Oscars, given for film achievements by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), is an American event but has been universally embraced as the ultimate symbol of success and accomplishment in the world of global cinematic entertainment. Indeed, the importance of the Oscar Awards goes way beyond the film world and the American locale.

For awards to bear motivational significance, they have to fulfill at least three functions: They have to be visible and known to every artist, they have to carry a high degree of prestige, and they have to be within reach of success by any aspiring artist or production company. The Oscars meet all of these conditions: They are visible, they are prestigious, and they are within reach.

There are several reasons for the institutionalization and extraordinary preeminence of the Oscars. First and foremost is the longevity of the award. Conferred for the first time in May 1929 (for achievements in 1927-1928), the Oscar is the oldest film prize in history. A tradition of 82 years (and still going strong) has made the Oscar a respectable symbol with a solid heritage.

The other entertainment awards are like the children and grandchildren of the Oscars. The Antoinette Perry Awards (Tonys), by the League of New York Theaters and Producers and the American Theater Wing, were first presented in 1947. The Emmys, awarded by the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, were presented for the first time in 1949. The Grammys, the youngest showbiz awards, were first bestowed by the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences in 1959.

Scope and Prestige

The Tony is essentially a local award, given for achievements in the Broadway theater and largely limited to the New York City arena. Movies, by contrast, speak a universal language and have the potential of reaching everyone. Even people who don't live in the United States and don't speak English are aware of the Oscars and their significance.

The Oscar's prestige stems from the status of the Academy within the film industry. The Academy has always been elitist, with membership that constitutes a very small percentage of the film industry. Yet, despite elitism, the Academy's procedures are quite democratic: The Academy, with its various

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branches, gives equal representation to all artists, regardless of specialty (writers, directors, players). The nomination process is based on peer evaluation: The Acting branch selects nominees in acting, the Directors branch for directing, and so on. However, each Academy member proposes nominees for the Best Picture, and the entire membership votes for the winners in all the categories.

Film artists, like other professionals, attribute the utmost importance to recognition from their peers because they consider them the only experts with the necessary knowledge to make competent evaluation of their work. For most filmmakers, the significant reference group, which sets standards to be emulated and also serves as a frame for judging merits, consists of fellow workers.

Scarcity of Awards
The scarce number of awards also contributes to the Oscar's prestige. In the entire Academy history, about 700 players have been nominated for an Oscar and only 220 have actually won. Every year, only 20 actors are nominated in four categories—Actor in a Leading Role, Actress in a Leading Role, Actor in a Supporting Role, and Actress in a Supporting Role—and only four win, one winner for each category. These 20 performances are selected out of thousands of eligible performances.

Similarly, the 5 films (enlarged in 2009 to 10) competing for Best Picture are chosen from a large pool of over 300 eligible films. Hollywood film production has declined, though: In the 1940s, over 500 films were released on an average year. Even so, the Oscar is more competitive than most awards, due to the large number of films, performances, and achievements every year.

The Academy has refused to divide the categories by genre (e.g., drama and comedy). The Tonys and the Golden Globes share separate sets of categories for dramatic plays and musicals/ comedies. Those in favor of one prize claim that increasing the number of awards decreases their prestige; too many categories belittle the award. The Grammys are awarded in over 70 categories, and singers can be nominated in multiple categories for the same song.

The Oscar is awarded to artists of all nationalities: One fourth of the nominees have been foreign, non-American artists. This international dimension extends the visibility of the Oscar and contributes to its prestige. And the Oscar's prestige, in turn, makes for intense international competition. The scarcity of awards and the intense international competition have made the Oscar all the more desirable.

The Oscar as Politically Correct Entertainment
Most Academy members tend to judge a film by the importance of its subject and relevance of its issue; this was clear in 1982, when the film Gandhi swept most of the Oscars. Cinematically, according to many critics, it was a rather conventional, solemn biography of the noble political figure, lacking epic scope and visual imagination. Gandhi may have been a better movie had it been directed by a more subtle and inventive filmmaker. However, Gandhi's figure was so inspirational and his preaching for nonviolence so timely a message in the context of the 1980s that Academy voters favored the movie over Steven Spielberg's E.T., Sidney Lumet's The Verdict, and Sydney Pollack's comedy, Tootsie.

Pollack's Tootsie, for example, was accomplished on every level, but it lacked the noble intent and "important" theme that Gandhi possessed. It was praised by the New York Times critic Vincent Canby, who described the film as having the quality of an important news event. Although he also faulted it for its earnestness, Canby thought that the film succeeded in reminding the audience about the existence of exceptional people, people who were able to rise above the profit motive that paradoxically motivated many of the moviemakers themselves.
It is worth noting that the Academy's taste didn't differ much from that of the critics. *Gandhi* opened to almost unanimously favorable review; the only dissenting voices among the major critics were Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael. And it won the New York Film Critics, the National Board of Review, and the Golden Globe awards. However, there was no consensus among critics that year: the Los Angeles Film Critics cited *E.T.* as Best Picture, and National Society of Film Critics cited *Tootsie*.

With its more conservative membership, which is about a generation older than many of Hollywood's most active innovators and two generations older than most American moviegoers, the Academy has traditionally favored earnest, noble, and inspirational fare that propagated political correctness even before the concept existed.

The Academy's tendency to choose earnest movies that deal with “important” or “noble” issues over audacious movies that are more artistically innovative or politically charged is easily documented. The Academy's preference is for safe, mainstream, noncontroversial film fare that is imbued with a widely acceptable message:

**Noble Theme Over Artistic Quality**

In 1937, *The Life of Emile Zola* over *The Awful Truth* and *Lost Horizon*

In 1941, *How Green Was My Valley* over *Citizen Kane*

In 1942, *Mrs. Miniver* over *The Magnificent Ambersons*

In 1944, *Going My Way* over *Double Indemnity*

In 1951, *An American in Paris* over *A Place in the Sun*

In 1952, *The Greatest Show on Earth* over *High Noon*

In 1956, *Around the World in 80 Days* over *Giant*

In 1964, *My Fair Lady* over *Dr. Strangelove*

In 1966, *A Man for All Seasons* over *Alfie* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

In 1967, *In the Heat of the Night* over *Bonnie and Clyde*

In 1971, *The French Connection* over *A Clockwork Orange*

In 1976, *Rocky* over *Network* and *All the President's Men*

In 1980, *Ordinary People* over *Raging Bull*

In 1981, *Chariots of Fire* over *Reds*

In 1982, *Gandhi* over *Tootsie* and *E.T.*

In 1983, *Terms of Endearment* over *The Right Stuff*

In 1989, *Driving Miss Daisy* over *My Left Foot*

In 1990, *Dances With Wolves* over *GoodFellas*

In 1994, *Forrest Gump* over *Pulp Fiction*
In 1997, *Titanic* over *L.A. Confidential*

In 1998, *Shakespeare in Love* over *Saving Private Ryan*

In 1999, *American Beauty* over *The Insider*

In 2000, *Gladiator* over *Traffic*

In 2001, *A Beautiful Mind* over *The Lord of the Ring: The Fellowship of the Ring*

In 2009, *Slumdog Millionaire* over *Benjamin Button* and *Milk*

In 2011, *The King's Speech* over *Inception* and *The Social Network*

**Huge Impact**

The immense effect, both symbolic and pragmatic, of winning the Oscar is another unique feature. Unlike the prestigious Nobel Prize, there is no financial honorarium, although the Oscar’s economic worth is extraordinary: The winners’ salaries often skyrocket overnight. Winning an Oscar means hard cash at the box office; the Best Picture award can add $20 to $30 million in theater ticket (or DVD) sales.

The Oscars are influential in both domestic and global markets. In the 21st century, foreign box office receipts amount to more than half of movies’ overall gross sales. Along with prestige and money, the Oscar-winning actors gain negotiating power for better roles with better directors, and they also enjoy increased popularity outside the Hollywood film industry. Winners in other categories enjoy increased reputation within the motion picture industry, even if they do not become better known among the general public. No other entertainment award has such comparable effects. The Oscar’s preeminence in the entertainment world is enhanced through extensive coverage in all media: print and radio in the first two decades and TV over the past 50 years. This media blitz is not confined to the United States: The Oscar show is a popular TV program, watched live or on tape by over 1 billion people in over 170 countries.

Every profession is stratified, although some more sharply than others. In acting, the inequality in rewards (money, prestige, popularity, power) between the elite and the rank and file is particularly sharp. There are three relevant audiences and three corresponding evaluations in the film world: evaluation by peers, evaluation by critics, and evaluation by the public. The first evaluation is internal to the film world, whereas the other two are external or outside the industry. However, all three evaluations are important because they operate at the same time, and each exerts some impact on the film world.

What makes the Oscar such an influential award is its combination of all three evaluations. Through the Oscar, the Academy voters function as peers, as critics, and as tastemakers. No other award combines so well the usually disparate critical and popular judgment. The Oscar is the only award to exert such a direct and pervasive influence on every element of the industry: the movies, the filmmakers, and the audiences.

**See also:**

Cinema, Cultural Industries, Film Festivals, Global Culture, Media, Hollywood, Prizes and Awards, International

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