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Moviegoers to Hollywood: 'Make it real'

By [Daniel B. Wood](#) and [Gloria Goodale](#) | Staff writers of The Christian Science Monitor

LOS ANGELES - Ballots are out and armchair Oscar voters are in place as five sober dramas - all with weighty subject matter - vie for Hollywood's top honors: best film and best director.

But does the annual cinematic shootout at the Oscar corral - coming this year March 5 - mean much these days, beyond who has bragging rights the next day?

The answer depends on who's doing the talking. To some, Oscar night - and the movies it celebrates - has become a Rorschach test for a self-absorbed industry out of touch with mainstream tastes. Other culture watchers, though, insist that the cinematic tribute reflects, and even guides, America's collective direction and values.

As that debate rages on, at least one larger trend is evident in nominations of recent years, including this one: From biopics to message films, audiences and creators alike seem to be drawn to "reality"-based movies - both in content and technique, say those who teach, study, analyze, and criticize the film industry.

Regardless of which film and which director take home the golden statuette, they say, this year's list of competitors points to an evolution of Hollywood's intentions and aspirations - at least in some corners - and a maturation of American audiences.

"American movie audiences are growing up and getting real, because they feel reality is where they can move forward in their lives," says author Maria Grace, who writes about the cultural and social implications of American cinema.

In this view, movies in general and this year's nominees in particular reflect the issues Americans have been confronting more directly in the past five years: Middle East politics ("Munich"), race relations ("Crash"), the death penalty ("Capote"), gay unions ("Brokeback Mountain"), and media trust ("Good Night, and Good Luck"). Each of those movies is nominated for best film.

"People want more honesty and authenticity," adds John Michalczyk, director of the film studies program at Boston College. "Twenty years ago, if you made a biopic it was a canonization of values. Now you have to make it balanced and honest."

New generations of moviegoers were raised on reality television - and their very own hand-held cameras, says Chad Hartigan, box office analyst for Reelsource.com. "People want things that remind them of their own lives and tell them about other people's real lives," he says.

This attraction to the "real" is not only evident in the subject matter - biopics such as "Capote" and "Good Night, and Good Luck" - but also technique. "Munich" and "Crash" use

hand-held cameras and natural lighting, as well as improvised dialogue and character development - all techniques drawn from the documentary world and used by feature filmmakers to heighten a sense of immediacy and realism.

The events of 9/11 only accelerated people's attraction to real events - and encouraged a deeper sense of introspection as a culture, observers say. "Munich" is a film essay on the politics of the Middle East, and "Crash" confronts entrenched racism in America's inner cities.

"As a result of a collective trauma, a society can be forced to begin contemplating the reasons behind its collective experience," says Ms. Grace.

Many observers applaud Hollywood's growing willingness to tackle controversial subjects.

" 'Munich' is especially impressive with what [director] Steven Spielberg and screenwriter Tony Kushner are doing to comment on the Israeli situation," says Elayne Rapping, professor of American studies at the University of Buffalo, SUNY. "It shows the real frustrations of even progressive Jews with the Israeli-Palestinian question."

Even a film that steers clear of geopolitics, such as "Brokeback Mountain," carries a pointed nod to real life when it references the 1998 beating death of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man in Wyoming. It is being lauded, even by detractors, for confronting the issue of the personal costs of making life decisions on the basis of social norms.

Hollywood's growing willingness to tackle gritty, topical issues head on, while commendable, is only part of the story, says conservative culture watcher Michael Medved. This year's nominated films, he says, show that the industry continues to grossly ignore the interests of the vast majority of moviegoers.

"This year's films are more likely to acknowledge their bias or their agenda," says the syndicated talk show host. "That's a good thing."

But, he adds, the industry's preference for what he calls left-wing politics, in everything from Middle East policy to promoting alternative lifestyles, is not. Nearly every film on the Oscar list has done poorly at the box office, Mr. Medved says, underlining the fact that the vast majority of America is not interested in them.

"It would make good sense if they would green-light something with a different point of view," he adds.

Politics aside, be careful not to read too much into the Oscar picks, says Peter Lehman, director of the Center for Film and Media Research in Arizona. "This is about the politics of legitimizing Hollywood and representing the industry as having serious issues on its mind, as opposed to just wanting to make the cash register ring."

But neither is the box office the full measure of a movie, says Grace.

"Movies are the 21st century's version of the eternal myths - the way all ages listen and learn the lessons of the world they are in," she says.

One thing conservatives and liberals can agree on is that, when it comes to Oscar contenders, the academy goes for respect, not money.

"The Oscar gap that exists between the academy and its audience isn't snobbery or liberal elitism as much as it reflects a different grading scale," says Matthew Felling, media director for the Center for Media and Public Affairs. "Most moviegoers look for entertainment, while the academy looks for art."

And the nominees are ...

Here are some of the nominees the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences selected Tuesday for the 78th annual Oscar awards, divided by category.

Best Picture

"Brokeback Mountain"
"Capote"
"Crash"
"Good Night, and Good Luck"
"Munich"

Actor

Philip Seymour Hoffman, "Capote"
Terrence Howard, "Hustle & Flow"
Heath Ledger, "Brokeback Mountain"
Joaquin Phoenix, "Walk the Line"
David Strathairn, "Good Night, and Good Luck"

Actress

Judi Dench, "Mrs. Henderson Presents"
Felicity Huffman, "Transamerica"
Keira Knightley, "Pride & Prejudice"
Charlize Theron, "North Country"
Reese Witherspoon, "Walk the Line"

Director

Ang Lee, "Brokeback Mountain"
Bennett Miller, "Capote"
Paul Haggis, "Crash"
George Clooney, "Good Night, and Good Luck"
Steven Spielberg, "Munich"

Cinematography

"Batman Begins"
"Brokeback Mountain"
"Good Night, and Good Luck"
"Memoirs of a Geisha"
"The New World"
- *Associated Press*

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