

The Academy Awards are the one sporting tournament I follow with any level of engagement. I pay attention to the cottage industry of prognosticators that starts speculating straight out of Sundance, more than a year before the ceremony; I despair about the unsuccessful campaigns mounted by my favorites, as they fall by the wayside; I predict potential nominees and winners; I exult and rant about the films that make it; and, every late winter or early spring, I watch the overlong spectacle alternating between feelings of suspense, delight, and stultifying boredom.

I am, of course, not alone in my passionate, can't-look-away ambivalence. It's a tradition among those who regard themselves cinephiles at this point to yell about the conservative (predominantly white, male, and old) voting body and its middlebrow tastes. Or to get volubly invested in David vs. Goliath arguments that make up in passion for what they lack in nuance.

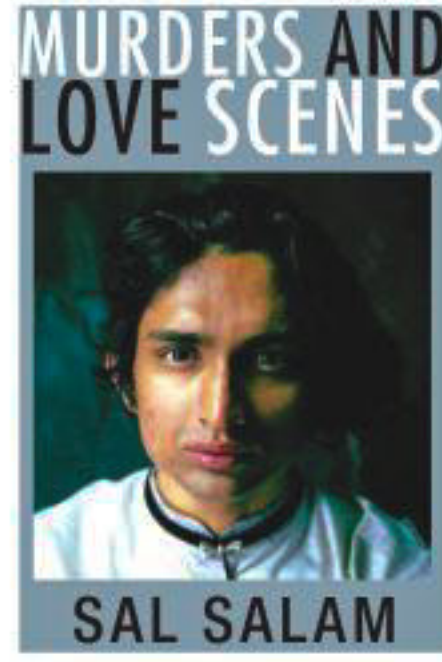
For the casual movie going public, the Oscars are either a mildly amusing pageant with some pretty stars in prettier clothes, and the nominations are a primer on what "important" non-superhero films they ought to catch up on in theaters not quite near them or on streaming, so that the flurry of memes and think pieces can make some sense. They've learned from Twitter and Facebook that the film that didn't win was robbed, or that the film that won wasn't woke enough, or they discuss Meryl Streep's predictably great speech and Jennifer Lawrence's even more predictably charming gaffe over lunch at the office.

The Oscars, then, are about the nominated movies but also ... not just about those movies. We're talking about *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* and *The Shape of Water*, the two frontrunners for Best Picture as I write this. We're talking some more about the potential victory at the world's most watched movie event of a throwback romance that centers around the government-approved persecution of an innocent foreigner of sorts or what a violent comedy about the aftermath of sexual violence means at this specific cultural moment, what with #MeToo, #Timesup, and the waking nightmare of America's proudly bigoted President. We want to address the numerous joys of Greta Gerwig's funny, poignant *Lady Bird* but perhaps also get mad about how she could be one of only five women nominated for direction in the awards' ninety-year history. This grand, awkward, self-congratulatory programme has, I suppose, become a higgledy-piggledy prism through which our thoughts and concerns about pop culture and the culture at large are refracted into varicolored, irresolute, shouty conversation.

The conversation is often interesting and illuminating, of course, but it helps when the films in the mix are truly great—as several of this year's nominees are. None of my personal favorites are likely to win the major awards, but their inclusion signifies hopeful things about how the member body's tastes are diversifying, since that enthusiasm might translate into more such films being made. And they're so good they've already made it to my list of all-time beloved films.

Sure, we have to suffer through the nomination of obvious awards bait like *The Darkest Hour* (because what the world needs right now is another Churchill hagiography), likely to win Gary Oldman his first Best Actor Oscar. And *Three Billboards* may have excited viewers with its bald, excoriating, timely-feeling anger; but it bungles its portrayal of racism in America, with a shocking sort of ineptitude and reduces its black characters to mostly silent set decoration.

But how lovely it is to see Jordan Peele's masterful *Get Out*, my personal Best Picture of 2018, honored with multiple nods! It is about things we ought to be talking about, of course, but we're only talking because it is so good, so vivid, so assured in its craft and storytelling, so deft with its deployment of both satire and horror, so cunning in how it confronts us with its ugly truths. The film has already become a huge hit and is universally acclaimed; it hardly needs a coronation at the Oscars. But by recognizing it, the Academy has made itself look a little less out of step with the times.



ON THIS YEAR'S OSCARS



The Shape of Water



Call Me By Your Name



Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri



Last Men in Aleppo

I also adored *Lady Bird*, which I mentioned earlier for Gerwig's induction into the outrageously tiny club of female directors who've gotten a directing nod. Gerwig is a prolific actor, but this is her first film, just like *Get Out* is Peele's first. (The latter was better known as one half of the sketch comedy duo *Key and Peele* until recently.) Neither film feels like a freshman effort. Gerwig evokes the perils and pleasures of girlhood in this film about a smart, prickly, dramatic teenager whose battles and detentes with her no-nonsense mother should feel familiar to most of us who've been clever and femme and restless. This is the Best Film nominee that'll make you laugh the most, but it's also a moist-eyed love song for youth and its attendant miracles (and for Sacramento, where Gerwig grew up and which she portrays here with unsentimental large-heartedness).

My other two favorites, *Call Me By Your Name* and *Phantom Thread*, are both period love stories. The first is sunlit and languorous and elliptical and queer; the second is chilly and suspenseful and precise and the other kind of queer—in that, it is really very strange (questionable breakfast foods are a plot point, as is a maternal ghost). They both feel like instant, forever-quotable/memeable classics, though. *Call Me By Your Name*, like *Lady Bird*, has a teenage protagonist, but Elio's infatuation is deeper and more complicated than *Lady Bird*'s various dalliances. He's fallen for a handsome older American houseguest, who's only in their gloriously photographed shambles of an Italian household for the summer. Love at the movies has never looked this idyllic, felt this heady in a long time. At the end, as the credits started rolling over Timothée Chalamet's sad-elf face (he'd be my pick for Best Actor) and Sufjan Stevens' transcendent song begins playing, I felt aired out, open in spirit and heart. *CMBYN* is definitely the best time I had at the movies last year.

Phantom Thread is less ... elevating, but it is screamingly funny and diabolically acute about love, marriage, and the perverse instincts that keep both love and marriage chugging. Frances McDormand is the unbeatable-seeming frontrunner for the Best Actress in a Leading Role award right now, but my pick would have been the uncanny Vicky Kriepes, who, it seems to me, invents a whole new way of existing truthfully onscreen, a new grammar of film acting, in *Phantom Thread*. She is a formidable match for the great Daniel Day-Lewis, who has broken hearts with his announcement that this will be his last film.

Kumail Nanjiani, thankfully, has a long career in cinema ahead of him. He co-wrote the delightful *The Big Sick*, nominated for Best Original Screenplay, with Emily Gordon, his wife; the film is based on the real-life story of how they met and navigated a relationship and her sudden illness. It is a witty take on romantic and familial relationships (Nanjiani depicts his conservative Pakistani family with fond exasperation and bittersweet humor). It'd be fabulous to see this Muslim immigrant accept an Oscar while Trump tweets furious, misspelled diatribes about the Hollywood elite, but I suspect the love he's gotten from couples all over the world who've navigated inter-cultural relationships and grave health challenges and found truth and heart in his film of their own have been just as rewarding for Gordon and him.

The Oscars also highlight worthy documentaries and feature films from outside the West (although the short listing process for both can be baffling). The trail blazing Agnès Varda is nominated at eighty-nine for her charming *Faces, Places*. If she attends, we shall all be blessed with the sighting of a great whose body of work is of far greater import than any gold statuette.

Of course, the irony of the producer of *Last Men in Aleppo* (one of the nominated documentaries) being denied a visa to the US for the ceremony, is cruel and obvious. But, hopefully, people will feel inspired to seek out his film, and all the other terrific, true films that have somehow made it into a notoriously myopic voting body's line of vision. And they will find in those films beauties and revelations that will outlive the pomp and tinselly splendor of this year's Oscars.

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INTERVIEW

The rather long and tongue-twisting name of Apichatpong

Weerasethakul may not be at the tip of the tongue for the average cinephile in Bangladesh, but it is ubiquitous to any serious follower of contemporary independent cinema anywhere in the world. Winner of the Cannes triffecta of Palme d'Or, Un Certain Regard and jury prize (in different editions), the 47-year-old from Thailand has been a darling of the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) for nearly two decades, and this year featured one of the festival's biggest attractions: SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL, a mega-installation in the form of a fully-operational hotel whose guests got to experience cinema at Weerasethakul's "preferred plane of existence"—of sleep and dreams.

On the first day of IFFR when I was told we should put forward our interview requests through the festival's Press Desk, I put down Weerasethakul's name rather wishfully, fully aware how slim my chances are of landing an



SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL

PHOTO COURTESY: KINO-ZEIT.DE

"I look for the person behind the film"

In conversation with Apichatpong Weerasethakul

FAHMIM FERDOUS back from Rotterdam



Apichatpong Weerasethakul

interview with one of the festival's biggest stars in a sea of seasoned and acclaimed journalists. It proved a great decision: I did get a schedule, albeit a 20-minute group interview alongside Aldo Pedro Padilla Poma (a film journalist from Chile) and Paige Lim from Singapore, a fellow Young Film Critics participant. What made it truly special was that it took place inside the stomach of SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL—sitting in a close circle on floor cushions with dim lighting and an ambient soundscape in the background.

As the three of us took turns to try and get three interviews out of him in one conversation, I got a peek inside his silently brilliant mind about why he likes the films he does, and his philosophy as a cinematic "truth teller".

The Daily Star (TDS): Your name came up in Bangladeshi news recently when there was a film from Bangladesh—*The Wheel* (1993) by Morshedul Islam—on a list of your favorite films from the 20th century you gave to French VOD service La Cinetek. That film is 25 years old, but there are other films on that list that are much older than that, and it made me wonder: how do the films you like stay with you?

Apichatpong Weerasethakul (AW): I was struck, educated, and influenced by many films during my 20s and 30s, and I watched a lot of films, especially when I went to study art and experimental film

in Chicago... because in Thailand, there were no festivals at the time. So at that time I was exposed to those films and I watched a lot of films. I think I watched *The Wheel* in Thailand, later. It was such a big influence to come back to Thailand and work on my own (*pauses*) memory. I wasn't inspired by the US... I don't have a memory there. But when I started to make movies in my 30s and 40s, I started to watch less and less films. So the list you mentioned is from the period when I was intensely watching films.

TDS: There are two other films on that list I found that are from the Indian subcontinent: *The Chess Players* ("Shatranj Ke Khiladi", Satyajit Ray, 1977) which is an iconic film, and the rather experimental *The Saga of Khayal* ("Khayal Gatha", Kumar Shahani, 1989). Because I come from the region, it's of curiosity to me and our readers—what is your impression of films from that part of the world?

AW: I have to say I don't know much... I don't have that much chance to see films from there ... only in festivals.

The films on that list are those that I saw, so I don't think it is really justified for me to speak about the contemporary ones.

TDS: From the ones that you saw was there anything specific that stood out for you, or did they speak to you for different reasons, individually?

AW: I think the use of soundtrack and music is what strikes me. And the sense of time and the simplicity was really striking, at least in the movies that I like.

TDS: Going back to the list of your favorite movies, it has American titles like *Re-Animator* (a campy American sci-fi horror comedy from 1985), *I Walked with a Zombie* (a 1943 horror film which the *New York Times* at the time called "a dull, disgusting exaggeration of an unhealthy, abnormal concept of life") or the original *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Why are these films among your favorites? What are the things that strike you when you watch a film?

AW: It's the authorship. I look for the person behind the film. Sometimes you see the film and they have a good story

and good special effects but that's it. It's like a living thing when you encounter a human being. If you like that guy or girl, you have a special connection because you know him or her. Sometimes when you see a movie, you can see the director; you can sense their personality... something you really cannot feel in mainstream Hollywood.

TDS: At your talk, you spoke about your commitment to tell the truth about difficult things like the Thai junta who conduct a sort of "attitude adjustment" where dissidents are detained and conditioned in a certain way before they reappear. This has happened in various forms around the world with authoritarian regimes, and it has been happening to some extent in Bangladesh where people suddenly go missing and when they reappear after months, they don't say anything. When you're addressing something like that in your work, something that is so much a part of the fabric of society and is a reality that is so universal... how does that universality of this truth play in your portrayal?

AW: I can only know that it's connected; it's something that's a pattern of authoritarian regimes—the fear of information, the fear of (*pauses*) Facebook. But I only express in my own way. I am not an activist, so for me it's more about how do I present these feelings? Not only being in the place of no freedom, but there are pleasures in life too. So I try to present these in my films. I think if people are honest when they make images, and there will be different voices; combined they will be a testament of time. It doesn't have to be a protest film or anything. It's just the different colours of life at a particular time.

The Daily Star's Fahmim Ferdous attended the 47th International Film Festival Rotterdam (Jan 24-Feb 3, 2018) as part of its Young Film Critics Programme. More of his coverage of the festival can be found at iffri.com/en/blog.