

THE CONVERSATION

Why are we so surprised at the Oscars' lack of diversity?

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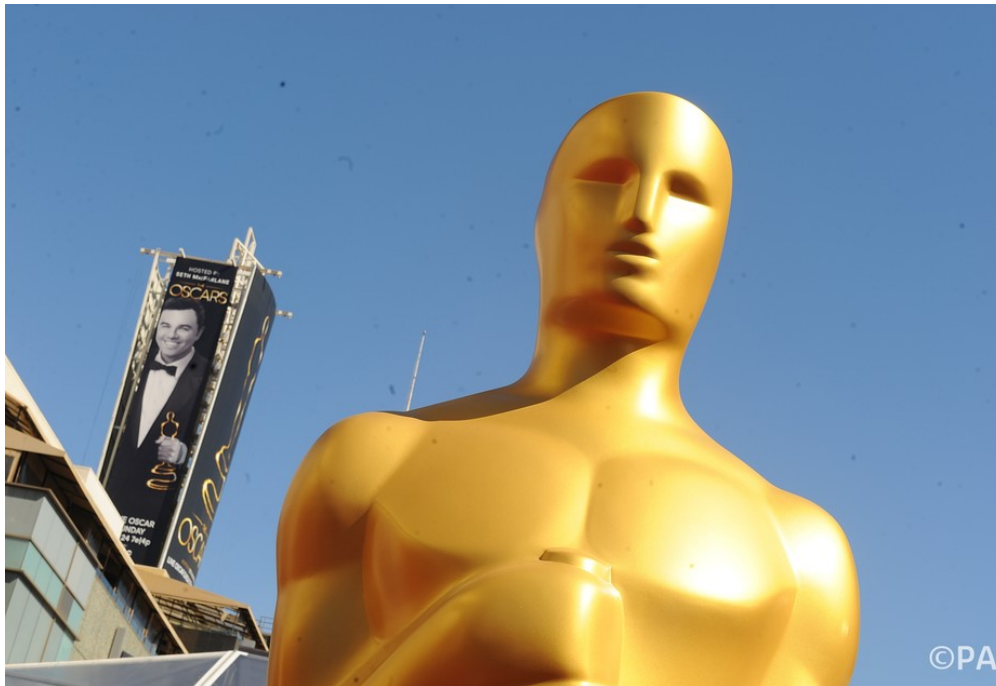
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One size fits all. Ian West/PA Archive

With the Academy Awards ceremony just around the corner, it's worth reflecting on some of the criticism triggered by the Oscar nominations and fuelled by the recent BAFTA awards. There was only one thing more predictable than the overwhelmingly white, male, able-bodied "face" of this year's Oscar nominations: the well-rehearsed outcries at the marginalisation of anyone who isn't a white dude.

What was perhaps surprising is that the list of contenders shows even less diversity than in previous years. It's just the second time in almost two decades that every single acting nominee is white.

The Best Picture category is made up of films about white men, that are directed by white men. The only exception is Ava DuVernay's *Selma*.

It's safe to say that stories by white men, about white men, is what the Oscars are all about. Not too surprising, really, considering that 94% of Academy voters are white and 77% are male.

Concerns have also been raised around the **treatment of disability within mainstream awards culture**. These voices have grown louder since Eddie Redmayne scooped the BAFTA best actor prize for his “genuinely visceral” performance as Stephen Hawking/of motor neurone disease in *The Theory of Everything*. Redmayne is now considered one of the likely winners of the best acting Oscar.

The occasional comparisons between able-bodied actors “cripping up” and white actors “blacking up” ignore the very different historical complexities of both forms of discrimination – but they nonetheless point to wider concerns around self-representation. The issue here is not only about which identity groups are represented on screen (women, ethnic/racial minorities). It is also about who they are represented by – and this is an issue crucially linked to questions of employment in the film industry, both in front and behind the camera.

Simply the best?

In an equally predictable manner, these often well-argued critiques are frequently dismissed – mostly by assertions that the list of nominees was not the result of white, male, able-bodied bias but simply an acknowledgement of the “best” films, directors and actors. This is an all-too familiar trope that ignores the deep-rooted structural inequalities within the film industry, not to mention the wider socio-cultural and political context.

I'm certainly not suggesting that this year's Oscar contenders are not good films, directors and actors, or that they don't deserve recognition. The Oscars are, after all, an occasion for the white, male-dominated Hollywood film industry to engage in a self-congratulatory celebration of its outputs. To ignore this is just as short-sighted as ignoring the institutional, political and historical contexts in which the Awards take place.

However, I also don't think that we, as (feminist, queer, anti-racist) critics, should just dismiss the Oscars and what they stand for on the basis of their obnoxiously normative predictability. Resignation or dismissal are too easy a way out. Mainstream cinema does matter to many people, for very different reasons.

Some historical context

The Oscars have a long history of marginalising women, racial and ethnic minorities and people with disability (to name just a few identity groups).

As recently as 2002, Halle Berry became the very first, and so far the only, woman of colour to win a Best Actress Oscar in the 85-year history of the Academy Awards. She won it for her performance in *Monster's Ball*. Men of colour have fared marginally better, receiving 9% of Best Actor Oscars.

Black actors and actresses have gained marginally more visibility and earning power in recent years. Jennifer Hudson, Mo'Nique, Octavia Spence and Lupita Nyong'o have all received supporting actress accolades, and Chiwetel Ejiofor (*12 Years a Slave*, 2013) and Viola Davis (*The Help*, 2012) best actor/actress nominations.

However, it is worth keeping in mind the small range of roles that tend to be available and, importantly, rewarded. The white Hollywood elite seems relatively comfortable celebrating non-white actors and actresses playing slaves, maids, drug addicts, musicians, athletes, crazy African kings or pirates.

No black director, male or female, has ever won a best directing Oscar – although Steve McQueen (12 Years a Slave, 2014), Lee Daniels (Precious, 2009) and John Singleton (Boyz n the Hood, 1991) have received nominations. No woman of colour has ever been amongst the nominees.

The Oscars also have an astounding history of rewarding able-bodied actors for playing disabled roles. If Eddie Redmayne returns with a best actor Oscar next week, he will join an illustrious list of able-bodied actors (all white and male, it goes without saying) rewarded for their “outstanding” performances of disability, including Dustin Hoffman (Rain Man, 1988), Daniel Day-Lewis (My Left Foot, 1989) and Tom Hanks (Forrest Gump, 1994). If not, he will join an equally illustrious list of actors nominated for acting Oscars for “cripping up”.



Stephen Hawking and Eddie Redmayne at the 2015 Baftas.

Daniel Leal-Olivas/PA Wire

Surprise and anger

The white, male norm at the Oscars, and Hollywood cinema more generally, has deep-seated cultural, political and economic roots. Unfortunately, this norm appears to be in the process of becoming more, rather than less, securely established. Films by white men, about white men, are given awards by white men. History tells us that we should probably be used to that by now.

But the lack of diversity of this year’s Academy Award nominations seems to have struck a particular chord.

This might be because the film industry has recently come under increased pressure to sort out its structural inequalities and racist and sexist hierarchies. These were spectacularly exposed when a significant gender-pay gap was revealed through emails leaked in the Sony Pictures hack.

It might also be because we have seen that things can be done differently. The overwhelmingly positive reactions (including from within the trans community) to the TV series *Transparent*, for instance, are largely ascribed to the involvement of trans people not only on screen, but in the production process more generally.

Similar arguments about the importance of diversity in the production process have been made about *Selma*. Obviously, this is not to say that only black or trans people can, or should, create representations of black or trans identities. But what it does suggest is that a greater variety of perspectives tends to lead to more diverse and, dare I say, “authentic” depictions, that speak to a wider range of audiences and experiences.

Or it might be because Ava DuVernay was expected to become the first woman of colour to be nominated for a Best Directing award for her stunning civil rights drama, *Selma*. Her exclusion was widely perceived as a snub.

Perhaps, it is also because the shooting of black teenager Michael Brown by a white police officer in August 2014, and the following heightening of racial tensions in the US, provided a heartbreaking reminder of a deep-seated structural and institutional racism. In this context, yet another self-congratulatory celebration of the achievements and struggles of the white male hero as conceived of by white male directors seems just too cynical.



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