

Political Drama at This Year's Oscars? Yes, Very Likely

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This is my third go at covering the Oscars as The Times's awards writer, the Carpetbagger, and heading into the season, I wondered what sort of hullabaloo would erupt this time.

In 2016, there was #OscarsSoWhite: For the second year in a row, the [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences](#) hadn't nominated a single minority director or actor, prompting public outcry and demands for greater diversity in the movie business.

This season it was clear after the Venice, Telluride, and Toronto Film Festivals — all litmus tests for awards-minded pictures — that it wouldn't be another #OscarsSoWhite year. The films that emerged from the festivals as likely Oscar contenders — “Moonlight,” “Fences,” “Lion,” “Loving,” and “Hidden Figures” (the film did not screen at Toronto, but its cast still showed up to promote it) — all starred minorities. And each of these pictures received major nominations, including a directing nod to Barry Jenkins, the director of “Moonlight,” who is black.

Yet for admittedly selfish reasons, I was hoping a new controversy would erupt. I

have to produce a Carpetbagger column about the Oscars contest every week, for three months. Absent a fracas, the subject matter can get awfully thin.

Before #OscarsSoWhite, there was always an Oscar-related dust-up to explore. Was “Selma” historically accurate? Did “American Sniper” [celebrate American bellicosity](#)? Was Julianne Moore making a feminist statement when she refused [to stick her hand](#) into E!’s Mani-Cam?

This year, however, the season had fast become humdrum. At awards show after awards show, [the same predictable winners](#) emerged — “La La Land” for picture, Damien Chazelle for director, Emma Stone for actress, Mahershala Ali for best supporting actor, Viola Davis for best supporting actress.

The only audible grumbling was connected to Ezra Edelman’s eight-hour documentary about O.J. Simpson, which ran on television as a mini-series, raising the question of whether it should be considered a film. The Academy decided it should and the documentary has been on a winning streak since.

The Carpetbagger worried there would be little news to report. But then came Donald J. Trump.

Just 12 days shy of the presidential inauguration, Meryl Streep used her acceptance speech for her Golden Globe lifetime achievement award to [denounce him as a bully](#). She drew thunderous applause (and, predictably, an [angry tweet from Mr. Trump](#), who said Ms. Streep — who later landed her 20th Oscar nomination — was “overrated”).

After the Globes ceremony, a few actors told me they thought Ms. Streep had every right to say whatever she wanted; others were more cautious. At HBO’s after-party, I asked Eddie Redmayne, (one of my earliest celebrity interviewees,) what he thought about the question of actors taking the stage to make political statements. “No comment, sorry!” he said. My sense was that when it came to Mr. Trump, Hollywood was still muzzling itself a bit.

This changed swiftly and dramatically on the weekend of Jan. 27 when President Trump tried to impose a travel ban on citizens of seven predominantly Muslim countries. His order prompted chaos and protests, and also affected the Oscars. The ban barred the Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi and the Syrian subjects of several nominated documentaries from entering the country. (The United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, of course, upheld a decision to block the ban, changing all this, though Mr. Farhadi had previously said [he wouldn’t come](#).)

As it happened, two of Hollywood’s major industry guilds — the producers and screen actors — were holding awards that weekend, and the industry’s aversion to political statements flew out the window.

At the producers' awards, John Legend said his vision of American "is directly antithetical to that of President Trump." The next night, numerous actors — including Mr. Ali, Ashton Kutcher, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Lily Tomlin and a star of "Stranger Things" — [took aim at the president](#) and his policies.

Clearly, staying apolitical was no longer an option for many Hollywood players, which likely will affect the character of the Academy Awards ceremony. Yet even though I got my wished for Oscar controversy — as well as the subjects for a few more Carpetbagger columns — I can't say I don't dream of simpler times. Bring back the mani-cam!

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