

# **Title: The AcaDAMNy Awards: A study of the politics and prejudice of the Oscars**

## **1.Introduction**

### **1.1 General Background**

2020 is the 92<sup>nd</sup> year of The Academy Awards, which is an annual event where trophies are given out to recognise cinematic creativity and technical excellence in the film industry, as well as to further market winning films. The first Academy Awards ceremony was held on May 16, 1929 in the Blossom Room of Hollywood's Roosevelt Hotel (*Academy Awards*, n.d) and the ceremony grew into a Hollywood institution from the 1930s onwards. The idea for the design of the famed statuette that winners receive, known as “Oscar”, was designed as a knight gripping a sword while standing on a film reel. The five spokes on the film reel signify the original five branches of the Academy: writers, directors, actors, producers, and technicians (Nix, 2015). The nickname “Oscar” wasn’t officially adopted for the statuette by the academy until 1939, and in 2013, The Academy Awards were officially rebranded as simply The Oscars (Pennington, n.d.).

For many years since 1942, when the results are to be announced via a live telecast of the ceremony, the suspense in anticipation of the names to be drawn from the sealed red envelopes continues to draw international attention to the film industry’s biggest night of the year. But increasingly, critics and film buffs are questioning the extent to which the awards are really indicative of cinematic creativity and talents; whether such honours really represent a consensus regarding cinematic achievements and whether the awards provide meaningful information about cinematic merits. Such scepticism saw to the all-time low of 26.5 million Oscars television audience in 2018, with many commentators charging that the awards had become too politically partisan (Zamer, 2019).

This cynicism culminated this year in Stephen King’s charge that the Oscars are “rigged in favor of the white folks” (Alison, 2020), and the question over how movies are evaluated and awarded get more bad press with President Trump’s infamous jab at the Oscars for awarding this year’s best picture honour to *Parasite*, because the film is South Korean, and mockingly lamented, “How bad were The Academy Awards this year? The winner is a movie from South Korea, what the hell was that all about? We got enough problems with South Korea with trade and on top of it, they give them the best movie of the year” (Ho, 2020). *Parasite* made Oscars history as the first film not in English to win best picture. It also won awards for best director, best original screenplay and best international film.

## **1.2 Rationale**

When it comes to Hollywood, no annual event is more anticipated and talked about than the Oscars and The Academy Awards are certainly far from controversy-free. Questions, like who actually makes up The Academy and what underpin their nominations and final decisions, become intriguing and rich material for analysis and critique. This is especially whenever the Oscar winners were neither popular with viewers nor with film critics. This research therefore seeks to uncover, through the examination of two of the most controversial Best Picture Oscar Winners, *Driving Miss Daisy* (1987) and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), the unexplained truths lurking behind the facade of a fair awards system.

## **1.3 Thesis Statement**

A New Historicism exploration of the factors influencing the Academy's controversial selection of *Driving Miss Daisy* (1987) and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) as Best Pictures will explain how the socio-political climate and money politics during the two years in America have impacted and influenced votes for these Oscar winners.

## **1.4 Research Questions**

1. To what extent do the main themes or issues of these 2 most controversial Best Picture Winners, *Driving Miss Daisy* (1987) and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), accurately reflect the interest and concerns of American society at the time of their release?
2. To what extent had institutional influences, both socio-economic and political, affected the final choice for both films?
3. How would a New Historicist film criticism of the nominated films help explain the Academy's eventual choice of these 2 Best Picture Winners?

## **1.5 Scope of Research**

This research paper will focus on the Best Picture Award as it is often considered the “main event” of the ceremony. This is because from the academy's perspective, it is the film with the

most important message; be it a social statement to something historical that had happened/is happening or a recognition of great screenplay and directing. Or all of the abovementioned. All the Best Picture nominees would also always see a boost in their box office sales after the nominations are announced, and after the winners are declared. At the same time, they are also the most scrutinised after the awards are given and often open to many contentious debates.

## **1.6 Research Significance**

This research paper hopes to add value to the current body of research on the ins and outs of the Academy Awards over the years. It hopes to determine if the Academy Awards are as nonpartisan as they appear to be, and if films awarded the Oscars deserved the accolades. Through this project, it is hoped that awareness is created to the awarding of the Academy Awards and possibly tie it with socio-political affairs as well as aggressive lobbying.

## **1.7 Limitations**

This paper will not be covering the other categories of the Academy Awards as a more thorough analysis could be achieved if the focus is on just one category's trend being analysed against the historical context of the American society at that time. This means that controversies related to gender or race issues might not be so clearly captured and conclusions might be less accurate with regard to the actual cultural, socio-political climates of the respective periods being studied. The choice of only two movies for analysis might also not be fully representative of how the Academy Awards had actually worked in their selection of the other years' Best Picture winners.

## **2. Methodology**

*Driving Miss Daisy* and *Shakespeare in Love*, which had won the "Best Picture" category, are selected based on the controversies surrounding their awards. They serve as good case studies, with the assumption that their winning could have been influenced by the Academy, voters and important stakeholders, who could have been affected in one way or another by the socio-political condition of their time. A study of the respective periods of their release would be undertaken to highlight key events that could have impacted society and the world at large, and to examine the degree of their impact on the Oscars. Through the lens of New Historicism, this research paper will then posit reasons for decisions made.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **3.1 New Historicism**

New Historicism, which became popular in the 1980's and commonly associated with Stephen Greenblatt, an English professor at the University of California, Berkeley, is a literary theory which seeks to understand history through pieces of literature and literature through its historical context (Greenblatt, 1984). Greenblatt posited that "literature is part of [the] cultural reinforcement of boundaries between that which is approved and not, that which is legitimate and not, that which is legal and not" (Robson, p. 20). In other words, a New Historicist investigates history and works of literature as though they are interconnected bodies. By finding out more about the culture and society in history, as well as when and where the work was produced, the New Historicist hopes to achieve a deeper understanding of how the work was interpreted in the past, and by analyzing the work itself, gain a deeper insight into how society of the time was like and why people might have interpreted the work in the way they did. The New Historicist would then reflect what is learnt on his/her own society and examine how that might have impacted the views of current readers on the same piece of literature. In other words, history is not seen as "a mere chronicle of facts and events, but rather a complex description of human reality and evolution of preconceived notions. Literary works may or may not tell us about various factual aspects of the world from which they emerge, but they will tell us about prevailing ways of thinking at the time: ideas of social organization, prejudices, taboos, etc." (Delahoyde, n.d.).

The same socio-historical approach can be used in the analysis of films. Everything from subject matter to who was cast in what role would be of interest to New Historicist critics for the clues they give of what that society was like. New Historicists will see in the films what is created and determine the extent to which audiences and critics' preference for a film, or genre of films, depends on outside factors. Whether the country was at war or whether it was an election year. Or whether the country was going through a cultural revolution in terms of gender or class conflicts. A new historicist film critic would therefore assess "the reactions of audiences and exhibitors to emerging technologies, focusing on the institutional histories of studios and government agencies, and tracing links between cinema and cognate industries" (Cinema: The Specificity of Cinema, n.d.). It is therefore interesting to examine through the scientific methods of New Historicism the role of government, institution, and culture in determining society's values, and this encompasses matters related to gender theories, sexual ideology, minority discrimination and other controversial issues (Foucault, 1977). It is therefore important to think about the very act of retelling history itself (Tyson, 2006). According to Tyson, history cannot

be looked at objectively, but rather that events are always interpreted as products of their time and culture and that "we don't have clear access to any but the most basic facts of history...our understanding of what such facts mean...is...strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact" (Tyson, p. 279). Therefore, in this research paper on the Oscar Best Picture Award, it would be interesting to question how the characters and events present in the film/s reflect the current events of the day and how such events are interpreted and presented; the extent to which the film/s support or condemn the events or issues, or whether they can be seen as a continuum of other socio-historical events of the same period (New Historicism, Cultural Studies (1980s-present), n.d.). This paper will also try to posit the interplay of both traditional and subversive discourses circulating in the socio political culture of that time and/or how they have been interpreted; how the film/s depict traditionally marginalized groups (New Historicism, Cultural Studies(1980s-present), n.d.). These critical questions will form the framework of our research paper to identify the various cultural and political movements that could have influenced the various stakeholders of the Academy in deciding their final choice.

### **3.2 *Driving Miss Daisy* (1987)**

The comedy-drama *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) is based on a play by Ulfred Uhry, of the same name, and it traces the 25 year friendship between Daisy Werthan, a rich elderly Jewish widow, and Hoke Coleburn, the African American chauffeur her son hires for her. Set in the turbulent period of the American civil rights movements, it explores the "possibility of mutual respect and understanding across racial lines" (Collins, 2019). Director Bruce Beresford's attempt to show the racial tension in their relationship to reflect the changing world, especially in the southern part of America, received mixed reviews. Some film critics deemed the film as "a touching tribute to friendship and human dignity" (Terry, 2005) and praised it for its "subtle and subversive portrayal of the civil rights movement and racial prejudice" (Terry, 2005 ). However, many others had criticized it for its "romanticized and overly simplistic portrayal of a relationship between a rich white woman and her black employee" (Terry), with "Beresford [leaning] on sentimentality too often; the African-American characters are mostly caricatures" (Yahoo Movies, 2014). For many critics, the preferred choice for Best Picture had been the contender *Do the Right Thing* (1989), directed by Spike Lee, which was considered more impactful as it "confronted racial issues head-on" (Emerson, 1990). Hence, it is worth considering the possibility that *Driving Miss Daisy* could have drawn controversy as it showed that "voters began to pick symbolic choices over true cinematic classics"(Yahoo Movies) and influenced the Academy's judging criteria to lean towards the 'safe side' (Denby, 1989).

### 3.3 *Shakespeare in Love* (1998)

Another film that beat its stiffest competitor for the Oscar Best Picture Award was *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), a reimagined historical romance about playwright William Shakespeare getting into a relationship with a woman named Viola de Lesseps while writing his play *Romeo and Juliet*. The main reason many claimed that the film won, instead of hugely popular *Saving Private Ryan* by Steven Spielberg, was largely because of heavy weight producer Harvey Weinstein's intense political campaigning. This charge became increasingly true with new revelations surfacing as a result of the many allegations of Weinstein's sexual harassment and misconduct since 2017, which showed his violations of what was deemed improper in how he deployed numerous consultants to lobby the members of the film industry and the Academy for his film, and how he "started negative whisper campaigns about his competitors" (Keegan, 2017). Till today, the victory of *Shakespeare in Love* over *Saving Private Ryan*, the latter movie many more people still remember today, remains a subject of controversy since the night ruthless and brazen campaigning won out over the film of an industry giant.

## 4. Discussion and Analysis

**This chapter will explore the factors influencing the Academy's selection of *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) and *Shakespeare In Love* (1998) as Best Pictures, through the lens of New Historicism and also consider the impact of an intangible socio-political climate and a publicity blitzkrieg in the final decisions.**

### 4.1.0 *Driving Miss Daisy*

*Driving Miss Daisy* (Beresford, 1989) tells the tale of an elderly Jewish widow, Daisy Werthan, and her African-American chauffeur, Hoke Colburn. The film focuses mainly on the bond between Daisy and Hoke that gradually develops over the course of 25 years of his employment, with Daisy Werthan being exposed to the racism against African-Americans as well as anti-semitic feelings that are rampant in the south of the United States, where the film is set. Though the film is meant to be a fictional historical film, it does not, in any way, represent any part of the history of events occurring in the time periods before, during and after the film. Critics have often charged it as one of the typical attempts by Hollywood to whitewash and romanticise the racism that African-Americans went through, for example, skirting around the racial segregation that was so rampant in America's history during those times. What would have been quite commonplace then, with the beginning of the story taking place in 1948, barely three years after World War II ended, would have been heightened tension resulting from intense racial

discriminations against people of colours. Even during World War II, racial segregation persisted, and it would seem highly unlikely for it to vanish into thin air after the war.

In short, the film makes few allusions to significant incidents and events of America's past, especially the racial tension and the civil rights movement, but any observer would be hard pressed to find something that could make this film stand out amongst other movies in 1989. Yet, in spite of its mostly average appearance, with few impactful events occurring over the course of the movie, the film managed to edge out its contenders and claim the Best Picture Award, beating out an extremely popular film, which was also based on racism, *Do The Right Thing* (Lee, 1989). Going into the Oscars, this film was viewed by many as an underdog, with few expecting it to win due to the variety of hits that year, and due to the movie itself being rather uneventful. Considering that it is set at a turbulent time of American racial history, there are very few references related to racism as compared to *Do the Right Thing*, which, even today, is widely considered to be one of the greatest films of all time, and was selected for preservation by the United State's National Film Registry (Liebenson, 2019). So, what enabled *Driving Miss Daisy* to beat out the latter, a more highly acclaimed film?

#### **4.1.1 Contrived Exchange**

In the movie, there are scenes that seemingly do not follow logic. During their trip to Mobile, Daisy and Hoke stop at a Sinclair Gasoline Service Station at Reece, Alabama, where Daisy enters to use the washroom whilst Hoke waits outside. A conflict results between the two main characters, where Hoke needs to use the washroom too, but Daisy believes that it is too dark outside for her to be left alone, and that he should use a washroom only when they reach Mobile. She also insinuates that it is Hoke's fault for not using the restroom earlier at the Service Station. The problem with this scene is that Daisy had lived her entire life in the states that they were travelling through, Alabama and Georgia, and hence it was impossible for her to be unaware that Hoke could not use the toilet there due to the strong racial segregation present. Hoke's retorts of how Daisy should know that "colored can't use the toilet at any service station", further highlight the fact that it was illogical for Daisy to forget the racial segregation that she should have known and experienced from a young age. The conflict, which is meant to show a glimpse of racism in society then, is also meant to serve the purpose of deepening the bond between Daisy and Hoke through this tense exchange, where they come into contact with the troubles of each other, and hence understand each other better. But this kind of conflict appears very contrived as it would be most unnatural for Daisy not to know as she had been brought up in the South.

#### **4.1.2 Whitewashing of Reality**

*Driving Miss Daisy* is set in Atlanta, Georgia. Then anti-Semitism had “reached a highpoint between 1945 and 1947”(Dinnerstein, 1981). Racism against African-Americans was rampant, with lynchings including “an attack on July 25, 1946, when two black veterans and their wives were pulled from a car near Monroe, Ga., and executed by a white mob”(Brown, 2018).

Absurdly, the only time racial segregation is mentioned in the movie is when the two main characters are driving to Mobile for Miss Daisy’s brother’s birthday, where the service station they pass by along the way does not allow coloured men in, which is a strange point on the timeline to mention racial segregation, as the locations where the film takes place are the southern states of the United States, Georgia and Alabama, where racial segregation was at the most heightened level. In the movie, there is no mention whatsoever of the rampant violence in the South against African Americans, especially after the ruling against segregated public education facilities for black and white students in the case of *Brown versus Board of Education* in 1954(Duignan, 2020). The movie, as compared to the much preferred critically-acclaimed film with the same theme of racism, *Do The Right Thing*, also has significantly fewer scenes where racism is involved, with racial slurs being almost non-existent; only one occurrence in the entire film when a policeman comments, “An old n\*gger and an old Jew woman taking off down the road again. That is one sorry sight.” The film seems to exist in a totally romanticised world where a white Jewish widow can co-exist with her black chauffeur undisturbed and have a tête-à-tête about their life with nary a fear about what is happening all around them. The cultured and etiquette-driven manners in their relationship seems to deliberately ignore the oppression of inequality surrounding their world at the time, creating a "fantasy of reconciliation" between the whites and African-Americans.

#### **4.1.3 Unconvincing Relationship**

At the start of the film, Daisy, as a ‘white woman’, is set to play the typical role of a cultured racist putting her black chauffeur, Hoke, in his place, hinting of white supremacy, which was a common thing then (Associated Press, 1970) and even now still. The film, however, creates an unrealistic tension where she even accuses Hoke of being a thief, but ends it with Daisy easily realising her prejudice against Hoke. This could be an allusion to the stereotype that African-Americans were thieves, and even then, would not make sense as Daisy has an African-American housekeeper which also goes against her previous mentions about wishing to stay independent. The character portrayal of Daisy hence is conflicted. Throughout the course of the film, there are suggested racial divides between the two as can be seen from their



interactions, such as when Daisy insisted Hoke leave the car keys before he stepped out to relieve himself on the journey to Mobile, a sign of distrust. The whole film seems to constantly down play this discrimination, focusing more on characterising Daisy as an old woman who merely wishes to stay independent and not have to rely on others to help her move around, as can be seen from her refusing help from Hoke at the start of the film. This is once again rather contradictory to her attitude towards her housekeeper, Idella. The two main characters are shown to eventually become close friends as they share their different experiences with each other on the trip to Mobile. The film tries to show how their friendship can transcend the boundaries of a normal employer-employee relationship but it was unconvincing as the basis on which their relationship is built upon is composed of illogical events that seem to serve the sole purpose of deepening their relationship. At the end of the film, after Daisy is hit by dementia, she then declares that Hoke is her best friend, which tries to evoke poignancy, but ends up as just a feel-good film about a white woman learning to be less racist through forced interaction with a black man. The denouement is totally out of touch with the very racially-charged climate of that period.

The film has Daisy in the position of the employer and Hoke in the position of the employee, which is the typical power dynamic in the history of African-American slavery. In trying to draw parallels with how the relationship between the “Whites” and “Blacks” was like at that time, and attempting to show how it can be improved in a similar fashion as seen in the film with Daisy and Hoke becoming close friends, instead of the employee-employer class difference, the film also depicts the racism in the South, but only through the sprinkling of casual racist words and small actions of insensitivity. Therefore, to suggest that a close relationship can result in spite of all that deeper racial tension that is not displayed in the film, it makes the close bond between Daisy and Hoke seem ineffective and thus not very convincing.

#### **4.1.4 A Better Competitor**

While *Driving Miss Daisy* was not a bad film per se, it did not stand out amongst its competitors that year, be it in box office rankings or critical merit in terms of the depth of the movie. *Do the Right Thing* (Lee, 1989), on the other hand, is a movie that depicts realistically the racial violence in American history. Its plot ends with violent deaths and riots, with racial tensions flaring, so much so that it was even feared that the film might spark real-life racial anarchy (Denby, 1989). It is a movie that gets included in American curriculum even today because of its realistic portrayal of the deep-seated hatred and bigotry between races (Scott & Dargis, 2020), and is deemed worth preserving in the United States National Film Registry (Liebenson, 2019) for future lessons. *Driving Miss Daisy*, on the other hand, is rarely mentioned. *Driving Miss Daisy* is often criticised for being too idealistic a movie of how different races can coexist

peacefully, and how the two main characters can symbolise how the black and white demographics can be true friends, whereas *Do the Right Thing* is praised for its raw honesty in exploring “racism from another more daring angle” (Scott & Dargis, 2020). *Driving Miss Daisy* also beat a classic favourite, *Dead Poets Society* (Weir, 1989), despite the latter movie having the highest box office score (BoxOfficeMojo, N.d.) among all the nominees of the 62nd Academy Awards Best Picture Award (Academy Awards, N.d.). Hence, conferring *Driving Miss Daisy* with the Best Picture of the year award clearly drew much controversy, then and even now, and it clearly shows the conservative preference of voters to “pick symbolic choices over true cinematic classics”(Yahoo Movies, 2014) and it also shows that the Academy’s judging criteria tend to lean towards the ‘safe side’.

#### 4.1.5 Conclusion

The long history of racism in America has left a deep divide between the two races. *Driving Miss Daisy* being awarded the Best Picture Award could be read as The Academy’s attempt to play down the brutality and the racially-motivated violence against African-American people, and to instead advocate for the hope of a reconciliation between the two races. But the way the film tries to ignore the harsh reality that is the history of that time makes the film seem too much of a fairy tale. The recent eruption of the Black Lives Matter protests clearly shows how the cracks between the two races have not been fixed, despite the efforts of the government and the people since then to repair them.

#### 4.2.0 Shakespeare In Love

***Driving Miss Daisy* is a good film, but it was not the Best Picture that year. There are other factors that had influenced choices made and realism, cinematic distinction and creative excellence were clearly not the main criteria in the final choice. Another film that did not deserve the Best Picture is *Shakespeare In Love* (Madden, 1998).**

*Shakespeare in Love* (Madden, 1998) is a reimagined historical romance film by heavyweight producer Harvey Weinstein. It tells the tale of a young William Shakespeare having writer’s block as he tries to come up with the play *Romeo and Juliet*, before he gets into a relationship with a woman named Viola de Lesseps. There are many references and allusions to Shakespeare’s works throughout the film and for a period drama the props and costumes are especially lavish and eye-catching. The plot and story of the film are original and emotional, but despite these tenets of cinematic excellence, it should not have stood a chance against the massively popular *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998) by legendary director Steven Spielberg. The moment when it was announced as the Best Picture winner, instead of *Saving*

*Private Ryan*, was an enormous upset for many, especially for Americans who saw the Oscars as a very American event, and *Saving Private Ryan* was an epic war film which was praised for its realistic depiction of the historic battles at Normandy in World War II, which American troops had participated in. It was a film that had appealed to American pride and patriotism with characters in the film depicted to have given their lives to save their fellow men and sacrificing their own to win crucial stages in the various battles against the Germans. Today, it is still considered one of the best films ever made and remembered by a lot more people than *Shakespeare in Love*. So, how did it lose to the latter?

#### **4.2.1 Weinstein's Extensive Campaigning**

Many have accused producer Harvey Weinstein of using underhanded tactics behind the scenes, since he was an influential Hollywood mogul at the time and continued to be one for decades before his fall in recent years. Weinstein was accused by more than a dozen women of sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape over the course of four decades, allegedly preying on many women who were looking for a career in acting by throwing his weight around, both literally and physically, attempting to coerce them into sexual acts through threats, temptations of a role in a huge production and sometimes through downright force (Ransom, 2020). Apart from perpetrating such crimes, prosecutors also wrote in their suit that Weinstein had gone to great lengths to cover up these misdeeds. One executive of his company had told the prosecution that Weinstein "had instructed him to lie for him" after the publication of an exposé the *New Yorker* published in 2017. Another longtime executive at the Weinstein's production company Miramax said that Weinstein had "zero compassion, empathy, civility" and "got a lot of joy by demeaning people" (Ransom, 2020).

These accusations from 2017 had come with other truths about the producer of *Shakespeare in Love*. He was described as a "man of extraordinary passion and determination" by *Shakespeare in Love* director John Madden (Fretts, 2019), for he was willing to do anything to get what he wanted. He was attributed with being the first to use a tactic such as political campaigning to enter and even win the race for Best Picture, influencing many other films' directors and producers to try similar strategies in the future. He had used similar methods to win awards for *The English Patient*, *My Left Foot* and *Pulp Fiction* in other major categories in the past (Fretts, 2019). This time however, the victory of *Shakespeare in Love* would have a special significance for Weinstein, as he could name himself one of the producers for the film and get his hands on the golden statuette he had always wanted. Previously mentioned were films which had been produced and directed by personnel in Miramax, but only with Weinstein's influence were they able to snatch the awards from other worthy films. He had not been able to call any of these past successes his own, but he realised that *Shakespeare in Love* could well be it. While Weinstein

could have seen the potential of the film and thus pushed as hard as he did for it to be awarded with Best Picture, his greed and lust for his very own Oscar award was the most probable reason why he was willing to spend over \$15 million on the campaign, making it the most costly one in history at that point in time (Rickey, 2011). The branch president of Weinstein's company Miramax, Mark Gill, even described their method of film promotion then as "hand-to-hand combat in the form of screenings, parties, and nonstop publicity" (Keegan, 2018). Instead of merely asking the cast to participate in a few talk shows or interviews to promote the film, Gill likened Weinstein's demands of the actors' efforts to raise awareness to him telling them that they had "three more months of shaking hands and kissing babies" (Keegan, 2018). He also threw lavish and elaborate screenings with the film stars present so as to mingle and interact with the audience before and after the film. He insisted they all be available for every single party, screening or industry event with Academy members in attendance. It was even reported Weinstein was so aggressively moving the female lead actress around the country to meet Oscar voters that he would have driven her to the point of exhaustion if not for her manager's intervention (Jamieson, N.d.). The amount of effort that went into such a campaign made it seem far more like a presidency was at stake instead of just an annual film award, and all at the behest of Weinstein (Keegan, 2018).

He was also acutely aware that he would have to win over not just moviegoers, but a special crowd of Academy members who would eventually be the ones voting for his film. He apparently organised a party upon *Shakespeare in Love* director John Madden's arrival in America, inviting a considerable number of Academy members for the reception which was against an Academy rule established in 1997 to curb excessive "hospitality" and sucking up to certain members (The Guardian, 1999). However, he was not penalized in the end because Weinstein argued that the event was not organised exclusively to curry the favour of Academy members since there were other celebrities as well and such an event could not be considered a party if guests of all types were not invited, putting the reception's status in the gray area (Jamieson, N.d.). He distributed VHS screeners of *Shakespeare in Love* among the Academy members, so that each of them could watch it conveniently from the comfort of their homes (Keegan, 2018). His next step was even more cunning, and bordered on actual manipulation where his previous actions had only constituted making impressions and publicizing the film. He hired numerous publicists to woo Academy members into choosing *Shakespeare in Love* over *Saving Private Ryan*, appealing to them through pathos rather than logos to get their votes. Sasha Stone, founder of [awardsdaily.com](http://awardsdaily.com) concluded that "he knew voters better than they knew themselves" and "gave them the justification they needed to vote with their hearts, not brains" (Fretts, 2019). Tony Angellotti, an Academy member, publicist and consultant hired by Weinstein agreed that the producer was able to successfully capture the hearts of the Academy members, many of whom were actors, by appealing to their pride for their art and industry as well as the irrepressible desire and interest to watch films which had characters like Shakespeare,

one of the earliest and most brilliant playwrights, not to mention a figure of fame in theatre. Many actors could connect with the character of Shakespeare in the film, since he may have been like a pioneer to them, and although the film may not have been historically correct in portraying the inspiration and making of one of Shakespeare's most famous plays, it was still about the making of the play, the creative process and possibly even the filmmaking process. This led Angellotti to concede that Weinstein's film "made its mark instantly with many of (the Academy members)" (Keegan, 2018). If the Academy did not have quite so many voters who were actors, it was highly possible that *Shakespeare in Love* would not have been voted for by as many members, and *Saving Private Ryan* might have gotten the Best Picture it deserved.

Furthermore, Weinstein deployed many people to start negative whisper campaigns about his competitors, especially *Saving Private Ryan*, which many perceived as the Goliath in a race of David-and-Goliath between *Shakespeare in Love* and it. Heeding his orders, Miramax allegedly "(dispatched) its spin-merchants to buttonhole film critics with sneering appraisals of *Private Ryan*, characterising it as 20 minutes of extraordinary pyrotechnics followed by an overlong and conventional war-film" (Keegan, 2018). DreamWorks were so incensed by his act of mudslinging, they requested Steven Spielberg to personally campaign more heavily, make more public appearances and allow an increase in the spending on their Oscar campaign, in an attempt to match Weinstein's efforts with *Shakespeare in Love*. However, Spielberg refused to "get in the mud with Harvey," (Jamieson, N.d.), also instructing DreamWorks not to join Weinstein's filthy race, forbidding them from spending more than the amount initially set aside for *Saving Private Ryan's* Oscar campaign (Feinberg, 2019). Thus, the aggressive scheme by Weinstein was a definite success for him, especially because Spielberg, a bigger name and figure of fame, refused to stoop to his level.

#### **4.2.2 Why *Saving Private Ryan* Should Have Won**

1998 was a year full of hearty competitors contending for the statuette of the Best Picture Award, but none were as prominent as *Saving Private Ryan* by Steven Spielberg, a director treated like royalty in Hollywood, who was projected to win the race easily. *Saving Private Ryan* is a war epic depicting the events of the Omaha Beach landings during the Normandy Invasion, a battle renowned as one of the bloodiest in history. The movie begins with the landing of US soldiers on the beach, where they are quickly annihilated by German forces. This opening action sequence is commonly lauded as one of the best battle scenes in the history of cinema, unflinchingly realistic because Spielberg had spent an estimated \$12 million just filming it, from the 20-30 amputees hired to depict maimed soldiers, 1500 extras to fill the bulk of unnamed soldiers and even the distinctive "ping" sounds of the soldiers' M1 Garand rifles (Rickey, 2011). The chilling detail and accuracy of the battle scenes led critic Roger Ebert to describe the film as a "powerful

experience” (Ebert, 1998a), while people of the younger generations who watched it said that it helped them to understand, empathize and reduce the generation gap between them and the veterans (Budanovic, 2018). Although the film was received with mixed reviews upon release because some veterans experienced PTSD after reliving the revolting and gory ordeal that the war had been (Budanovic, 2018), many more praised it for being the most realistic depiction of the combat they had ever seen and felt that it was nevertheless important to portray correctly the grim, macabre scene of war instead of glorifying it (Bradshaw, 2019). The Academy Awards originated from America, and a good number of Academy members were Americans, who, like the average moviegoer, were proud of the American identity and found the film easy to find patriotic pride in, imagining themselves as part of the company sent to find Private James Ryan.

Besides the intensity and raw, palpable emotion of the opening scene, from the scattered explosions and bloodied corpses strewn all over the battlefield to the fear of the remaining soldiers and the gripping story of an elite military unit’s pyrrhic quest to reunite the last remains of the Ryan family torn asunder by war (Bradshaw, 2019), another reason *Saving Private Ryan* was projected to win was because Spielberg was the director. The director’s status as an icon or even royalty of Hollywood was cemented far before *Saving Private Ryan*, because by the time the film was released in theatres, he had already become a household name, immortalized as the director of *Jaws*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, *Schindler’s List* and *Jurassic Park*, among which *Jaws* was a Best Picture nominee and *Schindler’s List* a Best Picture winner (Academy Awards, n.d.). With his commitment to using the latest techniques and technologies to ensure that his movies were always modern, his ability to attract viewers of all ages and demographics which guaranteed huge audiences, and his dedication to original material rather than milking the same old cash cow by continuing a franchise or series, he provided assurance of freshness and novelty in every new movie (Newbould, 2018). This could be seen in the use of state-of-the-art animatronics in *Jaws* and *Jurassic Park* or the fact that *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* appeal to people from all walks of life, drawing huge crowds and making him one of the most commercially successful directors (Newbould, 2018). However, the general consensus is that Spielberg’s most instrumental trait is his gift for great storytelling. *Saving Private Ryan* lived up to its reputation as a Spielberg film as well, since it eventually clinched the Academy Awards for Best Cinematography, Best Sound, Best Sound Effects Editing, Best Film Editing, and Best Director for him (Academy Awards, n.d.), only two awards fewer than *Shakespeare in Love*, which should have tied with *Saving Private Ryan*, each having 6 awards because of the fact that the Best Picture should have gone to *Saving Private Ryan*. In fact, a 2015 poll by the Hollywood Reporter even revealed that given another chance then, the combined votes of the Academy members would have resulted in *Saving Private Ryan*’s win over *Shakespeare in Love* (Beaumont-Thomas, 2015). 62 of the 99 Best Picture winning films also got the Best Director Award for their respective directors, so there was a fair chance that *Saving Private Ryan* would have gotten the Best Picture, since the last time a Best

Director who had not gotten the Best Picture for his film was 9 years ago in 1989, when the director of *Driving Miss Daisy* was not considered for a Best Director Nomination (Academy Awards, N.d.). Therefore, it defied all common sense that *Shakespeare in Love* would be able to overpower a film like *Saving Private Ryan* with beautiful scene shooting and phenomenal storytelling from one of Hollywood's best, as well as nearly lifelike portrayal of brutal war.

### 4.2.3 Conclusion

*Shakespeare in Love* may have been a reasonably good film with an emotional story, well composed original film score and convincing costumes to look the part of its Victorian setting, but except for its most devoted fans, the memories that its viewers harbour may be wrought with the anger that it upset *Saving Private Ryan* that year. *Private Ryan* had been released far earlier that year, remained at the top in box office sales and received critical acclaim out of all the films that year, appealing to the American demographic of the Academy members with its unrestrained, uncensored retelling of a few American patriots' fateful quest to save lives in a brutal war without glorifying the American effort and role in such bloodshed, with an emphasis on bringing Private Ryan home safely rather than winning the war or defeating the enemy (Ebert, 1998b). Even if the plots of both movies appealed to a large number of audience members, a film released far later that year, with a director whose reputation paled in comparison to Spielberg's should not have stood a chance. Hence, the victory of *Shakespeare in Love* over *Saving Private Ryan*, a name many more no doubt remember today, remains a subject of controversy since the night that an unworthy film with aspirations for Best Picture and its ruthless, brazen campaign won out over the film of an industry giant.

## 5. General Conclusion

Despite the Academy's attempts to diversify its membership in its awards voting bodies in recent years so as to show a fairer system, it still remains, as a whole, an elite and selective voting institution; some within the body had even openly admitted they hadn't even bothered to see all of the movies that were nominated in a given year. The socioeconomic influences entrenched in the Academy Awards, where millions are spent on aggressive campaigning and lobbying often do overshadow any arguments to be made for artistic merit. Votes can still be as easily campaigned for with private dinners and in private jets; all of which are accepted as customary during the awards season. Ideally, the Academy judges films based on their artistic merits only,

but as always, political considerations, money politics and even current events can have a greater impact on who eventually wins an Oscar.

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