

HOLLYWOOD

Reagan illusion mill outdazzles Oscar flash

By Pat Aufderheide

FOR THE LAST FIFTY YEARS, the Academy Awards have been a sanctifying ritual for celebrity, as well as an exercise in self-congratulation. But the time may finally have come when art has been pre-empted by life. When the Oscar nominations were announced this year, they came out on the same day that Reagan made his State of the Union address. And for moralism, populist sentimentality, wild fantasy and topsyturvy illusionism, the President won hands down.

Most of the nominated films were respectable entertainments in a traditional melodramatic mold, of the kind that, for a couple of hours, pours the syrup of sentimentality in between fissures in the social fabric. In the prestige categories, there was heartbreaking populist Americana that imitated '30s family-drama-about-social-issues films, in the rural trilogy of *Country, Places in the Heart* and *The River*. There was heartwarming Americana, too, in *The Natural* and *The Karate Kid*. There were epic-scaled morality

plays, *A Passage to India* and *The Killing Fields*. And there was mid-cult masterpiece in *Amadeus*, which made Mozart into a soundtrack of soundtracks.

A preference for schlock pervades the Academy, the professional organization of perhaps the most sentimental souls in America—veteran workers in the mass entertainment industry. The Academy's uplift tradition is the flip side of Hollywood scandal. If Hollywood stardom has always had a touch of harlotry, the annual awards ceremony has been the public demonstration of its heart of gold.

Both images are part of a bigger picture: Hollywood was always our haven of false consensus. When the lights went down, we dreamed together in an America we never knew outside it (a fact that escapes audiences around the world, who think Hollywood is America). When it first became a national pastime, moviegoing was a unique shared experience for people from a welter of immigrant cultures and oppressed minorities.

The tub-thumping "Americanization" campaigns of the '20s were outstripped by the mass appeal of a Theda Bara, a Rudolf

Valentino, a Cecil B. DeMille. Although some moviemakers, like Jack Warner, did see political implications in their work, most only wanted to sell movie tickets to masses of people who had little in common besides a general experience of poverty. The moguls unerringly located a common denominator in family entertainment: cheap sentiment.

False consensus is making a big comeback in the '80s, propelled by the disintegration of America's central international role. But now we stage our morality plays in other theaters: Beirut, Grenada and, soon, in the skies themselves with that coming attraction, "star wars."

For self congratulation and spectacle, who needs the Oscars when we've got the Olympics and the Inaugural? The only problem is that the lights never come up on this feature. The dream machine underneath the White House never quits, even when it's time to face reality.

Hollywood is still a bastion of liberal feeling. The biggest box-office hits, however, no longer depend on the misty populism that wins Oscars. Consider three top box office draws this year:

Ghostbusters, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, and *Beverly Hills Cop*, none of which won prestige Oscar nominations. Some say this reflects a traditional distaste for rewarding high-profit items during Hollywood's holy rites. And that has been true before, although not invariably; all-time box-office hit *Gone with the Wind* swept the Oscars in 1939, for instance. Others note that comedy usually fares poorly, and that Steven Spielberg, like other members of the "movie brat" generation such as Francis Coppola and George Lucas, is not seen as a team player in the industry.

Maybe, though, these films just don't fit into the Academy, which for better or worse wears its heart on its sleeve. None of these films even pretends to compete with that melodrama of Reagan's double-bill. They are the movie within that movie. In *Ghostbusters*, we meet a yahoo gang of entrepreneurs selling (as J. Hoberman pointed out in the *Village Voice*) the perfect '80s product, a service for an imaginary need. In their boys' playground-world, they have pissing contests with laser guns and battle a bitch-goddess. (Bill Murray hollers, "Let's show this bitch how we do things downtown!")

In *Indiana Jones*, an American adventurer makes the world his playground. In *Beverly Hills Cop*, Eddie Murphy is the once and future black, mayhem incarnate in country club America. These films don't bother with moral choices for good guys and get-out-your-handkerchief resolutions. It's just hijinks all over the psychosocial map. The lowest common de-

nominator in these movies is brute force, slapstick that stings.

Other films registered a breakdown in pop culture conventions more critically, and predictably they too were slighted in nominations. In the Academy's own backyard was *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai*, a hectic pastiche of movie melodrama whose irony may have been too freewheeling for the practitioners of genre films. In a poorer neighborhood was the independent feature *Repo Man*, which, like *Suburbia*, expressed in punk aesthetic a rebellion against a world of generic products, options and emotions.

In another country altogether from that of mainstream entertainment was the understated, surprise-success independent feature *Stranger Than Paradise*. Director Jim Jarmusch offered up alienation on a plate and, like a sullen waitress, told us to take it or leave it. His three characters wouldn't

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FILM

An old message from the heart

By Manar Said

BEYOND THE WALLS, NOMINATED for an Academy Award in the foreign-language category, is an Israeli film that addresses the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The film spends a great deal of time humanizing a group of Palestinian political prisoners and their antagonists, Jewish criminal prisoners, all stuck in a maximum security prison in Israel. The film's premise is that all people, given enough time and good will, will discover they have more in com-

mon than what divides them.

Scripted by Benny Barabash and directed by his brother Uri, *Beyond the Walls* shows the brutality with which Palestinian political prisoners are treated in Israeli jails by interrogators and sometimes by the criminal prisoners. The film portrays the slowly-developing understanding, friendship and love between the two main leaders in the prison—Isam, leader of the Palestinian politicals (Mohammed Bakri), sentenced to two life sentences for "terrorist attacks," and Uri Mizrahi (Arnon Zadok), leader of the Jewish criminals and in for armed robbery.

F. Murray Abraham, AMADEUS; Judy Davis, PASSAGE TO INDIA; Ralph Macchio, THE KARATE KID;

Together the two men organize a hunger strike for concessions from prison authorities. Isam's hour of reckoning comes at the end of the movie, when prison authorities try to break the strike by offering him freedom. His decision to stay in prison wins the hearts of the other prisoners and leaves the audience with a bittersweet taste of what life is like for Palestinians committed to nationalist ideals.

Director Uri Barabash explained in an interview with *In These Times* that for him the movie was intended "above all to fight against prejudice." The message he wanted the audience to take home is simple: "If love, brotherhood and companionship are possible in such a hell of a place, why not here and now?" His chosen genre is the old-fashioned love story, with gut-level emotional appeal.

The film has played to packed audiences all over Israel, and some special screenings included en-

counter sessions with the actors and audience discussions of their reactions. Barabash says these were successful, because they allowed Arabs and Jews to talk out their feelings with each other. Barabash credits the movie's success precisely with its lack of political concreteness, which he dismisses as "propaganda and rhetoric."

"If you want to make a film for 12 people, go ahead," he says. His film was intended for a mass audience, and he chose to "speak through the heart, and maybe the stomach, not through the head."

The movie's strength is its sympathy for the Palestinian prisoners. However, a lack of understanding of Palestinian politics plagues the whole movie. In one heated discussion among the Palestinians, one of the few times Palestinians are seen talking among themselves, one says, "The only good Jew is a Jew who leaves Palestine." Isam answers, "Your fanatics and their fanatics are just the same. You're not interested in

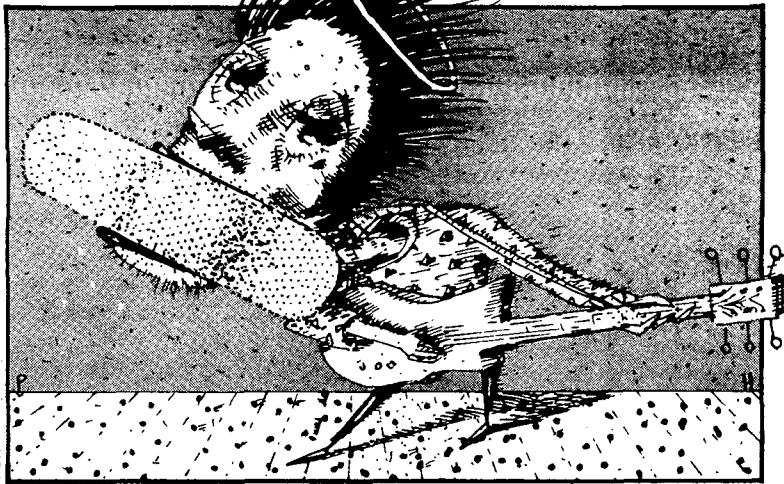
human beings, just ideologies."

In fact, no faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) officially espouses the racist doctrine of driving the Jews out of Palestine. This brief encounter is really an attack on ideology in all its forms, which Barabash says he finds useless in winning hearts for peace.

The fine ending is owed to the persistence of leading Palestinian actor Mohammed Bakri. According to the script, Isam was supposed to accept the prison authorities' offer to leave jail with his wife and son. But Bakri told Barabash on the set that if he agreed to play this scene as written, "he wouldn't be able to look his neighbors in the eye anymore." No Palestinian political prisoner would abandon ship like that, he argued, especially one like Isam.

Beyond the Walls will be distributed in the U.S. by Warner, and it may benefit not only from Oscar publicity but from the controversy it has stirred up in Israel. It was

MEDIA BEAT



POP MUSIC

An oily sound from Band Aid

By Simon Frith

BAND AID'S "DO THEY Know It's Christmas?" has become the best (and fastest) selling British single ever—eight million copies at last count. It was number one for January, and record shops' Feed the World racks look permanent.

This is the sort of success story that transcends taste. I bought it not to be left out, so I could join the debate about what it all means. The basic decency of pop stars seems to be the general reading; the poor are always with us is the message for me.

But organizer Bob Geldorf's energy is truly admirable; I'm less clear about the "sacrifices" made by the rest of the stars—a morning's work? And the shenanigans on *Top of the Pops*, as faces jostled to be seen, added spice to the season's party game: guess who refused to join Band Aid. (Annie Lennox? Elvis Costello?)

Good for them, if so. Happy as I am that the record's made £6.5 million for Ethiopia (and the political implications of treating the famine as simply a natural disaster aside), "Do They Know It's Christmas?" is the apogee of the dispiriting pop era that dates from EMI's signing of Duran Duran. Music and marketing are now indistinguishable; the Band Aid story is, above all, a celebration of sales success.

The "them and us" convention of rock and roll has been turned around. "We" are now the haves, "they" the have-nots. "Do They Know It's Christmas?" is a dreadful record because of its tone. Not compassion (which involves self-doubt and fear), but smugness. "They" don't know it's Christmas, "we" do. And in encouraging pop fans to identify with this (white, comfortable) consensus—who can disapprove of famine relief?—Band Aid are really intervening in a specifically British pop argument.

The coal miners' strike in England has inspired the most directly political use of music since Rock Against Racism. More musicians have played more benefits this year than for at least the last five. Even Wham played, or rather mimed, on a strike support show. The miners are vilified by the rest of the mass media so pop sympathy matters.

But the miners are good for music too. Their struggle has restored an essential sense of divi-

sion to the rock and roll scene. "Whose side are you on?" has become an important question again, gives consumer choices an ideological edge. And as the government continues, semi-successfully, to starve men back to work (striking miners get no social security payments, no strike pay), pop celebrations of affluence lose conviction—before Ethiopia, food parcels were being raised for Britons.

Do good causes make for good music? The question has been posed most pressingly by groups not in Band Aid. The Redskins and Bronski Beat are male trios, booted skinheads determined to subvert the skins' usual macho-fascist image. Bronski Beat are gays, a falsetto voice over a synthetic beat, heavily influenced by Sylvester.

They've been stalwart performers at miners' benefits, but their real ambition is to make the realities of gay sex (hostility, anxiety, love) as normal a concern of chart pop as disco/leather fantasies. Their music is stylistically limited, but emotionally charged. Frankie says "relax"; the Bronskis say "we can't." They have, as a result, been dismissed by a surprising number of critics as "whiners," "obsessed" with their sexuality, no fun. In the '70s Tom Robinson's bitter, ironic, "Glad to Be Gay" was misheard as cheerfully sentimental. Bronski Beat have, so far, left less room for ambiguity.

The Redskins, by contrast, are Britain's first Trotskyist pop group, a punk trio with soul leanings and no doubt that sexual politics is a diversion from class struggle. Like Bronski Beat, though, they've signed a big deal with Decca even while remaining the most indefatigable of the miners' support groups, and the point is (I write without cynicism) that the strike has done them good, too.

The Redskins are exciting live for their sheer energy, but Chris Dean can't really sing and his songs need the political conviction—the sound of working-class solidarity—that derives from the miners' example. Without that example, the Redskins' stance would merely be a posture.

A correct posture, mind you. I'd take the romance of the rank and file over the oily sound of charity any day.

Simon Frith, who teaches sociology at the University of Warwick, is the author of *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock'n'Roll*.

Shakespeare's Greatest Hits

William Bennett, the rock'n'roll loving youngster who got a good Jesuit education and then brought the concept of Top 40 to the classics during his tenure as head of the National Endowment for the Humanities—calling for a national standard-setting list of "best books" that all high school students should read before graduating—is now Secretary of Education. He may be one of the few members of this administration who knows how undemocratic Plato's *Republic* (one of his favorites) is. Not everyone is as happy as Martin Peretz, who in a recent issue of *The New Republic* published what looks like a recommendation letter for the man. At the University of Minnesota several professors called an open meeting to debate Bennett's report "To Reclaim a Legacy," his parting shot from the NEH, sounding an alarm about slipping standards (a.k.a. creeping contemporaneity) in the humanities. Calling Bennett one of the "Reagan Knights," German professor Jochen Schulte-Sasse claimed that Bennett's approach "objectifies, isolates and alienates great texts as ahistorical cultural authority." Bennett promptly earned the title, enthusiastically endorsing the administration's proposed budget cuts for education. Non-classical college curricula, he argued, failed to make students "better culturally and morally," so parents need not mourn the passing of grants and loans for college education. The \$50,000 for a Harvard degree, he went on, might better be spent setting a kid up in business. He did not endorse establishing a fund for this purpose.

The Devil in Disguise

Bennett isn't the only one worried about current definitions of the humanities. The religious right is exercised by the grip of "secular humanism" in the public schools. The Moral Majority defines it as "an incorrect view of mankind, placing the created at the center of all things, rather than the creator." Now, "secular humanism" is forbidden in public policy. In the Education for Economic Security Act of 1984, federally funded "magnet schools" may not use funds for "any course of instruction the substance of which is secular humanism." The restriction, apparently a trade-off to conservatives to get the bill passed, was dismissed by one legislator who said the term was so vague it didn't mean anything. But liberal critics are alarmed, including People for the American Way executive director Tony Podesta, who calls the term "a hoax concocted by the far right, which uses the phrase to describe anything they don't like, from the theory of evolution to the works of Homer, Hawthorne and Hemingway." As secretary of education, Bennett may have to explain his top 10 favorite classics to one of the administration's favorite constituencies.

On the Best Authority

The Screen Actors Guild, dominated by liberals for the last 15 years, has been under attack since 1980 by a dissident group, Actors Working for an Actors' Guild. One of AWAG's co-founders, actor-producer Morgan Paull, has just declared his decision to run for "high guild office" this year. The only problem is that Paull is a producer, and a producer is, uh, management. Even Ronald Reagan thinks so, or did in 1960, when he stepped down as SAG president because, as he put it, "It's a guild tradition that no person who has a substantial producer interest in the making of motion pictures should serve as an officer or member of the board of directors." Paull already stepped down from his position as AWAG chair once, but now he says his resignation was unnecessary. The Department of Labor may disagree; in a similar case in the Writers Guild of America, it ruled against writer-producers.

What's Missing from This Picture?

They called it "the living room war," because television brought America's role in the war in Vietnam into our homes. Or at least, that's how it seemed. In a recent analysis of TV coverage of the war between 1968 and 1973, published in the *Journal of Broadcasting*, Oscar Patterson III found otherwise. He discovered that less than a quarter of the stories in his 180-program sample concerned Vietnam. Perhaps more significant was that only rarely did the stories include films or photos of combat. Pictures of dead or wounded featured in only about 2 percent of war-related stories. And body counts appeared, invariably, as pictureless statistics. Patterson thinks that "a few graphic, highly dramatic events" stuck in people's minds, changing their perception of their nightly news feed.

Linguistic Liberation

In a recent interview in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, Czech poet and 1984 Nobel laureate Jaroslav Seifert explained the relationship between poetry and politics. "I write to feel free," he said. "What one looks for in language is the most elementary freedom—freedom to express innermost thoughts. That is the basis of all freedom, and it ultimately takes the form of political freedom."

"When I write," he continued, "I strive not to lie. If one cannot speak the truth, one should keep silent."

—Pat Aufderheide

know what to do with a movie like *Country*. In their seedy environs, a slam-bang entertainment like *Ghostbusters* might brighten up an aimless evening.

Some of the most energetic and interesting films of the year deserted traditional narrative, putting music and performance in the center instead. The best of *The Cotton Club*, whose story line was perfunctory, was in its ecstatic performance scenes (and word is that the best was left out, in obedience to mainstream marketing "wisdom" that left Richard Gere as bait for white audiences).

Jonathan Demme's expert control made the Talking Heads' *Stop Making Sense* as disorienting a disturbance as their music is. And Prince's *Purple Rain* offered to an MTV generation an emotional blowout that makes melodrama look tame. *Purple Rain* was more than a string of music videos; it was an extended musical improvisation on the theme of struggle for self-expression in a world without consensus about anything.

With this much evidence of change converging on the sound stages of Los Angeles studios, Hollywood's romance with itself is looking a little dated. You might even say it's in danger of being upstaged. When the Academy Awards are broadcast this year, they will be watched by tens of millions of people around the globe. And, if producers have anything to say about it, one of the featured celebrities will be the master of false consensus himself, Ronald Reagan. It's be a bit part, but he doesn't have to worry. He's now the star of his own show. ■

Sissy Spacek, *THE RIVER*.

shown at the Knesset, to predictably mixed reactions, and even settler fanatic Meir Kahane helped publicize the movie.

In Jerusalem, 3,000 people held a counter-protest when Kahane demonstrated against it, driving him away with tomatoes and chants. Barabash says he has been denounced as pro-PLO in the Hebrew press. On the other hand, many Palestinians criticize the film for not being realistic enough, and for avoiding mention of real political groups and sticking to emotions.

The main problem with the film from a Palestinian perspective is that it is able to capitalize on the pathos of the Palestinian tragedy without committing itself to any concrete solution. It leads the audience to believe that good will alone can overcome institutionalized racism. ■

Manar Said is a writer for *Al Fajr*, the Jerusalem Palestinian weekly, where she wrote extensively on *Beyond the Walls*.