

By Todd Leopold

CNN

TEXT SIZE

**(CNN)** -- Many questions came to mind when the Oscar nominations were announced: Who's going to win best picture? Why wasn't "Once" nominated more than once?



"The Godfather" was the leading box-office film of its time -- and won the Oscar for best picture.

But there was one question that, surely, Hollywood didn't want to hear.

Does anyone care anymore?

It's not the kind of question anyone in Tinseltown would ask aloud. However, the entertainment industry must surely be wondering if its biggest night has started, like the pictures in "Sunset Boulevard," to become small.

"The Oscars Should Die," headlined a Marc Peyser column on Newsweek.com, calling the show "freeze-dried." "[C]onsidering the anticipation and hype that precede the show every year, this is one pretty awful excuse for A-list entertainment," he wrote.

"[O]nce again, there are lots of films that most people haven't seen and don't care about," wrote Slate's "Hollywoodland" columnist Kim Masters after the nominations were announced. "Should commercial success figure into Oscar nominations? Of course not. But when it comes to generating big ratings for the telecast, this year's slate spells trouble." [📺 Interactive: This year's nominees »](#)

Indeed, Oscar's TV ratings have been struggling -- though that's a relative term for a traditionally much-watched show dubbed "the Super Bowl for women" for its ability to draw large numbers of female viewers.

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Since 1974, only seven Oscar broadcasts have attracted an audience lower than 40 million viewers. Three of them have occurred in the last five years -- 33 million viewers watched in 2003, about 39 million in 2006 and 39.9 million last year.

## Art and commerce, then and now

(Best picture winners in bold; best picture nominees in italics)

### The top 10 box office champions, 1976

1. "Jaws," 1975
2. **"The Godfather,"** 1972
3. "The Exorcist," 1973
4. **"The Sound of Music,"** 1965

5. "Gone With the Wind," 1939
6. "The Sting," 1973
7. "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," 1975
8. "The Towering Inferno," 1974
9. "Love Story," 1970
10. "The Graduate," 1967

The top 10 box office champions, 2008

1. "Titanic," 1997
2. "Star Wars," 1977
3. "Shrek 2," 2004
4. "E.T.," 1982
5. "Star Wars - Episode I: The Phantom Menace," 1999
6. "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest," 2006
7. "Spider-Man," 2002
8. "Star Wars - Episode III: Revenge of the Sith," 2005
9. "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King," 2003
10. "Spider-Man 2," 2004

Sources: *Weekly Variety*, via "The Book of Lists" by David Wallechinsky, Irving Wallace and Amy Wallace; [boxofficemojo.com](http://boxofficemojo.com); [IMDb.com](http://IMDb.com)

Compare those totals to the 1998 telecast, the year "Titanic" was crowned, which drew 55.2 million viewers.

Peter Sealey, an adjunct professor of marketing at Claremont Graduate University's Drucker School and a former Columbia Pictures executive, acknowledges that the show has trouble when the nominees, however noteworthy, aren't big box-office successes.

"The show will have modest ratings this year," he says. "The nominees are not the kinds of films women go to see." (Of this year's best picture nominees, at least two -- "There Will Be Blood" and "No Country for Old Men," the two favorites for the prize -- are downbeat, violent films lacking big stars. Only one, the sleeper hit "Juno," has pulled in excess of \$100 million at the box office.)

Independent filmmaker and two-time Oscar nominee John Sayles observes that recent Oscars have also lacked star power. "Certainly, the TV show is happier with bigger celebrities rather than newcomers," he says.

He observes that one year, host Billy Crystal, noting the presence of relative unknowns, asked, "Who are you people?"

Still, says Sealey, Hollywood movies continue to have a global impact. "Movies are a central cultural force for the United States. ... The movies we make are the standard all over the world. They're a tremendous social force," he says. There's a reason, he implies, the Oscars are broadcast all over the world.

"The Academy Awards," he concludes, "still matter."

They matter as much for their marketing potential as their ability to draw a large television audience. After all, a movie that earns an Oscar nomination almost always gets a box office boost, assisted by those ads that blare how many nominations the film received. It's a shot of extra publicity for a film that may have died otherwise. (**Sidebar: Turning prestige films into box-office gold**)

The Oscars were always as much about marketing as art, another way to keep movies in the forefront of the public imagination. Louis B. Mayer and his industry pals created the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in early 1927 to improve the industry's image -- then under fire because of labor disputes and boundary-pushing material -- and honor its best work, Mason Wiley and Damien Bona write in their

indispensable book "Inside Oscar."

Eighty years later, with the studios now in the hands of large multimedia corporations, the awards haven't changed much. Though the Hollywood studios would be pleased if mainstream blockbusters were nominated, they're just as happy with the low-budget "indie" films that earn awards -- since, for the most part, they all have their own "indie" branches, such as Fox Searchlight and Paramount Vantage, says Notre Dame film professor Jim Collins. (One of these indie branches, Warner Independent Pictures, is a unit of Time Warner, as is its parent Warner Bros. -- and CNN.)

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"They see it as diversification," Collins says. "It's not like the Oscars have been taken over by a band of renegades. Virtually every studio has a summer popcorn movie and a fall prestige film. Each major studio developed an independent division to expand market share."

In the last three years, only four of the 15 best picture nominees have been from the major studios, he notes.

Audience tastes have changed as well. In the pre-"Star Wars" era, some of the biggest box office hits of all time were also best picture winners, including "The Godfather," which -- with its large, ethnic cast, rich dialogue, deliberate pacing, period setting and three-hour running time -- would almost certainly be an indie film today. (See box of top 10 hits, then and now.)

More recent bonanzas and best picture winners such as "Titanic" and "Lord of the Rings" are the exceptions that prove the rule: the former hearkened back to old-fashioned epic filmmaking, the latter equally appealed to fantasy-loving fanboys and art-house audiences.

"It used to be, come one, come all," says Collins. "But when you're dealing with sophisticated ways of calibrating audiences, [the studios] ask, 'How do we fill out the [demographic] quadrant?'"

So, given the realities of the marketplace, what can the Oscars do to boost viewership? Every year Oscar show producer Gil Cates announces various initiatives to speed up the show and make it more entertaining, and every year the running time is extended by long-winded speeches or self-congratulatory tributes to the majesty of film.

Sayles suggests that the awards go to an "American Idol"-style vote-off, or try a suggestion from the screenwriter William Goldman to make the voting transparent. With so many awards shows on TV, it's hard to make the Oscars stand out, he says: "It used to be that there were the Oscars, and that was it. There were no SAG Awards, or the People's Choice Awards." Even the Independent Spirit Awards, once an industry sidelight at best, is televised and features major names, he points out.

(Moreover, there's as much interest in celebrities and clothes as the awards: Collins says some of his students may watch the red-carpet specials "and then wander out.")

**Or should the Academy do anything? Sealey observes that it's not just the Oscars -- network viewership is down across the board, a decline that has been going on for almost two decades.**

**Besides, he says, if the Oscars isn't the monster it was in years past, it's still -- next to the Super Bowl -- perhaps the most dependable audience event any network has.**

In the end, the Academy can only hope that, mild-grossing prestige films or no, the Oscars retain their special aura. Writer Bruce Vilanch, a regular Oscar show contributor, was asked by Entertainment Weekly if he'd still watch if the honors were derailed by the writers strike and ended up in some truncated form.

"Of course. I'd watch the Oscars without sound," he said. "It's the Oscars." [E-mail to a friend](#) 

