

The Academy Awards: Sparkly, Sensational, and Totally Sexist



Photo taken from [The Spectator](#).

Ever since the hashtag “[Oscars So White](#)” began floating around last year, the awards show has scrambled to frame itself as a more racially inclusive platform. Sure, there was diversity in the Best Picture category with *Moonlight*, *Fences*, and *Lion*, but these all contain male-centric plots. The Academy is still [lagging drastically behind](#) when it comes to celebrating female-centric narratives that are challenging and socially important.

Why was *20th Century Women*, along with its leading lady Annette Bening, left completely out of the running? Why did *Hidden Figures* garner a Best Picture nomination, but Taraji P. Henson, the woman at the film’s emotional helm, fail to receive a Lead Actress nod? Because (and this is just a hunch)

the general public, the Academy included, is still very unsettled by autonomous, intelligent, and unapologetic women. (See: [patriarchy](#).)



The cast of *20th Century Women*. Photo taken from [Google](#).

20th Century Women takes place in Santa Barbara, California, in 1979. It tells the story of the intellectual, Birkenstock-clad Dorothea (Annette Bening) trying to raise her son Jamie (played by the endearing Lucas Jade Zinman) to be a “good man,” without the help of a man. She enlists the help of her boarder Abby (given to us by the lovable Greta Gerwig) a mid-20s’ photographer with a joie de vivre who is coming to terms with a barren womb; and Jamie’s friend Julie (played by Elle Fanning), the angsty, sexually aware teenager who can’t wait to skip town. Dorothea’s other boarder, the sexy, sensitive William (played by the sexy, sensitive Billy Crudup) works with his hands and floats in the background, intermittently giving Jamie gems of advice like, “You don’t just have sex with the vagina. You have sex with the whole

woman.”

Dorothea, Abby, and Julie are a collective celebration of womanhood at its different phases. They each give Jamie something different: Dorothea gives him the winning mix of maternal love and freedom; space to discover who he is. Abby gives him a plethora of feminist literature. Julie gives him blue balls, unrequited love, and ultimate heartbreak, a “necessary” lesson according to his mother.

Together, these women mold our feminist dream boy. He is our future. He is what will diminish rape culture. He will not be afraid of his emotions. He is being conditioned to become not just a “good man,” but a good human.

[Mike Mills](#), the writer/director, artfully urges us toward a better future with his brilliant characters. He ultimately begs the question, “How can we co-exist as opposite sexes, as different people, in peace?” *20th Century Women* is a love note to the human experience, specifically the female experience. Mills challenges us. He bends rules and mixes genre. He is not afraid to air his grievances about our flawed world.

So I’ll ask again: Why was this film overlooked? It was brilliant, deeply emotional, and separately cerebral. Why was Bening’s performance left out? Was she too confronting? Not “feminine” enough?

The same questions plague me when it comes to Taraji P. Henson, the star of *Hidden Figures*, a thunderbolt of a film. *Hidden Figures* was nominated for Best Picture, but Henson herself was overlooked. How can they nominate a film without recognizing the woman who drove it?



The women of *Hidden Figures*. Photo taken from [Boston Magazine](#).

Taraji portrays the uber-genius [Katherine G. Johnson](#), one of the first black women to play a crucial role in NASA's flight missions. She calculated the trajectories, launch windows, and emergency back-up return paths for many flights from Project Mercury, including the early NASA missions of John Glenn and the 1969 Apollo 11 flight to the Moon. This was all in a time when black people – let alone women – were not even allowed to touch the same doorknob as white people. Katherine now holds a Presidential Medal of Freedom as well. (No big deal.) Unfortunately, I hadn't heard about this woman until I saw the film. But alas, it's history kids, not "theirstory."



Dorothy Vaughan, Katherine Johnson and Mary Jackson (L-R) were “human computers” at NASA when the United States made some of its biggest strides in space. BOB NYE/NASA/DONALDSON COLLECTION/SMITH COLLECTION/GADO/GETTY IMAGES. Photo taken from [HowStuffWorks.com](https://www.howstuffworks.com).

Henson undertook this colossal and honorable task of portraying such a woman with regal grace and emotional genius. She was subtle, raw, comedic, and stole every scene even when, at times, it seemed that she was trying hard not to do so. This is no small task, especially when acting alongside the powerhouses Octavia Spencer (nominated for Best Supporting), who portrays Dorothy Vaughn, and Janelle Monae, who portrays Mary Jackson – [two other genius women of color working at NASA](#) alongside Katherine.

I cried, I laughed, I became enraged at the umbrella of injustice that hangs over women, especially black women. Katherine works as hard as her predominantly white male peers, but she is constantly being tested. She is not allowed to use the same coffee pot; they give her a separate pot and label it “colored.” She is not allowed to use their bathroom. She is

hard-pressed to breathe comfortably in the same room.



Hidden Figures co-writer Allison Schroeder is the only woman nominated for screenwriting in any category. Photo taken from [The LA Times](#).

In a heart-swelling scene, she finally buckles under the discrimination. Her boss (played by Kevin Costner) asks her in frustration why she disappears for almost an hour each day. Katherine, soaking wet from the rain, finally bursts, exclaiming that she has to walk a mile back and forth to get to the colored bathroom. Her honest outpouring startles him awake – he sees her pain, he sees the impact it has on her crucial work, so he decides to make all bathrooms at NASA color neutral. He also throws out the “colored” coffee pot with a warning glare to his bigoted scientists. I was sure this scene was going to play at the awards show as Taraji’s nomination clip. But alas, that dream failed to launch.

The Oscars are still coming around to the fact that the world is indeed not seen only through white, male, heterosexual

eyes. They're doing a little better. They were kind enough to open up one spot for a black man in a leading role (Denzel Washington for *Fences*) and one spot for a black woman in a leading role (Ruth Negga for *Loving*). But two black men and two black women in a leading role? That would have been a little much. It's not the [BET Awards](#) here; it's the Oscars!



Ruth Negga in *Loving*. Photo taken from shadowandact.com.

So, the Academy chose Ruth Negga as the filler for the unnamed “colored” slot in the Lead Actress category. Negga is the star of *Loving*, the story of an interracial couple living in 1950’s Virginia. She portrays [Mildred](#), the colored wife of a white man, Richard Loving. They are arrested for their marriage and, with the help of the ACLU, they take their case all the way to the [Supreme Court](#). They win, and this victory aids to eliminate the cruel miscegenation laws that plagued the United States during the pre-civil rights era.

Unlike Katherine, Mildred is timid and devoid of passion. She has no sovereignty, and she does not desire it. Her story arc is completely intertwined with a man’s life. When a member of

the ACLU asks Mildred and Richard if they want to appear at the Supreme Court to hear their case, one of the most historical in U.S. history, Richard says he won't go. Mildred then, of course, says she won't go without him. Come on Mildred! Where's your independence?

The same lack of female individuality can be seen in *La La Land*, another sub-par film that swept a Lead Actress and Best Picture nomination. The story revolves around Mia, portrayed by the wide-eyed wonder girl Emma Stone, a struggling actress. She falls in love with Sebastian (played by Ryan Godling – that is not a typo), a struggling jazz musician who, for some reason, bemoans modern jazz. Mia eventually gives up on her dreams of acting until Sebastian pushes her to go to the one final audition that turns out to be her break. Note: if it wasn't for the man in her life to urge her, she wouldn't have accomplished her dreams. Anyway, Mia and Sebo move in together, they both hit the big time, they break up, the end. What weight. What circumstance. What a bore.

Sure, *La La Land* is well-directed. Yes, it's a well-executed homage to *Singin' in the Rain*, to classic movie magic, but it's not socially important. It doesn't present anything extraordinary, nor does it showcase a female lead that exhibits strength and self-certainty. In contrast, *20th Century Women* and *Hidden Figures* give us female leads who are self-made and self-assured. They're wrapped up in their own lives, their own intellectual endeavors, and their onscreen romances blossom out of this fact. The men who love them love their independence and the romance remains a [B-story](#) throughout.

Nonetheless, it seems the Academy voters want to continue to reinforce the image of woman as delicate and codependent. They'd rather recognize the likes of Emma Stone in *La La Land*, cheery white women playing cheery roles about the industry, because what would the Oscars be without that? And the likes of Ruth Negga in *Loving*, timid colored women who must remain

in the shadow of their white male counterpart.

Annette Bening and Taraji P. Henson did important work. Their performances chipped away at the suffocating mold of “woman” that male hands have crafted. Their characters remind us that the struggle for women’s rights and the struggle for civil rights are intertwined: they are both a struggle for human rights. The Academy, ever the influencer and tastemaker, should use its social pull to expose such brilliance. Art is revolution. Art teaches us about ourselves and others. It is up to these voters to recognize cinema that explores an often-unseen point of view, to recognize art about women that is challenging and not just pretty.

Maybe Taraji P. as Katherine was too much – an uber-intelligent, funny, black, female, no shit-taker history-maker. And Annette as Dorothea, too unruly – her clothes too loose-fitting, her attitude about sex too casual, her life too unconventional. Perhaps we are doomed to remain in a society that is blinded by sparkles and sensationalism, content with demure women, knights in jazz-hipster armor, and feeble plot lines. Perhaps I’ll go cry into a [Laura Mulvey](#) essay now.

POST OSCARS ROUND-UP

So the results are in – the unsurprising (yet still infuriating) win of Emma Stone, the much-deserved win of Viola Davis, and the history-making win of *Moonlight*. And because this article implores the industry to move away from enforcing patriarchal standards, Casey Affleck’s win cannot go unmentioned. A person accused of sexual harassment on two accounts is still given work and grandiose accolades. Why? Because this said person is a white male, related to another powerful white male, and this is enough to keep him on the roster for auditions. But that’s old news. And now the 2017 Oscars are old news as well.

Yet we cannot allow our short-term memory to short-change us. From now until next February, we should all try to pay attention to films that may not have been able to afford a huge promotional release. We should pay attention to films that are quirky and off-kilter and honest and don't quite fit into traditional categories of "romance" "drama" "comedy". Life is all of those things at once, and good cinema reflects that. Let's spread the word about films that make us proud of women and proud to be women. Let's celebrate films that portray men who also celebrate women, men like Jamie. And finally, let's boycott films that employ predators.

This way, when next year's Oscars come around and the nominees are predominantly white, and the Best Director category is completely male-dominated, and the Best Actress category is full of women who portrayed characters that fit into the patriarchal dream, we will know we have done everything we can to change the industry norm. If we continue to demand a different kind of art, in time, the industry will bend a bit. Let's hope it will give opportunities to female directors without asking them to pay the price with their bodies. Let's hope the industry will choose a colored queer director instead of the white male director with a few big names on his roster. Let's celebrate art that reflects the messiness of real life, films that makes us feel seen. There is nothing wrong with white people breaking into song and dance in the Hollywood Hills (I'm talking about that scene from [La La Land](#), but I could also be talking about an Oscars after-party). We just can't allow that to remain the industry standard for high-art.