



WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

THE OSCARS 2017

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What was the significance of
the 2017 Oscars meltdown,
and why does it really matter?
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Picture courtesy of Altitude Films

You might think that in a year dominated by the awfulness and uncertainty of the Trump presidency and with the dark storm clouds of an unraveling Brexit gathering ominously, there would be little to say about the Oscars. Something so self-obsessed, self-aggrandising and in-thrall to its own superficial image making might seem irrelevant under the circumstances. Mind you, there's been something just like that in the White House this year, so maybe not.

The Oscars can often be good slick fun but also so over-controlled and stage-managed that, to paraphrase the title of a big 2017 contender, they can come over as a little Blah Blah Bland. However, not so earlier this year; and not just because of the buttock-clenching embarrassment for all concerned when the

wrong Best Picture winner was announced, there were a number of other, less obvious reasons why it was a particularly interesting night.

Ostensibly though, this was the year of the wrong winner. Up to that point it had all been going so well. *La La Land* (Chazelle/USA/2017) had won a clutch of Oscars including best actress for Emma Stone and best director for Damien Chazelle. Casey Affleck had just won Best Actor when Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty, the original duo from *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn/USA/1967) stepped up to the podium to announce the ultimate award, Best Picture. Beatty opened the envelope and after hesitating for a moment, apparently for dramatic effect, showed it to Dunaway who announced '*La La Land*'. So far so good; the cast and crew ascended the stage to collect their trophy and had launched

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into their thank-you speeches when there was a brief commotion. The film's producer, Jordan Horowitz stepped quickly to the mic.

'I'm sorry,' he said 'there's a mistake. Moonlight, you guys won best picture.'

Horowitz's fellow producer Mark Platt reinforced the point,

'This is not a joke. They read the wrong thing.'

Unsurprisingly, horrified pandemonium ensued before Barry Jenkins, the director of *Moonlight*, (Jenkins/USA/2017) stepped up to make the best of what should have been his big moment, but had now become a very awkward and embarrassing moment indeed.

Beatty later tried to explain:

I want to tell you what happened. I opened the envelope and it said, 'Emma

Stone, *La La Land*. That's why I took such a long look at Faye and at [the audience]. I wasn't trying to be funny.

The problem turned out to be simple, catastrophic human error. The process for announcing the Oscars had for over 80 years been the responsibility of the accountancy firm PWC. It was they that tallied the votes, so only they knew who had won in advance of the night. They had someone in each wing of the stage with a duplicate set of envelopes containing the winners in each category. In turn, the two accountants would hand over the envelope for each category as the next presenter arrived. So it had always worked, until this year, when senior accountant Brian Cullinan, distracted by the moment and Tweeting excitedly on his phone, accidentally gave Beatty the duplicate envelope for the already announced category of Best Actress, not Best Picture. This included the words 'Emma Stone *La La Land*', which explains why Beatty looked puzzled when he opened it.

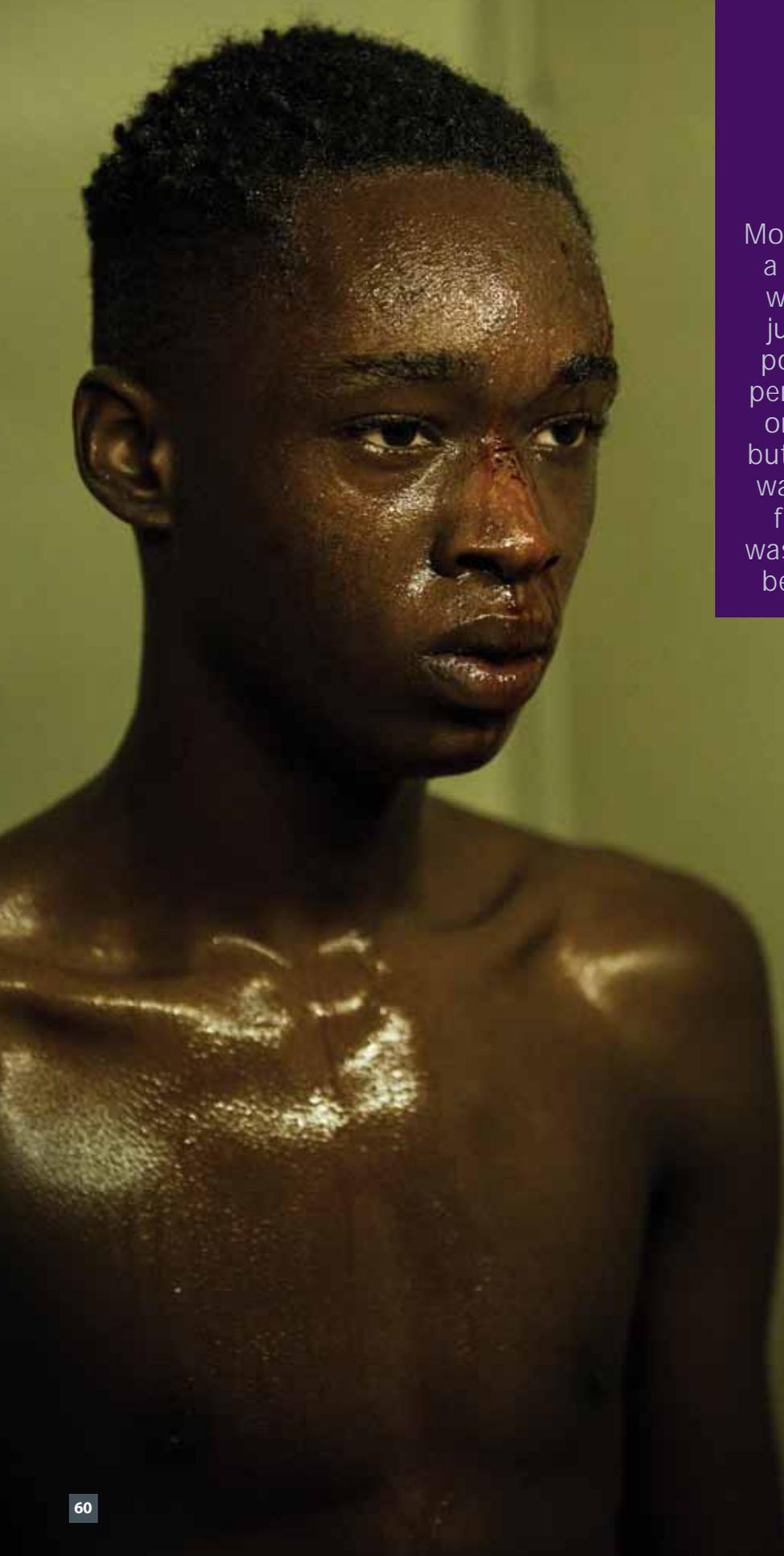
Moonlight's Producer Adele Romanski summed up, saying that she hoped her film's win was

'...inspiring to people, little black boys and brown girls, and other folks watching at home who feel marginalised.'

Which is why it all really did matter. As awful as it may be to make a mistake in front of an audience of millions, this is an awards show where, on the whole, the rich and powerful vote for other rich and powerful people to get an award that makes them richer and more powerful. Throughout the history of the Oscars, most of those doing both the voting and the winning had been white and male.

Moonlight was therefore a genuine rarity, bucking the monolithic white male dominance of American cinema. In Barry Jenkins, the film had a black writer-director, working with a black cast and a mixed-race crew. Together they created a film that did not fall into the cliché of so many other films with non-white casts. The makers did not assume that a black cast meant the film had to be about being black and struggling with race issues, any more than any white-dominated film would be expected to focus on what it feels like to be white.

The film is a coming-of-age drama, about a young gay man growing up in Miami, who also just so happens to be black. The film fulfils the notion that a society becomes post-racial when skin-colour becomes incidental and irrelevant. It is limiting and restrictive that black people (or for that matter women, gay people or any other 'minority') can only be protagonists in films specifically about being black, (female



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or gay) or which, in some other way, directly address the experience of their 'minority'.

So it really mattered that *Moonlight* had its moment spoiled. Especially, as it turned out, in the year of Charlottesville, Trump and white nationalist/far-right resurgence, when so much social progress seemed on the cusp of reversal.

This was, you may remember, two short years after the 'Oscars So White' affair of 2015, when all major nominations went to white actors. Major black artists such as Will Smith and Spike Lee went on to boycott the similarly white dominated 2016 awards in protest.

Two years later after the original controversy, with a newly installed African American CEO, Cheryl Boone-Isaacs, and some major changes to the lists of those who got to vote, the first fruits of a new approach reached cinemas. *Moonlight* was not the only 'black' film in contention, others in early 2017 included *Hidden Figures* (Melfi/USA/2017), *Fences* (Washington/USA/2017) and *Loving* (Nichols/USA/2017)

However worthy, well-made, and important these films were, they were films about being black. They told powerful stories, which needed to be told, but still reinforced the cliché that black people, when cast, should lead stories about being black, often for majority black audiences. A restriction never suffered by the traditional white male lead. Hence, *Moonlight* was a deserving winner, not just for the power of its performances or direction but because it was a 'black' film which was not about being black.

It was therefore, all the more disappointing that at *Moonlight*'s moment, when the changes generated by 'Oscars So White' took effect, all anyone could talk about was an embarrassing snafu (Google it!) over envelopes. In the year of the rise of the right, films that help defuse racism, need to be seen and celebrated.

There is one more reason why the 2017 Oscars were worthy of note. The presenting duo Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway were the leads in *Bonnie and Clyde*, a 1967 film which changed the face of Hollywood, and had been invited to host to mark the fiftieth anniversary of its release.

By the 1960's despite the fall of the old Studio System, the formula for making American films had become stale and worn. Genre films with familiar stars and repetitive stories dominated. *Bonnie and Clyde* was amongst a small clutch of films including *Easy Rider* (Hopper/USA/1969) and *The Graduate* (Nichols/USA/1967) which shook things up and showed there was another way to make films that could be fresh, sexy, thrilling and shocking. These films became known as The New American Cinema. They changed the medium and led the way to the great films of the 1970s

and to the great auteur directors that dominated that time. It is often said that that the 1970's was the true golden age of American film: an era that produced classic films such as *The Godfather* (Coppola/USA/1972) and *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola/USA/1979), *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese/USA/1976) and *Raging Bull* (Scorsese/USA/1980).

Fast forward to 2017. Cinemas are packed with effects-laden genre films, mostly part of franchises or 'shared universes'. Yet in 2017, the worst summer box office season for many years, many of those 'sure fire hits' have flopped, whilst film-makers struggle to raise finance for anything which is not a micro-budget indie or a franchise-blockbuster. It might be argued that Hollywood really needs another *Bonnie and Clyde* moment, when a group of audacious and imaginative filmmakers hijacks the medium to thrill audiences and once again produce the sort of essential cinema that so often seems lost in today's world of filmmaking by numbers.

Perhaps the 2017 Oscars should be remembered for rather more than someone getting distracted and 'dropping the ball'. Could it be that *Moonlight* and others like it might be the first steps towards that new Hollywood? Films with heart, craft and conviction, where the storytelling matters more than the spreadsheet. A cinema of relevance, of challenge, rather than computer-generated Prozac. If so, the Oscars 2017 might have been the best awards night of all.

Jonathan Nunns is Head of Media Studies at Collyer's College and an A level moderator.



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