

The Oscars whiteout is driven by racism - and greed

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The Hollywood film industry has never tested the idea that a black actor could be more bankable than a white one

Sunday 24 January 2016 12.55 EST

The row about the Oscars looked like the perfect spectator spat: it was about something real. Why was there not a single actor of colour represented in the nominations? Was there a problem of under-representation at the judging level? What did it say to society that such a toweringly high-profile, public-facing institution could fail in such an obvious way? What might it say if, through simple and consistent argumentation, the situation could be resolved? Add in the global reach, the beauty quotient, and a couple of villains - Michael Caine telling black actors to “be patient”; Charlotte Rampling worrying that the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite was “racist to whites” - and you have a storm that is structurally perfect.

Just about the only thing wrong with it is that the Academy responded so fast, promising to double its female and minority membership by 2020. Ideally, it would have held out for longer to soak up more of the anger, which instead was scattered like after-fires at ill-judged remarks from the likes of Julie Delpy, who said at the weekend that she’d rather be African-American than a woman in Hollywood. The politics of competitive discrimination are fascinating - the elaborate respect that the discriminated-against are required to pay to one another has the effect of muting their solidarity and, of course, takes the heat off the people doing the discriminating. But arriving on the heels of the all-white Oscars, the actor’s remarks started no such conversation, and instead left her exposed like the slowest antelope, apologising through her “people”, as Rampling had done before her.

Why, given the merry outcome, might one be left with a nagging sensation that this is rather a cosmetic, sanitised version of a conversation about racism? Why does it seem as though there’s a more important debate about race, in Hollywood, in America, in the general atmosphere of exported American culture, that has not been had?

Last week the Economist published a chart showing the number of black Oscar winners over time to have been “pretty much in line with the size of America’s overall black population”. The really marked disparity is between Latinos, as a proportion of the population, and as a percentage both of the Screen Actors Guild and of Oscar nominations. So we can rest assured that the Academy is still racist, just in a slightly different direction. Furthermore, the chances of this year’s “whiteout” being a statistical blip are extremely small, so the institution is becoming more racist over time. But actually, not only are the numbers more subtle than the debate allows, there is also a more subtle bias than numbers alone can describe.

John Skrentny, who runs the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, describes a recruitment phenomenon he calls “racial realism”. Employers match African-American, Asian-American and Latino candidates with markets or groups of the same race, on the basis that they will have a superior understanding. It happens across the public and private sector, in supermarkets and schools, in hospitals and telemarketing: this isn’t positive discrimination, indeed it is its opposite. It is not intended to foster equality of opportunity but to maximise profit. If, in the pursuit of that, a tacit racial segregation results, so be it.

In Hollywood, the relevance is the distinction between a black actor being chosen for a film like *12 Years a Slave*, where his race is critical to the plot, and a black actor being cast in any given supporting role, as a result of the business decision that white actors are more bankable and have to be cast as the lead. This is manifestly more pernicious than hiring a Latin-American tele-marketer to serve racially profiled customers. It creates a set of cultural expectations in which, defying the evidence of our own five senses, we accept that the black half of any given duo is less likely to get the girl, more likely to be killed in a comical or tragic accident, less likely to say something deep or droll, more likely to have been disposed of by the end of the film.

Bluntly, one race is cast in a supporting and therefore subservient role to the other, and this is oppressive in a way that all the representation in the world couldn’t address. You could have 20 black actors in a film all playing valets, and you would merely underline an idea of white superiority.

It has been observed often that mainstream cinema is becoming more sexist, with less use for anything other than the decorative female, and the erudite heroines of the 30s and 40s as alien to us now as mime artists or smoking babies. The root cause is the same; a cultural form this profit-driven will always cleave to the norm. Even as the wider culture changes, begins to accommodate arguments, recognises its flaws, these advances cannot percolate when the commercial interest is so fixed. This is not to say that challenging expectations could never make a profit. The idea that a black actor could be more bankable than a white one, or an intelligent heroine may actually attract audiences is simply not tested: challenge is a risk and, as such, a needless cost.

This isn’t to say that no victory has been won. The Academy will benefit from becoming more diverse: 2020 is rather a lax deadline to set for itself, yet the direction is to be applauded - but only if the industry as a whole starts to ask not “how representative are we?” but “who are we calling heroes?”.

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