

# 'The tricks of the trade (un)exposed'

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## Abstract

One of the filmic trends which has been neglected by the Academy Awards is the metacinema, which for practical purposes I will consider to be a cross between the complexities of the self-reflexive cinema (highly connoted with modernism) and the Hollywood Film (the classical films about the urge to 'make it' in Hollywood). Indeed, these films have always existed and some, as *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950, USA) and *Mulholland Dr.* (David Lynch, 2001, FRA/USA), have even made it to the ceremony, but were, predictably, defeated in the main categories, by other more 'serious' or less self-reflexive products. The United States has always insisted on not revealing the tricks of the trade while, ironically, generating films that deal with this theme, in order to cater to the curiosity of the metacinema-inclined spectator. For this reason such films are usually about the universe of cinema but not its medium, at least not in a way that discloses the operations of the technical apparatus.

Why are these films not viewed as serious enough and artistic enough to be awarded Oscars by the Academy in the categories of Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Cinematography? Are they being discarded for the same reasons that comedy and musicals usually are? Or are they being punished for being too unveiling? Or is the industry going for commercial products that can easily be pushed on a global scale and make a profit?

## Keywords

Metacinema; Metafilms; Hollywood on Hollywood Film; Metacinematic Allegories; *The Artist*.

## The tricks of the trade

The Hollywood on Hollywood Film is a staple of American cinema and has been so practically from its inception (i.e. the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). But what is a 'Hollywood on Hollywood Film'? Traditionally, it is a film about cinema, more specifically about the core of the American cinema industry - which is placed in Hollywood - and the way film viewers respond to those products.<sup>1</sup>

According to most writers on the subject, this trend is a genre (Tarratt 1970, part I; Behlmer and Thomas 1975; Muscio 1981; Soroka 1983; Ciment 1984). It is a contentious argument. On the one hand, following Thomas Schatz (1981, 21-36), its narrative is set in a specific cultural context and, through a four stage plot filled with conventional situations, it induces a certain horizon of expectations in the viewers; also, the iconography, the characters, the space and the conflicts are pretty well defined as in all genres they must be. In this light, the Hollywood on Hollywood Film is not a style simply based in 'qualities of tone and mood', as Paul Schrader (Silver & Ursini 1996, 53) advocates for the film noir, which he considers to be merely a style. On the other hand, the Hollywood on Hollywood Film exists in many shapes, which in themselves

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Meyers (1978, 11) describes it more colorfully as 'How an entire industry is built around the creation of, at best dreams, and, at worst, lies and corruption of reality'.

are genres: comedies, dramas, westerns, biopics, musicals, horror movies, and so on. This would invalidate the previous argument, were it not for the fact that comedy and drama are also known for its subdivisions in many subgenres. So, while accepting the iconography, characters, spaces and narrative plots put forward by P.D. Anderson in his PhD thesis (1978) as evidence of the Hollywood on Hollywood Film *Genre*<sup>2</sup>, in this article I still prefer to treat it as a trend so as not to compromise, through intellectual dispersion, the most important idea I wish to convey: that of the Hollywood on Hollywood Film as usually being passed over in the Oscars by the Academy of Arts and Sciences.

In order to address this issue more fully, one has to start by recognizing that the Hollywood on Hollywood Film, as it has been generally practiced in the United States up to this date, is inherently paradoxical. It is a trend with popular roots, which aims to seduce the viewers with a peep at a community and a profession that they cannot, most likely, ever enter, but will forever, painstakingly, try to penetrate. It is like showing candy to a child without allowing him or her to indulge in it. The operative word here is ‘showing’, but in a manner that does not *reveal*, thus preserving the *status quo*.

One way to do this is to not expose the tricks of the trade. Laurence Soroka (1983) mentions the horrified reaction of the mogul Louis B. Mayer upon seeing *Sunset Boulevard* on its premiere in 1950. Although the film was produced by Paramount Pictures, and not MGM, Mayer is claimed to have said the director (Billy Wilder) should be ‘run out of town’ [*sic*]. Fortunately, Wilder was not expelled from the filmmaking community, but the film he directed was, to a certain extent, punished on his behalf. Indeed, *Sunset Boulevard*, was nominated for 11 Oscars but went on to win only three of them: Best Art Direction, Best Music (Scoring) and Best Screenplay Written for the Screen. The latter statuette possibly felt like a vindication of the writers, since the film portrays a screenwriter (anti) hero, an underdog, much as the industry saw all such professionals at the time. In truth, the film hits too close to home, thus meriting the designation of *exposé*. Some things, however, according to Mayer, were not meant to be shown and least of all in an unfavorable light. The financial health of Hollywood and its film industry depended highly upon the next to legendary nature of Hollywood and the maintenance of the associated glamour, as much as of the general public’s ignorance of the technical proceedings behind the production and reception of a film. In this perspective, if filmmaking was portrayed in its technical operations, all the glamour associated with it would tumble down, since the shooting of a film is a laborious and boring task, as all the people who have actually made films well know. Also, in this light, self-reflexivity – the bearing of the apparatus (*‘le dispositif’*, as the French theorists called in the seventies) - would surely unmask the impression of ease which is the basis of spectatorial identification with the protagonists (the grammatical

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<sup>2</sup> P.D. Anderson is extremely specific about the narrative formulas (one for comedies, another one for dramas) and leitmotifs that make up for this cinematic paradigm. As a matter of fact, most of the features of this so-called genre can still be detected in the postmodernist films about film. It seems that, just as, according to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, cinematic narrative in general has not undergone a radical change; approximately the same angles of cinema about cinema live on in our present time. The streets of the city (including the Walk of Fame), the big mansions, the ironical and/or incompetent producers, the artsy and arrogant directors, the insecure and troubled actors, the glory and the downfall, the megalomania and the desire to succeed, the uprooting from an obscure little town usually in the heart of America, the films-in-the-film, *et cetera*, are all still here with us. The new addition, absolutely compulsory nowadays, is the huge advertisement on the hillside that reads H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D, which works as a sort of logo for the entire industry, of which the city itself is a metonymic representation. What is *Mulholland Dr.* (David Lynch, 2001) if not a spin on this narrative and related leitmotifs?

‘transparency’ of the classical American cinema as André Bazin baptized it) and the deriving immersion in the filmic universe.

In general, Hollywood has preserved its secrets well. The majority of Hollywood on Hollywood Films does not concentrate on the operations of filmmaking themselves. In the classical period until the demise of the Studio System, these films would be set on studio lots and sound stages and would also depict the main gate, the central casting, the front office, the screenwriters’ bungalows, the star’s dressing-room, the studio commissary and the screening rooms (Anderson 1978), but these places were more of a background than anything else. Despite the presence of an intradiegetic director, along with filmic doubles of the camera, the lights and the crew, and/or the screen and the projector, the films focused mainly on the disturbances caused on the sets by a hopeful intruder or the opinions given in the screening rooms by the characters. No outsider would learn how films were technically conceived or produced. There are some notable exceptions, but still exceptions they are: *Sherlock Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924); *Show People* (King Vidor, 1928); *A Star Is Born* (William A. Wellman, 1937); *Hellzapoppin’* (H.C. Potter, 1941); *The Bad and The Beautiful* (Vincente Minnelli, 1952), *Two Weeks in Another Town* (Vincente Minnelli, 1962).

### **And the winner is... *not* a Hollywood on Hollywood Film**

As early as 1909, D.W. Griffith directed *Those Awful Hats*, a comedy about the obstruction of vision in movie screenings caused by the ostentatious ladies’ hats of the era. The action is not set in Hollywood *per se* but the cinematic universe is already at stake here. Charlie Chaplin, the most popular comedian of the period and also the most artistically inclined, also delved in this trend in four short films: *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (1914), *A Film Johnnie* (1914), *The Masquerader* (1914), *His New Job* (1915), of which he directed the latter two himself. Again, the action is not quite set in Hollywood, but neither was the industry at that time. The East Coast was the main production center until the early 1920’s, at which point the relocation to California was finally complete.<sup>3</sup>

This cinematic trend was adopted in the beginning mainly for comedies and romances, as these were prone to *slapstick* and to over the edge gesticulation typical of the silent acting, sentimental and exaggerated by nature. P.D. Anderson (1978,74-308) points out that the Hollywood Film of the 20’s, 30’s and 40’s was usually made up of comedies following the narrative paradigm set by the first version of *Merton of the Movies* (James Cruze, 1924), where an ingénue, male or female, arrives in Hollywood with no notion of how to behave on studio sets and wreaks havoc during a shooting, before being ‘discovered’ as the very next big thing in comedy and put under contract by some company.<sup>4</sup> Prior to this film, and the deriving formula, however, there were a number of movies where naïve film viewers mistook the fiction on the screen for reality, denoting an obvious inexperience with the new medium. Later on, especially during the 50’s, again according to Anderson, a new, and sour, variation of the American Dream in Hollywood emerged: the dark side of the dream, where the industry was exposed as a money-making machine responsible for the personal downfall of its own idols. These films were usually melodramas and normally dealt more with the

<sup>3</sup> At the end of the Studio System cinematic activity began intensely to reemerge in other places once more, namely in New York.

<sup>4</sup> There are minor variations to this formula, as when, for instance, the naïve character decides to go home and marry her/his faithful love interest, rather than staying in Hollywood.

social universe of cinema in the Hollywood community that with the filmic practice of actual filmmaking (as Robert Stam calls the technical production and reception of films).

It is interesting, and important for my argument, that the so-called Hollywood on Hollywood Film has its roots in the Hollywood myth and the magnetism that such a place held in the imagination of the American people. As expounded by Christopher Ames (1997, 2), Hollywood was a state of mind, i.e. a construct formulated by the public, a mythical occurrence that cannot be entirely defined but has a tremendous pull in the public opinion. Let us not forget that Hollywood is geographically situated in California, a state which has been, and still is, promoted as a paradise on Earth. Besides, the luxurious existence of the stars of the silent period helped to convey the idea of opulence and glamour, which ultimately is what the star system is all about. No wonder that people from all over the country, especially during the hard times of the Great Depression, would want to come to his haven where everything was wonderful. Many tried and only a few succeeded, but the success stories of those few who did grew rampant in the imagination of the entire country and were exploited by the unit publicists of each studio. This explains the importance of biopics as well as their place in the Hollywood on Hollywood Film. As success stories of people who 'made it' in Hollywood, or anywhere else in the arts, they are wonderful marketing tools, if not the most reliable accounts of the life of those they apparently portray.

With this un-artistic DNA it seems almost natural the Hollywood on Hollywood Film would not fall into the category of Oscar material, which is supposed to be 'good' (technically competent, original enough, and possibly brainy, one presumes). However, this preliminary conclusion is somewhat biased and undermined by the facts themselves. It could be argued that being a low-brow filmic trend, the Hollywood on Hollywood Film wouldn't cut it for the voters, but of the 507 films nominated in the most important category, that of Best Picture, at least 17 overall were musicals, one of the most popular genres in American mainstream cinema, and four of them actually won the major prize: *The Broadway Melody* (Harry Beaumont, 1928/29 edition), *The Great Ziegfeld* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1936 edition), *Gigi* (Vincente Minnelli, 1958 edition) and *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002 edition). Although they are not intellectual, they are cleverly and competently made and are original enough to stand out amongst so many other products of the same genre. One could, perhaps, counter-argue that these specific films, unlike the Hollywood on Hollywood movies, are permeated with production values, which is something that American films of the classical period promoted. True enough, they are; but the same success rate accountancy can be made for the western, which is not so laden with production values, a few exceptions aside.

Contrariwise, it cannot be argued that all Hollywood on Hollywood Films had/have no quality. *Show People* (1928) could have been nominated for the first edition of the Academy Awards, if the organizers had willed it so. The film is usually indicated as very important, specifically in this trend, and the French academic Marc C  risuelo, a notorious cinephile, goes as far as calling it the matrix of the metafilm [which for him is the exact same thing as Hollywood on Hollywood Film], drawing a parallel between this opus and the French New Wave film *Contempt* (*Le M  pris*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1963). Other notorious films about the cinema were also entirely left out of the main artistic categories of the Oscars: those of Best Picture, Best Directing, Best Writing (Screenplay) and Best Cinematography.<sup>5</sup> Here follows a very short list of oversights by the Academy: *What Price Hollywood?* (George Cukor, 1932); *Sullivan's*

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<sup>5</sup> I elected these categories because they are the ones where, at least theoretically, authorship is more easily established and recognized by the industry.

*Travels* (Preston Sturges, 1941); *A Star Is Born* (George Cukor, 1954); *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952); *The Barefoot Contessa* (Joseph L. Manckiewicz, 1954); *Barton Fink* (Joel Coen, 1991); *State and Main* (David Mamet, 2000).<sup>6</sup>

In total honesty, some Hollywood on Hollywood Films have been nominated and a few of them even managed to win a golden statuette in one of the four above mentioned categories. Best Picture nominees: *A Star is Born* (1937); *Anchors Aweigh* (George Sidney, 1945); *Sunset Boulevard* (1950); *The Aviator* (Martin Scorsese, 2004); *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011). Only the latter won, in this category, but the film is mainly a French film, co-produced with Belgium and the US, and is ostensibly acted, directed and written by French people, an irony that should not go unnoticed. Best Director: *A Star Is Born* (1937); *Sunset Boulevard* (1950); the foreigners *Fellini's 8 ½* (*Otto e mezzo*, Federico Fellini, 1963) and *Day For Night* (*La Nuit américaine*, François Truffaut, 1974); *The Stunt Man* (Richard Rush, 1980); *The Player* (Robert Altman, 1992); *Mulholland Dr.* (David Lynch, 2001); *The Aviator* (2004) and again *The Artist* (2011). Once more, there was only one win: the coveted prize was awarded to the French director Michel Hazanavicius. There were a little above 400 statuettes up for grabs in this category over the years, of which only 9 films of this trend were nominated and only one was given the award. In the Best Cinematography category there were eight nominated films in the following editions of the ceremony: *Sunset Boulevard* (1950); *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952); *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962); *Star!* (Robert Wise, 1968); *The Day of the Locust* (John Schlesinger, 1975); *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (Robert Zemeckis, 1988); *The Aviator* (2004) and *The Artist* (2011). Only Robert Richardson, for *The Aviator*, which is more a biopic of Howard Hughes than a film about the cinema industry, could take the Oscar home. There were 598 statuettes handed out in this category over the years. Last but not least, the Screenwriting, which changed a lot in format and prizes over the years, delivering almost 900 awards in total (885 to be exact). 18 films of this trend were nominated<sup>7</sup> but only four won the award: *A Star is Born* (1937); *Sunset Boulevard* (1950); *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952); *Gods and Monsters* (Bill Condon, 1998, which is a biopic of the controversial film director James Whale). As perceived, the numbers are overwhelmingly against the Hollywood on Hollywood Film.

Christopher Ames points out the ideological contradictions of the American Movies about the Movies, living out a permanent tension between what is revealed / concealed and what is mystified / demystified (1997,12). No such thing happens in Europe, where from the onset of the French Nouvelle Vague, self-reflexivity and the films explicitly about the cinema have thrived, particularly in the art-house category, which is the main European output (but also in some mainstream commercial products as well). Two of these films have, ironically enough, made it to the Oscars, in the Best Director category: *8 ½* (Fellini, 1963) and *Day for Night* (Truffaut, 1974). None of them won, but their mere presence alongside American directors, in what is mainly an American event, attests to the preconceptions afflicting many members of the Academy and the institution itself, as responsible for the nominations to begin with. There is, by

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this article the names in brackets refer to the director of the film, notwithstanding the actual technicians/artists who were nominated. The directors' name is mentioned the first time the film title comes up and is omitted in the subsequent references.

<sup>7</sup> The other nominated films were: *What Price Hollywood?* (1931/32 edition); *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954); *Federico Fellini's 8 ½* (1963); *Day For Night* (*La Nuit américaine*, 1974); *The Front* (Martin Ritt, 1976); *The Stunt Man* (1980); *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Karel Reisz, 1981); *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Woody Allen, 1985); *The Player* (1992); *Boogie Nights* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1997); *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002); *The Artist* (2011). The dates refer to the Academy Awards edition.

comparison, an underestimation of the American film made by Americans, and an overestimation of the European output.<sup>8</sup> Is it fit to consider that the Hollywood on Hollywood Film has been handicapped in the Academy Awards ceremonies because of its potential to flaunt entertainment as such, proving to be another variation on the escapist narrative, even when it is spectacular? Is it not considered artistic enough, outside the borders of what can be considered 'good', as the erudite European self-reflexivity? Honestly, I think it is more complicated than that.

After 1963 and the release of two European films about the cinema – Federico Fellini's *8 ½* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* - things did take a more revelatory turn in this trend. Films became extremely self-reflexive in Europe, but also in the United States, albeit through a nostalgic vein and a more descriptive portrayal.<sup>9</sup> The lot of these American films was the same as their ancestors. *Nickelodeon* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1976); *Hearts of the West* (Howard Zieff, 1976); *The Front* (Martin Ritt, 1976); *The Last Tycoon* (Elia Kazan, 1976) never made it to the main categories of the Academy Awards. Even after the eighties - with the proliferation of such products as a result of the dissemination of *making of* documentaries, of which the Hollywood on Hollywood Film can be a sort of fictional substitute, and the phenomenon of crossover indie films, whose directors are, possibly, recognized film buffs reviewing their own experience either as spectators or film school students – these films continued to be disclaimed by the Academy and its golden statuettes.

## The unexplored path

I suppose it could be argued that not many films of this trend are made, if one considers the Hollywood on Hollywood Film to be exclusively about filmmaking and the personal universe of the filmmakers. But even so, this argument falls short of the mark if one ponders the competition the nominated films were up against. In 1937 *A Star Is Born* lost the Best Picture Oscar to *The Life of Emile Zola* (William Dieterle), a biopic of the known writer; in 1950 *Sunset Boulevard* was outweighed by *All About Eve*, which is undeniably a good film and one that also exposes the dirt behind it all in the arts, but does so in the theatrical universe; in 1952 *The Greatest Show on Earth* (Cecil B. de Mille), a production-value laden-film about the universe of the circus passed over an exposé of Hollywood, *The Bad and the Beautiful*; in 2001 David Lynch's *Mulholland Dr.* had to contend with *A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard), another biopic, for the Oscar of Directing (not having been nominated for Best Picture to begin with). It seems obvious that some of the choices are political rather than artistic, which, in itself, is not shocking news. The Academy is a window to many countries, including the States, as well as an Association with specific membership rules; the ceremonies themselves

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<sup>8</sup> The late film Pauline Kael, possibly the most important film critic in the US for over three decades, considered the American classical cinema, which she deemed to be entertainment collectively produced, 'intolerable' [*sic*]: "The French [film critics of the *Cahiers du cinéma*] saw something in our movies that their own movies lacked [...]. Our movies were a product of American industry, and in a sense, it was America itself that they loved in our movies [...]. But for us, the situation is different. It is good for us to be reminded that our mass culture is not altogether poisonous in its effects on other countries, but what is appealing, exotic – "American" – for them is often intolerable for us' (Kael via Wartenberg, 115-116). She didn't conceive of an industrial product being anything other than common and uninteresting; for her only European artists as Ingmar Bergman, Jean Cocteau F.W. Murnau and Carl Dreyer to be artists. Her attack on Orson Welles, in an attempt to undermine his 'geniality' was famous.

<sup>9</sup> Dennis Hopper's *The Last Movie* (1971) is an exception.

undergo a process of selection heavily based on marketing. Consequently, there is no denying the importance of exposure and preservation in this process. Foremost, preservation of the commerce, through the ideologies (or ‘messages’) put forward by the films, which could help to maintain or obtain a good image in certain markets; but also preservation of one’s own status, since everyone and everything related to movies is attributed a certain financial value. Sometimes the Academy doesn’t want to rock the boat; other times it does exactly that with the argument that the industry needs new blood (that is what happened during the indie wave of the eighties, in large measure due to the Weinstein Brothers via the Miramax).

In 1978 Parish, Pitts and Mank published a thorough study on films about Hollywood, which they, fittingly, decided to entitle *Hollywood on Hollywood*. The book is the ultimate anthology about films that take ‘Hollywood as a background, as a story setting’ (1978, 1). As such, it is supposed to include all the Hollywood on Hollywood films until 1977, but, in fact, many of the films it addresses are only accidentally set in Hollywood (e.g. *The Studio Murder Mystery*, Frank Tuttle, 1929), or are very loosely connected to the cinematic universe (e.g. *The Loved One*, Tony Richardson, 1965 and *The Last of Sheila*, Herbert Ross, 1973), or yet focus on the private life of the characters rather than their profession (e.g. *In a Lonely Place*, Nicholas Ray, 1950). If one adopts a broader definition, considering a meta-film to be a film about the cinema in general, and not only about Hollywood produced films, and if one accepts that the entire opus has to be thematically about the nature of cinema as an art form or a technical skill (and not a social community or a backdrop for personal problems) and that there must be a conscious discourse (an ideological position) about cinema in the theme and the story, running throughout the entire film, then the Hollywood on Hollywood Film becomes much more. In fact, it now accommodates not only direct descriptions of the activity but also allegorical depictions, not easy to detect by everyone, since they come in the form of a running metaphor coexisting with a literal narrative meaning. A film such as *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), that possesses a strong subtext of spectatorship, is nowhere to be found in the aforementioned anthology by Parish, Pitts and Mank, presumably because the authors had no such objects in mind. An anthology of (meta)cinematic allegories is yet to be made.

I certainly do not propose to make it now, but taking into consideration this enlarged definition, what I do propose is to take a new look at the Oscar nominees and winners and see what comes up, in order to ascertain if there are any significant changes. The answer is yes, there are many films which had previously flown under the radar and that now become notorious as hybrid metafilms or full blown metacinematic allegories. Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* collected three impressive statuettes in the 1977 edition of the Academy Awards, winning the categories of Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen. The story is not set in Hollywood, taking place in New York instead; the main character is a stand-up comedian, not a film actor; there are no shootings, Hollywood mystique and the usual fare of leitmotifs. However, the protagonist is a passionate film viewer and there is an undercurrent discourse on cinema throughout, including a cameo appearance by Marshall MacLuhlan in a movie theater hall. *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) also pops up with nine nominations and one win, in the Best Original Screenplay category. Considering that the film is not eminently commercial, that it was under attack by Heart’s press in general and Hollywood gossip columnist Louella Parsons in particular, that it didn’t have the theatrical release it should have had, and that it arose much jealousy due to Welles charisma, young age and the nature of the contract he managed to sign with

RKO (which endowed him with total artistic control over the film, including final cut), the balance is not too bad.

The broad definition of metacinema, instead of the more exotic and perhaps less serious Hollywood on Hollywood Film, reveals a taste for spectacle rather than just entertainment, a penchant for variety instead of narrative formulas, and a propensity for the eulogy of art and artists, connoting film with other artistic endeavors. That is also why so many musicals can be considered a form of enunciative mirror image or *mise-an-abyme*, metonymically representing cinema production in general. Jane Feuer, for instance (1982), argues that the backstage musical, where dancing and singing artists took part in an institutional show, was already a way of using the apparatus just as the more direct films about film did. The existence of a proscenium, the shot/reverse shot of the artists and the public, and the musical numbers having an innate logic and unrealistic nature proved, in her opinion, the perfect diegetic counterpoint to the film watching experience. The effect was even more stressed when the dancing and the singing broke free of the constraints of the proscenium but the characters remained very much involved in show business. Films such as *The Band Wagon* (1953) and *An American in Paris* (1951), both directed by Vincente Minnelli and produced by Arthur Freed, are good examples of what Feuer calls the ‘art musical’ (2001), set in the world of show business and/or art in whatever form.

With this new approach in mind, a lot of memorable metacinematic allegories (either allegories of spectatorship or creation) can be accounted for. The list that follows is not all inclusive.<sup>10</sup> For Best Picture: *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *All That Jazz* (Bob Fosse, 1979), *Inglorious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009), *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), *Hugo* (Martin Scorsese, 2011); for Best Directing: *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944), *A Double Life* (George Cukor, 1947), *All About Eve* (1950) \*, *Rear Window* (1954), *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *8 ½* (1963), *Blow-up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), *Day for Night (La Nuit américaine)* (1974), *The Elephant Man* (David Lynch, 1980), *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999), *Talk to Her (Hable con ella)* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002) \*, *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010); Best Screenplay: *Children of Paradise (Les Enfants du Paradis)* (Marcel Carné, 1945); *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954), *Wild Strawberries (Smulltronstället)* (Ingmar Bergman, 1959), *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1960), *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1985), *American Splendor* (Robert Pulcini and Shari Springer Berman, 2003), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004) \*; Best Cinematography: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Albert Lewin, 1945), *Zelig* (Woody Allen, 1988).

As for the musicals, either backstage or art musicals, which can also be allegories in their own right, there are a few more memorable titles to join to the list. In the years that followed the introduction of sound, many were nominated, but as the years went by the genre dwindled in nominations. Again the list is not exhaustive. Best Picture: *The Broadway Melody* (Harry Beaumont, 1928/29) \*, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (Lloyd Bacon, 1932/33), *Top Hat* (Mark Sandrich, 1935), *The Great Ziegfeld* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1936) \*, *Stage Door* (Gregory La Cava, 1937), *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1948), *An American in*

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<sup>10</sup> Although some of these films garnered nominations in several categories, I will proceed to list them only in one of them, that which, from the aforementioned four (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenwriting and Best Cinematography), presumably carries more weight, artistically and financially. The dates refer to the Academy Awards edition. The asterisk indicates the films that actually won the Oscar.

*Paris* (1951) \*, *Gigi* (Vincente Minnelli, 1958) \*, *Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrman, 2001), *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002) \*; Best Directing: *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972) \*; Best Screenplay: *The Band Wagon* (1953), *The Country Girl* (George Seaton, 1954) \*, *Interrupted Melody* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1955) \*, *It's Always Fair Weather* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly (1955), *The Producers* (Mel Brooks, 1968) \*, *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney Furie, 1972), *Fame* (Alan Parker, 1980), *Victor/Victoria* (Blake Edwards, 1982),

All in all, there are almost 200 nominations in the above mentioned four categories, for what I now propose to call metafilms. Still, this number falls way short of the approximately 2,400 nominations in the same categories since the beginning of the Academy Awards ceremony. The disparity is made even more blatant by the fact that many films made from the inception of cinema to this day could be considered metacinema by my parameters. Therefore, even with this theoretical addition, the numbers do not favor the films about cinema, which have been more disregarded by the Academy than they should have.

### Where an Oscar had never gone before

Metacinema is not concerned with reality, but is not synonymous with escapism as well. This alone, could prove reason enough to consider that the American mainstream public is not the right public for it. And yet, as mentioned before, it was the low-culture Hollywood myth that helped to spread it once the slapstick period was over and/or the films became longer. The Merton of the Movies (comedy) and The Dark Side of the Dream (drama) narrative typologies, as coined by P.D. Anderson, are intrinsically American, even if they were later employed by other countries in their commercial products. Maybe the operative word here is 'commercial'. Could this be related to the intellectual preconception that I've mentioned earlier? After all, some European films of the art-house variety were nominated for the Oscars. I do not wish to undermine these choices; simply to say that this points to a surreptitious desire to validate 'art' and difference, equating them with quality. If this is the case, complexity becomes the key word for many choices made.

This could very well be the reason why *Citizen Kane* won the Oscar for Best Screenplay, being a story that Louella Parsons considered all disjointed (indeed, the film is told in flashbacks from different points of view). So is *All About Eve* (1950), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), all of them winners of the statuette. On the other hand, the convoluted narratives of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Karel Reisz, screenplay by Harold Pinter, 1981), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Woody Allen, 1989), *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and *Adaptation* (2002), the latter two directed by Spike Jonze and written specifically for the screen by Charlie Kaufman, were also nominated but didn't win, probably because they are more straightforwardly perceived as being related to cinema,<sup>11</sup> even if they are not exactly Hollywood on Hollywood Films.

Conversely, the most commercial metacinematic products are also nominated for the Oscars, but in this case they usually belong to the musical comedy and biopic genres (with the added interest that some of the nominated musicals are also biopics of artists). Since most of these objects are not set in Hollywood, they are not immediately associated with metacinema. That is probably the reason why *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952) was gravely omitted by the Academy, but *The*

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<sup>11</sup> They are, indeed, hybrid metafilms: movies set in the industry but partly imbued with a metanarrative and/or metaphorical dimension.

*Band Wagon* and *An American in Paris*, whose plot is set on Broadway, were not. The same could be said for the film *Stage Door* (1937), as well as the all-star revue extravaganzas and the stage musicals adapted to screen (as *Cabaret*, 1972), which were all validated. Lest one thinks this has something to do with the directors, let me remind you that the same team Donen/Kelly had another film nominated, more specifically, in the Best Screenplay category: *It's Always Fair Weather* (1955, written by Betty Comden and Adolph Green). In this story, not only the action is set in New York, but it actually takes place far from Broadway, as the film is an integrated musical.

Also, considering that quite a few biopics of stars or artistic entrepreneurs were nominated for Oscars,<sup>12</sup> one wonders why *Ed Wood* (Tim Burton, 1994) was left out of the major categories in an year where *Wyatt Earp* (Lawrence Kasdan) was nominated for Best Cinematography; the Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski was put up for *Red (Rouge)* as Best Director; the British romantic comedy *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell) was nominated for Best Picture; and *Heavenly Creatures* (directed by a yet-unknown Peter Jackson) was contemplated as choice for Best Screenwriting. It could be argued that the problem lays in the fact that the portrayed Ed Wood was a director and that Hollywood always prefers the stars. True, but then why nominate films based on the life of James Whale and Howard Hughes, who not only were directors but were also considered disreputable in their times? Probably because they were/are considered 'good' directors who also left a commercial imprint in the industry. Edward D. Wood Jr., on the other hand, was the lowest of the low as far as 'art' is considered and his films, weird and poorly manufactured as they were, never made money, although *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959) became a cult classic and a must-see for sci-fi film buffs. The Academy couldn't accept a tribute paid to such a man, even if Burton's film itself is artistically worthy and extremely original. But then again, eccentric as he is, Burton himself is not Oscar material; plus he commits the sin of exposing too much and too well the tricks of the trade of the so-called 'world's worst director' of all times, soiling the image of Hollywood in general and the aura of the star in particular. Here is another man who probably would have made Louis B. Mayer shiver in a fit of rage.

And then came 2011, truly a year to remember as far as the relationship of metacinema and the Academy Awards is concerned. Not only did Martin Scorsese, Professor at the Columbia University as well as renowned American film director, decided to pay a much deserved tribute to the French Georges Méliès, the most important pioneer of all anti-illusionist films, of which metacinema is a part; but a French crew of artists actually came to Hollywood with a film that portrays the Hollywood myth as usually depicted in the Hollywood on Hollywood Film. I'm obviously referring to *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius), whose title assumes both the homage to the American traditional metafilm and the artistic nature of the project. Indeed, the film falls right into what Soroka (1983) designates as Hollywood Modernism, a hybrid form of commercial and modern/creative cinema that manifests in a self-reflexive opus about Hollywood.<sup>13</sup> Just as Cérésuelo considered the American metafilm a forerunner of all European films about the cinema, we can say that the Europeans came back with a vengeance and, in the process, taught a lesson to Hollywood. Undeniably, *The Artist* has a strong discourse on film and it makes the enunciation (i.e. the technical resources of the film) serve the story (the narrative

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<sup>12</sup> Among the personalities on focus are Florenz Ziegfeld, Marjorie Lawrence, Vincent van Gogh, Marilyn Monroe, Billie Holliday, James Whale, Harvey Pekar, Howard Hughes and George M. Cohan.

<sup>13</sup> In his PhD thesis Soroka exemplifies extensively with three films – *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and *The Last Movie* (1971). Only the first was nominated for the Academy Awards.

storyline about Hollywood). It does expose a lot of technical tricks of the trade, as well as Anderson's narrative formula(s), but it cannot be considered a film *against* Hollywood, as Giuliana Muscio (1981) sees the exposés of the 50's.

In its own right, *The Artist* is the most complete film about Hollywood and, for once, the Academy didn't hold it against it. Quite the contrary, the film was a smash hit, winning five Oscars, including that of Best Motion Picture of the Year, and garnering 10 nominations in all. One of the most important accomplishments of the film is that it mixes the positive side of success in Hollywood with the downfall caused by the industry. It is a reenactment of the crossed destinies narrative prompted by David O'Selznick for *What Price Hollywood?* (George Cukor, 1931) - in which the fate of one character on the rise intersects that of another character on the way down. Thus, in only one film, Selznick succeeded in making the story more complex and more generically hybrid (fusing the comedy streak with the dramatic penchant). In *The Artist*, set in the upcoming of sound (the plot actually starts in 1927), this intersection is made very obvious by a scene shot on a three-leveled staircase. In the fictitious Kinograph Studios, the main characters meet again on this staircase, but the man is going down and actually stands a few stairs beneath the woman, who is on her way up and headed for stardom.

Hazanavicius' film improves on Selznick's formula in that it manages not to be overly melodramatic, neither too comedic. The balance of tone is just right and, unlike Selznick's Hollywood trilogy (*What Price Hollywood?*, 1932, and *A Star Is Born*, 1937 and 1954 versions), this opus presents us with a happy ending. The reason seems to be its other original source. In fact, if one considers the entire plot and the intertextuality it holds, then it must be admitted that the film is also a graft of the Hollywood on Hollywood musical *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), from which it takes the theme of the conversion to sound and the career renewal of a matinee action idol, with the looks of a Douglas Fairbanks, who ends up doing musicals. The grinning of the protagonist and his physical resemblance to Gene Kelly both point that way. *The Artist* starts with a premiere, as does *Singin' in the Rain*, and shows a lot of microphones throughout, but, unlike that musical, the transition of Hazanavicius' film is not made by the characters, through the plot, it is made by the plot, through the characters. In other words – and the pun is intended – it is the film that learns to speak and converts to sound, via the authorial *mise-en-scène* (in the screenplay and the direction, both pertaining to Hazanavicius), not the industry, via the story. Thus, *The Artist*, which is the narrative of a silent 'artist' (as the character Valentin sees himself) refusing to let go of his artistic principles, is made Oscar-worthy.

Not only that, but the film is also considered by the Academy Awards own database as being 'competitive' (it is one of the films with 5 or more competitive awards listed on that site), contradicting Andy Klein's notion that 'Movies about moviemaking don't make money' (1991,54).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, for a production budget of \$16,000,000, *The Artist* did very well in the box office, attaining the mark of \$44,667,095 domestically and \$83,589,617 internationally (\$128,256,712 worldwide for movie theatre distribution).

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<sup>14</sup> Opposite opinion was held not only by David O' Selznick, as can be perceived by some memos he wrote, but also by American historian Theodore Huff, who in 1953, made the commercial and artistic eulogy of the Hollywood on Hollywood Film (1953, 171). He claimed: 'Authors almost always do their best work when they write about people and locales they know intimately, and Hollywood has invariably been successful (and/or interesting) when it has made films about itself'.

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