

Reflections on Oscar Nominations for 2013

Well, the list of Oscar nominations has been released, and now the Oscar buzz really begins. As usual, I was happy and disappointed by the choices. Happy that so many good films are being recognized. Disappointed that such a good one as *Lee Daniels' The Butler* didn't make the cut for "Best Picture," or that the Saudi Arabian *Wadjda* and British-South African *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* were not honored. I suspect that we still are living in a time when the inclusion of a "black" film is a token gesture, so that there is room for just one such film on the list.

The Academy's list differs greatly from my [Top Ten List](#) for Visual Parables because their criteria are centered more on aesthetics and box office success than spiritual or moral content. To see the list and also reviews of the various films available on visualparables.org click onto the title.

Best Picture

It is good that so many films are again included, though I wish that there were the full possible contingent of 10 so as to include either the Coen Brothers' wonderful *Inside Llewyn Davis* or *Lee Daniels' The Butler*. Despite the quality of such films as *American Hustle* and *The Wolf of Wall Street*, I don't think either is equal to the two omitted films.

[American Hustle](#)

David O. Russell's "based on a true story" film features some wonderful performances, but the subject of the rise and fall of scam artists isn't nearly as important as that of several of the other films on the list.

[Captain Phillips](#)

This is a good parable of courage and resourcefulness, with

another fine performance by Tom Hanks. Another plus factor is the all too brief depiction of the plight of the Somali peasants who are forced by world economic circumstances beyond their control (or understanding) to choose between starving or stealing. I find it remarkable that the Academy members seem to understand this by nominating the nonprofessional Barkhad Abdi for a "Best Supporting Actor" award for his excellent performance as the pirate leader.

[Dallas Buyers Club](#)

It is no surprise that Matthew McConaughey was nominated as "Best Actor" in this character transformation film. We move from intense disapproval of his philandering, gay bashing, and drug ingesting early in the film to a grudging admiration for the way he emerges from total self-absorption to championing the underdog gay community later on. That the film is based on a "true story" makes it even more compelling.

[Gravity](#)

Technically perhaps the most complicated of the films, and aesthetically perhaps the most beautiful, this tale of pluck and survival certainly deserves to be on the list, even though I did not include it on Visual Parables Top Ten list. Beyond the mere technical aspect is Sandra Bullock's great performance as the heroine for whom our daughters can look up to.

[Her](#)

Spike Jonze's truly great film cautionary film about our relationship to our digital devices and our relationship to each other bumped the wonderful *Wadjda* from the Top Ten list for Presbyterian News Service because of its late arrival in the Cincinnati area. The last shot of the two friends sitting together on the roof of their apartment building is the perfect ending, designed to make us think about how we are involved with social media and friends and neighbors.

Nebraska

This reversal of the Prodigal Son parable confirms that Alexander Payne is one of the best directors in Hollywood. Seldom has unconditional love been presented as effectively as in what the son does for his father through the course of their trip from Montana to Nebraska and back.

Philomena

Both a social problem film (the mistreatment of out of wedlock mothers by the Irish Catholic Church) and a personal memoir, this is a moving story of a woman of faith so strong that she can forgive the nuns who sorely abused her 50 years earlier.

The Wolf of Wall Street

I think this “true story” is way too over the top to be on this list, as entertaining as it is. It is the name of its director Martin Scorsese and the performances of Leonardo De Caprio and Jonah Hill that swayed the Academy voters to nominate the film.

12 Years a Slave

This is my favorite candidate both because of the light it sheds on our dark past and the skill of director Steve McQueen and Chiwetel Ejiofor’s truly magnificent performance as the runaway who moves from total despair to acceptance to hope. I believe that it would be good for the country if this film were so honored, hopefully convincing more people to go and see it. Already the possibility of it being nominated has moved the studio to re-release it. I hope those who have seen the film will talk it up, maybe organizing a discussion group to explore the film’s relevance for today.

Best Actor

I am torn between three of the excellent nominees.

Christian Bale, *American Hustle*

Very good as a guy who scams the gullible, yet who still has a

touch of decency so that he tries to protect a good-hearted politician who unwisely attempts to use underhanded means to achieve public good.

Bruce Dern, *Nebraska*

This may be the last chance that this fine second tier actor for this award, so I would be happy if it he is chosen, even though my favorite is the star of *12 Years a Slave*.

Leonardo DiCaprio, *The Wolf of Wall Street*

One of our finest actors, but I think this should not be his year in a film that is not as important as some others.

Matthew McConaughey, *Dallas Buyers Club*

He is deserving of the title because of the incredible preparation involving weight loss, as well as his on-screen performance. He convincingly moves us from repulsion to acceptance.

Chiwetel Ojiofor, *12 Years a Slave*

Both because of the importance of the film and because of his on-screen performance, I hope he wins. When I watched that scene at the slave cemetery wherein we see his face change from despair to hope as his friends sang "Roll, Jordan Roll," I felt that he had at least a nomination clenched, if not the award itself.

Best Actress

Amy Adams, *American Hustle*

A wonderful performance, but...

Cate Blanchett, *Blue Jasmine*

It is good to see Woody Allen back in great form, as well as Ms. Blanchett's fine performance as a woman who is her own worst enemy.

Sandra Bullock, *Gravity*

A very good performance to place along the one in *Blindside*.

Judi Dench, *Philomena*

My favorite to win because of the importance of the film's theme of discovery and forgiveness, as well as her delightful performance.

Meryl Streep, *August: Osage County*

Still another great performance by this phenomenal actress, I would not be too disappointed if she noses out Ms. Dench. What a portrait of a woman so shaped by her own sad childhood that

she is making everyone else as miserable as herself!

This probably enough for now, though I do want to add that I have seen but one of the foreign films nominated—part of the penalty for living in “fly over country” is that we often are weeks or months late in seeing films available much earlier on the West and East coasts. Still, because of the great way that the themes of unjust persecution and reconciliation are tied in with the celebration of the Nativity, I am rooting for [The Hunt](#).

Other nominations worth thinking about, but not now:

Best Supporting Actor

Barkhad Abdi, *Captain Phillips*

Bradley Cooper, *American Hustle*

Michael Fassbender, *12 Years a Slave*

Jonah Hill, *The Wolf of Wall Street*

Jared Leto, *Dallas Buyers Club*

Best supporting actress

Sally Hawkins, *Blue Jasmine*

Jennifer Lawrence, *American Hustle*

Lupita Nyong'o, *12 Years a Slave*

Julia Roberts, *August: Osage County*

June Squibb, *Nebraska*

Best director

Alfonso Cuarón, *Gravity*

Steve McQueen, *12 Years a Slave*

Alexander Payne, *Nebraska*

David O. Russell, *American Hustle*

Martin Scorsese, *The Wolf of Wall Street*

Best Foreign Film *The Hunt*, Denmark