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## How the Oscars Have Changed Since I Went in 1990

*A former movie exec says how she really feels about this year's Academy Awards.*

By Alison Brantley



Twenty years ago, I sat on the front row at the Academy Awards, and when Jodi Foster called out the name of the Best Actor, I pushed a shocked Daniel Day Lewis out of his seat to receive his Oscar for his role in *My Left Foot*. That felt like my own reward for championing the underdog film, as acquisitions executive for the young and independent Miramax, the new kid on the Hollywood block. The movie was also up for Best Film, in a lineup that included *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Driving Miss Daisy* (the winner) *Dead Poets Society* and *Field of Dreams*. After that, a stream of independent dramatic films began infiltrating the old system, and the distributors who represented them ingeniously used the Oscar nominations to market their smaller films, which historically did not do as well at the box office.

And it worked.

Over the years, as box office share began to grow for these sorts of films, the studios wouldn't let it happen without a fight. The battle began almost immediately between the studios and independent distributors for lordship over the "quality" film. The studios couldn't operate guerilla style, so instead they began to purchase the independent companies outright.

There were some great movies during this period, yes, and some great synergy of Hollywood bucks and independent moxie, both in front of and behind the camera (*Shakespeare In Love*, *The English Patient*, *Juno*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, for example). But the soul had been sold. And the inevitability of a bottom-line mentality in a time of uncertainty would pave the way for formulaic, celebrity-driven, bigger-budget, "safer" films to continue to dominate the production meetings. I've been told by more than one Hollywood agent recently, when asked which films are being "green lit," that at the top of the list are big-budget action films based on cartoon characters, romantic comedies (the box office workhorse of the last 10 years). And, at the bottom: dramas. Why are you not surprised?

### Does Oscar help the underdog?

*Photograph: Photo By: Dee Cercone/Everett Collectio*

With the expansion of the Best Film category from five to 10 films this year, the Academy is now allowing films like *Avatar* and *Up*, which have not traditionally been nominated, to compete with dramas. You could call that progress. The expansion also acknowledges how successful the independents were in using the Academy Awards to make their films financially viable. But seeing as Hollywood has institutionalized that success, are the films really all that independent? And, today, if original, highly artistic films are neither championed inside the current Hollywood system nor produced by the "independents," where will they come from and how will we see them? Perhaps the Internet has the answer. But for now, just imagine this year's Best Films category without *Hurt Locker*, *Inglorious Basterds* or *Precious*. On Sunday, I'll be sitting in front of my new flat screen TV, rooting for the underdogs, thankful that they're there.