

Written by Mike Schulz
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Last night, at the tail end of her opening monologue, Academy Awards emcee Ellen DeGeneres took a moment to acknowledge the year's tight race for Best Picture, and stated that “anything can happen” regarding the evening's biggest prize. “Possibility number one: *12 Years a Slave* wins Best Picture,” she said. “Possibility number two: You're all racists.”

Which, it turned out, was a possibility voters were *not* willing to face.

I guess the writing should've been on the wall the moment we realized that Sidney Poitier – a passionate and vocal *12 Years* supporter – was seated front-row center, the legendary actor/activist's stern countenance suggesting the exhausted chaperone at a post-prom mixer. (Whenever the camera landed on or passed Poitier during the ceremony, even during its most agreeable moments of levity, you could read his expression as “I will have none of this foolishness.”) The more jaded among us may even have wondered whether the decision to have Best Picture revealed by Will Smith wasn't *entirely* about the man's box-office power or previous Oscar recognition. (DeGeneres, again nimbly addressing longtime complaints about the Academy's lack of inclusiveness, kicked off the trophy-giving by introducing Anne Hathaway with “And now, please welcome our first white presenter”) But when Smith opened the envelope, it was official: Despite *Gravity*

leading into the announcement with seven wins to a mere two for director Steve McQueen's film – and with only two other top-prize nominees netting any wins at all –

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12 Years a Slave
was named 2014's Best Picture.



Personally speaking, I'm delighted about this. *12 Years* was my favorite, if not my prediction, among the options, and judging by the win's rather ecstatic reception in the Hollywood & Highland Center auditorium, it was also the favorite among a great many voters. Yet I can't help feeling, just a smidge, that a Best Picture win might have been the worst possible outcome for McQueen's slavery drama, at least for a few years, and especially for a significant percentage of *Gravity* devotees. "Oh, *come on!*" you can hear the pissed-off masses cry with Will Arnett-style pique. "Alfonso Cuarón gets Best Director and the movie gets six other Oscars and it somehow *loses* Best Picture?! They just voted out of *guilt*!"

Maybe; *12 Years'* studio, Fox Searchlight, mounted an aggressive – and, according to some, blatantly manipulative – campaign strategy in the final weeks of voting, employing the slogan "It's time" as a not-so-subtle reminder of the Academy's sorry track record with movies that even remotely broach the subject of race relations in America. (The two most recent winners that did – 2005's *Crash* and 1989's *Driving Miss Daisy* – are also two of Oscar history's more derided victors. Ironically enough, they're also two of the relative few Best Pictures not to also score wins for their directors.) Maybe, like myself, voters *en masse* just liked *12 Years* better than the eight other nominees, and considered *Gravity* more of a technical astonishment than the year's finest overall achievement. But good luck convincing the haters of that; for them, McQueen's movie won, and *Gravity* ultimately got screwed, out of collective liberal guilt. And for this demographic, I fear, *12 Years'* Best Picture triumph will quite possibly be the reason many avoid seeing it in the future – anti-*12 Years* partisans won't give it the *satisfaction* of viewership. (I have friends who refuse to ever watch

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Dances with Wolves

because it won Best Picture over Scorsese's

GoodFellas

, when they should instead be refusing to watch Costner's Western for other reasons entirely.)



The anguished, however, should take heart, not merely because of the seven Oscars *Gravity* did receive, but because a tech-category-and-Director-sweeping film losing Best Picture to a rival with fewer total wins is hardly unprecedented in the annals of Academy history. Hell, it happened just last year, when Ang Lee and his

Life of Pi

team earned five awards to Best Picture winner

Argo

's three, and there were two ceremonies in the '70s that even more closely mirrored what transpired last night. The 1977 race found

Star Wars

nabbing seven technical Oscars (although not Best Director) while Best Picture and three additional trophies went to

Annie Hall

. And at the end of the 1972 contest,

Cabaret

boasted eight Oscars total, including Best Director for Bob Fosse, while another movie – just like

12 Years a Slave –

wound up solely with Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay, and an acting award. Its title?

The Godfather

Hopefully, then, there's still a chance for *12 Years a Slave* to be seen for what it is: one of the finest films in an almost universally-agreed-upon outstanding film year, and the title that was just lucky enough to be in Will Smith's envelope over intensely tough competition, and in no way an F-you to Cuarón's clearly highly-regarded option. For the moment, unfortunately (and without having yet dived into any online, op-ed sniping), I think

12 Years

' Best Picture victory – or rather,

Gravity

's Best Picture loss –

is going to burn all the wrong people for all the wrong reasons. Those of us who've followed the race over the past several weeks know how uncomfortable, if not downright ugly, things were getting in the seemingly endless

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12 Years

-versus-

Gravity

debate. Even with 2014's Oscar race now behind us, and for the foreseeable future, it's not likely to get any prettier.



So what else happened last night? Well, as mentioned, Ellen DeGeneres hosted, and was okay, I thought. Her opening monologue was actually pretty killer. With no movie-montage or song-and-dance to start the evening, the genial and seemingly relaxed DeGeneres – who previously played Oscar-night ringleader in 2007 – strode on-stage and was obviously the immediate beneficiary of much goodwill in the wake of last year's wildly divisive emcee Seth MacFarlane. (Noting that the 2007 nominees included Cate Blanchett, Meryl Streep, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Martin Scorsese, DeGeneres assumed a perfect deadpan and labeled this year “*so*

different.”) Her early jokes, though, made it clear that she wasn't going to be the

completely

nicey-nice alternative to MacFarlane; following a salty jab at June Squibb (“

I'm telling everyone you were wonderful in

Nebraska!” she mock-yelled at the 84-year-old), DeGeneres also got in solid shots at Jennifer Lawrence, for her tendency to fall down in public, and Liza Minnelli, for looking just like Liza Minnelli. (“Good job, sir.”)

But while she managed to salvage portions of her later shtick through sheer amiability – plus the *ne plus ultra* in Hollywood-elite selfies – the host's evening-long, wandering-through-the-aisles routine too often fell flat, with the ordering-in-for-pizza running gag only yielding very occasional pleasures. (The sight of Brad Pitt passing out paper plates was one of them.) And aside from an intentionally tardy entrance as Glinda the Good Witch, which happened in conjunction with the show's time-wasting tribute to *The Wizard of Oz* (albeit one highlighted by Pink's fine, if vocally-unsupported-at-times, take on “Over the Rainbow”), there really wasn't much else to DeGeneres' hosting last night.

Many of her on-screen moments took place with DeGeneres deliberately losing herself in the crowd, and that's how her hosting, in general, came off; I tended to lose track of her even when she was directly in front of me.

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... Octavia Spencer, Chiwetel Ejiofor, and Matt Damon. The telecast was a landmark moment for diversity in Hollywood.

... Based on the winners in 1968, the Academy Awards have a long history of recognizing excellence in film.

... *Boyz n the Hood* (1982) and *Music Saved My Life* (2006).