

My Counterpoint to the Oscars Snub

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guage Film in 2015; available on DVD]

2. I cannot for the life of me figure out how *"Love and Mercy"* got so totally shut out of the Oscars this year. It contains three of the very best performances of the year -- Paul Dano as the young Brian Wilson, John Cusack as the middle-aged Brian Wilson, and Elizabeth Banks as Wilson's second wife, Melinda Ledbetter -- and provides a remarkably insightful window into an inscrutable life. For once Hollywood has given us a biopic that doesn't merely chronically recount events but gets at some deeper and more complex truths about Wilson, pointing you toward his essential mystery. The particularity of Wilson's intention and his enthusiasm for the act of creation come through in Dano's scenes with mostly older studio musicians and at the piano assembling the scaffolding of the wondrous "God Only Knows"--and throughout, the genius of Wilson's compositions come through as never before. And Cusack and Banks bring a remarkable sense of authenticity to their depiction of the love that grew between Wilson and Ledbetter under the most trying of circumstances. This wise

and beautiful film sparks love and mercy for an unknowable person, and sends you back to his music for more of the secrets hidden there. [Rated PG-13 for thematic elements, drug content, and language; on at least 76 other critics' top ten lists; deserved Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Actor (John Cusack and Paul Dano), and Best Actress (Elizabeth Banks); available on DVD.]

3. *"The Salt of the Earth"* is a cinematic spiritual journey via the photography of Sebastião Salgado, as curated by co-directors Juliano Ribeiro Salgado (son of the celebrated artist) and the great Wim Wenders. The photographs themselves are profound and other-worldly, charting the artist's immersive travels into cultures all around the world, particularly those suffering famine, war, and marginalization. Wenders elicits, among other things, perspective and wisdom from the artist in interviews filmed in dialogue with the photographs themselves, and the artist's son adds further insights from the perspective of his own journeys with his father. The trajectory of the artist's life, beginning with hunger and curiosity and through despair and then hope, is resonant and deeply inspiring. Af-

ter three viewings, I still feel like this film has more to teach me. [Rated PG-13 for thematic material involving disturbing images of violence and human suffering, and for nudity; haven't seen this on any other critics' top 10 lists for 2015; in French, English, and Portuguese; nominated for, and should have won, the Academy Award for Best Documentary in 2015; available on DVD and streaming.]

4. *"Son of Saul"* got its theatrical release in Portland just in



Leonardo DiCaprio and Grace Dove in *"The Revenant."*

time to make it onto my 2015 list. This Hungarian film is not for the faint of heart; it immerses you in a day-and-a-half in the life of Saul, a member of the Sonderkommando -- prisoners whose job it was to assist with disposal of the dead--in the Auschwitz concentration camp. Nearly all of the film portrays

Saul's own tight vantage point; he is always moving, moving, moving through unthinkable horrors, never and yet always responding. I expect that this is likely the most realistic depiction of Auschwitz ever assembled, and conveys a real sense of the hell that was part of every waking moment for prisoners there. In the film's first moments, Saul has an encounter that awakens in him a determination to bury a particular body, an essentially impossible task--yet that purpose activates his humanity. The cinematography and sound work is like nothing I have ever seen, and the perspective

eign Language Film and, of the four I have seen, it should win; still in theaters.]

5. *"The Revenant"* is the only film on my list to have received major awards' notice--and it deserves the recognition, though for more than the limited reasons you'll hear articulated in the media. Yes, the director, cast, and crew challenged themselves by filming in remote locations under extreme conditions, and the film assembles scenes of frontier life that are impressive for their harshness, realism, and violence. And yes, Leonardo DiCaprio's performance deserves an Oscar (though John Cusack and Paul Dano deserved nominations as well for *"Love and Mercy"*). But the reasons this film ended up so high on my list of the year's best films also include that it grounds this story in the indigenous cultures that peopled this continent long before European settlers and plausibly equips the main character with tools and spiritual will to survive that he could only really have gained from exposure to those cultures. Hollywood may have missed the best of this film's wisdom, but I didn't -- and I'm glad that its director hasn't let industry accolades distract him from shooting higher than the industry can appreciate. [Rated R for strong frontier combat and violence including gory images, a sexual assault, language and brief nudity; on at least 130 other critics' top ten lists; in English, French, and Pawnee; nominated for, and deserves, the Academy Awards for Best Picture, Director, Actor (DiCaprio), Cinematography, Editing, Costume Design, Makeup and Hairstyling, Sound Mixing, Sound Editing, Visual Effects, and Production Design; also received

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of the film is so specific that it manages to communicate things about this aspect of human experience that have never been attempted before. Obviously this is not entertainment -- but at times films offer an opportunity to bear witness that I believe is extremely important for those of us who have the will to endure it. This is that kind of film, and an extraordinary achievement for its director, star, and everyone involved. [Rated R for disturbing violent content, and some graphic nudity; on at least 112 other critics' top ten lists; in Hungarian, Yiddish, German, Russian, Polish, French, Greek, and Slovak; nominated for the Academy Award for Best For-

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