

Shining Beauties, Changing Contents-Perspective on the Aesthetic and Cultural Background of the Times from the past Oscar-Winning Actresses

Zihan Han

School of Language and Communication, Beijing Jiaotong University, 100044 Beijing, China

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Abstract: This study examines the Academy Award for Best Actress as a lens through which to understand the evolving aesthetic, cultural, and political shifts across nearly a century of film history. By analyzing the roles, performances, and characteristics of Oscar-winning actresses from 1929 to 2024, this research uncovers the ways in which these portrayals reflect broader societal values, gender norms, and cultural ideologies. Through a detailed examination of historical contexts and the changing nature of femininity as represented in cinema, the study reveals that the evolution of winning roles mirrors the political and economic climate of the times, offering a unique reflection of struggles, triumphs, and shifts in public consciousness. The research demonstrates how the Best Actress award has not only highlighted significant artistic achievements but also functioned as a barometer for cultural transformations and gender representation in the film industry. Ultimately, this study underscores the Best Actress award's role as both a cultural and historical marker, providing valuable insights into the intersection of art, society, and the ongoing negotiations around women's roles in both film and society.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Academy Awards, also known as the Oscars, are among the most prestigious honors in the global film industry. They are established in 1929 by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS).

Furthermore, The Academy Award for Best Actress is one of the major acting categories., which honors a female actor for delivering an outstanding performance in a leading role. The selection criteria for this award are strict and multifaceted, considering their performance quality, role significance, contextual factors, industry momentum, and so on. Voters assess the actress's portrayal's depth, complexity, and emotional impact. Nuanced, transformative, or groundbreaking performances are highly regarded. The character's centrality to the film and its narrative weight influence the evaluation. The historical or cultural relevance of the role, along with the film's themes and societal resonance, can amplify its significance.

The award itself also carries a lot of significance and value. Apparently, The Best Actress win typically elevates an actress's profile, leading to more

prominent roles, increased creative opportunities, and broader influence within the industry. Next, it serves as a lens, through which the broader cultural, political, and economic conditions of the era are often visible. After that, winning performances often mirror societal values, struggles, or triumphs. They frequently capture prevailing cultural aesthetics and spiritual pursuits, making them a snapshot of the times. Moreover, it is an artistic benchmark that sets a standard of excellence and inspires future generations of actors and filmmakers. Last but not least, the award solidifies the actress's place in cinema history, contributing to their lasting cinematic legacy. This paper aims to explore how Oscar-winning actresses and their roles provide insights into the aesthetic and cultural background of their times, examining the interplay between film narratives and societal values.

2 THE AWARD AS A CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL MARKER

As mentioned, the Best Actress award serves as a lens through which the broader cultural, political, and economic conditions of the era are often visible.

2.1 Economy

Films featuring strong, aspirational female characters are often celebrated during times of economic prosperity. Conversely, during downturns, narratives of resilience and survival resonate more deeply.

For example, *Gone with the Wind* (1939) emerged in the aftermath of the Great Depression, a period when society was yearning for economic recovery and a return to stability. The film's central character embodies a grand, idealistic image of resilience and determination. Despite facing numerous hardships, she remains hopeful and driven, mirroring the societal aspirations for revival and prosperity. Her journey through the film reflects the broader economic struggles of the time, while also offering a vision of hope and renewal.

In contrast, *Nomadland* (2020) was released in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, a period marked by widespread economic instability and the challenges faced by the working class. The film centers on a woman who, after losing her job and home, embarks on a journey across the American West, living out of her van. Her story captures the realities of economic hardship, highlighting the struggles of ordinary people to survive and find meaning in a world that has left them behind. The film's portrayal of resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity resonates deeply with audiences, reflecting the economic anxieties and aspirations of the time.

These shifts in narrative focus indicate that award-winning films often reflect the economic psychology of the times, whether presenting visions of revival and luxury or depicting survival and resilience. The portrayal of female characters in these films not only mirrors the broader economic conditions but also offers a commentary on societal values and aspirations. In times of economic prosperity, female characters are often depicted as ambitious and aspirational, embodying the spirit of progress and achievement. However, during economic downturns, these characters are more likely to be portrayed as resilient and resourceful, highlighting the importance of adaptability and perseverance in the face of adversity.

2.2 Politics

Many award-winning films are closely related to the political situation, whether it is the surface characters, actors, director nationality, or deep narrative background.

For instance, *Two Women* (1960), set against the backdrop of World War II, tells the story of an Italian mother and daughter fleeing to their hometown to avoid the war. The film captures the human cost of conflict, highlighting themes of survival, resistance, and the impact of war on civilian life. The characters' struggles reflect the broader political realities of the time, offering a poignant portrayal of the resilience and courage required to endure such hardships.

Similarly, *The Lives of Others* (2006) is set in East Germany during the height of the Cold War. The film explores the lives of ordinary citizens under a repressive regime, highlighting the pervasive surveillance, fear, and the struggle for artistic and personal freedom. The lead character's portrayal of a woman caught in the crossfire of political oppression offers a powerful commentary on the impact of totalitarianism on individual lives. Her journey reflects the broader political climate of the time, capturing the tension between state control and the human desire for freedom and self-expression.

These films often reflect the political climate and its impact on individuals and communities, highlighting themes of conflict, resistance, and human resilience. By portraying the struggles and triumphs of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, these films offer a window into the political realities of their times. The characters' experiences and actions serve as a testament to the enduring human spirit, even in the face of overwhelming adversity. The Best Actress award, in recognizing these performances, acknowledges the importance of such narratives in capturing the political and social dynamics of the era.

2.3 Ideology

Many awarded roles reflect changing societal and multiple ideologies, such as the push for civil rights, women's empowerment, or LGBTQ+ representation.

For example, a groundbreaking performance in *Monster's Ball* (2001) marked a significant milestone as the first African American woman to win Best Actress. The character's journey through the film highlights the complexities of racial identity, social justice, and the struggle for equality. Her performance offers a powerful commentary on the ongoing fight

against racial discrimination and the importance of representation in the media.

Similarly, *The Favourite* (2018) explores the complex relationships between the queen and her two same-sex lovers, highlighting shifts in gender and sexuality representation. The film's portrayal of these relationships challenges traditional gender norms and offers a nuanced exploration of power dynamics, love, and desire. The lead character's performance captures the emotional and psychological complexities of her role, reflecting broader societal changes in attitudes towards gender and sexuality.

The evolution of feminist narratives and representation of diverse identities has been reflected in awarded performances, indicating a shift in mainstream storytelling priorities.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

We conducted a complete sample analysis of the Oscar-winning actresses from 1929 to 2024 and encoded their roles and physical characteristics. In terms of film characters, we have encoded the following dimensions: character position, character profession, character age, character era, character location, character achievements, character setbacks, and the relationship between the character and the protagonist. Regarding award-winning actors, we encode the following dimensions: actor nationality, actor skin color, actor hair color, actor eye color, and actor face shape, which attempts to explore the mainstream aesthetic and cultural background reflected by the Oscar-winning actress.

3.1 Appearance

Among all the winning actresses, there are 69 Americans, 14 Britons, 2 Canadians, 2 Swedes, 2 Frenchmen, 2 Italians, 1 Malaysian, 1 Australian American, 1 Belgian and 1 South African. Among them, Americans accounted for 72.63%. This is not surprising because The Academy Awards were established by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in the United States. In addition, the economy and film culture industry of the United States have indeed been leading the world for a long time. Naturally, the level of directors, actors, and producers in the United States has also been on par with other countries for a long time.

There was only one winner with black skin and only one winner with yellow skin. The reason is the same as above. As for face shape, there are no unique patterns that change over time, most of the actresses

have oval faces heart-shaped faces, or conical faces, some mature characters have square faces, and some cute and lovely characters have round faces. After all, the facial shapes of beautiful women are very similar.

The hair color of Oscar-winning actresses reveals significant trends in aesthetic preferences over time. In the first 20 years of the Academy Awards (1929-1948), 40% of the Best Actress winners had blonde hair. This proportion decreased to 30% between 1949-1968 and further to 20% between 1969-1987. However, there was a notable spike between 1988-2007, with 60% of the winners being blonde. Since 2008, the proportion has dropped to approximately 45%.

Blonde hair has historically symbolized a white-centric aesthetic, often associated with beauty and youth. However, this aesthetic preference has fluctuated over time. The initial decline in the number of blonde winners suggests a shift away from traditional beauty standards. The resurgence in the 1980s and 1990s reflects a period of nostalgia and renewed appreciation for this aesthetic. In the 21st century, the trend towards greater diversity in beauty standards is evident, as the proportion of blonde winners has gradually decreased. This shift indicates a broader evolution in societal perceptions of beauty and the increasing recognition of diverse aesthetic ideals.

3.2 Occupation

To be honest, compared to housewives and career women, the disparity in the number of noble and commoner characters is more significant. The characters carrying identity tags such as "wealthy heiress", "royal lady", and "distressed princess" are highly welcomed and obsessed by the audience. These characters are either noble and elegant, innocent and lovely, or vigorous and brave. Some are fictional and fictional stories, while others are historical figures that have actually existed. These stories not only satisfy the audience's golden imagination of "aristocratic families" and deepen their understanding of historical figures but also encourage the audience to face reality more tenaciously, after all, the queen also has thorny troubles and has to face storms alone.

By 1976, there were as many as 10 characters labeled as "nobles" and "rich daughters" in the first 40 years, whereas in the following 40 years, this number dwindled to only 3. Among these three, 'Howards End' and 'Shakespeare in Love' are historical retrospectives, while 'The Queen' serves as an objective record of Elizabeth II, and "The Iron

"Lady" tells the story of Margaret Thatcher, the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. This indicates a shift towards more populist characters, suggesting the era of "aristocratic families" has passed. Instead, there is a greater emphasis on ordinary individuals or women of lesser social prominence, aligning with the more professional portrayal of female characters.

In the illustrious hall of the Academy Award for Best Actress, these roles were far from traditional family binders despite the early emergence of many housewife characters on screen. On the contrary, with their unique charm, they exhibited admirable qualities of tenacious struggle between family and self, relentlessly pursuing freedom and dreams, from silently enduring to bravely speaking out, breaking free from the constraints of ordinary daily life.

For example, *The Divorcee* tells a story about a woman who was abandoned by her husband but found her true love in the end. *The Sin of Madelon Claudet* tells the story of a woman who experiences a series of tragic experiences and tenacious struggles, including being abandoned after pregnancy, being wrongfully imprisoned, and being forced to engage in prostitution to raise her son after being released from prison. In the end, she successfully raises her son to adulthood and sends him to medical school. Their stories have inspired generation after generation of audiences.

3.3 Narration

In the nascent era of Oscar-winning films, spanning from 1929 to 1960, the narrative fabric of female characters was intricately interwoven with love and family. The preeminent actresses of this epoch frequently embodied roles whose existences pivoted around the quest and sustenance of love. Be they peasants, white-collar employees, or affluent ladies, their tales were anchored in love. They would traverse the gamut of emotions in love, confronting betrayal yet ultimately endeavoring to safeguard their relationships and families. For instance, in the 1938 film "The Good Earth," the female protagonist endured her husband's infidelity but tenaciously held the family intact. This mode of storytelling was not confined merely to romantic love but also permeated family relations, with women commonly portrayed as selfless mothers, relinquishing everything for the sake of their children.

Although films throughout the 1930s and 1950s revolved around the themes of pursuing love and protecting marriage, pioneering attempts had already been made. For example, *Dangerous* (1936) tells the

story of the female protagonist who always wanted to divorce her original husband but was rejected, ultimately succeeding in her struggle to be with her lover. During this period, the female protagonist's suffering was mainly due to her widowhood and husband's betrayal. However, during particularly difficult times such as World War II, the Civil War, and the financial crisis, many films also celebrated women's struggles against their tragic fates, including those from original family (*Seventh Heaven*), Tsunami (*The Farmer's Daughter*), air raid (*Mrs. Miniver*), accidental killing (*Gaslight*), business closure (*Kitty Foyle*) and other sources of suffering.

Nevertheless, a momentous transformation took place after 1960. Female characters started to liberate themselves from the constraints of the domestic realm and ventured into society. They assumed a wide array of professional personas, including producers, nurses, and translators, and shone brightly in diverse fields and relationships. Although love still remained pivotal in their lives, it ceased to be the exclusive focus.

Room at the Top (1960) tells the story of the female protagonist who is under pressure from class and society, struggling and striving to improve her social status. Films such as "Women in Love" (1971) delved into the intricate nexus between love and free will, mirroring the awakening of female self-awareness.

These characters were no longer straightforward adjuncts in the context of love but instead pursued more egalitarian and liberated relationships. Additionally, this era was characterized by the profound impact of historical events on women. They withstood the rigors of war and the Great Depression, and their experiences during these arduous times imbued them with symbolic significance, epitomizing the social struggles and transformations of the period.

Commencing from 1984, the depiction of female characters persisted in evolving. They emerged as even more multifaceted and self-reliant. They encountered not only challenges in personal relationships but also impediments in the professional and social arenas. For example, in "Norma Rae" (1980), the female lead spearheaded a labor union struggle, thereby accentuating her resoluteness and valor in the face of social inequity. Their accomplishments were no longer exclusively determined by love and family but also by their contributions to society and personal development.

Since 1969, 33 out of 60% of the Academy Award winners for Best Actress have been "absolute leading actresses", meaning that there are no other male or female leads, and any social relationships are with

supporting or affiliated female leads. Before 1969, female leads usually appeared alongside male leads in similar roles. This comparison also established the rise of feminism.

In summation, the odyssey of female characters in Oscar-winning films has been an extraordinary evolution. Starting from being circumscribed within the domain of love and family, they have progressively emerged as robust and autonomous individuals with a rich tapestry of roles and values. Their narratives have broadened to embrace a more extensive panorama of human experiences, encompassing social concerns, personal maturation, and the quest for dreams. This metamorphosis mirrors the shifting perception of women in society and their burgeoning significance and sway in sundry facets of life.

4 CONCLUSION

The Academy Award for Best Actress transcends individual recognition; it encapsulates the intersection of artistry, cultural values, and societal progress. By honoring performances that resonate both emotionally and intellectually, the award not only celebrates cinematic excellence but also helps frame and understand the artistic, social, and political landscapes of its time. The evolution of winning roles reflects broader cultural, political, and economic conditions, capturing the prevailing aesthetics and ideological shifts of their times. As Oscar-winning actress Kate Winslet once said, "Don't change yourself for anyone; you are already perfect enough." These extraordinary female characters declare to the world that even in the most inconspicuous corners, they can shine the most dazzling light. Therefore, let us remember these brilliant stars in cinema history, using their courage as a mirror, and let every girl bravely be herself and live out her most authentic self, because every soul has a unique shining point.

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