

THE JURY IS ALWAYS RIGHT

SATIRE: A confessional report on the stuff that prizes are made of **By Boris Mitić**



“Dear sponsors, dear organizers, dear filmmakers, dear jury colleagues.

In my short and modest career, I have received the following awards: One Roman fountain. One hologramic glass flower. One rusty horseshoe. One Gypsy Oscar. One Chronograph, whatever that is. One cobblestone cube, which frightened anyone who came my way. One reindeer on wheels - for a urban ecology prize. One abstract painting called Water, in which everyone saw a hedgehog. One king-size eye. One statue of a Greek philosopher, my favorite audience award. One Mariachi cameraman I have yet to receive. One Siberian photo bag. One letter from the Ministry of Culture of Bolivia, where I never even sent my film. Several cashless second-best mentions that always came in a broken frame. A Grand Prix sculpture, that I secretly exchanged for a much smaller one that I liked better. And many more, which are dusty beyond recognition.

All this to say: If you win an award, it can be a great way to decorate your toilet. If you don't win anything, it's not a big deal, because there are many other ways to decorate your toilet. And the winner is ... ”

That's my standard pseudo-dramatic award ceremony speech. It works every time, and it makes everybody happy. But I always wanted to elaborate on it.

You wouldn't put awards on book shelves. Any book you've read or haven't read is more valuable.

Awards are great motivation boosters for young or unconfident filmmakers, but once you're branded an 'awarded filmmaker', what else is there to it?

Just crosswire the politics of festival selections with the credibility of the jury members, the eclecticism of their criteria, the 'expectations' of producers and distributors, the redundancy of the media hype, the pathos of the losers and the obnoxiousness of the winners, and you'll definitely want to drink away that award ceremony night in any local pub.

Awards are sponsored by bad-conscience financial institutions or culturocidal political bodies.

Awards are decided by second-rate international judges who pray for peaceful jury decisions so that they get the afternoon off on the last day of the festival to buy souvenirs or answer emails.

Awards are made in bulk by third-class local craftsmen who also pray for peaceful jury decisions, so that they can quickly engrave the personaliae of the winner and rush home early that night.

Worst of all, awards always end up being unscrupulously recycled by both laureates and their national film centers to cover every past, present and future failure.

But I do enjoy being a jury member. You get the best seat in the cinema and you don't even need to make up excuses if you want to watch a potentially boring film on DVD in your hotel room.

Everybody laughs at your jokes. Your body language gains weight. Your silences breed wit.

I always insist that we start by defining the preferred merits of our winning documentary: Should it be the most victimocratic film? The most tragic? The most current? The most artistic? The most inspiring? The most messageful? The most original? The most challenging? The most challenged? The most symbiotic in theme & style? The one with the smallest carbon footprint? The best?

Of course, everybody laughs, because everybody laughs at whatever jury members say. And I never expect a serious debate about it either, I just do it because it makes the others more relaxed and more open to express their own 'issues'. Either verbally, or in their body language, or in their silences.

And that's the fun part: true nature filtered through presumed objectivity and colloquial good manners. Political vetos, personal conflicts, vanity checks, ricochet sympathies, conservative pragmatism, stylistic partisanship, 'Art' dogmas... It's delightful how everything gets revealed when you discretely press the right buttons.

But awards can also be a curse.

Deserve it or not, you'll face jealousy, gossiping, denigration and contempt from friends and colleagues alike. You might even be less likely to receive public funding next time, because hey, he doesn't need it, he has that award from... Korea. Or was it Brazil?

Many jury members will think the same way, so your future films will always be less awarded than your previous ones, and you will enter either a downward spiral or a chronic upstream battle.

And 'awarded filmmakers' are a curious breed, too. Some will overspam every special mention in every village festival, others will not show up even for life achievement awards. But most will just hate all the jury members who ever failed to give them the top award, and that bad blood can be career-long.

That's why I always insist that we should give awards to everybody, from \$100.000 in oil barrels to the very winner to a 0,1l bottlet of wine to the last loser. The psychological effect will be the same, as every post-Christmas parent knows.

And I constantly insist, though with much less success, on introducing new categories of awards:

Best poster, Best failed potential, Best overcoming of compromises, Best manipulation that most people didn't notice, Best jury member, Best Q&A... Just to deflate the drama.

And the drama reaches its climax, of course, at the last jury dinner.

Only the glasses of wine know it all – the facial expressions, the tethered comments, the oblivious bitterness...

The festival director hovers in the background, worried about how his favorites will fare, about sponsors objecting the jury decisions and possibly quitting next year, about the price of the last-minute flight ticket for the winner.

The hard week's work seems to stretch indefinitely, until trench fatigue and press release deadlines suddenly reshuffle the napkin votes into a verdict that every jury-dinner waiter could have predicted hours earlier: The winners are... everybody's 3rd favorite, 1 local diva, 1 promising or far-away author, 1 charismatic youth, and 1 prize decided unilaterally by the eldest or heaviest jury member, who knows – maybe it's his or her last jury.

So what do I do? – I insist on writing the jury statement. Nobody likes to do it and I know that nobody reads them anyways, but that's where I clean my conscience, in between those laconic lines.

And I never hand out the Best Documentary Awards myself. I just stare at the spotlight and think about texts like this one.

Boris Mitić has also experienced many other, non-tropical prizes with his documentary films, but those will be the subject of another, much more affirmative text. boris@dribblingpictures.com

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