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Michael Mann's "Heat" is the Most Laughable Oscar Snub of All Time



Matt Fish

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Nearly 25 years after it first hit theaters in 1995, Michael Mann's epic crime drama "Heat" is considered a modern classic. It also failed to garner any Oscar consideration in the run-up to the 1996 Academy Awards telecast.

Seriously. Not one single nomination to its name.

It's a stupifying snub that outranks Best Picture almosts like "Pulp Fiction," "Taxi Driver," "Brokeback Mountain" and last year's "Roma" as arguably the Academy's most egregious oversight ever.

It's not as if the pieces hadn't been in place at the time either. You had: Robert De Niro and Al Pacino, both of whom reached the apex of their 90s-era career resurgences with this film; a holiday season release date, typically saved for awards bait and Disney's next Star Wars cash grab, and; a studio in Warner Bros. that had been on a Best Picture tear for nearly a decade (see "The Accidental Tourist," "Dangerous Liaisons," "Goodfellas," and "The Fugitive," to name just a few).

Somehow, Academy voters still chose to ghost a film that has become a modern crime masterpiece. The funny thing part is that its influences can be felt almost everywhere in pop culture — from "[The Dark Knight](#)" to the "[Grand Theft Auto](#)" video game franchise to [real-life armored car robberies](#) in countries around the world.

Adding to the retroactive embarrassment is the list of Best Picture nominees from the 1996 Oscars. As you might expect, it hasn't aged well.

Beyond "Braveheart," the movie that took home the night's biggest prize, the category is light on work that has penetrated the general zeitgeist as thoroughly as "Heat." I mean, even "Babe" got a Best Picture nomination

Like, huh? What?

Saltiness aside, there's some scientific proof waiting in the wings here. I want to take a closer at this snub and look at five major reasons why "Heat" was so richly deserving of Academy recognition:

De Niro, Pacino and the Rest of the Cast Are Excellent

From the two world-class leading performances to a long list of supporting players who more than rise to the occasion, "Heat" is a film that features great casting choices and even better acting.

Let's start with the two biggest stars on the marquee: De Niro and Pacino. Veterans of so many classics crime dramas, from "The Godfather" trilogy to "Mean Streets," "Scarface," "Serpico," "Goodfellas" and many others, these two revered actors embody their cop and robber personas as few Hollywood stars can. Looking at their respective careers, De Niro's Neil McCauley and Pacino's Vincent Hanna represent the high-water marks of each man's post-prime output.

The total embodiment of character — instinctively being able to slip into those skins with such confidence — is showcased brilliantly in the famous café sequence, where both men agree to a momentary truce to sip late-night cups of coffee, put their cards on the table and, in the end, reveal how much they need each other to scratch a professional itch that won't ever go away.

The supporting cast is also excellent, full of truly great performances that give the film a grounded, gritty edge, alternating between bursts of barely controlled rage and sections of quiet pathos. It's that depth of character and emotion that makes "Heat" compelling, affecting drama and not just another cops-and-robbers action flick.

Two supporting roles stand above the rest: Ashley Judd's Charlene and Diane Venora's Justine. Both women play beleaguered wives who, in searching for more intimacy with their partners, end up coming between their men and the work that consumes them. In some ways, the film is more about them and how they grapple with their unjust relationships than any crimes committed at gunpoint.

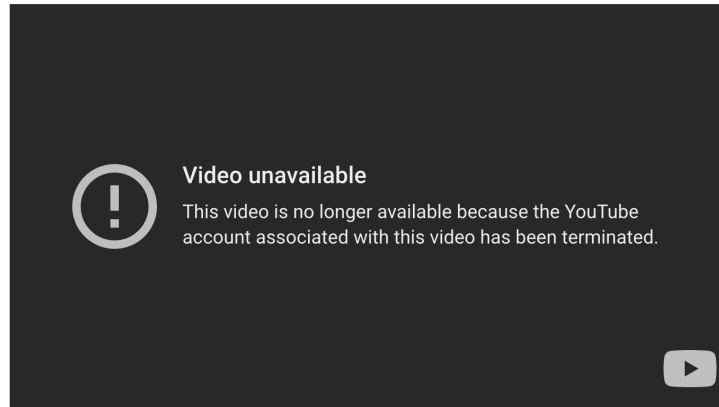
It's almost unthinkable that De Niro, Pacino, Judd, Venora or any other cast members weren't even nominated for acting Oscars. In a year that saw Nicholas Cage, Susan Sarandon, Kevin Spacey and Mira Sorvino win for films that have been largely forgotten by moviegoers over time, "Heat" boasts a collection of performances that were badly underserved.

The Sound Design Set the Standard for Movie Shootouts

One of the most memorable moviegoing experiences I've ever had in my life was sitting in a small screening room on a rainy Sunday night, watching "Heat" in all its original 35mm glory.

The biggest thing that stood out to me was the sound design. The booming gunshots, the driving mostly electronic score, the powerful, selective use of silence; every sound design aspect melded together perfectly and, in my opinion, set the standard for the aural component of today's police dramas.

What continues to blow me away after dozens of viewings is the sheer force of the sound design for the shootouts. Instead of inserting pre-made gunfire effects in post-production, Mann and his team carefully placed microphones in and around the locations where shooting took place. The result is a collection of action set pieces that hit you with unprecedented ferocity.



The bank robbery sequence, a stretch of the film that lasts nearly 15 minutes, is jaw-dropping because of its complexity on a sound design level. Everything is captured, cut and mixed to perfection, bringing an added level of visceral intensity to the action. You feel like you're right there, in the middle of the frightening situation, and sound plays a big part in that sensation.

Another example of the film's audio elements playing off each other deceptively well is the opening credits sequence, where the beginnings of the armored car heist start coming together. Notice how the diegetic sound effects almost become part of the score, blanketing the movie's soundtrack in an electronic-based symphony.



For very different reasons, the only other film I can remember that

overwhelmed me with its sound design in a theater was Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey." In that case, it was the enormity of the music marrying with the grandiose images; for pure adrenaline-fueled sonic grit, "Heat" is an unequaled beast of a movie.

The Stylish Photography Expertly Captures a Gritty Los Angeles

Michael Mann's various TV and film projects have always oozed visual flair. From the throbbing fluorescents of "Miami Vice" to the cool, steely look of "Collateral," he uses inventive techniques to infuse that style with gritty realism. "Heat" is no exception.

Mann and cinematographer Dante Spinotti paint the Los Angeles cityscape as an eerily beautiful entity, especially during sequences that happen at night. Though nearly 100 locations were used over the course of the three-and-a-half-month shoot, the pair also experimented with super low frame rates and green screen technology to get the exact look they wanted.



Another visual choice that adds to this atmosphere is the use of the telephoto lens. Mann's shots cover lots of spatial ground yet also crowds the frame with his subjects. This results in an intimate, almost claustrophobic feeling that attaches itself to nearly every scene.

In fact, for as expansive as the action set pieces are in "Heat", that kind of tight coverage during dialogue scenes and even wordless exchanges make everything seem far more tense. The moment just before De Niro's McCauley kills Waingro is a perfect example of how the framing effortlessly raises the stakes for the viewer.



The lens choice also helps to melt the Los Angeles lights into blurry, dreamlike backdrops. Coupled with off-kilter angles and harsh shadows, Mann and Spinotti take elements of film noir that ground the visual style in

enough naturalism to strike a perfect balance between mood, atmosphere and believability.

To think that “Heat” wasn’t at least nominated for the superlative camera and visual effects work is mind-boggling. I mean, I’m sure Academy members felt great about giving “Batman Forever” a shot at Best Cinematography instead...

The Script and Dialogue Elevate the Epic Story

An aspect of “Heat” that sometimes gets lost in the shuffle is just how great the script and, in particular, the dialogue is.

During its nearly three-hour running time, Mann gives us so many iconic lines and long passages of back-and-forth dialogue that crackle with energy and timing. For aspiring screenwriters such as myself, the screenplay serves as a textbook example of how to maximize your exposition through character interaction.

The seamless storytelling goes a long way to giving this epic film a quick pace, never leaving the audience to feel like they’re too bogged down with information. A great example of how the dialogue on “Heat” works so well is this quiet moment that Neil has with his crew prior to going through with the bank robbery. Several character deaths are foreshadowed ever so subtly during this extremely well-written conversation.



Though overstuffed with subplots and tons of bit characters, the screenplay interweaves their stories perfectly and provides appropriately weighted snapshots of their lives. In the era of remakes and reboots, “Heat” would make a great extended eight or 10-episode mini-series because there’s so much meat on the bone that Mann only hints at here.

Most people seek out or re-watch this film because of the action and rightfully so, but in the process, you’re also treated to a rich tapestry of character-driven drama, and that’s due in large part to the precision of its outstanding screenplay.

The Themes of Loneliness and Obsession are Thoughtfully Explored

Finally, we’ve got the overall themes that the film explores. The exploration of loneliness and obsession with one’s work is what gives “Heat” the emotionally impactful depth that most action films or lesser crime dramas sorely lack.

De Niro’s McCauley represents one end of the spectrum here. He’s a man of extreme professionalism, a self-made social outcast who, to paraphrase his

extreme professionalism, a self-made social outcast who, to paraphrase his famous line, refuses to get attached to anything he can't walk out on in 30 seconds flat.

This theme is tackled mainly through the budding romance between McCauley and Eady. When he admits to being alone but, in his words, "I am not lonely," he sounds like he's trying to convince himself more than anyone else.



Pacino's Hanna deals with those same issues, positioning up the hero and villain is very similar men who are just on opposite sides of the law. Hanna knows deep down that he is the root cause of his lifeless marriage and, more broadly, a life where nothing fulfills him to the degree that his morbid line of work does.

The script gives us a handful of scenes that force Pacino's character into moments of vulnerability, such as when he's confronted by a family member of a slain prostitute. There's a moment of sad but heartfelt indecision where he realizes how he's unable to connect with men and women who aren't cops.

It's these themes and how well they're woven into the on-screen drama that makes the ending and especially Neil's fatal decision to seek revenge, so heartbreaking. We understand that these men want to change but are incapable of doing so, resigning themselves to lives with attachment or emotional investment in anything other than work.

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These are just a few of the reasons "Heat" is the most laughable Oscar snub of all time. Is there a more unjust decision in Academy Awards history that I'm forgetting? Shout it out in the comments below!

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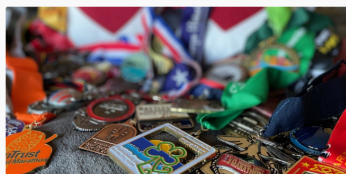
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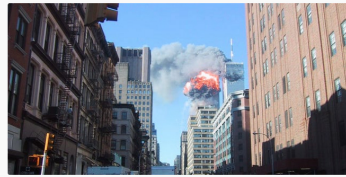


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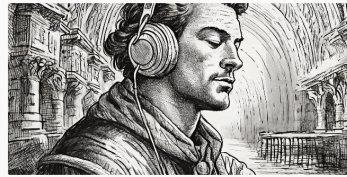


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