

Oscars or Emmys?

COVID-era releases blur awards legacy

Streaming video has accelerated the melding of the TV and movie worlds.

During the opening banter at the Golden Globes awards telecast, hosts Tina Fey and Amy Poehler tried to explain the changing media landscape. They emphasized the Hollywood Foreign Press Association's annual recognition goes to both movies and television shows, and as Poehler confessed, "It's hard to tell them apart this year." Fey noted that, "We watch TV and movies differently," offering jocular examples of production techniques that traditionally distinguished TV shows from feature films.

Their dialogue revived a question that has simmered in Hollywood for a decade. Why are there still separate Academies and awards for TV and movies? The Golden Globes (bestowed by producers, actors, writers and critics) recognize both distribution systems: theaters and home electronics. Understandably, there are huge historic and economic reasons to separate Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences "Film" and Television Academy "TV" awards — even though the two sectors are intertwined at studio, technology and many other levels. And increasingly in viewers' perceptions.

Some believe that since top talent [performers, directors and writers] are working in both spaces, it could force a merger of the organizations. As the studios expand their direct-to-consumer strategies, they won't care about the awards like when they needed buzz to sell DVDs. Economically and aesthetically, TV shows and films have long differed, but those distinctions are merging.

Meanwhile, the style of film and television has evolved. The writing and production of TV shows was driven by characters and the continuing story arc

was sustained for multiple episodes, while a motion picture was a single-standalone story. The popularity of film "franchises" (think "Avengers") means annual updates of stories with familiar characters and situations. At the same time, streaming video series look like long movies. For example, Netflix' popular "Unorthodox" (four episodes totaling 3.5 hours) was not much longer than "The Irishman."

These projects are fomenting a new vision of the "viewing time" commitment by binge or otherwise.

Follow the Money Flow

The revenue and pricing structure has also changed. Broadcast and cable channels were ad-supported, while customers bought tickets to see a movie. Streaming services offer a new mix of revenue systems.

Streaming video has accelerated the melding of the TV and movie worlds, and pandemic-induced restrictions have sent feature films directly to home screens. Although the prestige of an Oscar historically outshone an Emmy award, it's not clear the audience distinction will persist. More, it's uncertain if the award programs will return to their earlier glory.

With fragmented audiences, ratings of the awards telecasts have been dropping precipitously. The bragging rights for producers and performers may soon disappear for such awards — further complicating the economic equation.

This year's Oscars emphasized the theatrical/home video convergence. Thanks to the pandemic, most of the 2020-early 2021 Hollywood output intended for theatrical debuts showed up first on home screens. As a result, the streaming companies (which would have released some of their original programs theatrically) wound up as leaders of the pack for Oscar nominations: Netflix snagged 35 nominations, Amazon Studios had its most-ever at 12 nominations and Disney+ and Apple each earned their first nominations.

Some new productions will continue to bend the distinctions between film and TV shows, notably limited series such as "Wandavision" on Disney+. Meanwhile, movie stars have become video headliners. For example, Natalie Portman and Lupita Nyong'o will star in the new Apple TV+ "Lady in the Lake" mini-series — the first major TV project for both Oscar-winning actresses.

And to underscore the Awards blur: when the 73rd Emmy Awards are telecast on September 19, 2021, they will appear on both the CBS-TV broadcast network and on its corporate cousin, the Paramount Plus streaming service. ■