**Inquiry 2: Best Picture Context**

*Context: the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood and assessed.*

Historical and cultural contexts can reveal a lot about a text—the way it was made, the way it was received, and the way it can be viewed in other contexts. While it’s important not to make assumptions about why/how outside forces affected a text’s outcome, research and close reading a text can help us to understand why, perhaps, it was and is valued.

For this project, you will **select a film that was nominated for or has won the Best Picture Oscar, and though both research and close reading the film you will work towards understanding why this film was well received in relation to its historical and/or cultural contexts.** Obviously, as it was nominated for or won Best Picture, it was valued by certain audiences. But why? What is it about this film that made it resonate deeply with the audience at the time of its release?

For example, one of this year’s nominees for Best Picture is *Her*, a film that explores themes of how we interact with our digital technologies. Our current cultural context is one in which our increasing dependence on technologies like iPhones invites more discussion on how our relationships with computers dictate the way we live our lives. As such, *Her* may have resonated with audiences because this theme is highly relevant to our current historical/cultural context.

Another example: *Midnight Cowboy* came out in 1969 is the first and only Best Picture winner to hold an X rating from the MPAA. Why was this film rated X (it has since been lowered to an R rating)? This may be an indication of the cultural context in which it was made. Furthermore, how were audiences of that time able to overlook the racy rating and connect with the film, leading to it being valued and celebrated at the Academy Awards?

Some questions to start with as you begin selecting a topic and researching:

* Why was this film *valued* at the time?
* Was the context speaking back to a *larger cultural event or assumption*?
* How were its *themes* ones that resonated with critics and audiences of that time?
* How is this film existing within a body of other films with *similar content/genres*?

**Grading:**

\*This project is worth 250 points, or 25% of your grade in the course.

Research blog/annotations (5%): you will keep track of your research using your blog, constructing at least 10 posts—one per required source. As this project asks you situate how the film was received in relation to its contexts, you should **consult at least 4 reviews and/or essays on the film and 6 sources related to the context in which is exists** (historical, cultural, political, etc.). Each blog entry should provide a citation for the source, summarize the source, and briefly analyze it in terms of how it relates to your project as a whole. Shoot for around 150 words per posting—keep in mind that any writing generated in your annotations can be used in your paper. If you’re thorough and productive in your discussion of your sources and synthesis of your research, you will have a much easier time writing the paper.

Paper/writer’s reflection (15%): Your researched paper should be **at least 1200 words** and be written for people who are unfamiliar with the film, and therefore, may not have been part of the audiences that agreed this film was one of the year’s best. It’s your goal to try and explain to your reader why this film was valued, and how the contexts in which it existed shaped that value. **In-text citations and an attached works cited page** is required. Your final draft should be accompanied by a **writer’s reflection,** which addresses one or some of the following questions: what has this inquiry revealed to you about how contexts shape a text’s reception? What has this inquiry revealed to you about how the contexts in which you exist may affect the way you read a text? What has this inquiry revealed to you about researching? General thoughts on what you learned throughout this inquiry are welcomed.

Rough draft completion & peer response participation (5%): As always, rough drafts do not need to be “good,” but they do need to **have some semblance of a beginning, middle, and end** when they are due on peer response day. Your participation in peer response also influences your grade—your **thoughtful engagement with your peers’ writing** is important!

**Important Dates:**

* February 20th: Library research session: meet in King Library room 110
* March 6th: All ten blog annotations due.
* March 13th: rough drafts of the paper due for peer response.
* March 18th & 20th: In-class meetings cancelled in favor of individual conferences.
* March 23rd: Final drafts & writer’s reflections due. **This is the Sunday before Spring Break—plan accordingly!**

**Some Tips:**

* Be careful not to conflate the historical context of the plot with the historical context of when the film was released. For example, if you are writing about *12 Years a Slave*, you would discuss the context of 2013, not 1841 when the film takes place.
* This project, while having specific topic guidelines, is wide-open in terms of what direction you want to take/what aspect of the film’s reception and context you want to focus on. I encourage you to have a general idea when you begin, but be open to allowing your research guide you to new and alternative topic areas that you may discover are of interest to you.
* The research process will weigh heavily on the grade for the paper. This means that the presence of strong, reliable, and relevant research is important. Additionally, the integration of sources is a huge aspect of this project—how you discuss the sources in relation to each other and your own ideas, and how well you represent others’ work in your own writing.
* The best way to ensure you’re on the right track is to talk with me-- I’m always happy to meet with you outside of class to discuss your ideas and goals for this project. As always, I’m open to adapt this inquiry to meet your unique interests. If you have an alternative idea for a paper that still engages with research and contexts, let’s discuss it!