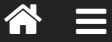


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FILM

Who Watches Oscar Shorts?

We watch Oscar Shorts! All this year's nominated shorts, reviewed.

📅 February 5, 2020 👤 Michael Giltz

If you want to win an Oscar betting party, you have to put in the work. And that means watching the Oscar nominees for Best Animated, Live Action and Documentary Short. And you're in luck! This year's batch of films are pretty strong across the board. Some years you watch them and think, "Really? These are the five best animated shorts?" Not this time.



Animated

Oscar shorts often tackle grim subjects, but the animated category is the best bet for sheer fun. Usually the animation shorts are brief and dependably entertaining. But this year the serious outnumber the silly. Instead, this year's crop covers daddy issues, forced abortions, animal brutality, dementia and kinky hair. And if you're a little girl struggling with your 'do, that last subject is most definitely just as serious as the others.

"Daughter" is an Australian story of a girl who never felt loved by her reserved father. The admirably chaotic camerawork isn't typical for animation. But the story is dour and since the dad is far from unfeeling, you can't help thinking, "Get over it!" That's hardly the creator's intent, so maybe she was too kind to her father?

In contrast, "Sister" pulls no punches. It's a what-if tale inspired by China's brutal one-child policy. This isn't bad, if a tad labored. But the animation doesn't wow and I'm convinced Oscar voters will wrongly see the film as pro-life simply because it opposes forced abortions. They'll know its heart is in the right place but still avoid it anyway.

The two lighter shorts are "Kitbull" and "Hair Love," both with connections to Oscar powerhouse Pixar. "Kitbull" has a cute title but this indie short made on a dime doesn't have the polish of the usual Pixar flicks. It's sweet but not a slam dunk, though cat and dog lovers will appreciate the rescue-animal vibe. It's a strong calling card for the talent involved but nothing more.



'Hair Love,' from Sony Pictures Animation.

"Hair Love" is the potential giant killer. It features an adorable little girl of color struggling to deal with her kinky hair. Dad joins in and it's funny, cute and filled with gags and "awww" moments. Then there's a sentimental twist. I resented that heart-tugging left turn and worse, the animation just isn't any good. It's very, very basic. The story has already been turned into a successful picture book and if audiences love it when you see the film, take that into account. But I wasn't sold.

By far the best animated short is "Memorable." It's a stop-motion story of a painter struggling with dementia as his wife provides crucial support. The visuals are gorgeous, with unexpected angles and imagery that echoes great

painters in history. The film handles dementia touchingly, and the emotion is real. It's a genuine work of art.

However, with three of the five nominees rather dark and sad, voters might lump in "Memorable" with the other serious fare, allowing "Hair Love" to slip through. My heart says "Memorable" is too good not to win. But my head says "Hair Love" might be a spoiler.

Live Action

Another five pretty good to great shorts. In typical Oscar shorts fashion, they tackle sexual assault, a brutal orphanage, cancer, drug running and ISIS. Where's Buster Keaton when you need him?

Actually, "Nefta Football Club" has a light-hearted tone. Two young brothers in Tunisia stumble across a lost donkey weighed down with bags of drugs. The little one believes the powder is laundry detergent while the older one realizes this could change their lives forever. Toss in confusion over the singer Adele, bumbling would-be crooks, and a soccer match played on a dusty unmarked field and you've got the general drift of this story. It ends amusingly but doesn't quite nail the moment completely. That makes this good but not great, though it's worth keeping an eye on any crowd pleaser.

"Nefta" doesn't stick the landing. But "The Neighbor's Window" is more disappointing. The demands of life harry a married couple with kids. Circumstances "force" them to watch the hot young couple across the way in another apartment building. Those two people seem to have time for nothing but sex and parties. The wife accuses her husband of being obsessed with their neighbors but it's really she who can't stop watching. "The Neighbor's Window" is nicely acted in a low-key way. But it gives the wife grief for being human and overwhelmed by parenting in the most obnoxious ways possible. Instead of encouraging us to reevaluate our lives, the film wags its finger at her. I assume many others will be just as annoyed.

"Saria" focuses on two sisters trapped in a brutal, dehumanizing Guatemalan orphanage that makes HBO's "Oz" look like a Sunday picnic. Based on a true uprising, it includes prison breaks, vicious guards and a horrifying tragedy. The two leads are good together but this bites off too much for a short. To really make an impact, they needed more money, more time and better production values.

The Belgian work "A Sister" is a modest little thriller that actually benefits from not trying too hard or delivering too many plot twists. Essentially, we get one. A guy and a girl are driving in a car late at night. He's tense and she's somewhat nervous while calling her sister to apologize for being late to pick up her daughter. Then the scene begins again and we realize the woman has been abducted after an assault of some sort. And it's not her sister she's talking to: it's emergency services and they're trying to garner information to track her down. Everything that follows is straightforward and modestly tense. While "A Sister" was wise to avoid melodrama, that means once we know what's going on, the piece has nowhere to go.



From 'Brotherhood,' directed by Meryam Joobeur.

In contrast, the Tunisian short "Brotherhood" is chock full of dramatic twists and revelations. It earns every one of them. A family in rural Tunisia struggles to get by when the eldest son suddenly returns home with a new bride in tow. She wears a burqa, keeping herself apart from this new family and raising tensions even higher. The son apparently ran off to fight with ISIS against his dad's wishes. Now they barely speak to each other while the mother tries to keep the peace. It's an illuminating work, showing divisions among Muslims of varying sects, fathers and sons, siblings and more. That makes "Brotherhood" smart, complex and a drama that earns its heartbreak.

"Nefta" is cute and if it had a better button at the end, I'd see it as the clear choice. Being the lone short with comic relief is certainly in its favor. "Saria" and, in its way, "A Sister" are also both strong. Still, I think "Brotherhood" will prevail. When in doubt, stick with the best short, the one that makes me want to see a feature film by its director Meryam Joobeur.

Documentary

Another strong batch of shorts. In years past, watching the doc shorts can be a chore. They're often too long and each one is more depressing than the last. This year's topics are as passionate and dark as usual. But even the two shorts lasting 40 minutes didn't feel too long for me.

"In The Absence" tells the story of an infamous ferry disaster in Korea that ultimately led to that country's President leaving office in disgrace. Thanks to cell phones, video cameras and numerous recorded phone calls, this tragedy is very well documented. It's a slow-motion nightmare, with the ferry tilting, taking on water and then sinking to the bottom while the indecision of those in charge leave countless rescue boats frozen. After watching the film, I'm still not quite sure why so many different people failed to act when they could have made a difference. Maybe the filmmakers became too familiar with this story, one that everyone in Korea would know all too well? Still, the incompetence, miscommunication and puzzling indifference of the rescuers and government officials comes across well. Some powerful moments but it's never a good sign when you have so many questions about what you just watched.

"St. Louis Superman" profiles a young man who got sick of gun violence and ran for statewide office. Ultimately Bruce Franks Jr. prevails in getting gun violence named a health crisis, which makes St. Louis eligible for some much-needed funding to combat the root causes. Oh and he's also a rap battler, though the film captures that side of him briefly and unremarkably in just one scene. But all the drama happens off stage. The film is missing the strategy of how Franks convinced the mostly white and Republican politicians at the state capitol to support his measure. So is the pain of more deaths and Franks' struggle with depression because of it, a fact covered briefly in a postscript. In short, they missed the good stuff.

In the same way, "Walk Run Cha-Cha" asks us to fill in a lot of details. It profiles an elderly Vietnamese couple in the US, a husband and wife team who love to do ballroom dancing. It fills in their rather dramatic backstory for us, but it never truly comes to life. They met as young people in Vietnam and dated for six months. He fled the country and spent the next six years fighting to get her out of there too. She did, they rekindled their romance and now decades later they share a passion for dancing that allows them to communicate their love. It's cute watching them dance at the finale to "We've Only Just Begun." But the real drama happened many years earlier, giving this piece a muted impact.

The gorgeously shot and edited "Life Overtakes Me" is puzzling in a deeply disturbing, Oliver Sacks sort of way. It's about the medical phenomenon known as Resignation Syndrome. Child refugees in Sweden simply can't handle the tension and uncertainty of their vague legal status. Their families must wait years to discover if they will become citizens or if Sweden will return them to the violence and despair of their home countries. So the kids just sink into comas.

First they stop talking, then they stop eating and then they remain becalmed and essentially unresponsive as life goes on around them. It's bizarre and unsettling to watch their parents and siblings deal with these kids who can remain comatose for months and years. Often they only come out of it slowly, but only months after the family learns it has been accepted. This is a dark fairy tale about how the world treats refugees and is very unsettling to watch. It ends with a depressing coda: Resignation Syndrome has now spread to refugees in Australia.

That's a very impressive short. But the clear winner in this category is "Learning To Skateboard In A Warzone (If You're A Girl)." In Afghanistan, some brave young girls risk their lives to break with centuries of tradition by daring to go to school and learning to read and write...and how to skateboard. Yes, they go to class and then they head to

Skateistan where female instructors gently lead the girls in the basics of the sport. A lot of serious issues are intelligently threaded into this short. But let's face it. This is ADORABLE. And inspiring and moving and genetically engineered to win the Oscar. I watched it first and almost didn't watch any of the other documentary shorts because why bother. It's a winner, full stop.

Tags: Brotherhood, Hair Love, In The Absence, Learning To Skateboard In A War Zone, Life Overtakes Me, Nefta Football Club, Oscar, Oscar Shorts, Saria, St. Louis Superman, The Neighbor's Window

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Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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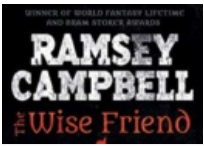
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