

# Nominees, winners, and losers

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**Abstract** The paper tries to convey the idea that choosing a winner among a group of nominees or short-listed candidates may hurt those who bestow prizes, those who are selected, as well as those who base their own choices on the ranking. We base our observations on examples of contests (movies, literature, and music) in which winners often turn out not to be better than nominees. Our suggestion is therefore to select, say five candidates, and not to rank them, but reward all nominees equally.

**Keywords** Contests · Awards · Prizes · Ranking

## 1 Introduction

In the past, art evaluations were mostly implicit. An interesting and amusing exception is the famous contest between two Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasios active during the fourth century BC and reported by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia*: “Zeuxis had represented some grapes, painted so naturally that the birds

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The authors are grateful to two anonymous referees and to Kathryn Graddy for comments that much improved the paper. We are also grateful to Victor Fernandez-Blanco who always made himself available to answer our many questions on movies. The part of the paper on the Oscars as well as the general discussion on whether we need rankings is new. To show that what is discussed about movies may also apply in other fields of the arts; we, however, draw on previous work on musical competitions and the Booker Prize.

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flew towards the spot where the picture was exhibited. Parrhasios, on the other hand, exhibited a curtain, drawn with such singular truthfulness, that Zeuxis demanded that the curtain should be drawn aside to let the picture be seen. Upon finding his mistake, with a great degree of ingenuous candor he admitted that he had been surpassed, for that whereas he himself had only deceived the birds, Parrhasios had deceived him, an artist.”

But in general, evaluations were not as explicit. (Art) historians Vasari (1568) and Van Mander (1604) wrote on the lives of Italian and Flemish artists from the Renaissance, but without ranking them. The same is true for Lampsonius' (1572) choice of 23 engraved portraits in his small volume of “well-known” painters from the Low Countries. The first art historian to dare a partial ranking was de Piles (1708) in his *balance des peintres*;<sup>1</sup> by “partial” we mean that he rated artists on a certain number of properties (color, expression, drawing and composition), but stopped without computing an aggregate rating (that he could have easily obtained by adding the weights for instance).

The situation changed dramatically during the twentieth century, where public competitions proliferated in almost all artistic (as well as scientific) activities. English (2005) describes this at great length, and with much elegance. There exist several movie competitions in almost every country. The number of literary prizes can hardly be tracked. In France only, there are over 2,000 prizes every year.<sup>2</sup> The number of piano competitions went from five in 1945 to over 600 nowadays,<sup>3</sup> of which 340 are held in the US alone. The 2,500 pages thick 2005 directory *Awards, Honors & Prizes* lists over 33,000 prizes covering some 400 subject headings from “Academic Freedom” to “Zoology,” and including obviously many domains of the arts.

The rationale for creating so many competitions is clearly motivated by English (2005, pp. 50–68). He argues that competitions introduce special excitements and special opportunities for mass spectacle, a claim to authority by those who organize and administer prizes to “producing” cultural value, the affirmation that art is a superior domain, and the possibility for those who fund the prize to clear some of their past misbehavior (Nobel, Booker, Pritzker), among other reasons. He adds that “the systemic compulsion both to imitate and to differentiate, to establish, vis-à-vis the better established and more prestigious prizes, relationships of carefully calculated complementarity or antagonism, has been uncontainable. Each prize [...] produces a host of imitators with various legitimizing claims of similitude and difference [which in turn] gives rise to another order of imitators, and so on” (English 2005, pp. 64–65).

It is now easy to see who may gain from this flurry.

It is doubtful that consumers who are assumed to learn to discern what is good and what is not, do so by seeing Michael Jackson awarded 240 times, Steven Spielberg nominated 150 times and awarded 90 times, *Titanic* receiving 80 awards, and writer John Updike 39 prizes.<sup>4</sup> Bouton and Kirchsteiger (2011) show that a

<sup>1</sup> See also Ginsburgh and Weyers (2008) and Graddy (2013).

<sup>2</sup> *Le Monde*, September 7, 2010, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> See Masa Mizuno's Music Directory, <http://www.afn.org/~afn39483/> (accessed on October 14, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> English (2005, p. 25).

good ranking cannot hurt if it is used in individual decisions only; otherwise, it can generate externalities on other consumers and therefore make some or all of them worse off, since it changes their demand structure. If prices are rigid (which is so for movie theaters, books, and, to some extent, concert halls<sup>5</sup>), rankings may lead to congestion, make rationing of some consumers necessary and thus decrease their welfare. If prices are flexible, rankings may increase the market power of producers and hurt all consumers.

Prizes not seem to make artists happy either. This is, for instance, what John Berger said in his acceptance speech of the Booker Prize in 1972: “The competitiveness of prizes I find distasteful. And in the case of this prize, the publication of the short list, the deliberately publicised suspense, the speculation of the writers concerned as though they were horses, the whole emphasis on winners and losers is false and out of place in the context of literature. Nevertheless prizes act as a stimulus—not to writers themselves but to publishers, readers and booksellers.”<sup>6</sup> According to English (2005), the Australian poet Peter Porter is reputed to have said “there is hardly any writer in Sydney who has not won [a prize].” He died in 2010, without realizing that after his death, Australia’s leading literary review, the *Australian Book Review*, would rename its poetry prize the Peter Porter Poetry Prize.

It is also doubtful that nominated and short-listed artists who failed to get the prize, but waited and built up hopes during the many weeks preceding the ceremony<sup>7</sup> are happy to hear their name as having *not* won.

If there is an economic theory about why contests exist, it should start by asking “what is maximized.” This may well be the utility of those who bestow prizes. Above all, contests seem to “provide a closed elitist forum where cultural insiders—artists, critics, functionaries, sponsors, publicists, journalists, consumers, kibitzers and beggars—engage in political influence peddling and mutual back scratching.” (English 2005, p. 25).

The purpose of this paper is not so much to discuss why competitions are organized, nor whether they are useful or not,<sup>8</sup> but whether explicit rankings (*and the winner is...*) that emerge are more informative on quality than would be a limited list of five or ten individuals or works selected by the judges and presented as *and the winners are...*

The paper describes a couple of examples showing that winners are often not of better “quality” than other nominees. Therefore, it may be superfluous to select the “best among the best,” as long as nominees are the best. In Sect. 2, we consider “Best Movie” Oscars in some detail. The two next sections turn to the Queen Elisabeth piano contest and to the Booker Prize for Fiction. Section 5 concludes.

<sup>5</sup> See Courty and Pagliero (2013).

<sup>6</sup> See <http://gostbustere.tumblr.com/post/17158444595/speech-by-john-berger-on-accepting-the-booker-prize-for> (consulted April 2, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> The Oscars winning movies are guessed by every newspaper weeks before the ceremony; a session of the Queen Elisabeth piano competition takes a full month for those who reach the finals; names of possible winners of literary prizes are circulated during weeks by specialized literary newspapers before the winners are announced.

<sup>8</sup> These issues are discussed by English (2005, 2013) and Frey (2005, 2006, 2007).

## 2 Oscars

The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences awards Oscars since 1929, with two sessions in 1930, and no session in 1933.<sup>9</sup> With the exception of 1929 (where two winners were awarded), there is only one “best movie,” but the number of those nominated for “best movie” changed over time.<sup>10</sup> We collected the full list of winners and nominees, as well as 15 lists of so-called 100 top movie lists compiled in the late 1990s and briefly described in [Appendix](#). In some of the lists, movies are rank ordered, in others they are not. Therefore, we did not take ranks into account, but just whether a movie appears or not in a list.<sup>11</sup> Some ordered lists also contain more than 100 movies, but to be consistent with other lists, we stopped the count at 100.

We assume that the number of lists in which a movie, Oscar winner or nominee, appears is a proxy for its “quality” at some later stage, when judged by movie experts as well as by moviegoers. *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, nominated in 1942) appears in 15 lists and “is of quality 15,” while *Tom Jones* (Tony Richardson, Oscar in 1964) appears in one list only, and its quality is thus equal to 1. Oscars and nominees that appear in no list have quality 0.

The results of these calculations appear in [Table 1](#). It accounts for all awarded movies between 1929 and 1995 as well as for non-nominated movies that are of better quality than the Oscar in that year. We stopped in 1995, since two of the lists were established in 1995 and can of course not include movies that were awarded after 1995. The table is constructed as follows. Column (1) gives the year in which the Oscar and nominations were awarded; column (2) gives the title of movies that were awarded as well as those that were not, but achieve higher quality than the Oscar.<sup>12</sup> Column (3) gives the year in which the movie was produced. Column (4) contains the type of award: O for Oscar, N for other nominated movies; O-HQ means that the Oscar was also the highest quality (HQ) movie; N-HQ means that a nominated movie is of better quality than the Oscar; HQ alone means that the movie is of better quality than the Oscar and was not nominated. Columns (5) to (7) give the quality obtained by the Oscar, by other nominees and by the movies whose quality is larger (or equal) than the one obtained by the Oscar.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For a complete list of winners and nominees since 1929, see <http://www.imdb.com/event/ev0000003/1929>.

<sup>10</sup> There were 4 between 1929 and 1931 and from 1945 to the present days. This number was 7 in 1932, 9 in 1934 and between 1937 and 1944, and 11 in 1935 and 1936.

<sup>11</sup> This is related to Ginsburgh (2003), who looked at movies produced between 1950 and 1980, three Top Movie Lists only and was not interested in comparing Oscars and nominated movies.

<sup>12</sup> It may happen that no nominated movie is of quality larger than 0. This is indicated by the number of titles that were nominated (usually four), but did not achieve more than 0 quality. In 1930 (1), there were no other nominations than the Oscar.

<sup>13</sup> See also the notes at the bottom of the table.

**Table 1** The Oscars winners and nominees appearing in at least one “Best Movies” list

Year of ceremony (1)	Title of movie (2)	Year produced (3)	Type (4)	Oscar (5)	Best nominee (6)	Highest quality (7)
1929	Sunrise	1927	O-HQ	<b>6</b>		<b>6</b>
	Wings	1927	O	1		
	Four titles		N		0	
1930 (1)	The Broadway Melody	1929	O	<b>0</b>		
	No official nominees		N			
	<i>The Camera Man</i>	1929	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>The Man with a Movie Camera</i>	1929	HQ			<b>1</b>
1930 (2)	All Quiet on the Western Front	1930	O-HQ	<b>4</b>		<b>4</b>
	Four titles	1930	N		0	
1931	Cimarron	1931	O	<b>0</b>		
	Four titles		N		0	
	<i>No better movie</i>		HQ			<b>0</b>
1932	Grand Hotel	1932	O	<b>0</b>		
	Seven titles		N		0	
	<i>City Lights</i>	1931	HQ			<b>9</b>
	<i>M</i>	1931	HQ			<b>5</b>
	<i>Frankenstein</i>	1931	HQ			<b>4</b>
	<i>Dracula</i>	1931	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Monkey Business</i>	1931	HQ			<b>1</b>
1933	No ceremony					
1934	Cavalcade	1933	O	<b>0</b>		
	Fourty Second Street	1933	N-HQ		2	<b>2</b>
	<i>King Kong</i>	1933	HQ			<b>10</b>
	<i>Duck Soup</i>	1933	HQ			<b>6</b>
	<i>Trouble in Paradise</i>	1932	HQ			<b>3</b>
	<i>Zero for Conduct*</i>	1933	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Sons of the Desert</i>	1933	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Queen Christina</i>	1933	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Scarface</i>	1932	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Freaks</i>	1932	HQ			<b>1</b>
1935	It Happened One Night	1934	O-HQ	<b>6</b>		<b>6</b>
	The Thin Man	1934	N		1	
1936	Mutiny on the Bounty	1935	O	<b>3</b>		
	Top Hat	1935	N-HQ		5	
	Captain Blood	1935	N		3	
	<i>The Bride of Frankenstein</i>	1935	HQ			<b>5</b>

**Table 1** continued

Year of ceremony (1)	Title of movie (2)	Year produced (3)	Type (4)	Oscar (5)	Best nominee (6)	Highest quality (7)
1937	The Great Ziegfeld	1936	O	<b>0</b>		
	Dodsworth	1936	N-HQ		2	<b>2</b>
	Mr. Deed Goes to Town	1936	N-HQ		1	<b>1</b>
	<i>Modern Times</i>	1936	HQ			<b>7</b>
	<i>Swing Time</i>	1936	HQ			<b>4</b>
1938	The Life of Emile Zola	1937	O	<b>1</b>		
	Lost Horizon	1937	N		1	
	<i>No better movie</i>		HQ			<b>1</b>
1939	You Can't Take It with You	1938	O	<b>0</b>		
	The Adventures of Robin Hood	1938	N-HQ		7	<b>7</b>
	La Grande Illusion	1937	N		2	
	<i>Bringing Up Baby</i>	1938	HQ			<b>6</b>
	<i>The Lady Vanishes</i>	1938	HQ			<b>1</b>
1940	Gone with the Wind	1939	O-HQ	<b>14</b>		<b>14</b>
	The Wizard of Oz	1939	N-HQ		14	<b>14</b>
1941	Rebecca	1940	O	<b>3</b>		
	The Philadelphia Story	1940	N-HQ		10	<b>10</b>
	The Grapes of Wrath	1940	N-HQ		7	<b>7</b>
	<i>His Girl Friday</i>	1940	HQ			<b>5</b>
1942	How Green Was My Valley	1941	O	<b>1</b>		
	Citizen Kane	1941	N-HQ		14	<b>14</b>
	The Maltese Falcon	1941	N-HQ		9	<b>9</b>
	<i>The Lady's Eve</i>	1941	HQ			<b>7</b>
	<i>Sullivan Travels</i>	1941	HQ			<b>4</b>
1943	Mrs. Miniver	1942	O	<b>1</b>		
	The Magnificent Ambersons	1942	N-HQ		5	<b>5</b>
	Yankee Doodle Dandy	1942	N-HQ		4	<b>4</b>
	<i>The Palm Beach Story</i>	1942	HQ			<b>3</b>
1944	Casablanca	1942	O-HQ	<b>14</b>		<b>14</b>
	The Ox-Bow Incident	1943	N		3	
1945	Going My Way	1944	O	<b>0</b>		
	Double Indemnity	1944	N-HQ		10	<b>10</b>
	<i>Laura</i>	1944	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>Henry V</i>	1944	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>Meet Me in St Louis</i>	1944	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>The Miracle of Morgan's Creek</i>	1944	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>To Have or Have Not</i>	1944	HQ			<b>1</b>

**Table 1** continued

Year of ceremony (1)	Title of movie (2)	Year produced (3)	Type (4)	Oscar (5)	Best nominee (6)	Highest quality (7)
1946	The Lost Weekend	1945	O	<b>2</b>		
	Mildred Pierce	1945	N		1	
	<i>Children of Paradise</i>	1945	HQ			<b>4</b>
1947	The Best Years of Our Lives	1946	O	<b>7</b>		
	It's a Wonderful Life	1946	N-HQ		14	<b>14</b>
	Henry V	1944	N		2	
1948	Gentlemen's Agreement	1947	O	<b>0</b>		
	Great Expectations	1946	N		3	
	Miracle on 34th Street	1947	N-HQ		2	<b>2</b>
	<i>The Bicycle Thief*</i>	1947	HQ			<b>4</b>
	<i>Out of the Past</i>	1947	HQ			<b>4</b>
1949	Hamlet	1948	O	1		
	Treasure of the Sierra Madre	1948	N-HQ		8	<b>8</b>
	<i>Letter from an Unknown Woman</i>	1948	HQ			<b>4</b>
	<i>Red River</i>	1948	HQ			<b>2</b>
1950	All the King's Men	1949	O	<b>0</b>		
	All four movies		N		0	
	<i>The Third Man</i>	1949	HQ			<b>12</b>
	<i>Kind Hearts and Coronets</i>	1949	HQ			<b>3</b>
	<i>White Heat</i>	1949	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>Gun Crazy</i>	1949	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>The Reckless Moment</i>	1949	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>On the Town</i>	1949	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Adam's Rib</i>	1949	HQ			<b>1</b>
1951	All About Eve	1950	O-HQ	<b>12</b>		<b>12</b>
	Sunset Boulevard	1950	N		10	
1952	An American in Paris	1951	O	<b>4</b>		
	A Streetcar Named Desire	1951	N		4	
	A Place in the Sun	1951	N		1	
	<i>The African Queen</i>	1951	HQ			<b>6</b>
1953	The Greatest Show on Earth	1952	O	<b>0</b>		
	High Noon	1952	N-HQ		8	<b>8</b>
	The Quiet Man	1952	N-HQ		5	<b>5</b>
	<i>Singing in the Rain</i>	1952	HQ			<b>14</b>
	<i>The Golden Coach*</i>	1952	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Umberto D*</i>	1952	HQ			<b>1</b>

**Table 1** continued

Year of ceremony (1)	Title of movie (2)	Year produced (3)	Type (4)	Oscar (5)	Best nominee (6)	Highest quality (7)
1954	From Here to Eternity	1953	O	<b>3</b>		
	Shane	1953	N-HQ		4	<b>4</b>
	Roman Holiday	1953	N		1	
	<i>Tokyo's Story</i>	1953	HQ			<b>5</b>
1955	On the Waterfront	1954	O-HQ	<b>9</b>		<b>9</b>
	The Caine Mutiny	1954	N		2	
	Seven Brides for Seven Brothers	1954	N		1	
1956	Marty	1955	O	<b>1</b>		
	Mister Roberts	1955	N		1	
	<i>Rebel Without a Cause</i>	1955	HQ			<b>6</b>
	<i>The Night of the Hunter</i>	1955	HQ			<b>6</b>
	<i>Pather Panchali</i>	1955	HQ			<b>3</b>
	<i>Bad Day at Black Rock</i>	1955	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>East of Eden</i>	1955	HQ			<b>2</b>
1957	Around the World in 80 Days	1956	O	<b>1</b>		
	Giant	1956	N-HQ		2	<b>2</b>
	<i>The Searchers</i>	1956	HQ			<b>12</b>
	<i>The Seventh Seal*</i>	1956	HQ			<b>6</b>
	<i>All that Heavens Allows</i>	1956	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i>	1956	HQ			<b>2</b>
1958	The Bridge on the River Kwai	1957	O-HQ	<b>8</b>		<b>8</b>
	Twelve Angry Men	1957	N		2	
1959	Gigi	1958	O	<b>1</b>		
	Four titles		N		0	
	<i>Vertigo</i>	1958	HQ			<b>15</b>
1960	<i>Touch of Evil</i>	1958	HQ			<b>9</b>
	Ben Hur	1959	O	<b>5</b>		
	Four titles		N		0	
	<i>Some Like it Hot</i>	1959	HQ			<b>13</b>
1961	<i>North by Northwest</i>	1959	HQ			<b>12</b>
	The Apartment	1960	O	<b>3</b>		
	Four titles		N		0	
	<i>Psycho</i>	1960	HQ			<b>12</b>
1962	<i>La Dolce Vita*</i>	1960	HQ			<b>6</b>
	West Side Story	1961	O-HQ	<b>8</b>		<b>8</b>
	The Guns of Navarone	1961	N		1	
	The Hustler	1961	N		1	



**Table 1** continued

Year of ceremony (1)	Title of movie (2)	Year produced (3)	Type (4)	Oscar (5)	Best nominee (6)	Highest quality (7)
1963	Lawrence of Arabia	1962	O-HQ	<b>12</b>		<b>12</b>
	To Kill a Mockingbird	1962	N		5	
	The Longest Day	1962	N		1	
1964	Tom Jones	1963	O	<b>1</b>		
	Four titles		N		0	
	<i>8 1/2</i>	1963	HQ			<b>3</b>
	<i>The Great Escape</i>	1963	HQ			<b>2</b>
1965	My Fair Lady	1964	O	<b>3</b>		
	Dr Strangelove	1964	N-HQ		11	<b>11</b>
	Mary Poppins	1964	N		2	
1966	The Sound of Music	1965	O-HQ	<b>7</b>		<b>7</b>
	Doctor Zhivago	1965	N		3	
1967	A Man for All Seasons	1966	O	<b>0</b>		
	Who Is Afraid of Virginia Woolf	1966	N-HQ		1	<b>1</b>
	<i>Blow Up</i>	1966	HQ			<b>4</b>
	<i>The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*</i>	1966	HQ			<b>3</b>
	<i>Persona*</i>	1966	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>Au Hasard Balthazar*</i>	1966	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Masculine Feminine*</i>	1966	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Two or Three Things I Know</i>	1966	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Hold Me While I Am Naked</i>	1966	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>The Rise of Louis XIV*</i>	1966	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Andrei Roublev*</i>	1966	HQ			<b>1</b>
1968	In the Heat of the Night	1967	O	<b>0</b>		
	Bonnie and Clyde	1967	N-HQ		10	<b>10</b>
	The Graduate	1967	N-HQ		10	<b>10</b>
	Guess Who Is Coming to Dinner	1967	N-HQ		2	<b>2</b>
	<i>Belle de Jour*</i>	1967	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Two For the Road</i>	1967	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Le Samourai*</i>	1967	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Cool Hand Luke</i>	1967	HQ			<b>1</b>
<i>Wavelength</i>	1967	HQ			<b>1</b>	

**Table 1** continued

Year of ceremony (1)	Title of movie (2)	Year produced (3)	Type (4)	Oscar (5)	Best nominee (6)	Highest quality (7)
1969	Oliver	1968	O	<b>0</b>		
	Funny Girl	1968	N-HQ		1	<b>1</b>
	<i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i>	1968	HQ			<b>12</b>
	<i>The Producers</i>	1968	HQ			<b>3</b>
	<i>Once Upon a Time in the West</i>	1968	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>Barbarella</i>	1968	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>The Night of the Living Dead</i>	1968	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Petulia</i>	1968	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Faces</i>	1968	HQ			<b>1</b>
1970	Midnight Cowboy	1969	O	<b>8</b>		
	Butch Cassidy and the S. Kid	1969	N		4	
	<i>The Wild Bunch</i>	1969	HQ			<b>9</b>
1971	Patton	1970	O-HQ	<b>5</b>		<b>5</b>
	M.A.S.H.	1970	N		4	
	Five Easy Pieces	1970	N		2	
	Love Story	1970	N		1	
	Airport	1970	N		1	
1972	The French Connection	1971	O-HQ	<b>5</b>		<b>5</b>
	A Clockwork Orange	1971	N-HQ		5	<b>5</b>
	The Last Picture Show	1971	N		2	
1973	The Godfather	1972	O-HQ	<b>15</b>		<b>15</b>
	Cabaret	1972	N		3	
	Deliverance	1972	N		2	
1974	The Sting	1973	O	<b>2</b>		
	The Exorcist	1973	N-HQ		3	<b>3</b>
	American Graffiti	1973	N		2	
	<i>Mean Streets</i>	1973	HQ			<b>5</b>
	<i>Don't Look Now</i>	1973	HQ			<b>5</b>
	<i>Badlands</i>	1973	HQ			<b>4</b>
1975	The Godfather II	1974	O	<b>12</b>		
	Chinatown	1974	N-HQ		13	<b>13</b>
	The Conversation	1974	N		2	
	The Towering Inferno	1974	N		1	
1976	One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest	1975	O-HQ	<b>9</b>		<b>9</b>
	Jaws	1975	N		8	
	Nashville	1975	N		5	
	Barry Lyndon	1975	N		2	
	Dog Day Afternoon	1975	N		1	

**Table 1** continued

Year of ceremony (1)	Title of movie (2)	Year produced (3)	Type (4)	Oscar (5)	Best nominee (6)	Highest quality (7)
1977	Rocky	1976	O	<b>3</b>		
	Taxi Driver	1976	N-HQ		11	<b>11</b>
	Network	1976	N		3	
1978	All the President's Men	1976	N		1	
	Annie Hall	1977	O-HQ	<b>12</b>		<b>12</b>
	Star Wars	1977	N-HQ		12	<b>12</b>
1979	The Deer Hunter	1978	O-HQ	<b>7</b>		<b>7</b>
	Four Titles	1978	N		0	
1980	Kramer vs. Kramer	1979	O	<b>0</b>		
	Apocalypse Now	1979	N-HQ		11	<b>11</b>
	All That Jazz	1979	N-HQ		1	<b>1</b>
	<i>Manhattan</i>	1979	HQ			<b>5</b>
	<i>Alien</i>	1979	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>Life of Brian</i>	1979	HQ			<b>2</b>
1981	<i>Being There</i>	1979	HQ			<b>1</b>
	Ordinary People	1980	O	<b>1</b>		
	Raging Bull	1980	N-HQ		13	<b>13</b>
	The Elephant Man	1980	N		1	
	<i>The Empire Strikes Back</i>	1980	HQ			<b>5</b>
	<i>The Shining</i>	1980	HQ			<b>2</b>
1982	<i>Airplane</i>	1980	HQ			<b>2</b>
	Chariots of Fire	1981	O	<b>1</b>		
	Raiders of the Lost Ark	1981	N-HQ		6	<b>6</b>
	Reds	1981	N-HQ		2	<b>2</b>
	On Golden Pond	1981	N		1	
1983	<i>The Road Warrior</i>	1981	HQ			<b>2</b>
	Gandhi	1982	O	<b>1</b>		
	E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial	1982	N-HQ		11	<b>11</b>
	Tootsie	1982	N-HQ		5	<b>5</b>
1984	<i>Blade Runner</i>	1982	HQ			<b>10</b>
	Terms of Endearment	1983	O	<b>1</b>		
	Four Titles		N		0	
1985	<i>Once Upon a Time in America*</i>	1983	HQ			<b>2</b>
	Amadeus	1984	O-HQ	<b>5</b>		<b>5</b>
	Four Title		N		0	

**Table 1** continued

Year of ceremony (1)	Title of movie (2)	Year produced (3)	Type (4)	Oscar (5)	Best nominee (6)	Highest quality (7)
1986	Out of Africa	1985	O	<b>0</b>		
	The Color Purple	1985	N-HQ		1	<b>1</b>
	Witness	1985	N-HQ		1	<b>1</b>
	<i>Brazil</i>	1985	HQ			<b>3</b>
	<i>Ran</i>	1985	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>The Breakfast Club</i>	1985	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>The Beautiful Laundrette</i>	1985	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>My Life as a Dog</i>	1985	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>The Purple Rose of Cairo</i>	1985	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Lost in America</i>	1985	HQ			<b>1</b>
1987	Platoon	1986	O	<b>2</b>		
	A Room with a View	1986	N-HQ		3	<b>3</b>
	Hannah and her Sisters	1986	N		1	
	<i>Blue Velvet</i>	1986	HQ			<b>8</b>
	<i>Aliens</i>	1986	HQ			<b>5</b>
1988	The Last Emperor	1987	O	<b>0</b>		
	Moonstruck	1987	N-HQ		1	<b>1</b>
	Broadcast News	1987	N-HQ		1	<b>1</b>
	<i>Withail and I</i>	1987	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>The Princess Bride</i>	1987	HQ			<b>2</b>
	<i>The Untouchables</i>	1987	HQ			<b>1</b>
	<i>Raising Arizona</i>	1987	HQ			<b>1</b>
1989	Rain Man	1988	O	<b>2</b>		
	Dangerous Liaisons	1988	N		1	
	<i>Wings of Desire*</i>	1988	HQ			<b>3</b>
	<i>Die Hard</i>	1988	HQ			<b>3</b>
1990	Driving Ms Daisy	1989	O	<b>1</b>		
	Field of Dreams	1989	N-HQ		2	<b>2</b>
	Dead Poets Society	1989	N		1	
	<i>Do the Right Thing</i>	1989	HQ			<b>4</b>
1991	Dances with Wolves	1990	O	<b>3</b>		
	Goodfellas	1990	N-HQ		7	<b>7</b>
	The Godfather III	1990	N		1	
	Ghost	1990	N		1	
1992	The Silence of the Lambs	1991	O-HQ	<b>9</b>		<b>9</b>
	Four Titles		N		0	
1993	Unforgiven	1992	O-HQ	<b>5</b>		<b>5</b>
	The Crying Games	1992	N		1	
	A Few Good Men	1992	N		1	

**Table 1** continued

Year of ceremony (1)	Title of movie (2)	Year produced (3)	Type (4)	Oscar (5)	Best nominee (6)	Highest quality (7)
1994	Schindler's List	1993	O-HQ	<b>11</b>		<b>11</b>
	The Piano	1993	N		6	
	The Fugitive	1993	N		1	
	The Remains of the Day	1993	N		1	
1995	Forrest Gump	1994	O	<b>3</b>		
	Pulp Fiction	1994	N-HQ		10	<b>10</b>
	The Shawshank Redemption	1994	N-HQ		5	<b>5</b>
	Four Weddings and a Funeral	1994	N		1	
	Quizz Show	1994	N		1	

(a) This list contains all Oscars as well as all other nominated and high quality (see text for the definition) movies that are considered today as better than the Oscar

(b) The list contains a certain number of foreign movies that are of high quality, but that are not included in the calculations, since the rules set by the Academy did not allow them to run in the competition. They appear with a \* after their title

(c) In 1929, two movies were selected as Oscars: a best picture (unique and artistic production) and a best picture (production). We only chose *Sunrise*, which is the best of the two

(d) In 1930, there were two Oscar celebrations, one in April (1930(1)) and one in November (1930(2)). The April competition was also discarded from the competition, since no official list of nominees was announced

(e) According to Rules 2 and 3 of the official Academy Awards Rules a film must open in the previous calendar year, in Los Angeles County, California, to qualify (except for the Best Foreign Language Film)

Taking into account all 66 ceremonies,<sup>14</sup> average qualities of types are as follows: 3.94 for Oscars, 6.28 for Nominees (including of course Oscars, since the Oscar is one among the nominated movies<sup>15</sup>), and 8.10 for Highest Quality (HQ from now on) movies. Though the distributions of qualities are not normally distributed,<sup>16</sup> we nevertheless computed *t* tests (assuming that standard errors were not equal in the samples) to assess whether one could say something about average qualities being significantly different. The values of those *t* tests are 3.12 (with 130 degrees of freedom) for the null hypothesis that compares the average quality of Oscars and Nominees, and 5.55 (with 130 degrees of freedom) for the null that compares Oscars and HQ movies. Both values are much larger than the (one-tailed) tabulated value of the *t* variable at the 1 % probability level. Oscars are thus on average of statistically significantly lower quality than nominated movies that are, in turn, of lower quality than HQ movies. Here are some other characterizations:

<sup>14</sup> In 1929, two movies were awarded the Oscar, but we took only the better one (*Sunrise*) and ignored the other (*Wings*) in our calculations. There were two ceremonies in 1930, but in 1930 (1), there were no official nominees and the data were discarded as well. There was no ceremony in 1933.

<sup>15</sup> Note that if Oscars are excluded, the average for nominees is 4.5, that is higher than the one for winners.

<sup>16</sup> There is of course a long tail of movies of quality 1 and 0.

- (a) *Oscar and Best Nominated movie*. The Oscar is not the best quality nominated movie in 31 cases out of 66.
- (b) *Oscar and HQ movie*. The HQ movie is missed as Oscar in 43 cases out of 66, and there are 15 cases in which the chosen Oscar did obviously not pass the test of time and appears in no list (quality 0).<sup>17</sup>
- (c) *Nominated and HQ movies*. The HQ movie is not chosen as nominated movie (and could therefore not receive the Oscar) in 25 cases out of 66.
- (d) On average, every year, there are two HQ movies that, today, appear to be of larger quality than the Oscar.

Can one say something about the probability of selecting the movies (Oscars and nominees) that appear in the largest number of lists every year? Is the choice made at random, as is the case in wine competitions (Hodgson 2009)? Eligibility criteria for feature movies are not very restrictive, and one cannot exclude the case that all movies produced can be submitted. This number varies quite dramatically over the 66-year period that is envisaged, and according to the sources. In line with what is written in the various contributions in Pokorny and Sedgwick (2005), this number is at least equal to 200 on average, though this is probably a lower bound.<sup>18</sup> To be eligible, a movie must have been commercially released in a Los Angeles motion picture theater and played for seven consecutive days during the year preceding the awards ceremony.<sup>19</sup> It is, however, clear that not all movies produced are eligible and not all eligible movies are candidates for Oscars. We could, however, not get hold of these numbers.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore impossible to estimate the statistical distributions that would make it possible to answer this question.<sup>21</sup> Fifty-one of these became Oscars (of which 18 are of quality less than 3). But the point we wish to make is rather the following.

If the Academy had considered all five nominees to be winners, it would have included a higher quality movie than the one it chose as Oscar in 30 cases.<sup>22</sup> It would also have captured the HQ movie of the year in the 18 cases it appeared among the nominees, but did not reach the Oscar. This include movies such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1939), *The Philadelphia Story* (1941), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1941), *Citizen Kane* (1942), *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1945), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1947), *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1949), *Sunset Boulevard* (1951), *High Noon* (1953), *Dr Stangelove* (1965), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1968), *Chinatown* (1975), *Taxi Driver* (1977), *Star Wars* (1978), *Apocalypse*

<sup>17</sup> In one case (1931), no movie made it to any list.

<sup>18</sup> According to the 2010 Yearbook of European Audiovisual Observatory, this number varies between 600 and 900 during the period 1999–2009.

<sup>19</sup> For complete rules see <http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/rules/85/rule01.html>.

<sup>20</sup> A rough guess at this can be made as follows. Assume there are 100 eligible movies that are candidates for Oscars. Over the 66 years, this amounts to 6,600 movies. The 15 best movie lists contain a little less than 500 movies (of which 310 are of quality less than 3).

<sup>21</sup> Hodgson (2009) was able to do this since he could get hold of the number of competitions in which the same wines were competing, during the same year.

<sup>22</sup> In nine occasions, it would have selected movies that ended up being of identical quality. This would have put *Gone With the Wind* on equal footing with *The Wizard of Oz* in 1940, or *Annie Hall* with *Star Wars* in 1978.

*Now* (1980), *Raging Bull* (1981), *Pulp Fiction* (1995), and many others, as can be checked in Table 1.

### 3 Musical contests

The Queen Elizabeth musical competition is an international competition for piano (and violin), organized in Belgium since 1938 and considered as very demanding and prestigious.<sup>23</sup> It attracts an average of some 85 pianists from many countries, once every 4 years. The order of appearance of those who are admitted to the very first stage is drawn at random *before* the competition starts and remains unchanged during the three later stages, including the finals in which the twelve so-called finalists perform at a rate of two per evening during six evenings. All twelve were ranked until 1991. Since 1992, only the first six are ranked, while the remaining ones are merely recognized as “finalists.”

The analysis of the 11 competitions organized between 1952 and 1991 is summarized in Table 2, where we cross day of appearance (columns) and three groups of finalists aggregated according to their final ranks (1–4; 5–8; 9–12). Visual inspection of the table suggests that, in the first three days, there is a concentration of results in the third group (there are only 16 candidates in the first group and 23 in the third one), while those who perform during the last three days are more likely to be among the first four (28 candidates in this first group, 21 in group 3). This intuition is confirmed by tests using categorical data analysis.<sup>24</sup> There exists thus a relation between the final ranks of the candidates and the day on which they perform: Those who appear first have a lower probability of being ranked among the first, while the probability of being part of the first group increases later during the week. Glejser and Heyndels (2001) further show that those who perform second in the evening increase their odds to be ranked in a better way. Given that the order in which they perform is randomly chosen before the contest starts, this implies that the final ranking may also be random. This is quite unfortunate, since, as shown by Ginsburgh and Van Ours (2003), those who are better ranked have more success later during their musical carrier, though others with lower rank may in fact be as good or even better.

### 4 Literary awards

Literature is also prone to poor judgments. The Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to many writers who fell into oblivion. But, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Stefan Zweig or Jorge Luis Borges did not receive it. André Gide, at the time gatekeeper at Gallimard, the Parisian star publisher, rejected the first volume of Marcel Proust’s monumental *In Search of Lost Time*. Likewise, Simon and Schuster

<sup>23</sup> The section on the Queen Elisabeth contest is based on Flores and Ginsburgh (1996) and Ginsburgh and Van Ours (2003).

<sup>24</sup> See Flores and Ginsburgh (1996) for the details of the analysis. The authors also find that the effect of order of appearance on ranking is much weaker in the Queen Elisabeth violin contest.

**Table 2** The Queen Elisabeth piano contest final rankings and order of appearance (competitions between 1952 and 1991)

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
Ranked 1–4	4	7	5	9	11	8
Ranked 5–8	8	6	13	7	3	7
Ranked 9–12	10	9	4	6	8	7

Source Flores and Ginsburgh (1996)

rejected John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* in the 1960s, with a quite insulting "it isn't really about anything" as comment given by the expert reader. Toole died in 1969, but received nevertheless the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1981.

Ginsburgh (2003) analyzes the Booker Prize for Fiction, established in the UK in 1969. The prize aims at rewarding the best novel of the year written in English, though Americans living in the United States seem to be excluded.<sup>25</sup> Since it is quite hard to get hold of the number of copies sold by all winning and short-listed writers of the contest, he suggests using the number of editions of books that were awarded (or short-listed) as proxy for quality.

For each winner and short-listed title from 1969 to 1981, he collected information on the number of various editions (hardbound, paperback, audio-book, new or used), that could be ordered from Amazon in July 2002, that is, many years after the prizes were given; the age of each author when she or he received the award or was short-listed; and the number of other titles available on the online catalog of the Library of Congress by each winning or short-listed author written before and after she or he was selected. See Table 3.

As indicators of quality, he used (a) the number of editions that were published between year 11 and year 20 after the title was selected for the prize [column (6)]. Given that in most cases the cover of the book reports on whether it won or was short-listed for the Booker, those who buy the book "know what they buy;" and (b) the number of other titles written by each author that were available from the Library of Congress and were published before and after the author was awarded [columns (7) and (8)]. The results for winner and best short-listed books (that is the one that was reedited most often after it was short-listed) appear in Table 3, which is constructed in the same way as Table 1 for movies. It reports on winning, and "best quality" short-listed books. The table also reports the age of each author in the year he won or was short-listed, and the number of other titles published before and after he or she was awarded.

Results show that short-listed titles were reedited more often than winning titles in eight cases, winner and short-listed titles are tied in two cases, and the winner does better in three cases only. On average, the number of reeditions of the best short-listed title is larger than for winners.<sup>26</sup> The average age of both types of

<sup>25</sup> For the full list of one or two winners and the three to five additional shortlisted writers, see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_winners\\_and\\_shortlisted\\_authors\\_of\\_the\\_Booker\\_Prize\\_for\\_Fiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_winners_and_shortlisted_authors_of_the_Booker_Prize_for_Fiction).

<sup>26</sup> We can unfortunately not exclude that the number of copies in each re-edition of winning titles is larger than that for short-listed titles.



writers is roughly the same (winners are 2 years younger), but short-listed authors write more than winners, both before and after they won. These observations lead again to the conclusion that there seems to be little difference in quality between winning and short-listed titles, and if the quality indicators used are reasonable, that short-listed titles even do slightly better. Winning does not seem a good incentive to foster new works.

## 5 Conclusions

All three cases point in the same direction. At best, there is hardly any difference between winners and short-listed candidates. In the case of the Oscars and the Booker Prize, nominated or short-listed works are better than winners in more than half of the cases. Even if not all nominated movies or short-listed books do better, there is often at least one that does. In the Queen Elisabeth piano contest, finalists seem to be randomly ranked, and there is no reason to believe that the first is any better than those who are ranked after her or him.

One may argue that selection in the arts is more difficult than in other fields. This is far from being so, and there are many illustrations that the same holds for wine contests (Hodgson 2009), prizes for scientific papers (Coupé 2013), scientific papers in general (Coupé et al. 2010), medical diagnoses (Meehl 1996; Redelmeier and Baxter 2009), sports (Lee 2008), judicial decisions (Danziger et al. 2010) and under many other circumstances (Kahneman 2011).

It is difficult to suggest changes that would make things better systematically, since contests are organized in very different ways. Some works are not produced to enter a competition, and their producers have no control over what happens during the contest, since in most cases, they are not present during the selection process. This is so for movies, books, paintings, but not for musical competitions or sports like figure skating, where works are produced in the presence of those who judge them, and judgments may reflect other qualities than artistic performance.

Many contests require several steps in order to discard candidates or works that are deemed to be of insufficient quality. Judges may change between steps for various reasons, such as time constraints they may face, and this has as consequence that not all candidates are judged by the same judges.

In some cases, all finalists—chosen after several stages of the competition that eliminate people or works judged unworthy—are ranked. This used to be so for the Queen Elisabeth piano competition where 12 finalists were selected and ranked from one to 12 until 1991.<sup>27</sup> In other cases, there is a unique winner among the finalists, and a certain number of unranked nominees. The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences selects five nominees, one of them becomes a “winner,” while the four other nominees are not ranked. The same happens in most literary contests, such as the Man-Booker prize or the Pulitzer. But, there also exist

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<sup>27</sup> For having sometimes been present as the prize list was announced, one winner at a time, it was horrible to follow the decreasing length of clapping as the announcements of names got beyond the first three winners.

**Table 3** The Booker Prize 1969–1981 winners and short-listed writers and some characteristics

Year	Type	Author	Title of book	Age author	No editions	Other before	Titles after
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
1969	W	Newby, P.H.	Something to Answer for	51	0	16	8
1969	S	England, Barry	Figures in a Landscape	37	0	2	2
1969	S	Mosley, Nicholas	Impossible Object	46	1	5	13
1969	S	Murdoch, Iris	The Nice and the Good	50	2	12	21
1969	S	Spark, Muriel	The Public Image	51	1	20	14
1969	S	Williams, G.M.	From Scenes like These	35	1	5	7
1970	W	Rubens, Bernice	The Elected Member	42	3	2	23
1970	S	Barker, A.L.	John Brown's Body	52	4	8	9
1970	S	Bowen, Elisabeth	Eva Trout	71	3	28	4
1970	S	Murdoch, Iris	Bruno's Dream	51	2	13	20
1970	S	Trevor, William	Mrs Eckdorf in O'Neill's Hotel	42	1	6	32
1970	S	Wheeler, T.W.	The Conjunction	34	0	1	2
1971	W	Naipaul, V.S.	In a Free State	39	3	10	14
1971	S	Kilroy, Thomas	The Big Chapel	37	1	2	7
1971	S	Lessing, Doris	Briefing for a Descent into Hell	52	3	20	30
1971	S	Richler, Mordechai	St Urbain's Horseman	40	3	8	11
1971	S	Robinson, Derek	Goshawk Squadron	39	2	2	9
1971	S	Taylor, Elisabeth	Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont	59	4	15	2
1972	W	Berger, John	G	46	3	5	18
1972	S	Hill, Susan	The Bird of Night	30	3	9	24
1972	S	Keneally, Thomas	The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith	37	2	7	20
1972	S	Storey, David	Pasmore	39	2	9	13
1973	W	Farell, J.G.	The Siege of Krishnapur	38	5	3	1
1973	S	Bainbridge, Beryl	The Dressmaker	40	3	4	19
1973	S	Mavor, Elisabeth	The Green Equinox	46	0	6	0
1973	S	Murdoch, Iris	The Black Prince	54	4	16	17
1974	W	Gordimer, Nadine	The Conservationist	51	4	13	16
1974	W	Middleton, Stanley	Holiday	55	0	9	22
1974	S	Amis, Kingsley	Ending Up	52	3	23	19
1974	S	Bainbridge, Beryl	The Bottle Factory Outing	41	2	6	17
1974	S	Snow, CP.	In their Wisdom	69	4	22	7
1975	W	Praver Jhabvala, Ruth	Heat and Dust	48	6	13	7
1975	S	Keneally, Thomas	Gossip from the Forest	40	2	9	18
1976	W	Storey, David	Saville	43	3	15	7
1976	S	Brink, Andre	An Instant in the Wind	41	3	3	13
1976	S	Hutchinson, R.C.	Rising	69	0	16	2
1976	S	Moore, Brian	The Doctor's Wife	55	3	14	11

**Table 3** continued

Year	Type	Author	Title of book	Age author	No editions	Other before	Titles after
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
1976	S	Rathbone, Julian	King Fisher Lives	41	1	8	17
1976	S	Trevor, William	The Children of Dynmouth	48	4	15	23
1977	W	Scott, Paul	Staying On	57	7	15	0
1977	S	Bailey, Paul	Peter Smart's Confessions	40	0	4	8
1977	S	Blackwood, Caroline	Great Granny Webster	46	2	3	6
1977	S	Johnston, Jennifer	Shadows on our Skin	47	2	4	12
1977	S	Lively, Penelope	The Road to Lichfield	44	4	9	29
1977	S	Pym, Barbara	Quartet in Autumn	64	9	6	8
1978	W	Murdoch, Iris	The Sea, the Sea	59	3	21	12
1978	S	Amis, Kingsley	Jake's Thing	56	5	26	16
1978	S	Brink, Andre	Rumours of Rain	43	3	4	12
1978	S	Fitzgerald, Penelope	The Bookshop	62	5	4	9
1978	S	Gardam, Jane	God on the Rocks	50	1	6	11
1978	S	Rubens, Bernice	A Five-Year Sentence	50	0	9	16
1979	W	Fitzgerald, Penelope	Offshore	63	6	5	8
1979	S	Keneally, Thomas	Confederates	44	4	14	13
1979	S	Naipaul, V.S.	A Bend in the River	47	7	15	9
1979	S	Weldon, Fay	Praxis	48	1	8	32
1980	W	Golding, William	Rites of Passage	69	7	13	6
1980	S	Burgess, Anthony	Earthly Powers	63	3	34	16
1980	S	Carr, J.L.	A Month in the Country	68	4	6	1
1980	S	Desai, Anita	Clear Light of Day	43	3	6	6
1980	S	Munro, Alice	The Beggar Maid	49	3	5	8
1980	S	O'Faolain, Julia	No Country for Young Men	48	2	8	4
1980	S	Unsworth, Barry	Pascali's Island	50	2	9	9
1981	W	Rushdie, Salman	Midnight's Children	34	7	2	11
1981	S	Keane, Molly	Good Behaviour	77	5	5	14
1981	S	Lessing, Doris	The Sirian Experiments	62	2	29	21
1981	S	McEwan, Ian	The Comfort of Strangers	33	9	5	8
1981	S	Schlee, Ann	Rhine Journey	47	2	5	2
1981	S	Spark, Muriel	Loitering with Intent	63	3	26	8
1981	S	Thomas, D.M.	The White Hotel	46	4	15	14

Column (2): type refers to winner (W) or short-listed (S)

Column (5): age refers to the age of the authors in the year she or he was awarded

Column (6): no editions is the number of times the awarded or short-listed book was reedited

Columns (7) and (8): number of books published by the author before and after receiving the award or being short-listed

competitions such as the Chopin (Warsaw) or the Tchaikovsky (Moscow) piano contests, with years where there is no “first” or no “fourth” in the ranking. And, W. H. Auden who was judge for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition from 1947 to 1959 refused to select a winner in 1950 and 1955.

In some contests, grades have to be entered after each performance (figure skating), or evening (the Queen Elisabeth contest). Therefore, the first grade given by a judge conditions the remaining ones. It is impossible to go backwards and change some grades after all the candidates have been seen or auditioned.

Given all these shortcomings, the questions that come to mind are *Do we need rankings? Why is it necessary to select a winner?* and *Does there need to be a winner every year?* In many cases, rankings are subjective and/or contaminated by extraneous factors that have little to do with the quality that is supposed to be measured. As mentioned above, W. H. Auden was courageous enough to point out that sometimes, there may be no winner at all. Why not simply say that “this year, no movie deserves to be nominated or this year there is no winning movie,” which could obviously have been done in 1956: *Marty*, the winning movie, and *Mister Roberts*, the best nominee, were both of rather poor quality (according to the lists of top movies). Or more radically, as one of the referees suggests—and with whom we agree—abolish competitions altogether.

Finally, since there is often no difference between the winner and those who are nominated or short-listed, why not dare saying: Here is our list of five best movies, or pianists or writers? Even candidates realize that the outcomes of a contest are random. The winner of the 2012 Queen Elisabeth violin contest “had the feeling that a different jury or day of performing could have changed [his] rank.”

It looks unfortunate that art has become a game which need hierarchies and therefore also losers whose names get cited during the closing ceremony. What we need is a selection of the bests (plural), and not only of the best (singular). But, do we really need to know the names of the losers, unless loosing is part of the game, as was the case with gladiators not only in Stanley Kubrick’s 1960 movie *Spartacus*, but also in the real life of Ancient Rome?

## Appendix: Fifteen top 100 movie lists

1. *Rolling Stone Magazine*, 100 Maverick Movies of the Last 100 Years (1999)  
Established by the Magazine and critic Peter Travers  
<http://www.filmsite.org/rstone.html>
2. *Los Angeles Daily News* Readers’ Poll, Greatest American Films (1999)  
Readers’ poll organized on the basis of a list of 400 movies established by the American Film Institute  
<http://www.filmsite.org/dailynews.html>
3. *Video Detective*, Top 100 Films of all Time (1997)  
A guide written by Jim Riffel

- <http://www.filmsite.org/top100.html>
4. *Time Out Film Guide*, Top 100 Films (1998)  
Compiled from readers who submitted their all-time top ten film lists  
<http://www.filmsite.org/timeout2.html>
  5. *Time Out Film Guide*, Top 100 Films (1995)  
Directors, producers, actors, programmers and critics were polled to name their top ten films  
<http://www.filmsite.org/timeout.html>
  6. *Village Voice Critics' Poll*, 100 Best Films of the twentieth century (2000)  
Fifty or more distinguished film critics, including Molly Haskell, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Andrew Sarris and others, to vote in their film poll <http://www.filmsite.org/villvoice.html>
  7. *FilmFour*, 100 Greatest Films of all Time (no date)  
List established by UK's Channel 4  
<http://www.filmsite.org/filmfour.html>
  8. *Guinness Book of Film*, The Top 100 Films by Genre Type (1999)  
One hundred films extracted among the 1,000 films listed in the *Guinness Book of Film*  
<http://www.filmsite.org/guinness.html> (no longer available in October 2012)
  9. *Entertainment Weekly's*, 100 Greatest Movies of All Time (1999)  
A guide written by senior editor Ty Burr  
<http://www.filmsite.org/ew100.html>
  10. *Mr. Showbiz's Critics Picks*, 100 Best Movies of all Time (2003?)  
A list made on the *Mr. Showbiz* Web site, a full year and a half before the *American Film Institute* announced their own list of 100 Greatest American Movies  
<http://www.filmsite.org/mrshowbz.html>
  11. *Mr. Showbiz's Readers Picks*, 100 Best Movies of all Time (2003?)  
see list no. 10  
<http://www.filmsite.org/mrshowbz.html>
  12. Leonard Maltin, 100 Must-See Films of the twentieth century (2000)  
List established by American film critic Leonard Maltin  
<http://www.filmsite.org/maltin2.html>
  13. *American Film Institution*, American Greatest Movies (2005)  
Movies selected by AFI's blue-ribbon panel of more than 1,500 leaders of the American movie community

<http://www.afi.com/docs/100years/movies100.pdf>

14. *American Multi Cinema*, 100 Greatest Films (no date)

See comments on the website

<http://www.filmsite.org/momentsindx.html>

15. *Movieline Magazine's* 100 Best Movies ever Made (1995)

List compiled by Virginia Campbell and Edward Margulies

<http://www.filmsite.org/movieline.html>

Most websites give details about how their lists are compiled. Last accessed in 2011.

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