Peru is bubbling with excitement these days. It is exactly five days before the live telecast of the 82nd Oscar Awards and *The Milk of Sorrow* (*La Teta Asustada*), a film lensed by Peruvian director Claudia Llosa, is competing with the entries from Austria, France, Israel, and Argentina, for the coveted Best Foreign Language Film Award. Just a couple of weeks ago, the Andean nation was electrified when Hollywood star Anne Hathaway, in the televised announcement of this year’s Oscar nominations, mentioned *The Milk of Sorrow* as one of the final five nominees for the foreign-language race. “Nominated to Make History” and “Peru on Display” were the headlines in Lima’s broadsheets the following morning, and the film’s lead actress Magaly Solier, a Quechua-speaking native of Ayacucho, unabashedly wept for joy on national television. The paroxysm of emotion in Peru may seem puzzling to mainstream American audiences who see the Oscars as nothing more than Hollywood’s glitzy annual company picnic, or at best, an opportunity for film buffs to fish for titles to add to their Netflix queues. But for the marginal cinemas of the Third World and their respective national audiences, the Oscar Best Foreign Language Film nominations generate Superbowl-level mirth each year and for good reason: an Oscar victory is the golden ticket to international distribution, and, ultimately, cultural recognition.

**Hollywood is Hollyworld**

Unquestionably, the global entertainment market has long been dominated by Hollywood. From the incipient screenplay, which is considered “intellectual property,” down to exhibition, distribution, and DVD royalties, the American motion picture industry is, to borrow a line from the Oscar winning film *Titanic*, “king of the world.” Hollywood is Hollyworld. That said, the way for Third World Cinemas to find a global market is by grafting onto the formidable distribution machinery of Hollywood. Corollary to this would be the added value of promoting cultural identity, which is of particular import in a globalizing world that continues to be characterized, not just by an unequal economic exchange, but also, an unequal symbolic exchange. The acknowledged modern-day storyteller, cinema plays the role of custodian and emissary of cultural memory through audiovisual language and grammar. Thus, it is not difficult to imagine that for the peoples of the developing world, national identity and pride are at stake in an Oscar nomination.
nomination; it is the global platform they need to tell the stories of their culture.

The Oscar Babel

Is there a level playing field in the Oscar Best Foreign Language Film competition? From high profile and affluent film industries, to obscure and cash-strapped national cinemas, the foreign-language derby attracted a diverse Babel of sixty-five entries this year. While the category provides some space for cultural democratization, it also creates a dramatically lopsided equation. Credit must be given to the struggling national cinemas of Peru, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, and the Philippines for conscientiously sending their most celebrated films to the Oscars each year, even when they are made to compete with the well-funded films of France, Germany, Italy, and Japan. A cursory look at the production budgets of some of the 2010 entries could give us a sense of the playing field. Austria’s Das Weisse Band, which is touted as this year’s frontrunner, costs US $16.3 million to produce as compared to Peru’s The Milk of Sorrow, which costs US $1.2 million with the help of Spanish funding. The Philippine entry Ded na si Lolo was shot on a shoestring of US $45,000 with the noble intention of using the proceeds to fund the schooling of the children of unemployed production staff. Bedeviled by the global economic collapse, the once thriving Philippine film industry—formerly ranked fifth in the world with an annual input of 160 films—is now down to 50 films a year, most of them, independent digital film projects. Soxie Topacio who directed Grandpa is Dead relied on the kindness of industry colleagues who agreed to be paid a pittance for their services, only to be rudely awakened by the fact that promoting the film in the United States for the Oscar nominations would cost more than making the film. His compatriot Adolfo Alix, whose film Donsol made it past the first round in the 2007 Oscars, understands this conundrum very well. “The Academy has thousands of members and you have to send screener copies to all of them, not to mention mount an aggressive campaign to get it noticed” (Lisotta 2009).

Given the asymmetry of the playing field, it is not entirely surprising that save for Bosnia’s win in 2002 for No Man’s Land, no other film by a Third World filmmaker has ever won the Oscar Best Foreign Language Film trophy. India, home to the world’s biggest film industry known as Bollywood, has been nominated thrice but has not produced a winner. The Oscar success of last year’s Slumdog Millionaire cannot really be counted as an Indian triumph; despite its Mumbai setting and its use of Indian talent, the film was produced in the United Kingdom and was lensed by British filmmaker Danny Boyle.

Another reason for the paucity of Third World Cinema in the Oscar Foreign Language Film winners’ circle is the fact that Academy voters have tended to look for films that inculcate the Hollywood tried-and-tested formula: a clear three-act storyline, emotional accessibility, and a more-or-less happy ending. One foreign film producer describes this as a preference for “a more meat-and-potatoes kind of film.” Critics have noted that this is one of the reasons why notable foreign films that choose difficult themes or that dare challenge cinematic conventions run the risk of being snubbed, especially by the older, more traditional members of the Academy. Should this prognosis prove accurate, the chances of Peru’s entry winning the 13.5-inch, gold-plated Oscar statuette this year are as good as that of a camel entering the eye of the needle. The Milk of Sorrow is a poetic remembering of the sexual violence committed against women during the 1980–2000 armed conflict between government forces and the Maoist Sendero Luminoso (“Shining Path”) guerillas. Because of its disturbing subject matter coupled with the unconventional stylistic signature of its filmmaker, Oscar
naysayers do not foresee a win for *The Milk of Sorrow*.

**Theology and Third World Cinema**

Third World Cinema’s struggle to find voice and visibility does not end with the Oscars; a similar lopsided equation reverberates later in the theology and cinema scholarly debate. Western scholars in this interdisciplinary research area have tended to be circumscribed in their choices of case studies, opting to examine popular Anglo-American blockbusters rather than making an effort to do the intercultural homework and engage in a mutually critical conversation with subtitled films of Third World origin. The eventual winners of the mainstream Oscar categories—Best Picture, Best Screenplay, Best Cinematography—are the ones that are likely to merit theological attention, not some unusual Peruvian film cached in the “foreign-language” category. “Hollywoodcentrism” is the term that S. Brent Plate, editor of the anthology *Representing Religion in World Cinema* assigns to this tendency (9), an apt designation considering that a number of works in the theology-cinema debate have not moved beyond commentary on over-analyzed, decades-old Hollywood titles such as *Star Wars*, *Dead Poet’s Society*, and *Field of Dreams*. If the present ferment of doing theology is necessarily “theology between the global and the local,” as theologian Robert Schreiter proposes (Schreiter, ix), then a theological engagement with cinema must overcome xenophobic binaries of mainstream/foreign and give due theological attention to the contribution of an authentic world cinema culture.

**No Hollywood Ending**

“We have already won!” Magaly Solier’s immediate reaction to the good news is indexical of her awareness that the Oscar nomination itself is nothing short of a miracle. She also knows that the odds are infinitely stacked against her film and that it will take a bigger miracle for it to actually win. But Peruvians remain optimistic. On March 7, they will gather around televisions sets all over the country and wait for those precious few minutes when Hollywood finally announces the foreign film it has chosen to bring to the world stage. They can only hope and pray that the presenter will say, “and the Oscar goes to . . . *The Milk of Sorrow* from Peru!”

Until the Oscar playing field becomes truly representative of a world cinema culture, the marginal cinemas of the Third World will continue to regard the pursuit of the Oscar dream as, in more ways than one, an act of faith.

(Argentina’s *The Secret in their Eyes* was the eventual winner of the Oscar Best Foreign Language Film Award.)

**References**

