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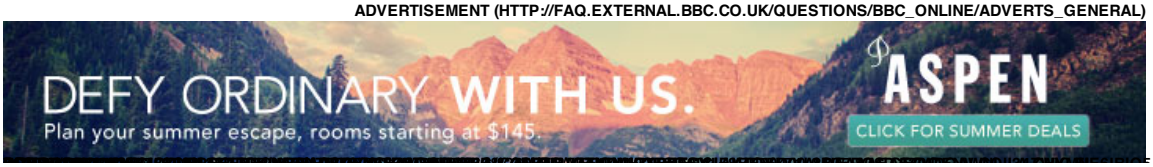

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| 2 September 2013

Is the Oscars race overwhelming Toronto Film Festival?

Tom Brook

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As the Toronto Film Festival approaches, is it in danger of being overshadowed by Oscars speculation? Tom Brook reports.

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Every film festival can be defined by the talk among attendees. In Cannes, discussion routinely centres on who will win the Palme d'Or – the festival's top prize. In Sundance there's ongoing chatter over new discoveries and which film has won a distribution deal. And in Toronto – which opens this week – the conversation increasingly around the Oscars race, and those festival films likely to be contenders.

Oscars hype at Toronto, where some 290 full-length features will be screened, seems to grow by the year. There's already a fast-growing fascination with the Academy Awards race, months before the ceremony takes place. Among Hollywood's Oscars forecasters, Toronto is viewed as a major strategic event – the place where the studios launch what they hope will be the winning films. Scott Feinberg, lead awards analyst at the Hollywood Reporter, says: "Anybody who is interested in the Oscar race has to either attend or pay attention to what happens at the Toronto Film Festival. It's become a very important role in the Oscars race."

Some films seeking Oscars attention will bypass Toronto this year – but there are plenty of Academy Awards hopefuls being screened. It's already being predicted that the drama August: Osage County, starring Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts, has Oscars potential, as has the opening night film The Fifth Estate, which has Benedict Cumberbatch portraying WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. Matthew McConaughey is also being tipped for an Oscar nomination for his portrayal of an Aids activist in the picture Dallas Buyers Club. All this buzz is being generated before many of these films have even been screened.

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The film version of Nelson Mandela's autobiography Long Walk to Freedom is to have its world premiere at the Toronto Film Festival in September.

One reason why Toronto plays such a pivotal role in the Oscars race is timing. The festival takes place at the end of blockbuster season just as the studios are beginning to release their more serious autumnal fare – in other words, the kind of pictures that can win Oscars. With more than 1,000 accredited members of the press in town, a premiere in Toronto can give a hefty –kick-start to a picture hoping for Oscars glory.

The first time I noticed Toronto's key role in the Oscars campaign was in 1999, when American Beauty took the festival by storm. The masses of publicity it generated carried it through to the Academy Awards ceremony in 2000, where it won Best Picture and four other Oscars.

Scott Feinberg notes there's a strong correlation between a film being launched at Toronto and it ending up with an Oscar. "Seven of the last thirteen Best Picture Oscars winners played at Toronto," he says. "Crash, No Country for Old Men, Slumdog Millionaire, The Hurt Locker, The King's Speech, The Artist and Argo. For Best Picture winners that's an unbelievable ratio. No other festival comes close to that."

Media friendly

Toronto is also particularly effective at launching Oscar campaigns because the media is so enthusiastic and happy to go along with the hoopla. Alicia Quarles, a US entertainment correspondent for E! News who'll be on the red carpet in Toronto, says the press is "incredibly interested in possible Oscar contenders. That's what we go to Toronto for. You see as many movies as you possibly can. You know, you say: 'Hey is this an Oscar movie?'"

The Hollywood studios who are peddling their Oscar hopefuls really descend on Toronto en masse to take advantage of the mostly friendly media presence. This year, Warner Bros, Disney, Universal and Paramount – as well as The Weinstein Company and studio offshoots Focus Features and Fox Searchlight are among the Hollywood entities in town – most holding press junkets to promote their films to journalists.

Toronto, which welcomes the studios and their films, is mindful that matters could get out of hand. "You want to make sure that that just doesn't overwhelm the festival," says its director, Piers Handling, "that it's not just about those studio junkets. And I think we've tried to do everything we possibly can to make sure that Toronto's a balanced festival with representation from countries around the world."

Even so, films not fodder for the Oscars machine can get left out. It can be tough for smaller, more challenging international pictures– the directors and their publicity handlers have to work extra hard to get their films seen by journalists. And the focus of many reporters isn't on the films at all. Gui de Mulder, a film correspondent from

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Canal+ in Spain, says: “I think the US press is a little pathetic. The mainstream media is very, very frivolous – sometimes I’m embarrassed to be next to them on the red carpet because they ask questions that are really embarrassing: ‘Oh my God! Oh my God! What are you wearing?’”

Some see the festival transformed from its original role when it was founded in 1976. “The Toronto Film Festival began very much as an alternative to mainstream cinema,” says Toby Miller, author of Global Hollywood 2, who has long followed trends in the film industry. “It was about trying to get away from Hollywood domination, to support local filmmaking and other international cinemas. What’s happened in the case of Toronto in recent years is that it’s become a marketing device for Hollywood.”

The festival’s director Piers Handling disagrees. “There’s no way that we as a festival or organisation will ever succumb to becoming purely a mouthpiece for any one cinema – most importantly Hollywood.” He sees it as a battle. “It’s a long fight, a good fight, all we can do is show as many other films that are going to have absolutely no potential at all for Oscars or for awards season, the films that take risks, the films that are international in scope, to keep that kind of alternative independent cinema alive.”

There are many different forces at work that have led to the Oscars race, and Hollywood’s sway over the press has limited way it often covers the festival. “You can certainly blame this to a certain extent on individual journalists,” says Toby Miller, “but I would lay more at the door on the lack of adventurousness of editors and proprietors who are very often thinking of their audiences in extremely restrictive and unsophisticated ways.”

But blogging and the growth of social media are ensuring the festival is covered outside the constraints of the mainstream press – and that’s certainly going to help many films.

Ultimately the fascination with the Oscars race that’s going to emerge from Toronto in the next few days can benefit everyone at the festival. Without the studios peddling their Oscar hopefuls, far fewer journalists would be in town – and the less chance there would be for an enterprising reporter or critic to stray away from the pack and stumble onto a fresh film that goes on to become a glorious unexpected hit.

Thankfully, it happens almost every year.

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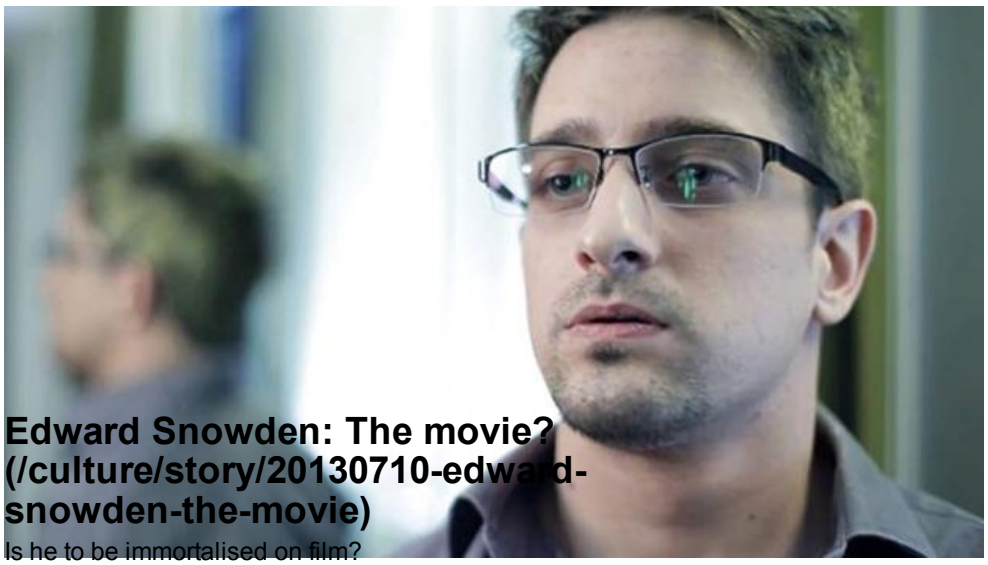

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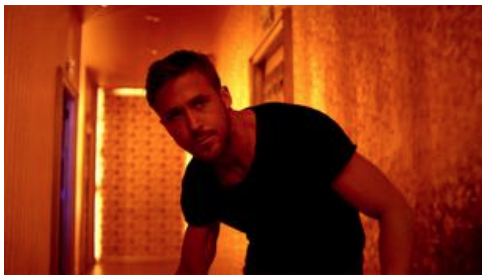

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