

The Best Picture Race: Potential Strengths and Vulnerabilities of the Top Films

[Jenelle Riley](#) Dec 23, 2020 12:00pm PT



Courtesy of Netflix/Apple TV+

It seems like every year prognosticators are declaring the Oscar race to be the most unpredictable yet, but this time, we swear it's true! With theaters all but shut down and studios unable to screen films live where they can sense the reaction, the playing field feels wide open. And there are still four months to go! For now, *Variety* took a look at the films competing for [best picture](#) and what their perceived strengths and vulnerabilities could be in the eyes of voters.

Ammonite

(Neon)

Inspired by the life of self-taught paleontologist Mary Anning, this romantic drama features standout turns from Kate Winslet (as Anning) and Saoirse Ronan as the unhappy young woman who comes to study with her, then falls in love.

Strengths: The pairing of Winslet and Ronan has piqued a lot of interest; it's a period piece with superior below-the-line elements. Focusing on an invisible woman whose contributions to history are continually overlooked or credited to men, the subject matter feels timely.

Vulnerabilities: Box office is hard to gauge in COVID, but the film opened with little fanfare in November.

Borat Subsequent Moviefilm

(Amazon)

Sacha Baron Cohen brings his lovable idiot back for a sequel to the 2004 movie, with a political and feminist twist.

Strengths: Everyone has seen it, most people love it and it's certainly got everyone talking. The original "Borat" landed an Oscar nomination for its screenplay and a best picture — musical or comedy nod from the Golden Globes, and many prognosticators believe Cohen was close to snagging a lead actor nomination. Cohen has a lot of goodwill for his work in "The Trial of the Chicago 7" that could also boost his chances this year, and the sequel's breakout star, Maria Bakalova, is also generating major buzz for a supporting actress nom.

Vulnerabilities: Comedies don't tend to fare well in the best picture race, let alone those shot in the style of "Borat," where many of the participants aren't in on the joke.

Cherry

(Apple TV Plus)

Anthony and Joe Russo leave “The Avengers” behind to bring Nico Walker’s story to the big screen, with Tom Holland playing the army medic turned bank robber.

Strengths: A showy turn by Holland is sure to intrigue and the subject matter — Holland’s character becomes addicted to opiates and turns to crime to support his habit — couldn’t be more timely.

Vulnerabilities: It’s coming into the game late (Feb. 21 theatrical, March 12 on Apple TV Plus) and the jury is still out on how critics and audiences will react.

Da 5 Bloods **(Netflix)**

Four African-American veterans return to Vietnam to recover the gold they helped hide years ago and to bring home the remains of their leader.

Strengths: Spike Lee’s Vietnam drama was released in June, but remains in the conversation. Delroy Lindo’s character still haunts months after. Perhaps the most poignant reason this film remains in the awards chatter-sphere is that it’s one of Chadwick Boseman’s last appearance before his untimely death. The film is a stellar example of filmmaking with an incredible history lesson to boot.

Vulnerabilities: Did this come out too early? There seems to be little chatter around the film. Getting this back up on the radar might be a tough one.

The Father **(Sony Classics)**

Anthony Hopkins plays Anthony, an aging man who is slowly deteriorating, refusing any help from his daughter, played by Olivia Colman.

Strengths: ANTHONY HOPKINS. That last shot was done in one take, and if you’ve seen the film, you’ll know exactly what is being talked about. Hopkins appears in almost every scene and the film runs at the perfect time of just under 100 minutes. Its beauty lies in its simplicity — much of the action takes

place inside Anthony's home, resembling a theatrical production — but that is what makes it practically perfect.

Vulnerabilities: Voters might worry the subject matter is too sad; though good reviews and word of mouth should help this one.

First Cow

(A24)

Otis, a skilled cook, travels west and joins a group of fur trappers in 1820s Oregon. When he meets King-Lu, a Chinese immigrant, the two collaborate on seeking fortune.

Strengths: Critics have rallied behind director and writer Kelly Reichardt, who always constructs rich stories, and the film earned four Gotham Award noms.

Vulnerabilities: Reichardt's films have never been for the masses and this is definitely more of a slow burn, even more so than her past efforts like "Certain Women" and "Wendy & Lucy."

Judas and the Black Messiah

(Warner Bros.)

Lakeith Stanfield stars as FBI informant William O'Neal, who betrayed Fred Hampton, played by Daniel Kaluuya, which led to his assassination in 1969.

Strengths: The 1960s have been a hot topic in filmmaking as of late, and the story of Hampton and his execution by government officials is profound tale. Director Shaka King helms the story like a master of 1970s cinema with a robust screenwriting team. Kaluuya is a former nominee for "Get Out" and Stanfield has shown that he has chops in films like "Uncut Gems" and "Sorry to Bother You." With producers Ryan Coogler and Charles King, this may be a surprise entry.

Vulnerabilities: The film has been a question mark for critics and voters since its trailer debuted in August. There may be many who are still unaware of its existence in the race.

The Little Things (Warner Bros.)

Writer-director John Lee Hancock helms this mystery-thriller in which Rami Malek and Denzel Washington hunt a serial killer — with Jared Leto playing their main suspect.

Strengths: The trifecta of Oscar-winning stars is sure to be a big draw, and Washington has a good track record with his films at the Oscars.

Vulnerabilities: With the exception of "Silence of the Lambs" winning in 1992, serial killer movies often find acclaim ("Seven") but rarely trophies.

Mank (Netflix)

Stepping back into Hollywood's Golden Age, "Mank" tells the story of Herman J. Mankiewicz and his race to finish the screenplay for Orson Welles' "Citizen Kane."

Strengths: David Fincher's passion project is indeed a visual feast. From Erik Messerschmidt's cinematography to Trish Summerville's costume design, there is no denying the story behind who really wrote "Citizen Kane" is a visual stunner. Films about artists and Hollywood tend to fare well with voters. And what better homage to pay than to what is considered one of the greatest films of all time?

Vulnerabilities: Expect it to do well in the crafts. But for a niche film, how far will voters go to say this is their number one film of the year?

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (Netflix)

The latest adaptation of an August Wilson classic (after "Fences") comes to the big screen with a story set primarily on one hot Chicago day as band members await the arrival of the great Ma Rainey.

Strengths: Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman, in his final film role, are all

but assured nominations for their searing portrayals. "Fences" managed four Oscar nominations, including for film and screenplay, and there's no reason to think "Ma Rainey" couldn't do the same. It's a timely tale with a diverse ensemble and every aspect, from the costumes to the set, is period perfect. **Vulnerabilities:** Speaking in terms of the plays, "Ma Rainey" is not as highly regarded as "Fences"; having said that, many have found "Ma Rainey" more accessible to audiences.

The Mauritanian (STXfilms)

Tahar Rahim stars as Mohamedou Ould Slahi, a detainee at the U.S. military's Guantanamo Bay who was held for over a decade without charges.

Strengths: Political, courtroom dramas can be excellent showcases for acting and writing ventures. Director Kevin Macdonald helped get Forest Whitaker to his Oscar win for "The Last King of Scotland," and this is another strong outing for the filmmaker. Rahim and Oscar-winner Jodie Foster deliver marvelous performances, and it's the type of film that could get a big jump off from the Golden Globes.

Vulnerabilities: It's one of the later releases of the season, and it'll be playing catch up in a very crowded eligibility year, despite the pandemic.

The Midnight Sky (Netflix)

George Clooney stars as Augustine, a scientist in a post-apocalyptic universe who races against time and the elements to stop astronauts from returning home to a global catastrophe.

Strengths: Clooney is one of three people in Oscar history that have been nominated in six different categories. They love him, and he's found love for his directing efforts with "Good Night, and Good Luck" and is a best picture winning producer for "Argo." It's also a competitive technical player, which typically amounts to a larger embrace in the Academy's top category.

Vulnerabilities: Science fiction is not always a friendly genre that the Academy rewards. Clooney's past few directorial efforts have been overlooked.

Minari (A24)

Written and directed by Lee Isaac Chung, this drama centers on a Korean-born man trying win his family's support as he pursues his dream of becoming a farmer in Arkansas in the 1980s.

Strengths: A24 and Plan B (Dede Gardner, Jeremy Kleiner, Brad Pitt) worked together on "Moonlight," so they know how to handle the awards terrain. And the biggest asset is the film itself, with expert work from writer-director Chung, and a trio of strong performances by Steven Yeun as the farmer, Yeri Han as his wife and a scene-stealing Yuh-Jung Youn as her mother. Chung's film is a testament to kindness, compassion and hard work, important messages in 2020.

Vulnerabilities: In a crowded season, this has no stars, it's largely in a foreign language and was made on a limited budget. A few years ago, some would have dismissed it as fodder only for the Indie Spirit Awards, but voters in the past few years have expanded their definition of "Oscar bait." A24 needs to woo people to get past the oddball plot description, because if they start watching, they will be hooked.

Never Rarely Sometimes Always (Focus Features)

Sidney Flanigan and Talia Ryder star as Autumn and Skylar, a pair of teenagers from rural Pennsylvania who travel to New York City to seek help for an unintended pregnancy.

Strengths: The film harnesses two of the year's greatest discoveries in Flanigan and Ryder. A timely and poignant drama, where women's right-to-choose is a focus in the media, Eliza Hittman's writing and direction packs a

wallop that stands out.

Vulnerabilities: Standing next to bigger, louder movies, Hittman's film may fade into the background. It's also one of those that can be easily overlooked in a screener pile (or virtual screening room) if you're not directly looking for it.

News of the World

(Universal)

Filmmaker Paul Greengrass reunites with his "Captain Phillips" star Tom Hanks in a drama about a man who travels from town to town in 1870 southwest U.S., and who is forced to care for an orphaned girl (Helena Zengel).

Strengths: From "Bloody Sunday" to the "Bourne" movies, Paul Greengrass continues to surprise and this offbeat Western has show-stopping sequences that remind viewers that he's a world-class filmmaker. He also taps into the expertise of his behind-the-camera group who all do excellent work, including DP Dariusz Wolski, editor William Goldenberg and production designer David Crank. The heart of the movie is the relationship of Hanks' and Zengel's characters; they and all the other actors in the film deserve serious awards consideration.

Vulnerabilities: In a crowded season, voters may think they've already seen this film ("The Searchers," "True Grit," etc.) Universal needs to emphasize the originality and remind viewers to stick with the film, as it builds in power.

Nomadland

(Searchlight Pictures)

Frances McDormand stars as a woman who embarks on a journey to live as a van-dwelling nomad.

Strengths: Has run through the festival circuit, picking up audience and critics' awards and accolades along the way. Director Chloé Zhao has been the talk of the awards season, and with star power like two-time Oscar-

winner McDormand, the film could quickly become a critical darling. In a year that has been championing diversity, a movie about the white experience, as told by an Asian woman, hits exactly at the heart of inclusivity in the industry. **Vulnerabilities:** Being the frontrunner for so long doesn't allow anywhere else to go but down. It's also much quieter than any of the other contenders in the mix.

One Night in Miami

(Amazon)

The Amazon film, which says it was "inspired by true events," is set in Miami in February 1964, after Cassius Clay became boxing's heavyweight world champion, and before he became Muhammad Ali.

Strengths: Oscar-winner Regina King makes a strong big-screen directing debut, and elicits top performances from her four stars: Eli Goree as Cassius Clay, Kingsley Ben-Adir as Malcolm X, Leslie Odom Jr. as Sam Cooke and Aldis Hodge as Jim Brown. The film is an acting showcase for all four and for writer Kemp Powers, adapting his own play. (Kemp is also one of the writers of Pixar's "Soul.") King offers straightforward storytelling without attempts at flash; after a crazy year, traditional filmmaking seems even more valuable than before, and the film offers insights into the life of a Black man in 1964 — and, by extension, in the 21st century.

Vulnerabilities: This year has several strong films set in the 1960s and/or dealing with the Black experience in America. Amazon's "One Night" needs to set itself apart from the others.

On the Rocks

(A24/Apple TV Plus)

Sofia Coppola reunites with her "Lost in Translation" star Bill Murray, playing the lovable cad of a father to Rashida Jones.

Strengths: Coppola's films always come with an air of prestige and Murray, working with one of his best directors, has earned kudos.

Vulnerabilities: Having come out in October, the awards buzz never really picked up steam, but people are still discovering it every day.

Palm Springs (Hulu/Neon)

Andy Samberg and Cristin Milioti star as Nyles and Sarah, two people who meet at a wedding and get stuck in an infinite time loop.

Strengths: It may look like slapstick comedy to the untrained eye, but Max Barbakow's directorial debut, based on Andy Siara's screenplay, was the largest purchase in Sundance history (by 69 cents). Samberg and especially Milioti are remarkable in their roles, and if the Globes come calling, watch out for this to grab the attention of Academy members who are in the mood for lighter content after a year full of COVID.

Vulnerabilities: Unfair but true, comedies are hard sells with voters. They'll need to see past J.K. Simmons shooting crossbows and Peter Gallagher love scenes.

Pieces of a Woman (Netflix)

A searing portrait of grief, Vanessa Kirby and Shia LaBeouf play a couple whose marriage is tested by the death of their newborn.

Strengths: Kirby and Ellen Burstyn, who plays her mother, are all but sure things for acting nod. Director Kornél Mundruczó could also garner attention from his branch for his assured hand, particularly with a raw, emotional birthing scene done entirely in real time and with one take.

Vulnerabilities: While critics have raved, it remains to be seen if voters will be able to get through the tough subject matter. It also might be seen as more of an actor's piece.

The Prom (Netflix)

Based on the Broadway show, down-on-their-luck Broadway stars find a “good cause” to get behind. They head to small-town Indiana to help a young teenager who just wants to take her girlfriend to the prom.

Strengths: In a year where Broadway is closed, there is no shortage of show-stopping dance numbers, vibrancy and toe-tapping moments in Ryan Murphy’s adaptation. There’s a lot to love with this feel-good show. Meryl Streep’s astounding performance as diva-esque Dee Dee Allen could well see her land a record-breaking 22nd Oscar nomination.

Vulnerabilities: Will the Academy take to Murphy crossing into film territory? Or will voters just take “The Prom” as pure entertainment and nothing else?

Promising Young Woman (Focus Features)

Emerald Fennell’s smart, savage debut film is a dark comedy/thriller starring a never-better Carey Mulligan as a former medical student who seeks to exact revenge on the male gender.

Strengths: One of the most talked-about entries, the film seems to be less divisive than expected — most reactions have been positive. Mulligan has a good shot at an actress nomination and Fennell’s darkly funny script is truly original.

Vulnerabilities: Did we mention it’s dark? The subject matter and a female protagonist who doesn’t asked to be liked might challenge some of the more conservative voters.

Soul (Pixar/Disney Plus)

Voiced by Jamie Foxx, Joe is a middle-school teacher who just wants to be the best jazz musician out there. One day, he gets some great news, and on his way home, he falls down manhole and travels to the Great Before — where he finds himself separated from his body.

Strengths: Arriving on Disney Plus on Christmas day, it will be there ready to stream for voters and their families, with no two-step authorization needed. Not only does it tackle Important Questions, it handles them in an accessible way — much like “Inside Out” — and it’s one of the most exquisite environments ever created by the Pixar team. And the film is diverse, featuring Pixar’s first African-American lead protagonist.

Vulnerabilities: While the animated feature competition is interesting, will enough voters love it to push it into best picture, where only nine previous animated films have gone before? Will it get enough number one or two votes?

Sound of Metal (Amazon)

Director/co-writer Darius Marder’s film centers on heavy-metal drummer Ruben (Riz Ahmed), who suddenly becomes deaf, and struggles to retain his career and restore his hearing.

Strengths: The film’s many assets include the script (by Marder, Derek Cianfrance and Abraham Marder), direction, performances by Ahmed and supporting actor Paul Raci and the sound work of Nicolas Becker. The film offers insight into deaf culture, a world most audiences have not seen and which is presented with intelligence and compassion. And 2020 audiences will easily relate as Ruben’s mentor tells him to “Learn to be deaf” and stop trying to recapture the past. It becomes a metaphor in the COVID era: Like Ruben, most people are waiting for life to return to “normal” and fighting the fear that it might never happen. That factor will be a big plus for the film.

Vulnerabilities: The first 10 minutes immerse the audience in the world of heavy metal and struggling musicians who are not immediately sympathetic. Timid viewers might want to abandon ship at that point, but if they do, they’re missing something special.

Tenet

(Warner Bros.)

The latest from Christopher Nolan, "Tenet" is a smart, exciting spectacle full of plenty of "how did they do that?" moments we've come to expect from the filmmaker.

Strengths: Few directors can combine blockbuster entertainment with critical raves like Nolan and the film will have a lot of support from the below-the-line craftspeople.

Vulnerabilities: Nolan's films have a spotty record in the best picture race and "Tenet" might have been best viewed in a theater. However, its early December DVD release will help more people to see it, so it could see a surge of support.

The Trial of the Chicago 7

(Netflix)

The film dramatizes the protests at the 1968 Democrat convention in Chicago and the kangaroo-court trial of several antiwar protesters arrested there.

Strengths: The film has everything going for it. Written and directed by Aaron Sorkin, it's smart, emotional and well-made, both above and below the line. It's also got a wealth of vivid characters, and each of the actors, led by Mark Rylance, Eddie Redmayne and Sacha Baron Cohen, gets moments to shine. The work of cinematographer Phedon Papamichael, composer Daniel Pemberton, editor Alan Baumgarten and production designer Shane Valentino surpass their usual (great) work. Actors and BTL branches will eat it up, as will Baby Boomers, and anyone who likes topical dramas.

Vulnerabilities: Because Joe Biden won the Nov. 3 election, some people may feel that the film has lost some of its urgency. They would be wrong. Just because things are better doesn't mean they're resolved. Netflix needs to remind voters of this.

The United States vs. Billie Holiday

(Paramount Pictures)

Andra Day stars as singer Billie Holiday, who is targeted by the Federal Department of Narcotics, which led to a tumultuous affair with the undercover agent.

Strengths: Steered by Lee Daniels, who was nominated for directing "Precious," the story of Holiday is one that has been aching to be told for decades. Day, who sang the Oscar-nominated song "Stand Up for Something" from "Marshall," could be a lead actress spoiler.

Vulnerabilities: The movie, and its buzz, have been muted for some time. Very few have seen it, and the last-minute entry trick will be difficult to execute this year.

The World to Come (Bleecker Street)

Set in the 19th century, director Mona Fastvold directs this love story between two unhappy wives.

Strengths: The film boasts strong reviews and won the Queer Lion for best LGBTQ-themed movie from the Venice Film Festival. Stars Katherine Waterston and Vanessa Kirby are earning raves for their chemistry and performances.

Vulnerabilities: It's a smaller movie, not as flashy as some of its counterparts and it remains to be seen if its later release (it comes out in February) will be a help or hindrance. Kirby is a lock for a lead actress nom for "Pieces of a Woman" and it might be a challenge to earn nods in two categories.