

# Academy awards ceremony



At the very first Academy Awards ceremony in 1929, the writing awards were already split into two categories: Best Writing, Original Story and Best Writing, Adaptation. (For the record, that first year saw the only presentation of an Oscar for Best Title Writing, an art that had become obsolete by the following year.)

Over the next few decades, the delineation of the screenplay awards morphed a bit.

For a while, three awards were presented: Best Original Screenplay, Best Original Story, and Best Story and Screenplay- confusing categorizations that speak to the tortured distinctions made by the Writers Guild when determining authorship. But for the last half century, the sensible division between an original screenplay and a screenplay based on a preexisting work has held.

Writers and their audiences see a difference between the art of creating characters, situations and dialogue out of whole cloth and the art of turning an existing work into a film script with all the requisite transformations that such a translation entails.

This is not to say that the distinction between an original and adapted work is always clear. In 2000, Joel and Ethan Coen 's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* was nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay thanks to a credit on the film that cheekily stated it was based on Homer's *Odyssey*.

Eyebrows rose all over Hollywood: O Brother had about as much to do with the Odyssey as did The Wizard of Oz or really any story about someone lost who wants to go home.

The Coens were perhaps prompt- ing the age-old debate as to whether any artwork, especially a narratively driven artwork, is ever truly original. In a broad sense, every storyteller obviously builds on the stories that came before him or her and relies on pre-programmed audience expectations.

Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* addresses this topic with great insight, and an entire academic discipline, the study of " Intertextuality," analyzes this phenomenon.

The Oscar nominees for Best Original Screenplay this year - American Hustle, Blue Jasmine, Dallas Buyers Club, Her, and Nebraska - all utilize existing genre tropes, standard (or subverted) plot devices, patterns of dialogue derived from previous works, and so forth. Blue Jasmine is quite consciously based on Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, with virtually every character and situation a direct outgrowth of the earlier work.

The dialogue is new, but it's debatable as to whether the work is " Original" in the strictest sense. Certainly it is much more of an adaptation than O Brother, Where Art Thou? Conversely, one of the nominees for Best Adapted Screenplay this year is