And the Oscar winner is ... pretty predictable

If you're placing bets on the Academy Awards, this year's major races make it easier than ever to lock in your votes

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MONTREAL — It was actually a very good year at the movies. This is in spite of the fact that most of you didn't catch the nine deserving Academy Award nominees for best picture. With the exception of Gravity, and perhaps Captain Phillips, none induced stampedes at the box office.

So it has always gone in Hollywood, where commerce takes a back seat to alleged art come Oscar time.

All the same, the Oscar selectors could have included three other stellar pics in the best-picture pack: Before Midnight, Fruitvale Station and Prisoners, which was directed by homeboy Denis Villeneuve. Then again, Villeneuve would likely have undergone the same indignity as fellow Montreal filmmaker Jean-Marc Vallée, whose Dallas Buyers Club got the nod as best picture while the director himself didn't get nominated.

Vallée is not the only snubbed helmsman here — not when nine films are in the running for best picture but only five directors are nominated. This is lunacy. Films don't direct themselves. Nominees for best picture and director should be one and the same. But that won't happen.

The good news for those inclined to wager on the Academy Awards is that this may be the most easily predictable contest in eons. So much so that we have decided to forgo the usual approach of who/what will win and who/what should win, in favour of who/what will win and what could get in the way.

Best picture

What will win: There should be no stopping 12 Years a Slave, one of the most unflinching and brutal probes of racism and slavery ever captured on celluloid. It makes for some excruciatingly tough viewing. It has also won just about every other film award leading up to the Oscars.

What could get in the way: Momentum has been steadily growing for American Hustle, which got off to a slow start but whose five lead performers are all adored in Hollywood. There's also the guilt factor: Gravity has grossed almost as much as the other nominated films combined, and its success helps pay the bills of many Oscar voters.

Best director

Who will win: It makes no sense in light of my rant about films and directors being synonymous with one another, but Alfonso Cuarón will win, largely because Gravity has to be rewarded with at least one major statuette for all the cash it has generated at the gate.

What could get in the way: Common sense. If they are going to give the best-picture honour to 12 Years a Slave, they really should give this award to the man who made it all happen, Steve McQueen. Some cynic — OK, me — posited the theory that McQueen also might win because some of the barmier Oscar voters could confuse the director for the action star of the same name, even though the King of Cool died 34 years ago.

Best actor

Who will win: Matthew McConaughey is the flavour of the year in Hollywood. Once mocked as being a pretty-boy hunk with the cerebral powers of a gnat, he is now being recognized — rightly so — as an actor of substance, for Dallas Buyers Club and such endeavours as the film Mud and the sensational HBO series True Detective. And McConaughey, having shed a chunk of his body weight for his part in Dallas Buyers Club, simply burns up the screen as a redneck rodeo rider turned unlikely AIDS patient/activist.

What could get in the way: Sentiment in favour of 77-year-old Nebraska star Bruce Dern, who delivers a stirring performance as a bitter alcoholic in the throes of dementia and pathetically in search of bogus prize money.

Best actress

Who will win: Cate Blanchett wins it in a walk for Blue Jasmine. The other nominees need not even contemplate writing an acceptance speech — even you, Meryl. Blanchett turns on the emotional jets as a matron unable to come to terms with her fall from the swell life in the Big Apple and her plunge into blue-collar reality in San Fran with her sis, who knows not from Louis Vuitton.

What could get in the way: Blanchett's director, Woody Allen, who is generally praised for bringing out the best in his female stars. Dylan Farrow, daughter of Woody and Mia Farrow, has once again brought up allegations of molestation against her father — although he had previously been investigated but was never charged in this matter. Dylan has also been sending out letters: "What if it had been your child, Cate Blanchett?" That, coupled with sentiment, could create a space for Philomena's fabulous 79-year-old Judi Dench, who has announced that, because of failing eyesight, she will likely be calling it a career.

Best supporting actor

Who will win: Jared Leto is seemingly unstoppable. He is also superb as the transgender, HIV-infected drug addict who forges a fascinating partnership with McConaughey's ex-redneck character in Dallas Buyers Club. Like McConaughey, Leto credits director Vallée for bringing out the best in his performance.

What could get in the way: Redneck attitudes among Oscar voters about transgender, HIV-infected drug addicts. And perhaps Bradley Cooper's perm in American Hustle, or Michael Fassbender, who plays a convincing racist in 12 Years a Slave.

Best supporting actress

Who will win: The closest contest of the six, but 12 Years a Slave's Lupita Nyong'o should prevail for her emotionally draining performance as a headstrong slave who is repeatedly abused and raped by her plantation-master boss (Fassbender) but still manages to hang on to some shred of dignity.

What could get in the way: Jennifer Lawrence, last year's best-actress winner and the female flavour of the year in Hollywood, who happens to be mighty impressive as the moll in American Hustle and who gives good acceptance speech.

The 86th Academy Awards, hosted by Ellen DeGeneres, airs Sunday at 8:30 p.m. on ABC and CTV, preceded by a red-carpet special at 7 p.m.