

TOM JONES

*“We are all as God made us –
and many of us much worse.”*

The Narrator (Michael Mac Liammoir)

The British Invasion exploded across the United States

on 4th February 1964, when The Beatles made their debut on The Ed Sullivan Show. Three weeks after the mop-tops’ sensational breakthrough, the Academy Award nominations were announced: Woodfall production Tom Jones blazed the way with ten nominations, confirming the remarkable international impact of UK culture.

Tony Richardson and John Osborne’s breezily post-modern adaptation of the pioneering 1749 novel by Henry Fielding (*The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*) changed the face of period, costume film-making almost overnight, shaking up a moribund genre with wit, colour, brio and fast-paced excitement. It went on to scoop four Oscars at the April 13 ceremony, beating mega-productions *Cleopatra* and *How the West Was Won* to the Best Picture award—adding the industry’s top honour to its bonanza box-office takings worldwide.

Despite the haul, Albert Finney missed out on Best Actor to *Lilies of the Field*’s Sidney Poitier for his performance as the picture’s eponymous jack-the-lad hero, with his wickedly handsome grin under a bold quiff of natural chestnut hair—such ahead-of-its-time coiffure in free-spirited contrast to the conventional wigs sported by almost all of the other male characters. Born in humble surroundings—he is reckoned the illegitimate son of a barber, aptly enough—Jones is raised by a squire in gentlemanly fashion, and thus speaks in a much “posher” manner than previous Woodfall protagonists.

But in his impulsive rejection of quasi-feudal morality, Tom is a close cousin of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*’s Arthur Seaton and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*’s Colin—seizing all of life’s opportunities with both hands, especially if they involve the temptations of nubile female flesh. While far from explicit in what is actually shown, *Tom Jones* was groundbreaking in its evocation of carnal lusts—as encapsulated in the iconic, much-parodied dining-table sequence of prandial foreplay during which the goatish Tom and his potential paramour Mrs Waters (Joyce Redman) devour each other with their eyes while simultaneously gorging themselves on fruits and meats.

Redman was one of three performers from the film—along with Diane Cilento and Edith Evans—nominated in the Supporting Actress category; one of only two occasions in Oscar history when a single film supplied the majority of nominations in an acting category (the other being the supporting actors from *The Godfather Part II* a decade later.)

Such was the rain of nominations that it now seems astonishing that Walter Lassally, who would win the cinematography award twelve months later, should have missed out—especially since, at this period, there were five nominations apiece for black-and-white and colour films. Lassally’s day-for-night lighting was revolutionary; his fluent manipulation of cinema language is a crucial element in the way the film brings the past to vibrant life. His barnstorming *pièce de résistance* here is the spectacularly exciting five-minute stag-hunting sequence—Fielding covers this *en passant*, via a one-sentence paragraph—in which shots from a low-flying helicopter are interpolated (by editor Antony Gibbs) to dynamic, thrilling effect.