

Business

Trump slams Hollywood for giving best picture to a foreign film. But the man who funded its Oscar run is a car tycoon from Texas.

Neon, the company that backed 'Parasite's' distribution, is owned by the very type of character Trump complained the Oscars overlooked

Trump slams Academy Awards for 'Parasite' win

President Trump criticized the Academy Awards during a Feb. 20 rally for awarding the top prize to "Parasite," a South Korean film. (The Washington Post)

By

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President Trump on Thursday lamented Oscar voters' recent decision to name "Parasite," the Korean-language thriller, as this year's best picture.

"And the winner is a ... movie from South Korea. What the hell was that all about?"

Trump [told a crowd](#) at a reelection rally in Colorado Springs. "I thought it was best foreign film, right? No, it was [best picture]." He said he wanted to see more winners like "Gone With the Wind," the epic love story set in the American South.

But it turns out "Parasite" won thanks to the backing of the very type of all-American character Trump complained the Oscars overlooked — a Texas car-dealership mogul.

Neon, the company that distributed "Parasite" and staged its successful awards campaign, is majority-owned by Dan Friedkin, a Houstonian who owns Gulf States Toyota Distributors, the largest supplier of Toyotas to dealers in Texas and surrounding states. His headquarters sits not in Seoul or even Hollywood but on the far west side of Houston, near a local marketing company and an offshore drilling firm.

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[*'Parasite's' best picture win suggests a new Hollywood globalism*](#)



Bong Joon-ho accepts an Oscar for “Parasite,” a Korean-language film. The movie’s Oscar run was powered by Daniel Friedkin, a car mogul from Texas. (Chris Pizzello//Invision/AP)

The “Parasite” moment brought to a head Friedkin’s years-long effort to parlay success from the scrappy world of car wholesaling to the Hollywood hustle. The [30West](#) media-investment arm that Friedkin funded with his car profits bought a majority stake in Neon in 2018, and the cash Friedkin funneled to the distributor helped the company release the movie and run its Oscar campaign.

The game-changing “Parasite” moment, in other words, might never have happened without Texans’ affinity for Toyota Tundras.

“What we see with Dan Friedkin and 30West is how profits from a very Middle American business can have a significant effect on global film,” said Ross Fremer, an executive in business development with the production and management company Cinetic Media who follows the space closely.

Contrary to Trump’s assumption, Friedkin’s “Parasite” connection demonstrates the domestic roots of even the most seemingly global parts of the entertainment business: A Korean moment in Hollywood was made possible by an American businessman wholesaling Japanese cars in Texas.

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Rendering Trump’s comment further ironic is that Friedkin has roots in Republican Texas politics: He was appointed to two six-year terms as chairman at the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission by former Texas Gov. Rick Perry (R), Trump’s first secretary of energy.

Friedkin, who is famously media-averse, declined to be interviewed. So did several of his top Hollywood lieutenants, including Micah Green, the former Creative Artists Agency power broker who runs 30West, and Tom Quinn, who runs Neon.

But his story demonstrates the unlikely link between a Texas tycoon and the global movie business.



From left, Matt Damon, Dan Friedkin, and his father, Thomas Friedkin, attend a Horsemen Flight Team event on May 3, 2014, in Chino, Calif. (Stefanie Keenan/WireImage/Getty Images)

With a [Forbes-estimated](#) net worth of \$4.2 billion, Friedkin is the 187th richest person in America, just eight spots behind Mark Cuban and 30 spots ahead of Meg Whitman. His fortune comes in large part from Gulf States Toyota, the exclusive distributor of the automaker's cars and parts to dealers in Texas and surrounding states. The company has nearly doubled its sales over the past decade to \$9 billion last year, much of which has gone to Friedkin's pockets.

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But the cash hasn't just been a way for the Texan, 54, to feed interests such as a private-plane obsession — it has fueled his bid to reshape Hollywood. In addition to 30West, he created the production company [Imperative](#) Entertainment and has spent years financially backing movies as varied as "Parasite," "The Mule," "I, Tonya" and "The Square," as well as lower-performing and less-regarded pictures such as the J. Paul Getty kidnapping tale "All the Money in the World" and the Julia Roberts drama "Ben Is Back."

Interviews with 10 film veterans and executives who have had dealings with Friedkin, many of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity so as not to jeopardize relationships, yield a portrait of one of the more enigmatic men in the modern entertainment business. Money and cinema have been mixing uneasily in Hollywood since Thomas Edison [flexed his monopoly](#) on film patents more than a century ago. But even in an industry where art and commerce make for odd bedfellows, Friedkin stands out.

The executive, according to two people who have worked with him, can have broad commercial tastes. But his film ventures involve some of the most upscale projects in town, including Martin Scorsese's period drama "Killers of the Flower Moon," which will shoot this year, and "Lyrebird," a World War II art-heist picture that Friedkin directed himself and was acquired by the upscale Sony Pictures Classics last year for a 2020 release, soon after which it was renamed "The Last Vermeer."

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Friedkin has an in-person manner that two entertainment veterans who have met with him described as down-home and not oriented toward foreign-language titles. ("The Last Vermeer," despite being populated by foreigners, is in English.) But he has often put money in prestige-oriented projects. Those movies also include "The Square," the layered 2017 Swedish-language film about moral choices and social norms that, like "Parasite," also won the Cannes Film Festival's top prize, the Palme d'Or.

Friedkin has a pedigree far from the world of film geekdom. His late father, Thomas Friedkin, was a pilot who became the largest shareholder of the now-defunct discount airline Pacific Southwest, which his father had started.

A racecar owner and enthusiast, Thomas Friedkin dabbled in Hollywood as a pilot, often on lower-profile movies such as the Disney science-fiction comedy "The Cat from Outer Space" and "Police Academy 4: Citizens on Patrol." He became a Toyota wholesaler via his racing connections during the 1960s, when Toyota was not yet a desirable brand in the United States.

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When his father died in 2017, the younger Friedkin inherited not just operating control of the business (his three siblings are less involved day-to-day) but also his father's affinity for combining flying and Hollywood. As he piloted his own planes all over the world, Friedkin started an aerial photography company. The firm handled a lot of the overhead scenes in the 2017 World War II hit "Dunkirk"; Friedkin flew some of the planes himself.

His actual Hollywood involvement, however, was modest for years. He founded two production companies in 2014. One was Imperative, with the help of Bradley Thomas, a longtime collaborator of the gross-out creators the Farrelly brothers ("There's Something About Mary," "Dumb and Dumber"). The other was a nonfiction entity called Pursuit Productions with Lauren Sanchez, the former "Good Day L.A." host who has been romantically linked to Washington Post owner Jeff Bezos. Sanchez, a helicopter pilot, also has a love of aerial photography. But for years neither venture gained much traction, producing few works of note.

Things began to change when Friedkin hired Green away from CAA in 2017. Long a fixture on the film-financing scene, the agent had worked closely with Friedkin while he was at CAA, inhabiting the role of matchmaking the billionaire with directors and scripts that are the mother's milk of Hollywood agencies.

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That set the ball in motion. Green and Friedkin hired the former's CAA colleague, a financing expert named Dan Steinman. The trio then brought on Trevor Groth, a longtime respected Sundance Film Festival programmer, to cement its indie-film bonafides.

Then came Neon. Friedkin helped finance "I, Tonya," the Oscar-winning film about the Tonya Harding-Nancy Kerrigan scandal. Neon, at the time an upstart founded by Weinstein Company executive Quinn, acquired, distributed and marketed the film, landing an Oscar for star Allison Janney. Friedkin so liked the job Neon did that he decided to buy a majority stake in the company, proving once again the old adage that nothing happens in Hollywood without the story of a disgraced ice skater.

Friedkin can operate in the film business with a kind of Netflixian range, stepping in and writing checks that others won't. Scorsese's next movie is a period story of oil and murder on Native American land and is being financed by Friedkin in a manner similar to how Netflix took on "The Irishman" — with a high budget that scared off traditional studios. Robert De Niro is in this movie, too. (Friedkin's entertainment expenditures can move in other directions — he's spent the past few months in talks [to buy](#) AS Roma, the Italian soccer club.)

Friedkin has made other financial decisions against Hollywood wisdom. #MeToo allegations against Kevin Spacey in 2017 threatened to sink "All the Money in the World," with distributor Sony Pictures ready to bury the project. Friedkin stepped in and wrote an additional check for more than \$10 million so that filmmakers could hire Christopher Plummer, reassemble cast and crew and reshoot all scenes in which Spacey appeared.

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From left, Dan Friedkin, Ridley Scott and Bradley Thomas attend the premiere of “All The Money In The World” in California in 2017. (Kevin Winter/Getty Images)

“Most people would take the hit and move on,” said a producer who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he did not wish to offend potential partners. “I think when that happened, a lot of people said, ‘This is a guy who does things differently.’”

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But how much Friedkin can become an established part of the Hollywood firmament remains unclear.

Two prominent film executives The Post interviewed with no competing interest said they were skeptical Friedkin, like many billionaires, would maintain interest in the film business, especially without a steady stream of hits. “The Mule” took in \$175 million worldwide, but “All the Money in the World’s” title proved misleading; it grossed just \$57 million globally. “Ben is Back” notched just \$10 million domestically. Friedkin was noticeably little-seen at events over Oscar weekend, even as “Parasite” was racking up prizes, suggesting a desire to keep a low Hollywood profile.

[*Global opinions: How ‘Parasite’ almost never saw the light of day*](#)

Meanwhile, three producers The Post spoke to, all of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity, said 30West’s strategy remains murky. “Are they investing in movie companies? Putting equity in movies? Investing in business that have nothing to do with movies? It’s not really clear what they are,” one producer said.

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30West announced Friday that it was acquiring a significant minority stake in Altitude Media Group, a British film sales and production company behind such films as the documentary “Diego Maradona.”

Friedkin’s financial success comes from a mix of skill and luck, according to auto-industry experts.

“Toyotas are some of the best-selling cars around, so to have an exclusive license like that is almost automatically going to be very profitable,” said Jack Cohen, a Los Angeles-based expert on automobile wholesaling and retailing. He noted it would be nearly impossible to obtain such a license today in the face of greater competition and corporate oversight.

“But you still need to manage it well, because if suddenly cars are selling better in other states, Toyota comes in and says, ‘Why are we giving the exclusive to you?’” Cohen said.

[*The complete list of Oscar winners*](#)

Hollywood is littered with billionaires who have packed up their bags when obstacles arose. For every [Arnon Milchan](#), there are five outsiders who came and went. This is particularly true for billionaires who white-knight commercially challenged foreign films that often most need the money. Unlike other industries, success in the movie business is often subjective and illusory.

It’s a theme Friedkin appears to be aware of and interested in. “Vermeer” is about a pricey piece of art and how its value, in a world of fickle perceptions, can quickly evaporate. Speaking at a Toronto International Film Festival screening, he noted the power of these illusions.

“Where do we draw the line on what is a fake?” he said.

“Everything comes from a collective view and vision of other experiences and other things that we’ve been exposed to,” he said. “When does something become a fake and when is it not a fake? We all recognize that those lines are pretty blurry.”

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Steven Zeitchik covers the business of entertainment for The Washington Post, examining the industry's trends, challenges, issues and ideas. Before joining The Post, he covered entertainment for the Los Angeles Times for eight years. He also did reporting tours for The Times in places including Ukraine, Egypt, Germany and the Bill Cosby trial. Follow