

# ‘OSCAR’: AN INSTITUTIONAL AND CONTESTED PERSONA READING OF THE ACADEMY AWARDS

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## ABSTRACT

*This article applies a persona studies approach to the case study of the Academy Awards. Key literature is used to situate an ‘Oscar’ persona within existing conceptualisations from the discipline. Oscar represents a composite persona that encapsulates an event, its broadcast, an Academy of individuals, and a larger discursive industry. It is a non-human persona that is coloured by distinctly human elements; it is collectively constructed on a massive scale, the process of which inviting constant contestation. Drawing from these theorisations I conduct a textual analysis to reach a persona reading of Oscar. As collective authors of the persona, members of the Academy, associated performers, and discursive contributors employ three distinct and consistent persona strategies: the Functional, the Spiritual, and the Ironic. Oscar’s taste-making function is enabled by extravagant staging and tempered by expressions of philanthropy yet performed with ironic self-effacement. The cumulative effect of these three performances allows Oscar manoeuvrability across the requirements of the different cultural contexts of each year. As well as providing a unique prism for understanding the Oscars as an institution, this work demarcates different levels of collective persona construction, challenging notions of central authority in production and performance, and accounting for the ongoing constructive work of publics.*

## KEY WORDS

Oscars; Awards; Taste; Meta-Collective Complex; Non-Human Persona

## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to diversify persona studies further towards the inclusion of non-human, institutional persona construction, using the Academy Awards (or ‘the Oscars’) as a case study. Examining the Oscars through the lens of persona studies, I contend, allows for a demarcation of levels of meaning represented by an ostensibly standalone industry event. We can consider the complexity of a persona construction dictated by not just a central (yet obscure) body – in this case AMPAS (the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science), or ‘the Academy’ – but of the publics that they engage with and are influenced by. Establishing ‘Oscar’ as a persona unearths several inherent tensions of a mediated persona developed over nearly a century torn between its broadcast roots and a scattered online audience, a collectively construed non-human persona, and a persona at the mercy of its unstable public contests.

I will firstly situate the Oscar persona within existing Persona Studies literature in an effort to map how this complex persona comes into being, before moving into a textual analysis

to identify its impacts. Given the longevity of the institution, my work here is by no means an attempt at a definitive, all-encompassing statement on what the Oscar persona is, has been, or should be. However, I argue that a) the discrete persona reading attempted for the scope of dates chosen reveals some key characteristics that are consistent across the Oscar legacy, and that b) there is potential to map the expansive and layered persona-construction processes at work with Oscar and similarly contested and/or non-human personas.

## **BACKGROUND & TERMS**

The Oscars have historically been understood as the peak film industry awards amongst (Western) filmmakers and audiences. They are a formative enterprise for the modern cultural awards systems – what English (2005) calls the “economy of prestige” – whereby their evaluative objective is achieved through applying a veneer of logical objectivity to an inherently subjective practice. As such, they can be understood through Bourdieusian frameworks as a gatekeeper of taste – as an institution, they have cultivated a high degree of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, the last of which they bestow upon “prestige stars” in their awards practice (McDonald 2013, pp. 215-253).

For their taste-making function, they have served as a site of inquiry to academics who scrutinise conceptions and representations of filmic quality (Levy 2003; Simonton 2011), or for societal representations (such as of age, race, gender, and sexuality) in filmic storytelling (Cabosky 2015; Levy 2003; Markson & Taylor 1993; Murch 2003; Simonton 2004). For their broadcasting legacy they are understood for their contributions to event television staging (Pavlounis 2018; Kaminsky 2019), and their roles in celebrity culture (Haastrup 2008; Swiatek 2014; Lawson & Draper 2021). Industrially, they are also considered for tangible impacts that they have on film success in terms of box office and marketing (Addis & Holbrook 2018; Deuchert, Adjamah & Pauly 2005; Kersten & Verboord 2014) or for what they indicate about filmmaking practice and standards (Mapp 2008; Rossman, Esparza & Bonacich 2010; Wang Yuen 2017).

It is important to clarify the terminology of the Oscars going forward. ‘The Academy’ is established shorthand for “the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences” and refers to the voting body and/or board of governors who administer the awards. As of 2021 there are upwards of 9000 Academy members who are organised into branches of professions; these branches vote to nominate achievements for their respective craft-specific categories, with winners from the nominees then decided upon by the entire voting body. The Academy Awards ceremony (and the broadcast thereof) is the Academy’s most public-facing function and their colloquial name of ‘the Oscars’ has become institutionalised by the Academy as a central part of their brand (e.g., their website address is ‘oscars.org’). The Academy Awards given out also go by the shorthand of ‘Oscars’, but for clarity I will only refer to them as ‘awards’ or by the specific category being looked at.

‘Oscar’ is the name I’m giving to the persona under investigation, the form and function of which I will map by reviewing existing Persona Studies literature.

## **CONCEPTUALISING ‘OSCAR’**

### **Composite Persona**

For a starting point, the use of the words ‘Oscar(s)’ and ‘the Academy’ are very much context-dependent and can lack a direct or discrete referent. Sedgman grapples with this issue of ambiguity in their development of a theatrical persona, noting that “to talk about ‘theatre’ is

sometimes to speak of a theatre building...sometimes about a theatre company... sometimes about the live performance event itself” (2019, pp. 98-99). They use this example to argue for a “composite persona... one whose cultural value comes from the interplay between these varying layers” (2019, p. 99).

This is a useful precedent to consider ‘the Oscars’ within Persona Studies. ‘The Academy’ can denote two very different collectives: that of the entire voting body or of the much smaller board of governors. ‘The Oscars’ can refer to the awards that are given out (whether specifically for categories, or as a generic concept of film awards, or as the statuette itself), or the Academy Awards (either as a ceremony or a broadcast). It is also an official branding nickname used by the Academy for their website (Oscar.com), broadcasts, and in their social media presentations. The connotations are potentially endless, e.g., with “Oscar nominated/winning” employed as an intertextual marker for prestige marketing (McGowan 2017, p. 223), or used in reference to the broader “awards season” (English 2005, p. 85). Though these layers of meaning have served as sites of singular interrogations by academics of different disciplines, ‘Oscar’ as a composite persona serves to consider these multiple referents in tandem, as their interplay produces a cohesive end result.

### Non-Human Persona

Non-human elements are an inherent implication of all personas, given that they are constituted by negotiations between individual action/performance, publics, and digital networks and artefacts (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020). Although the majority of existing persona analysis either applies this logic to examples of consistent, collective expressions of a persona type (e.g., Tomkinson & Elliott’s “contemporary gamer persona” [2020]) or to individual exemplars of persona enactment (e.g., Culbert’s “posthumous persona” of David Bowie [2020]), there are precedents for non-human entities as demonstrating persona construction.

The first relevant identifier to contend with is the “attributed persona” (Giles 2020, p. 25). In a typology of persona, Giles conceives of this broad grouping as when “persona is not attached to an individual, class of individual, or fictional character, but to an inanimate object or concept” (2020, p. 25). Returning to Sedgman (2019), their analysis of The Bristol Old Vic Theatre Company demonstrates a framework for an “institutional persona” by positing “institutions gain both social and economic capital in much the same way as individuals do, through the creation of a persuasive and cohesive narrative of self. In other words: through the production of persona” (2019, p. 99).

Sedgman breaks down the precedents of institutional persona into three groupings that Oscar fits into. Firstly, an institution connotes a sense of space (2019, p. 98). Whereas The Bristol Old Vic is spatially rooted in physical building, Oscar has historic and inextricable ties to Hollywood as a filmmaking hub (English 2005, p. 33). Secondly, institutions *institutionalise* (Sedgman 2019, p. 99), whereby those who operate within the institution contribute to the construction and maintenance of its persona. Just glancing at any ceremony’s list of celebrity nominees, presenters, and attendees is evidence of institutionalised celebrity. Lastly, an institution develops a persona through its public-facing dimension (2019, p. 99), whereby the visibility of its service operations contributes to its branding. Beyond its traditional broadcast model, Oscar is also partially made up of digitised networks to extend its presentational reach.

A non-human persona reading of Oscar is useful because it provides a framework to distinguish ‘the Oscars’ as a site of persona construction – most notably for its cast of Hollywood elites who participate in the public contest and acceptance of awards – from ‘Oscar’ itself as an agent of persona construction with its own stakes in the game. As Sedgman argues, an

institutional persona framework magnifies the production of the self that takes place even in the absence of a human self, and also “facilitates analysis of who is doing the work of producing an institution’s identity, and how this process is managed” (2019, p. 101), i.e., it invites scrutiny into what constructive work is done by the Academy (both the large cohort and small decision-making board) and by other celebrity performances in their broadcasts. It also illuminates the duality of individual contributions to a persona that they simultaneously draw from *and* reconstruct, e.g., both Jimmy Kimmel hosting the ceremony and Frances McDormand accepting an award are maintaining their own star personas while simultaneously contributing to the institutional persona of Oscar

A peculiarity of this example is that Oscar comes complete with a) a recognisably human name, b) a masculine human representation built into its visual iconography, and c) a near-century of historical baggage. None of these should be seen as necessary factors to consider the validity of a non-human persona generally, but they nevertheless colour this particular example in interesting ways. As of 2021, Oscar is 93 years old, meaning its persona construction has long outlasted the professional life of a comparable human person. Over such a lifespan Oscar has inevitably been understood in terms of peaks and troughs of relevance and impact but having already established institutional longevity works to perpetuate its justification for continued existence. For today’s Hollywood, having an Oscars ceremony is the default position rather than a justified eventuality.

### **Meta-Collective Complex (& Contest)**

The next point of clarification is of how to consider persona as collectively performed. On one hand, Sedgman’s analysis of the institutional persona covers a lot of ground to consider the work that institutionalised human actors perform in the service of a non-human persona. Beyond the roles of Academy members and board members in putting on the show and dictating filmic taste, the broadcasted ceremony itself is performed by a revolving cast of Hollywood elites, all of whom contribute to the impression of Oscar.

But beyond this literal interpretation of collective construction, Persona Studies as a discipline is uniquely able to speak to the collective component of all public-facing performances, and the active role of publics (and micro-publics) in their maintenance. Marshall, Moore and Barbour state that persona is not an individual, nor is it a collective – instead persona is a strategic and organised public expression of individuality aimed at collective publics (2020, p. 3). Moore, Barbour & Lee argue the case of persona as representing a “meta-collective complex”, whereby the public consumption, perception, and replication of different personas are inextricable from their ongoing viability (2017, p.6, emphasis removed). The implication is that all personas are collectively construed, and that publics and micro-publics play an active and engaged role in how personas develop. There are parallels to Richard Dyer’s conceptualisations of *stardom* to be noted (1998; 2004): a persona and a star image can both be understood as textual/contextual ingredients that form a cohesive narrative in a public’s collective imagination. However, with the meta-collective complex of persona, we are able to view this interpretive work of audience as also constructive, inherently contributing to its ongoing development. Oscar represents a crucial case study to demonstrate this in practice. Compounded by its long institutional history and thus varied iterations of strategic self-expression, it could potentially demonstrate the active negotiating and influencing work of its publics more starkly than a comparable human persona might.

This element of persona responsiveness has been usefully explored through some celebrity examples. Qyll (2020) has applied persona construction principles to the practice of “person branding”, through which an individual literal person (Madonna) leverages their

platform for commercial salience and community identification, rendering their persona a site of audience contestation. This framing specifically complicates the element of individual agency as central to persona construction, as the potential for a person brand comes in its ability to negotiate and integrate the interpretations offered by audiences at large. Further, Culbert (2020) has considered the potential of “posthumous personas” in the case of David Bowie. The machinations of persona construction through his final album, *Blackstar* (2016), were put in place by Bowie with the private knowledge of his deteriorating health but remained obscured until his death eventuated only days after the album’s release. The reception and maintenance of the persona was, instead, done in the wake of his life by his audiences in spaces like Reddit, among others; Culbert asserts “the narratives offered by the users both allows us to mourn the loss of the body but also establish the role of the persona as a separate and semi-autonomous entity” (2020, p. 51). This case study lays groundwork to consider the movement of persona authorship from Bowie himself to his fans/consumers, whereby the collective persona interpretations necessarily shape its overall impact and narrative.

Crucially, Oscar also represents a *contested persona*. With its extreme visibility, the Oscars as an event has long been the grounds for widespread cultural discourse amongst critics, industry publications, commentators, and fans. The advent of networked digital media and participatory cultures of production have exacerbated this: websites are dedicated to collating statistics and predicting outcomes of awards races; there are Oscars-dedicated podcasts, blogs, and YouTube channels hosted by fans and critics; industrial publications have Oscar’s-dedicated content; tangentially related publications exploit Oscars hype to create celebrity-based content. This network of co-dependent but hierarchical publics speaks to Tomkinson & Elliott’s exploration of a generic contemporary gamer persona (2020); they examine the way that a pre-existing and publicly recognisable persona can be co-opted (in their case by an energy drink), and how that co-option continues to mould the generic persona going forward. With Oscar, the mass of para-textual materials is vast and parasitic, appropriating the cultural import that the event has amassed; the sheer noise created inevitably feeds right back into the original persona in conflicting ways. This dynamic also demonstrates Oscar’s unique positioning in networked celebrity culture (Marshall 2010). The Oscars broadcasts and red carpets, although legacy media operations, are presentational to Oscar in that it constructs and (mostly) controls its own intentional performance. Without a specific spokesperson or consistent single human referent, discursive coverage of these events is entirely representational, interpreted by those with vested interests for wider consumption.

Duncan uses the contested persona in her study on Judi Dench’s ever-evolving persona (2019), exploring how the actor negotiates the many publicly constructed persona narratives that she has accumulated. Some, such as her elevation to the realm (that “forgotten old cupboard” [Cochrane 2009 in Duncan 2019, p. 29]) of “national treasures” (Duncan 2019, p. 29), she continuously and conspicuously negates as a strategy for ongoing employment and creative exploration. This, in turn, reinforces her seemingly preferred persona readings of authentic trustworthiness and ordinariness. As a contested persona, cultural dialogues steeped in film culture like #MeToo and #OscarsSoWhite demand recognition by the Academy, which discernibly impacts the ongoing Oscar persona performances (which I will expand upon in my textual analysis).

So conceptualising Oscar as a collectively construed and contested persona impacts the ways that we can read it. Academy-authored textual presentations, such as the Oscars broadcast or Twitter profile, must be recognised as influenced by and dependent upon the deeply polysemic readings and representations offered by its highly engaged audiences.

## THE OSCAR PERSONA: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Accepting that an institutional brand can engage in persona construction through the various avenues that humans use and manage, namely strategic multi-mediated messaging aimed at collective audiences, we can analyse 'Oscar' through the aesthetic and thematic choices of its ceremony broadcast, its self-promotion via legacy and social media, and its anointed place in Hollywood culture. I have analysed textual data with an explorative approach, not aiming for an exhaustive account of the Oscar persona, but one comprehensive enough to display its nuance and variability.

The scope explored is the years 2016-2021 (although complemented by examples from earlier years in parts). Rossman & Schilke (2014) identify the Oscars ceremony in terms of Bourdieusian taste-making cycles and propose that they are best understood as responsive to a five-year window of cultural feedback. Thus, while any single year can be a useful site of analysis for various readings, here a grouping of five years demonstrates the manoeuvrability of the persona within an observable and focussed timeframe. Years 2017 and 2018 were hosted by television personality Jimmy Kimmel, while the 2019, 2020, and 2021 ceremonies forwent a host in favour of a parade of celebrity presenters. For this non-human persona, although hosts and presenters are ostensibly endorsed voices to represent Oscar, the persona construction work extends so far as to include nominees, winners, and attendees who contribute to the broadcast in discernible ways. I pay particular attention to the enactment of the Oscars ceremony and accompanying broadcast (from the choices of nominations and winners to the individual performance beats hit throughout), as well as the para-textual materials present in terms of commentary and discourse, the institutional social media presence, and the Academy's efforts undertaken outside of the purview of the awards. Because Oscar is collectively constructed, it is worth noting that excerpts used as textual evidence often serve a dual function of contributing to the Oscar persona as well as to the individual star's persona performance.

Three distinct persona performances emerge, each of which contributes to the overall impression of Oscar. Firstly, a *Functional Persona* of 'taste adjudicator', employing codes of eventfulness and prestige to imply and perpetuate its hierarchical standing to judge film arts. Secondly, a *Spiritual Persona* of 'community leader', that fosters its continued relevance to filmmaking more broadly through mentorship efforts, film preservation, and appeals to morality. Lastly, an *Ironic Persona* of 'Hollywood Man', performed through the contributions of presenters and commentators so as to skewer filmmaking culture from an insider's perspective. 'Functional', 'Spiritual' and 'Ironic' serve as descriptive markers for the performance type that could be generalised to comparable persona readings in future studies; 'taste adjudicator', 'community leader' and 'Hollywood Man' are names given to the specific incarnations for the case of Oscar.

### Taste Adjudicator

Although something of an afterthought in the inception of the Academy, the process and ceremony of awarding film arts has become its central function (Levy 2003, p. 41). The construction and the maintenance of its authority to wield such symbolic capital gives rise to Oscar's Functional Persona of 'taste adjudicator', wherein the taste-making purpose is justified with a strategy of spectacle.

Oscar performing eventfulness itself is an inherited and consistent trait; in the pre-broadcast era it was foundational to the illusory, aspirational glamour of film stardom production, and from the ceremony's initial shifts to televised broadcast has been a continued strategy for positioning both Oscar and Hollywood in a cultural hierarchy (Pavlounis 2018).

'Eventfulness' permeates each aesthetic choice made in the production: the red-carpet for spectacular arrivals, unattainable beauty standards, and celebrity coverage (Lawson & Draper 2021); the extravagant stage in front of a collection of film stars who congregate for Hollywood's biggest night; the deifying of the chosen winners to the upper echelons of cultural impact. The cultivated 'meaning' of Academy Awards night is reiterated throughout the ceremony performance, with hosts and presenters reminding nominees of the potential career impacts that come with success, and with frequent references to winners past. In 2018 presenter Viola Davis introduces her segment with:

*Some of the most memorable and legendary performances in film history came from those who won the Oscar in the category of Supporting Actor. Each of the icons of the past set a daunting standard of excellence, one that each of tonight's nominees met with his performance. (Oscars 2018)*

The suspense of competition is heightened by framing nominees' faces collectively on screen in the lead up to the announcement (see Figure 1), aesthetically appropriating a television game show (Kaminsky 2019). Eventual winners perpetuate Oscar's myth-making with emphatic gratitude towards the taste-makers who chose them – "I'd like to thank The Academy". The effect is compounded by the poignancy most aim for if they are victorious: Best Supporting Actor of 2017 Mahershala Ali pays tribute to teachers; Best Actress<sup>1</sup> of 2020 Renée Zellweger honours heroes from all walks of life; Best Supporting Actress of 2017 Viola Davis dedicates her award and her artistic life to the stories buried in the graveyard, "[the] one place that all the people with the greatest potential are gathered" (Oscars 2017). The traditions of gravitas in awards acceptance necessitates an austere, artful script.



Figure 1: Framing of nominees as contestants (Oscars 2019)

The taste adjudicator is formed and performed with a conscious understanding of Oscar's position in a film awards hierarchy being key to its functionality. English (2005) maps an "economy of prestige" in the practice of cultural awards; if we consider filmmaking as a field of cultural production, and the Academy Awards as the first important, long-standing, and visible awards show conceived of, each subsequent awards show has to articulate a point of difference. The New York Critics Film Circle established in 1935 protested the Hollywood-centric studio influence over the Academy Awards; the Golden Globes aim(ed) for greater

international representation; the SAG Awards perform the acting profession as a unionised collective; the Golden Raspberries satirically honour the worst movies of the year (Simonton 2011, p. 10). The existence of these alternatives is borne from a degree of opposition to what the Academy Awards are in terms of process and ideology. Although they stand alone, they remain inextricably tied to the Academy Awards (and Oscar), which sit atop the hierarchy in terms of prominence and prestige, as evidenced by the season's ordering. When the Academy postponed the 2021 Academy Awards due to the disruptions of the COVID19 pandemic, the orbiting awards promptly announced their own date shifts; their acts of cooperation directly feed back into the functional performance of Oscar, as it retains its grandiosity and authority as the grand finale of the awards season overall.

However, this persona construction that relies on extravagance has proven risky and fallible. Concessions have been made to deemphasise spectacle in social moments when flaunting wealth and privilege is unacceptable, such as the cancelling of the red-carpet arrivals in 2003 after the announcement of America's invasion of Iraq (Swiatek 2014, p. 3), or the pandemic-set intimate but socially distanced staging of the 2021 ceremony. Overtly artificial attempts at creating impactful moments have also backfired, such as when the 2021 ceremony switched the usual order of category presentations. Rather than ending on Best Picture as the show's finale, producers instead moved Best Actor to the slot, anticipating a widely predicted posthumous win for Chadwick Boseman, and thus a poignant (and shareable) acceptance speech from his widow, Simone Boseman. When Anthony Hopkins, who was not present, was announced as the surprise winner, the broadcast abruptly ended on an anticlimactic and awkward note that became the central focus of negative critiques (Shoard 2021).

The elements explored operate in the performance of spectacle and eventfulness, which affords the taste adjudicator its elevated position as a gatekeeper of taste for film art. In other words, the function of constructing and performing extravagance is to justify and maintain the symbolic capital that Oscar connotes (and therefore wields). This strategy of exceptionalising stardom and manufacturing competition helped extend the broadcast to being one of the most watched television events globally at its peak (Real 1989, pp. 80-81). This reach is a source of authority for the Academy, as its decisions had tangible impacts on both individual career trajectories and wider perceptions of quality in film. The taste adjudicator's unstable grounds of constructed spectacle are strategically tempered by the Spiritual Persona performance to achieve more consistent viability.

### **Community Leader**

If the Functional Persona performs grandiose entertainment for the sake of artistic gatekeeping, then Oscar also maintains a Spiritual Persona that speaks to a more consistent sense of morality. The 'community leader' recognises the privilege represented and held by Oscar, and with strategically performed acts of charity and cultural leadership works to prove itself worthy of continuing in such a position.

Although the televised awards show is clearly the most conspicuous case of Oscar's persona performance, the Academy's often less-publicised efforts throughout the rest of the calendar year represent a sense of giving back to its community. The Student Academy Awards, for example, are a forum for international film students to present work within the prescribed modes of competitive arts; beyond the economic capital up for grabs in cash grants, the Academy notes that past winners have gone on to legitimate Oscars success, implying social and symbolic capital as added incentives. Beyond engaging with filmmaking practice, the Academy also awards grants to film scholars, thus endorsing the generation of new knowledge for the field.

The community leader also acts as a custodian of film history; the Academy has long been promoting its Los Angeles film museum through its many delays (finally opening in September 2021). Through Twitter, broader and more generalised film-based discussions help to foster connections to a film-enthusiast culture, allowing Oscar's profile to become itself a site of discourse amongst followers. Connections between the Academy and individual filmmakers are promoted, either through announcements of new members (often then retweeted by the subject), paratextual materials such as video interviews, or in-memoriam tributes. This use of social media thus promotes an image of Oscar as connected to its professional community, and, indeed, a leader within it – not so much participating in the dialogue as attempting to set it.

Beyond the targeted Academy-led initiatives that contribute to the community leader performance, its sentiments seep into the Academy Awards broadcast itself in the form of politically conscious speeches. Consider host Jimmy Kimmel's 2017 opening monologue:

*I don't want to get too serious, but there are millions and millions of people watching right now. And if every one of you took a minute to reach out to one person you disagree with – someone you like – and have a positive, considerate conversation – not as liberals or conservatives, as Americans. If we could do that, we could make America great again. We really could. It starts with us. (Jimmy Kimmel Live 2017)*

This excerpt reinforces a cultural imperialist perspective of America and Hollywood as being centres of the world's attention, both for entertainment and morality. It also came in the wake of Donald Trump's election in 2016, where Hollywood's elitist liberalism was a source of sustained attack from Trump and his supporters (although Wang Yuen has previously noted how the Academy Awards ceremony will often present a progressive face while perpetuating systemically racist and exclusionary practices [2017, pp. 49-50]). Kimmel's appropriation of Trump's campaign slogan points directly to the societal moment, yet he individualises vast and volatile political divides into an achievable gesture of good faith; he therefore positions Oscar as a platform to address societal tensions and to lead by example. This is reinforced again in his 2018 opening monologue as host, which was in the wake of #MeToo: "But what happened with Harvey [Weinstein], and what's happening all over is long overdue. We can't let bad behaviour slide anymore. The world is watching us. We need to set an example" (Jimmy Kimmel Live 2018).

These examples, performed by essentially Oscar's chosen face and voice for these years in the ceremony host, express the community leader's responsibility to engage with social issues. Oscar can be understood here as a synecdoche for Hollywood itself as a locus of power, and thus attracts the spotlight of scrutiny. This perceived duty extends beyond the host, both with presenters in hosted and host-less ceremonies, and with award recipients; the politically declaratory awards speech (Levy 2003, pp. 345-355) is now entrenched to the point of cliché, but is inevitable each year. Presenter Regina King recognises this in her opening monologue for the 2021 ceremony, which took place shortly after a guilty verdict was handed down in the Derek Chauvin murder trial:

*I have to be honest, if things had gone differently this past week in Minneapolis, I may have traded in my heels for marching boots. Now, I know that a lot of you people at home want to reach for your remote when you feel like Hollywood is preaching to you. But as a mother of a Black son, I know the fear that so many live with, and no amount of fame or fortune changes that. (Entertainment Tonight 2021)*

On points of representation, we can clearly see the community leader performance being undermined and influenced by the meta-collectives of Oscar discourse. Online movements like #OscarsSoWhite challenge Oscar's claims of morality and holiness. On the morning of the 2015 Academy Award nominations announcement where actors of colour were excluded from all categories (for what would be the first of two consecutive years), Black Twitter user April Reign created the hashtag that upon going viral demanded reflexive action from the Academy (Ugwu 2020). This contribution would become a definitive element of understanding and navigating Oscar in the years that followed. The Academy, under Cheryl Boone Isaacs' presidency, instigated a recruitment drive towards a more diverse membership, which in 2016 was 94 percent white and 77 percent male (Boone Isaacs in Ugwu 2020). The discourse spawned by the hashtag grew and enriched with each year; the shortcomings of Oscar regarding race were an entry point into understanding issues of diversity and representation across the entire filmmaking process; scrutiny was cast over the exclusion of other groups such as non-English language filmmakers, non-male directors, and identifiably disabled actors.

Mapp (2008) has previously explored African American representation at the Academy Awards, noting that resistance and protest efforts have historically been ignored or ridiculed. Although still a persona primarily enacted through the legacy media of broadcast television, the contemporary age of online discourse through digital communication has emboldened meta-collective persona construction that is pushing Oscar further in line with broader social progress. Today, the community leader persona has to engage to remain viable. As filmmaker Peter Ramsey put it,

*There's too many other ways to get entertainment now than the tiny number of movies that get official academy [sic] recognition each year. #OscarSoWhite is an alarm bell. It's saying, "Keep with us, or we're going to leave you behind."* (in Ugwu 2020)

The negotiated dialogue of persona construction can be seen across the recent acting nominations, where 2020's exclusion of actors of colour apart from a single nominee compelled a resurgence of #OscarsSoWhite, which was then implicitly acknowledged by Oscar delivering the "most diverse acting slate ever" a year later (Vary 2021).

The Functional and Spiritual personas should be read as symbiotic, working together to maintain Oscar's standing within the filmmaking field by expressing and perpetuating authority. The community leader is only affordable (literally and figuratively) by the money and notoriety generated by the taste adjudicator, and the privilege of holding such an authoritative position in taste-making culture is fortified by field-specific philanthropy and broader advocacy – a palatable spirit.

## **Hollywood Man**

A by-product of the enactment of the two performances just explored is a self-reflexive sense of humour, one that leans into the anthropomorphising of 'the Academy Award/s' into Oscar as a human representative of Hollywood culture. In this consistent approach to conceptualising 'Oscar' as a character, I posit a third performance of 'Hollywood Man' as an Ironic Persona. Consider this excerpt from host Jimmy Kimmel's opening monologue for the 2018 Oscars broadcast:

*Our friend Oscar - Oscar is 90-years-old tonight, which means he's probably at home right now watching Fox News. Of course, no, Oscar is with us. After all the years – after all the awards given for achievements in show business, Oscar is still number one, no question about it. Oscar is the most beloved and respected man*

*in Hollywood, and there's a very good reason why. Just look at him – keeps his hands where you can see them, never says a rude word, and most importantly no penis at all. He is literally a statue of limitations. And that's the kind of men we need more of in this town.* (Jimmy Kimmel Live 2018)

In this we not only see a literal interpretation of the name and figure of 'Oscar', but also several fundamentally human features attributed to Oscar as an imagined character: gender, age, and positioning. Delivered in the context of #MeToo, this joke sets up the inanimate Oscar image as the counterpoint to the old, white, power-broking men against who the mass reckoning was hoped to be imminent.

To reiterate, having a human name and a masculine-human visual iconography attached to Oscar should not be seen as necessary factors for non-human persona construction. However, in the performance of 'Hollywood Man' we can see where these impacts are most strongly felt. Having such tangibly human characteristics within close reach has allowed for Oscar to parody the humanity of its position.

The jokes offered only make sense because of a shared understanding amongst audiences of the general structure, impacts, and problems of Hollywood for the home viewer, and the knowledge of this perception from the crowd in the room. The above Kimmel joke has an ironic sting in the #MeToo context for those with an understanding of the Harvey Weinstein case beyond his predatory behaviour, because of how clearly his reputation for Oscars success afforded him protection within this elite Hollywood community (Farrow 2019): Oscar as an anthropomorphised idea of a human man may be an ideal in the specific cultural moment of the joke, but in practice was a part of the problem.

In contrast to Oscar's posturing of responsibility in its community leader performance, 'Hollywood Man' clearly offers no pretence of Oscar being an admirable or reparative voice for the issues invoked. Consider this exchange from 2020 presenters Steve Martin and Chris Rock:

*Rock: I dunno, Steve, I'm a little conflicted. You know - I was driving here tonight and seeing the terrible homeless problem in L.A. and –*

*Martin: Thank you Chris, so many stars! Oh my God there's Brad Pitt. (92<sup>nd</sup> Academy Awards 2020)*

The purpose of this joke is not to draw attention to a real-world issue facing the Los Angeles community – let alone an issue that Oscar could ostensibly be a positive advocate of change for given the inextricable ties between the Academy and Los Angeles as a location (English 2005, p. 33). Rather, the joke parodies celebrity exceptionalism and narcissism, and ties into notions of celebrity as frivolous and distracting. Oscar offers no antidote to this societal woe; indeed, its existence can be read as a symptom of it.

While the Functional and Spiritual personas work symbiotically to position Oscar towards high artistic and moral standing, the Ironic persona casts a shadow of hypocrisy over the entire enterprise. The Hollywood Man performance consistently forms its jokes within the endless scrutiny that the Academy faces, a satirical, tacit acknowledgement of the discourse without reparative commitments.

## CONCLUSION

Applying a persona reading to all that is 'the Academy Awards' allows for a mappable performance of 'Oscar'. The resultant characteristics of the functional 'taste adjudicator', the spiritual 'community leader', and the ironic 'Hollywood Man' appear consistently visible across

each surveyed year's iteration of Oscar. Yet how the performance eventuates is responsive to the specific requirements of the given year of its enactment. This malleability is crucial to a persona of extreme longevity such as Oscar, and strategically perpetuates its own institutional standing in the filmmaking field. As the scope of this article necessarily limited the number of years investigated, further work can be done to track this persona's flexibility historically, perhaps with an eye to definitive moments that have had lasting influence on its construction and impact.

Such a reading diversifies Persona Studies in its push for massively contested and non-human persona construction, theoretical threads that are surely present in the discipline but require further unpacking. As a generalisable case study, the Oscar persona is a useful demonstration of Sedgman's composite and institutional personas. It explores the extremities of collective persona construction in its longevity and adaptability, its revolving cast of presentational performers for its central text, and its negotiation with related industry agents and dialogue with its vocal publics.

## END NOTES

1. The Oscars (and many other awards) retain gendered categories of 'actor' and 'actress', despite the suffix '-ess' often connoting inferiority or trivialisation (Simonton 2004, p. 783; Dyer 1998, p. 9) and the structure's exclusion of non-binary people.

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