

Considering the Convergent Award Show

“Fighting the Award Show’s Power”

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When 2016 Academy Awards host Chris Rock graced the Dolby Theatre to deliver his opening monologue last February, a notable song accompanied his entrance. According to music supervisor Byron Phillips, the use of hip-hop group Public Enemy’s 1989 hit “Fight the Power” helped “do something that was representative of Chris, and who Chris was, and [set] the vibe and tone Chris wanted to set for the evening,” as well as differentiate this ceremony from previous broadcasts because, historically, “Oscar award show music hasn’t been super-aggressive.”¹ In the context of the event the “super-aggressive” track commented the Academy’s failure to generate any nominations for actors of color for the second consecutive year, a critique that accrued venom by night’s end as it underscored a montage of white achievement during the closing credits. This systemic oversight prompted a boycott from prominent figures like director Spike Lee and actress Jada Pinkett-Smith² as well as the circulation of hashtags like #OscarsSoWhite for viewers to voice and catalogue dissent,³ which Rock commented upon in his monologue.⁴ It also coincided with less visible but more overt forms of protest, such as filmmakers Ava DuVernay’s and Ryan Coogler’s decision to opt out and participate in #JusticeForFlint, a free concert organized by the Blackout for Human Rights collective to address the city’s water crisis.⁵

¹ Will Robinson, “Oscars’ Music Supervisor Explains Why ‘Fight the Power’ Bookended the Show,” *Entertainment Weekly*, February 29, 2016. <http://www.ew.com/article/2016/02/29/oscars-2016-fight-power-music-supervisor>.

² Joanna Robinson, “Spike Lee and Jada Pinkett Smith Will Boycott Oscars Over Lack of Diversity,” *Vanity Fair*, January 18, 2016. <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/01/spike-lee-jada-pinkett-smith-boycott-oscars-diversity>.

³ Tre’vell Anderson, “#OscarsSoWhite Creator on Academy List: ‘A Lot of Work Still Must Be Done,’” *Los Angeles Times*, June 29, 2016. <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-april-reign-oscarssowhite-academy-list-20160629-snap-story.html>.

⁴ Julie Miller, “How Chris Rock Addressed the #OscarsSoWhite Controversy in His Oscars Monologue,” *Vanity Fair*, February 28, 2016. <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/02/chris-rock-oscars-monologue-oscarssowhite>.

⁵ Yesha Callahan, “Ryan Coogler and Jesse Williams Discuss Importance of #JusticeForFlint Event Being Held Sunday,” *The Root*, February 25, 2016. http://www.theroot.com/blog/the-grapevine/ryan_coogler_and_jesse_williams_discuss_the_important_for_the_justiceforflint/.

In the short term optimistic industry scholars may argue that the Academy addressed such criticism earlier this summer when it invited 683 new members, a record-setting figure comprised of 46 percent female and 41 percent minority voters,⁶ and re-elected Cheryl Boone Isaacs as its president.⁷ However, “Fight the Power” also serves as a powerful intertextual reference to ongoing struggle for industrial visibility from media professionals of color, particularly for those who are part of or follow what Bakari Kitwana identifies as the hip-hop generation that came of age after the Civil Rights Era when the genre was in ascent.⁸ “Power” was also the theme to Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*, a prescient film about racism and police brutality in pre-gentrified Brooklyn that netted two Oscar nominations for Supporting Actor and Original Screenplay but was eclipsed by 1990 Best Picture winner, *Driving Miss Daisy*, to the objection of writer-director Lee and other attendees.⁹ The song was also released the same year that the Grammys added the Best Rap Performance category to reflect the genre’s commercial success but chose not to televise its presentation on CBS, resulting in nominees DJ Jazzy Jeff, Will Smith, and Salt ‘N’ Pepa staging a boycott.¹⁰ Finally, it framed Public Enemy’s absence from the 1991 Grammys after *Fear of a Black Planet*, their third album which featured the song as its lead single, received a nomination for Best Rap Performance By a Duo or Group but CBS and the Recording Academy chose not to broadcast the category’s presentation.¹¹ Thus, the programming decision to bookend last February’s Oscars telecast with “Fight the Power” raises

⁶ Gregg Kilday, “Oscars: Academy Unveils New Members List for 2016,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 29, 2016. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/oscar-academy-unveils-new-members-907361>.

⁷ Yohana Desta, “Cheryl Boone Isaacs Re-Elected to Fourth Term as Film Academy President,” *Vanity Fair*, August 3, 2016. <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/08/cheryl-boone-isaacs-reelection-academy>.

⁸ Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002).

⁹ “Did They Do the Right Thing,” *Los Angeles Times* 109 (1990): B6; “Kim Basinger Rips Academy for Snubbing Spike Lee’s Film,” *Jet* 78, no. 1 (1990): 27.

¹⁰ Steven Dupler, “3 Rap Acts Rap Grammys in Wake of Telecast Cut,” *Billboard* 101, no. 8 (1989): 3, 80.

¹¹ “Group to Boycott Grammys,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1991. <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/20/arts/group-to-boycott-grammys.html>.

important methodological questions for media industry scholars: how do we historicize convergent award shows? What contexts do we place them in? Finally, how can we harness the affordances of social media—its ability for users to circulate and elaborate on tweets, hashtags, think pieces, performance clips, acceptance speeches, and so forth—not only to advance conversations in the present but to critically approach the twenty-first century award show in relation to previous and ongoing manifestations of dissent and defection, particularly from media professionals of color who meaningfully contribute to major award shows' fraught legacies?