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## Vegan celebrity activism: an analysis of the critical reception of Joaquin Phoenix's awards speech activism

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### ABSTRACT

Acceptance speeches have long been used by celebrity activists as platforms from which to promote their personal, political or ethical agendas. The actor Joaquin Phoenix, an outspoken proponent for animal rights and veganism, dominated the Hollywood awards season in 2020 for his portrayal of Arthur Fleck in *Joker* and used his platform to address this cause. The reaction to Phoenix's speech in the trade and mainstream press reveals much about the role of celebrity vegan activism in the contemporary cultural and political climate. This article analyses the critical reception of Phoenix's Oscar speech across 37 US and UK trade press and mainstream news articles. In doing so, we highlight how gender and notions of hegemonic masculinity are managed and reproduced through the press discourse on celebrity animal rights activism. We argue that Phoenix's star persona and celebrity advocacy complicate the gendered norms associated with vegan practice. Finally, we address the issues of authenticity by examining Phoenix's performance of advocacy at the Oscars to argue that and the actor's speech popularises an emergent redemptive narrative of veganism, which negotiates hegemonic masculine ideals.


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On the evening of 10 February 2020, Hollywood elites gathered in Los Angeles for the 92<sup>nd</sup> ceremony of the Academy Awards. Joaquin Phoenix, an actor renowned for his unconventional acting techniques and subversive off-camera persona, was hotly anticipated to win the Best Actor award for his role in Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019). Not only had the role garnered Phoenix almost universal critical acclaim, the actor had also won the Best Actor award at each of the key events in the Hollywood awards season leading up to the Oscars, taking home a Golden Globe, Critics' Choice Award, Screen Actors Guild Award, and a BAFTA for his role as the titular *Joker*, Arthur Fleck. Acceptance speeches have long been used by celebrity activists as platforms from which to promote their personal, political or ethical agendas. It was unsurprising then that Phoenix, an outspoken proponent for animal rights and veganism, used the opportunity to do the same. The Oscars has long been a site of political and cultural expression and repression; from the use of acceptance speeches as activist campaign platforms to the institution's notable lack of diversity across decades of winners and nominees. Phoenix had already utilised his

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platform at the award ceremonies leading up to the Oscars to highlight a number of causes besides animal rights and veganism, drawing attention to racial inequality and environmental issues. Thus, it was expected that he would use the Academy Awards – the most prominent platform in the awards calendar – to make his most powerful speech. The reaction to Phoenix’s speech in the trade and mainstream press reveals much about the role of the celebrity vegan activism in the contemporary cultural and political climate.

This article analyses the critical reception of Phoenix’s Oscar speech across 37 US and UK trade press and mainstream news articles.<sup>1</sup> Applying a content analysis methodology, using the search terms ‘Joaquin Phoenix’, ‘Oscars speech’ and ‘academy awards’, articles from mainstream UK and US news outlets and US film industry trade press were selected for analysis. In this article, we explore three key areas: Firstly, we examine the notion of ‘acceptance speech activism’ and consider to what extent such speeches are culturally licenced; secondly, we address the way in which Phoenix presents as a vegan activist and as a celebrity to explore the tensions between these two identities. In doing so, we highlight how gender and notions of hegemonic masculinity are managed and reproduced through the press discourse on celebrity animal rights activism. We argue that Phoenix’s star persona and celebrity advocacy complicate the gendered norms associated with vegan practice. Finally, we address the issues of authenticity by examining Phoenix’s performance of advocacy at the Oscars to argue that and the actor’s speech popularises an emergent redemptive narrative of veganism, which negotiates hegemonic masculine ideals.

## Celebrity vegan activists

The role that celebrities play in the promotion of charitable or ethical causes has been the subject of much scholarly attention. Despite this focus, comparatively little has been written about celebrity activism as it pertains to the advancement of a vegan or animal rights agenda. Julie Doyle’s work on vegan celebrities goes some way to address this gap by examining how vegan celebrities’ presentations of veganism are ‘circumscribed by the logic of celebrity commodity culture’ (Doyle 2016, p. 788). As a result, the ethics of veganism are reworked as marketable lifestyle practices and, Doyle argues, it is often necessary for celebrities to employ strategies that downplay their ethical commitment to veganism to avoid hostile attitudes. As Doyle highlights, the cultural intermediary work of celebrity vegans must navigate the mainstream discourses on veganism which remain highly resistant to animal rights arguments. Indicative of such mainstream discourses Parkinson *et al.* (2019) propose that audiences are ambivalent about celebrity vegans, expressing a high degree of cynicism towards obvious celebrity endorsements of veganism while remaining interested in celebrity lifestyles that incorporate veganism. When associated with health, veganism as a lifestyle practice is, they argue, perceived to be more palatable than when it is aligned with an environmental or animal ethics agenda (Parkinson *et al.* 2019). Eva Giraud similarly argues that celebrity recipe books have long associated veganism with ‘good health’ rather than animal ethics to make vegan practices a better fit for the diet industry (Giraud 2021, p. 148). This has led to a popularisation of veganism but one which has promoted depictions of vegan practice as ‘individualistic purity politics’ that have obscured forms of inequality related to, for example, class, race, gender, and disability (Giraud 2021, p. 105). Laura Wright examines how, in U.S. discourse,

vegan identity is popularly constituted as privileged, liberal, and white, and points out that whilst celebrities have raised public awareness of veganism, it has been divorced from animal advocacy and celebrity bodies have been widely used to market veganism to the public as a weight loss diet (Wright 2015, pp. 133–135). These arguments about celebrity veganism attest to the importance of celebrities as mediating figures and part of the cultural politics of, what Josée Johnston and Michael K. Goodman refer to as, the ‘foodscape’ (Johnston and Goodman 2015, p. 210). In their discussion of ‘food celebrities’ Johnston and Goodman argue that such figures define, frame and mediate ‘the grammars of good food’ (Johnston and Goodman 2015, p. 211): They tell us what to eat, are aspirational, authentic, accessible, and inspire ‘practices of personal empowerment around food, health and choice’ (p.215). In their discussion, Johnston and Goodman include vegan animal advocates as ‘politicized food celebrities’ who frame what it means to be a ‘good food citizen’; an identity that is played out in the choice and consumption of morally ‘correct’ foods (Johnston and Goodman 2015, p. 211).

As well as health, veganism has more recently become strongly connected to debates about climate change where scientific evidence of the relationship between personal food choices and their impact on the environment has been discussed in news media, films (for example, *Cowspiracy*, 2014; *Meat the Truth*, 2007) and television (*Meat: A Threat to Our Planet*, 2019). If celebrity animal rights and vegan activism have had little attention in recent scholarship, the same cannot be said for celebrity climate change activism (see for example: Anderson 2011, Goodman and Littler 2013, Doyle *et al.* 2017, Park 2019, Abidin *et al.* 2020). Studies of environmental advocacy, particularly in relation to climate change, raise important questions about who counts as a celebrity activist (Anderson 2011). McCurdy makes the point that while celebrities can be activists, ‘activist waters have become increasingly muddied with the term expanding as an adjective to describe the campaigning work of celebrities’ (McCurdy 2013, p. 314). In a discussion of celebrity taxonomies McCurdy (2013) proposes instead two types of celebrity activist: ‘celebrity activists [...] – individuals who use their celebrity status to undertake activism’ and the ‘celebrity activist [who] is loosely defined as an individual who gains a prominent or notorious status in news media as a result of his or her activism’ (2013, p. 311). McCurdy highlights the question of authenticity and the legitimacy of identifying as an activist, a point which is particularly important in the case of Phoenix and others who present themselves as activists and take part in actions and public demonstrations with non-celebrities. In these cases, celebrity activism is often viewed with suspicion by audiences who question whether actions are merely a public relation stunt or lacking in authenticity due to the celebrity, by virtue of their status, being too far removed from the realities of the non-celebrity world to make the action meaningful (Parkinson *et al.* 2019). Despite levels of public scepticism about their activism, celebrities’ actions are perceived to have influence in the public sphere. Acting as cultural intermediaries, the role of the celebrity activist is therefore intrinsically bound up with the issue of accountability for the messages they promote. In their work, Huliaras and Tzifakis (2010) examine the growth of celebrity activism in world politics, arguing that while celebrities can be useful for raising awareness and – to an extent – exerting ‘some pressure on international actors’ to review policy, they are not responsible for the messages themselves. In his examination of the recent rise of celebrity advocates and their political function, Dan Brockington explores the two-way relationship and benefits for both celebrity and organisation that arise from

contemporary celebrity advocacy. Brockington argues that celebrity advocacy is a resource that can be used to popularise charities and politicians and in turn the association with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or policymakers lends gravitas to the celebrity (2014, p.11–12). Crucially, Brockington proposes that we must understand the authenticity of celebrity advocacy as ‘constructed and performed’ (p.11). The construction of authentic advocacy relies, he proposes, on four sources: Expert or experiential authority; affinity with others; empathy; and sympathy (2014, p.106). Brockington argues that these forms of authenticity are resources that can be drawn upon and performed in celebrity advocacy (p.107). ‘Authenticity’ he contests ‘is not some outpouring of a true inner-self.’ Instead ‘authenticity can only be recognised as such by virtue of its being effectively *performed* (108, italics in original).

### Acceptance speech activism

Celebrities who use their status to undertake activism do so in many ways; mainly through endorsement of charities, by using interviews, awards ceremonies and other high-profile events as opportunities to call attention to causes or by taking part in public actions with groups of non-celebrity activists. Of these, awards acceptance speeches offer especially important opportunities for celebrity activists to promote causes for four reasons: such events guarantee large audiences; the speeches are mediatised performances that stress the event’s liveness; by virtue of the award, the celebrity is already positioned as a special cultural intermediary; and, celebrities are expected to deliver a speech that represents an authentic self or, as Brockington proposes, an effective performance of authenticity. We refer to activism that is undertaken in this way as acceptance speech activism.

The Academy Awards – the pinnacle of the film industry awards season – is arguably the most significant platform for acceptance speech activism and has a long history of politicised speeches. For example, in 1973 Marlon Brando won an Academy Award for his role in *The Godfather* (1972). Brando boycotted the ceremony, sending in his place Sacheen Littlefeather, a Native American activist, who took to the stage to protest the stereotyping of Native American characters in film and the U.S. government’s failure to honour the treaties it had made with Native American nations. Receiving the Best Supporting Actress award in 1978 Vanessa Redgrave used the conclusion of her speech to criticise the actions of the Jewish Defence League. At the 1993 Academy Awards Richard Gere presented the award for Best Art Direction and used his time on stage to call for the Chinese President, Deng Xiaoping, to withdraw Chinese troops in Tibet, accusing the Chinese government of violating human rights. The same year, Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins presented the award for Best Film Editing and used the opportunity to focus attention on 266 Haitians being held in Guantanamo Bay who were being denied access to the U.S. due to their HIV status. In 2003, Michael Moore received the Academy Award for *Bowling For Columbine* (2002) and was booed by the audience when he openly condemned President George W Bush and US involvement in the Iraq War.

Racial and gender inequality have also been highlighted during Oscar ceremonies. The 2016 awards were dominated by the issue of racial exclusion when, in response to all the major award nominees being white, the hashtag campaign #OscarsSoWhite was established and celebrities boycotted the ceremonies and addressed the inclusion deficit in

their speeches. Issues of gender inequality were brought to the fore by Patricia Arquette in 2015 during her acceptance speech for Best Supporting Actress and by Frances McDormand in 2018 during her acceptance speech for Best Actress. The 2018 Academy Awards took place just months after the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment gained significant traction in the public sphere and during the Time's Up campaign. Time's Up pins were worn by many of the stars and the performance of the Best Song nomination, *Stand For Something* featured the founder of #MeToo, Tarana Burke and civil rights activist Dolores Huerta. As these examples illustrate, the Academy Awards are regularly used by celebrities and celebrity activists as opportunities to spotlight causes that they are passionate about and acceptance speech activism can be understood as a form of cultural documentation of the issues that impact both the film industry and wider society.

While the Academy Awards represent an important platform for celebrity activism, it is by no means the only notable event in an industry awards season calendar which runs from November to March. As well as the Oscars, the Golden Globes, the Critics' Choice Awards, the Screen Actors Guild Awards and the British Film and Television Awards (BAFTAs) are all significant events that receive international media coverage. Each of these offers a potential platform for celebrity activists to perform acceptance speech activism. If an actor or filmmaker wins multiple awards or awards in different ceremonies, their media coverage and opportunities to perform acceptance speech activism are also multiplied. This was the case for Joaquin Phoenix in the 2020 awards season.

Joaquin Phoenix: vegan activist and star persona

Joaquin Phoenix's vegan celebrity activism in the media is complex and multifaceted and involves the duality of his presentation as a celebrity on the one hand and as an activist on the other. Phoenix's presentation as an activist is much publicised. He partakes in 'real' activism, joining 'normal people' on marches and in protests. In the months prior to his Academy Award win Phoenix led an Animal Equality protest in London (Guardian Film 2020), attended an event for Extinction Rebellion in Los Angeles, was arrested at Jane Fonda's weekly demonstration – so-called Fire-drill Fridays – and left the Screen Actors Guild Awards to attend a pig vigil (Baum 2020). Phoenix's actions prompted *The Hollywood Reporter* to suggest that the actor had 'paired his Oscars pursuit with animal rights and climate change activism', a pursuit they coined as 'veganizing' the awards season 'behind the scenes'; 'not many contenders have so closely wed promotional duties with radical activism' (Baum 2020). As a vegan activist, then, Phoenix appears to present as a leader and someone willing to utilise their celebrity status and privilege to put animals first.

As a celebrity however, Phoenix presents as being at odds with certain cultural expectations and norms of celebrity behaviour. He has been a celebrity since childhood and has had a complicated relationship with the media, which began with the coverage of his older brother – River Phoenix's – overdose in 1993. Phoenix's media reticence complicates not only his role as a celebrity but also his role as a celebrity activist. The concept of celebrity inextricably links the known with the unknown, the familiar with the unfamiliar. Gitlin (2001, p. 22) describes celebrities as a 'familiar stranger'; celebrities are familiar because their public – and often private – life is exposed in the media, and stranger because they must remain unknown. According to Turner (2004, p. 3) the contemporary conditions of celebrity include being 'highly visible through the media' and he suggests

that their 'private life will attract greater interest than their public life'. An article in the *New York Times* addressed the contradiction of Phoenix's celebrity, commenting on his support for charities; 'but how would anyone know this, since he has no social-media presence (no Facebook, no Instagram, no Twitter) to connect with followers and inspire them? It seems indicative of Phoenix himself; extremely passionate but unconcerned with the reality, the tangible facts, of what he does and who he is' (Ellis 2017). The article reinforces the notion that a social media presence is crucial to an authentic form of celebrity activism which requires the celebrity to self-promote their activities through specific channels and act as a role model or inspiration for their followers. Phoenix's activism is, by comparison, private, to the extent that he does not publicise his plans or activities. Due to his well-known reluctance to engage with fans via social media, Phoenix's participation in public demonstrations and actions is therefore constructed in the *New York Times* article as being unusual, different, and detached from the realities of 'normal' celebrity activism. As such, his animal rights activism complicates the boundaries between private life and celebrity life.

Phoenix's star persona, however, is inseparable from what Kavka (2021) refers to as a 'deformist masculinity', an identity that his role in *Joker* further concretised (p.30). In *Joker*, Phoenix's character is a psychopath but instead of serving up mass murder without explanation for his actions, the narrative is an origin story that uncovers why Arthur Fleck became the Joker. The character is re-told as tortured and misunderstood and, for some critics, *Joker* offered a problematic excuse for toxic masculinity. The actor's 'loner roles have' argues Kavka 'plumbed the depths of masculine alienation, rage, and malaise' (2021, p.31). Phoenix is well-known for his commitment to a role, transforming his body, losing weight, altering his posture; 'a deformist masculinity which carefully disassembles the conventions of manhood with no guarantee that it can ever be put back together again' (Kavka 2021, p. 35). Phoenix is also known for rejecting normative behaviours and refusing to adhere to the presentational expectations of celebrity culture (Peberdy 2019, p. 564).

Taking his star image into account, Phoenix's public desire for privacy serves to reinforce the identity of the introspective loner, self-alienating, socially marginalised, and a vulnerable masculinity. Moreover, Phoenix's celebrity vegan advocacy problematises the norms of heterosexual masculinity which mandates meat as essential.

Whilst dietary control and regulation has been mainly focussed on the management of female bodies, in recent years attention has been paid to the nonnormative dietary choices of men and their role in a perceived crisis of white heterosexual masculinity (Wright 2015, p. 108). Accompanying this cultural shift has been the emergence of the 'hegan' identity; an ultramasculine vegan, often an elite athlete, whose plant-based dietary choices are defended instead as a means to acquire greater strength, health, fitness, and sexual prowess (Wright 2015, p. 144, Giraud 2021, p. 149). This version of masculinity reframes the vegan health and diet discourse more commonly associated with feminised food practices, and instead associates it with alpha males, often with political or economic capital, who have elected to follow a healthy lifestyle and rejected the dietary norms of meat-eating linked to obesity and heart disease (Wright 2015, p. 126). In mainstream media, the 'hegan' has proved to be a more acceptable vegan identity. It relies, however, on divorcing vegan practices from animal advocacy and aligning plant-based diets with ultramasculine norms. In contrast, the stereotype of the weak 'hippie' vegan serves to reinforce hegemonic masculine ideals where meat is strongly tied to notion of strength,

vitality, and manliness. We argue that Phoenix's performance of authenticity as a food celebrity involved in vegan advocacy, and his star persona associated with socially marginalised and vulnerable masculinity, complicate both of these categorisations, something which is reflected in the ambivalent critical reception of his Oscar speech, which will be discussed later. Instead, Phoenix presents a vegan activist identity, which is intrinsically tied to animal advocacy as a means of masculine redemption. In her study of male vegan activist-influencers, Catherine Oliver has also noted a tendency towards 'the redemption narrative' of veganism which she suggests is twofold: 'first, representing veganism as saving men from a life of violence [...] and secondly in protecting hegemonic masculinity by glorifying strength and virility' (Oliver 2021a, p. 2). In Oliver's study, the redemption narrative revolves around men exposing their historical meat eating as bad behaviours that are contrasted with the morality of veganism represented in healthy and virtuous bodies (p.7). We propose that redemption narratives take multiple forms and in the case of Phoenix's Oscar speech, the performance of authentic advocacy necessarily relies on the masculine redemption narrative to make his message relatable whilst at the same time his star persona- the socially marginalised introvert who has complete control over his vegan body which can be reshaped for each onscreen performance – complicates a hegemonic masculinity that both require and resist redemption.

### *Oscars speech*

Phoenix won accolades in the Best Actor categories across all the major film awards and utilised each event to draw attention to various causes. Already an established vegan celebrity activist having acted as an ambassador for PETA, Phoenix had previously spoken out against the meat and dairy industry and wool farming. In the lead-up to and throughout the awards season, Phoenix spoke about and took part in activist activities, including public protests and marches, consciously and purposefully making use of his media attention both at and around the awards ceremonies. At the Golden Globes, Phoenix praised the Associated Press for going plant-based and 'acknowledging the link between animal agriculture and climate change'. He called on his peers to 'take responsibility' and 'make sacrifices' pointing out that 'We don't have to take private jets to Palm Springs for the awards'. At the Critic's Choice Awards, Phoenix again, during his speech, praised the hosts for serving plant-based food. Phoenix's speech at the BAFTAs took aim at the 'systemic racism' inherent to the film industry opining 'I think that it is the obligation of the people that have created and perpetuate and benefit from a system of oppression to be the ones that dismantle it.' And finally, in his acceptance speech at the Academy Awards, Phoenix used his platform to perform vegan activism by addressing the cruelty of the meat and dairy industry saying 'I think that when we use love and compassion as our guiding principles, we can create, develop and implement systems of change that are beneficial to all sentient beings and to the environment.'<sup>2</sup>

The responses to Joaquin Phoenix's Academy Award speech offer interesting insights into how celebrity activists and vegan advocacy is managed within mainstream culture. What was most noticeable from critical responses in the trade press and mainstream media was that, despite greater visibility and awareness of vegan practices within popular culture, when aligned with animal rights, veganism remains a controversial issue. Many of the criticisms of Phoenix's remarks were focused on his views about animal rights. Davis



(2010) suggests that the problem with celebrity inspired campaigns is not the celebrity, but rather the construction of the issue for which the celebrity is campaigning. Similarly, we argue that the reception of Phoenix's speech was shaped primarily by his alignment of animal rights with veganism, a position which remains contentious within the cultural imagination. A 2018 study of non-vegans perceptions of veganism (rather than vegans) revealed that there were strong associations between veganism and words such as 'environmental', 'ethical' and 'compassionate' as well as derogatory terms such as 'restrictive', 'trendy', 'difficult' and 'extreme' (Parkinson *et al.* 2019, p. 50). In the same study, a majority of study participants regarded a vegan diet as either difficult or very difficult to sustain and when non-vegans were invited to describe vegans in their own terms, words such as 'self-righteous', 'preachy' and 'overbearing' were most commonly used (Parkinson *et al.* 2019, pp. 45–51).

The responses to Phoenix's speech show an interesting correlation with the findings of Parkinson *et al.* which suggest that meanings associated with veganism are mixed and not necessarily always negative. Thirteen of the 37 articles analysed for this study were broadly negative with the remaining 24 articles adopting either a positive or broadly neutral position. However, it is important to note that six of the 24 positive and neutral articles did not mention the animal rights or vegan messages in Phoenix's speech and four of these six focused solely on the actor's comments about his brother, River Phoenix.

The pseudo-religious associations noted in the Parkinson *et al.* study were evident in press coverage of Phoenix's speech which also referenced the white, liberal privilege and the perceived crisis in masculinity that have been associated with veganism (Wright 2015, Giraud 2021). These included descriptions of Phoenix as a 'white male saviour', 'not quite Hollywood's messiah' and 'definitely more Jesus than Joker'. Other pejorative terms used included describing the actor as a 'poster boy for male guilt', 'street bum', 'eccentric', 'controversial' and 'out-of-his mind'. Twelve of the 37 articles described his delivery as 'emotional' while the speech was referred to variously as 'a rant', 'a plea' and described variously as 'political', 'bizarre', 'baffling', 'uninformed', and 'unnecessary'. Indeed, the press uniformly praised the emotion in Phoenix's speech when he spoke about his brother but admonished the emotive nature of his comments about animal rights.

In press coverage of Phoenix's speech, the most reported reference to animal rights were the comments on the artificial insemination of a cow. Specifically, in his speech Phoenix said: 'We feel entitled to artificially inseminate a cow and then steal her baby, even though her cries of anguish are unmistakable. Then, we take her milk that's intended for her calf, and we put it in our coffee and cereal'. Twenty-five of the 37 press articles analysed for this study specifically mentioned this part of the speech either via a direct quote or paraphrase. Phoenix's inclusion of the treatment of cows in dairy farming was particularly significant for a number of reasons. First, the exclusion of dairy from a diet marks out one significant difference between vegans and vegetarians and therefore Phoenix's criticism of dairy implicitly aligns him with veganism rather than vegetarianism without him having to use the word vegan. Indeed, throughout his awards speech Phoenix avoided direct reference to vegan or veganism instead using the term 'plant-based' to refer to the food served at the Golden Globes and Critic's Choice Awards. Second, it has been usual for vegan campaigns to focus on the exploitation and deaths of animals for the purposes of meat production within the animal-industrial complex. While there have been an increasing number of pro-vegan campaigns targeting dairy in

recent years, it nonetheless remains less visible as a campaign theme compared with those that focus on animals as meat. Phoenix's summary of the cruelty of milk production would therefore be less familiar to audiences than criticisms of meat production. Third, the parallels between human and bovine are emphasised through use of the term 'insemination', 'baby' and reference to the biological process of lactation. Phoenix described how the parental bond is broken through human intervention (stealing the baby), and the resulting emotional response of the mother (cries of anguish). Fourth, he then highlighted the indifference with which the cow and calf's predicament is treated by drawing attention to the ubiquity of cows' milk and its uses. Furthermore, by using the plural nominative 'we' and the possessive 'our', Phoenix emphasises the general complicity and collective responsibility of the audience. In this well-crafted speech, Phoenix combines notions of entitlement, forced insemination, theft of a child, and a mother's suffering.

This elicited a powerful response from commentators, which was often negative. Referred to as a 'graphic description', some critics specifically called out this inclusion as variants of inappropriate or bizarre. In the UK, *The Independent* (Hall 2020) suggested that the example of cow insemination was a 'galling juxtaposition' with the other causes he mentioned;

to speak of the injustices of racism, of the experiences of people of colour whose history is steeped in slavery, then to discuss women, whose rights to bodily autonomy are still being challenged by anti-abortion laws across the States, and to mention queer rights, when members of the gay community have been beaten, criminalised and banned from marrying their partners — to utter these causes in the same breath as milking cows really only highlights Phoenix's already startlingly obvious white male privilege.

The *Independent* article concluded, "here's a tip for any straight white men wanting to stand with the gay community, women and people of colour: Don't jump to compare marginalised groups to bovine animals. It sends rather the wrong message' (Hall 2020). In the US, the *Spectator* (Slater 2020) referred to 'the cow bit' as an 'outrageous conflation . . . of racism and homophobia with the treatment of livestock', while *Vox* (Romano 2020) described it as a 'stream-of-consciousness rant about cows'. In *The Washington Examiner* (McGhee White 2020) Phoenix's 'rant about cow insemination' was labelled 'unnecessary and even uninformed' as the author drew on personal experiences of dairy farmers as 'hardworking' individuals who do not deserve accusations of 'neglect and abuse'. In perhaps the most surprising response, trade magazine *CinemaBlend* (El-Mahmoud 2020) chose to spotlight a response from The National Milk Producers Federation, which unsurprisingly accused Phoenix of misinformation and simultaneously promoted the health and economic benefits of milk products.

Six articles referenced and specifically problematised Phoenix's perceived amalgamation of human and animal issues (Devries 2020, Hall 2020, Harris 2020, Romano 2020, Rose 2020, Slater 2020). In his speech Phoenix said; 'I think, whether we're talking about gender inequality or racism or queer rights or indigenous rights or animal rights, we're talking about the fight against injustice. We're talking about the fight against the belief that one nation, one people, one race, one gender or one species has the right to dominate, control and use and exploit another with impunity'. In doing so, Phoenix presented a problematic form of intersectionalism that troubled his critics. The *Spectator* opined 'leaving aside the

outrageous conflation here of racism and homophobia with the treatment of livestock, the speech was more than anything unintentionally comical, in a way Hollywood sermonizing so often is' (Slater 2020) and *Vulture* wrote; 'Nooooo don't equate veganism with anti-racism – these issues are fundamentally different!' (Harris 2020). The criticisms of Phoenix's speech objected to a perceived conflation of human and animal oppressions and likening of human social groups with animal species. Phoenix's comments can be characterised as anti-speciesist (Singer 1975), a position often aligned with ethical veganism and some forms of animal rights. Phoenix's claims of shared injustices proffered uncomfortable ideas about how networks of oppression function and were presented in press articles as a series of ideological tensions that could be resolved by recourse to humour. Phoenix was represented in these accounts as a comical character and a target for media ridicule, his statements being regarded as evidence of an inability to comprehend the complexities of social injustice.

In his speech, Phoenix referred to the power that actors possess to use their position to give a 'voice to the voiceless'. This notion was picked up by many of the media outlets who included the direct quote (Alexander 2020, Amatulli 2020, BBC News 2020, Deninno 2020, Drury 2020, El-Mahmoud 2020, Gilbert 2020, McGhee White 2020, 2020, Murphy and Vary 2020, Nolfi 2020, Romano 2020, Rosseinsky 2020, Settembre 2020, Spargo 2020). However, of the 37 press articles that were reviewed for this paper, five did not mention animals or veganism at all (Alexander 2020, Boucher 2020, Boulton 2020, Devries 2020, Spargo 2020). This editing of the animals from the speech effectively made Phoenix, the activist, voiceless giving space only to the content that represented Phoenix as a celebrity. In addition, much of the remaining negative press coverage replayed long-held associations between support for animal rights and the feminisation of sentiment; a coupling that has been routinely placed in opposition to the privileging of masculine rationality over emotional responses towards animals (Molloy 2011, Parkinson *et al.* 2019). In a study of women in the anti-vivisection movement, the representation of women's emotional responses to animal suffering was repeatedly characterised as irrational, an argument that normalised their exclusion from public debate about animals (Molloy 2011, p. 29). Press coverage of Phoenix's response to animal suffering reinforced the link between emotion and mental instability. As such, Phoenix's speech was routinely described as 'emotional', (Amatulli 2020, Boulton 2020, El-Mahmoud 2020, Gonzalez 2020, McCarthy 2020, Murphy and Vary 2020, Pometsey 2020, Slater 2020, Spargo 2020, Yahr and Rao 2020), the term coupled with variants of 'irrational': 'eccentric' and 'overwhelmed' (Slater 2020), 'out-of-his-mind' (Deninno 2020), 'questionable' (McGhee White 2020) and a 'tirade' (Settembre 2020). Phoenix was described by some outlets as 'tearful' (Piña 2020, Amatulli 2020; Telegraph Reporters 2020) or 'holding back tears' (Carpenter 2020, Settembre 2020, Spargo 2020). His delivery and the content of the speech was described as 'rambling' (Associated Press 2020, Oleksinski 2020, Spargo 2020), and a 'rant' (McGhee White 2020, Oleksinski 2020, Woodcock 2020). In this way, Phoenix's response to animal suffering replayed well-worn associations between emotion and irrationality and reinforced the othering of the actor's position.

Edwards (2013) notes the importance of investigating the gendering of celebrity, pointing out that the mediatised filter through which we look at and engage with celebrities is itself subjectively gendered. Where Phoenix was criticised for his position, hegemonic norms of masculinity that discount emotion when it is linked to animal

advocacy were used to undermine the actor as a vegan celebrity activist. Spring-Serenity Duvall (2015) considers the role of 'masculine interventions' and transnationalism with regard to celebrity activism. Taking as a case study a comparison of Sean Penn and Wyclef Jean's reactions to the Haiti disaster, Duvall (2015, pp. 2–3) considers the way in which the two celebrities were 'constructed as binary opposite masculinities'. This reinforcement of oppositional male archetypes is, according to Duvall, utilised to 'legitimise and privilege masculine activism', so long as it does not undermine western hegemony. The gendering of celebrity thus has implications for questions of legitimacy and impact. In respect to Phoenix's role as a celebrity activist, his veganism and position on animal rights challenge ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Constructing Phoenix's response to animal suffering as emotional and irrational can be understood therefore as the management of a challenge to hegemonic masculinity by the press discourse and a resulting delegitimization of his activism due to gendered norms of male celebrity behaviour. However, it is important to recognise that such responses to Phoenix's speech were present in only 35% of the articles analysed for this study. The remaining 24 articles were broadly positive or neutral and of these 75% referred to the actor's vegan advocacy. Viewed through the lens of authenticity, it is to this ambivalence in the critical reception of Phoenix's vegan advocacy that the discussion now turns.

## Authenticity

The issue of authenticity is often addressed in academic work on celebrities and celebrity activists. Specifically, this refers to whether or not the words or actions of a celebrity are considered honest, which often comes down to questions of whether or to what extent our interaction with the celebrity is mediated, whether or to what extent that celebrity is performing (or acting), and the extent to which a celebrity's privilege plays into their role as activist. Chloe Preece argues that authenticity is key to celebrity brand narratives and 'derived from a unique vision of the world which is amplified, reproduced and co-created to create emotional engagement' (Preece 2015, p. 1). Chris Rojek (2001, p. 12) notes that 'social distance is the precondition of both celebrity and notoriety'. Fuqua (2011) builds on this by suggesting that the social distance that usually characterises celebrities can be consciously manipulated in order to deconstruct or reframe star image. Direct address is one approach that enables or aids authentic communication.

In her work on celebrity activism, Joy Fuqua (2011) explores the case of Brad Pitt and his role in the Make It Right Foundation and in doing so establishes his brand as a 'celebrity citizen', a term she uses to describe how 'Pitt's image – an amalgam of on- and off-screen roles – offers what seems to be a conscious deconstruction of a conventional star identity that depends upon distance and inaccessibility for meaning' (2011, p. 92). The same can be said of Joaquin Phoenix whereby in lieu of a presence on social media, acceptance speeches offer a platform for direct, unfiltered address. While acceptance speeches may offer the opportunity for direct address, this does not guarantee that the celebrity's claims will be judged to be authentic or authoritative. As a study of non-vegans' perceptions of vegan celebrities noted, celebrity endorsement of veganism is often regarded with cynicism by audiences who either doubt the sincerity of the claims, feel that celebrity vegan statements were trivial or think that veganism is something enabled by the economic privilege afforded to celebrities (Parkinson *et al.* 2019, pp. 65–

65). Eva Giraud also calls attention to the dual positionality of veganism as both ‘embodied resistance’ to normative consumption practices and ‘individualistic “ethical lifestyle” with elitist tendencies’ (Giraud 2019, p. 88). The relationship between Phoenix’s privilege, veganism, and authenticity was brought into question in press reports in multiple ways. *The Independent* (Hall 2020) described his ‘startlingly obvious white male privilege’. *The Washington Examiner* opined, ‘If anything, Phoenix’s rant revealed that he, too, has fallen into the unavoidable selfishness Hollywood spreads’ (McGhee White 2020). Perhaps most vehement on the subject was the article in *Spectator* (Slater 2020) which suggested, ‘nothing better sums up how detached the Hollywood lot is from ordinary people than a millionaire, holding a gold statuette, talking about the plight of dairy cows’ and blamed the ‘politicization of the awards’ on ‘a patronizing assumption on the liberal left that ordinary folk are so dazzled by celebrity, so open to their suggestion, that it is almost the duty of the rich and famous to preach the woke gospel, and thus help us shake our allegedly backward, selfish ways’. Such commentaries reveal that in Phoenix’s case his celebrity privilege was used to resolve challenges to cultural norms by conflating his economic advantages with ideological differences between celebrities and ‘real people’.

However, in Phoenix’s speech we also find all the sources that Brockington (2014) argues are necessary for performing authenticity. Phoenix offers expert authority in his account of the practices involved in dairy farming; a simplified but accurate description of what is required to produce milk for human consumption. He claims affinity with others in terms of our disconnection from the natural world, expresses empathy when he speaks about our shared fears of change, and sympathy when he talks about the cow’s cries of anguish. Emphasising both his fallibility and authenticity, Phoenix made a point of using his speech as a form of redemption narrative, characterising himself as ‘a scoundrel’, ‘selfish’, ‘cruel at times’, ‘hard to work with’ and ‘grateful’ for the second chances afforded him. Indeed, Phoenix made redemption a key theme of his speech saying that we are at our best ‘when we guide each other to redemption’. Phoenix’s identity as a food celebrity involved in animal advocacy is a balancing act, where the performance of authenticity must also be believable, charismatic, and charming (Johnston and Goodman 2015, p. 213). During his speech, the actor asks for forgiveness for what is, in part, an aspect of his star persona – the difficult, socially marginalised, misunderstood loner – whilst also asserting his identity as a progressive vegan concerned with matters of intersectional justice and a food celebrity who endorses what is morally good to eat and in doing so rejects the hegemonic norms of masculinity that are associated with animal products. Positive responses from the press included an article from the *Guardian* newspaper (Rose 2020) which referred to Phoenix as ‘Hollywood’s poster boy of progress’ and a *GQ* article which talked about the actor’s fight against injustice and indeed made a point of remarking that the actor had been involved in a ‘redemption tour of awards’ (Pometsey 2020). *The Atlantic* highlighted Phoenix’s authenticity by making comparisons between his star persona, reframed as a humble loner, and the artificiality of awards shows claiming that the speech was ‘an opportunity for an actor who’s deeply uncomfortable with the manufactured rigmarole of awards season to turn it into something he could stand, all without seeming too ungracious for the honours being festooned upon him’ (Gilbert 2020). A *Variety* article also focused on both the redemption aspect of the speech and Phoenix’s celebrity advocacy referring to his ‘impassioned speech that touched on racism, animal rights and his own ability to change’ (Murphy and Vary 2020). This press discourse runs counter to the negative coverage and, we propose, suggests

that Phoenix complicates the two dominant figures of the male vegan: the 'hegan' and the 'weak hippy'. Instead, the combination of his star persona and performance of vegan advocacy presents and popularises an emergent vegan identity which employs a narrative of redemption as a way to negotiate the tensions between hegemonic masculine norms and the feminisation of vegan practices.

## Conclusion

Despite vegan practices being more prevalent amongst women, the last five years has witnessed a growing number of male celebrities advocating for veganism, using their status and platforms to draw attention to links between meat and dairy production and consumption, environmental damage and human health and animal welfare concerns. As this article has highlighted, the link between veganism and health, and veganism and environmental sustainability have been broadly considered more palatable messages for mainstream audiences than the promotion of veganism for reasons of animal rights or animal ethics. Presenting what can therefore be regarded as the more challenging message about veganism and animal exploitation at the Oscars, this article's focus on press coverage of Joaquin Phoenix's acceptance speech draws attention to the ways in which mainstream discourses negotiate his celebrity activism through the lenses of gender and authenticity. There is evidence of a notable discomfort with Phoenix's veganism where it draws on posthuman intersectionality that acknowledged similarities in the asymmetries of power between human groups and humans and animals. Whilst critical reception of Phoenix's speech makes clear that his vegan advocacy remains in conflict with hegemonic masculine ideals, the positive and neutral responses that are notable across the press coverage suggest a more general ambivalence towards celebrity advocacy which we argue is connected to Phoenix's popularisation of a vegan masculine identity that employs a narrative of redemption. The success of celebrity activism rests in large part on the acceptance of the celebrity identity as coherent and authentic. Phoenix's presentation as an authentic vegan advocate relies not only on the performance of expert knowledge, affinity, empathy, and sympathy but on *his* redemption narrative where he characterises himself as difficult; a move that draws on his star persona as a marginalised loner. We argue that the general ambivalence towards Phoenix's speech reflects a shift in the contemporary performance of celebrity animal advocacy where the redemption narrative is part of an emergent vegan identity, which negotiates hegemonic masculine norms. Phoenix epitomises this negotiated redemptive masculinity through the combination of his star persona and identity as a celebrity food activist.

## Notes

1. 12 articles from mainstream UK news outlets, 18 articles from mainstream US news outlets and 7 articles from US film industry trade press.
2. This article, though it does take into consideration Phoenix's wider utilisation of his various award platforms, is focused on his speech at the Academy Awards and the reaction to it. The reason for this is two-fold: firstly, because this article is specifically concerned with *vegan* celebrity activism, and secondly because the Academy Awards represents the most significant platform for award speech activism.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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