12-14-2017

Breaking the Celluloid Ceiling

Kellie Ann Cassel

Grand Valley State University, casselk@mail.gvsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine/vol7/iss1/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cinesthesia by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
The world is in constant social flux. As a collective of human beings in the United States, we like to believe that we have been progressing forward when thinking about the issues of inclusivity and equality in the workplace. While there are many corporations that are helping qualified women break through the glass ceiling in order to rightfully prove they can lead and help grow a business, there is one major, 11 billion dollar per year business, that is often overlooked as far as these issues, and that is the film industry. Many people are under the false impression that the entertainment biz is incredibly inclusive, and while there may be a silver lining as far as diversity in portrayals we are seeing on screen, it is what goes on behind the camera that is most overlooked. The mass audience does not realize that only about 7% of larger budgeted films are written and directed by women (Kilday). It shouldn’t be a stretch to fathom this, since most moviegoers attend the theater to see their favorite stars on screen, not because they necessarily care who directed the film they’re watching. And though in recent years there have been a larger amount of films featuring strong female character leads, the fact remains that qualified female filmmakers have not been given equal opportunities in the industry. Film history has shown that women have had to prove their merit as a director with years of experience whereas many up and coming male filmmakers have been awarded million dollar opportunities based on one or two indie film or television credits.

In the 88 years we’ve celebrated the Academy Awards, of approximately 500 filmmakers that have been nominated for best director only four have been women, and only one has won. Kathryn Bigelow won the gold for directing *The Hurt Locker* (2009), and although she beat out
James Cameron and Quentin Tarantino, many cinemagoers have trouble naming any of her other films. And although many women have had their films nominated for best picture at the Oscars, as history shows, a best director nomination did not come paired with that honor. So, has it always been this way? Have female filmmakers always been marginalized and pushed behind the dominant male figure? Surprisingly, the answer is no. Hollywood is more male dominated today than it was 100 years ago. During the pre-sound era, women were especially popular on set, and many larger productions had female directors on call specifically to direct the female stars. To better understand the rise and fall of the female filmmaker in cinematic history, we’ll first review some notable women from film’s early period at the turn of the century, to gain some perspective on the issue.

In 1908, Thomas Edison won several camera patents that allowed him to standardize film length, per-foot pricing, and thus exemplify film production as a “technological view”. This new view altered the notion of what film was, from a dramatic art form to an industrial product. “This perspective worked against women’s progress into positions of authority, for it drew from the masculine meanings of scientific and mechanical expertise” (Mahar 44). This played a large part in deterring women from pursuing a career in film, even this early on in Hollywood. However, this was also the time women began their brief rise in the industry, and the first female director and producer emerged; Alice Guy Blaché. Blaché was especially unique because she didn’t begin as an actress, and made her mark on the studio system in France as a true pioneer whose films
critiqued the social systems of the world she lived in. She was considered a visionary and many “feminist film historians name her the world’s first story-director; period” (Mitchell). Despite her credentials, you won’t learn about her in a film history class.

Similarly, many cinema courses focus on the greats like D.W. Griffith or Melies, and fail to mention jack of all trades filmmakers like Lois Weber, who was a silent film actress, producer, writer, and director. Considered one of the first auteurs ever, Weber produced films that became social commentaries for the early 1900’s. Both Weber and Blaché faced censorship over their films, but uniquely, in their heyday, they were both able to get a pass on certain films because of the “delicate way” they handled scenes that included violence or more morbid elements. Weber was often praised for her finesse and authenticity when directing films about motherhood, prejudice, and “the generational conflict of the era” (Mahar 91).

A final feminine enigma who deserves an honorable mention is Grace Haskins, whose achievements are only highlighted, in depth, in the pages of scholarly film history books. She is a presence the internet seems to have never heard of. Haskins is more than another name on the list as early female filmmakers, and her achievements in the early twenties would have made her an icon today. At the young age of 22, in 1923, Haskins produced and directed her feature film *Just Like A Woman*, and she did it all outside of the studio system, by obtaining funding through private investors she pitched her idea to. Haskins had to get on her feet and find someone to believe in her, in person, without the modern promotional power of today’s social media.

These notable leading ladies were not the only women during this time to make their mark. Most female directors wrote their own films, and before 1925, over half of the total films produced had a female writer. Despite this golden age of feminine cinema, by the end of the
1920’s female filmmakers all but disappeared, and while there isn’t one catastrophic event that wiped them all out, there are several reasons for the sudden change. According to film scholar Karen Ward Mahar, “female filmmakers became marginalized as the film industry became a wall street defined vertically integrated big business.” It was no coincidence that female filmmakers became obsolete around the same time the sound era arrived, and Hollywood became the film industry, a corporation of sorts that began pumping out white-telephone films for major profit, instead of focusing on social issues. As filmmaking became a business, men deemed women too “gentle” to handle such a venture. Critics who once praised the depth and creativity of filmmakers like Blaché and Weber, now considered the content of thief films “dangerous” or impressionable, and it was wrong for the youth to get used to women in a position of power, even as film directors. Exclusive clubs like the Motion Picture Directors Association (MPDA) grew in popularity. Such fraternities were exclusive to men and the only woman ever to be granted membership was Lois Weber; at the cost of breaking the rules of course. And to top it all off, male filmmakers began to push the melodrama, a genre which reinforced the societal norms of a woman’s place and illustrated the nuclear family.

Thus, for decades in the film industry, moviegoers either did not know or did not care about the gender inequality plaguing the workforce behind the camera. Only within recent years has there been a larger gathering of people calling to not only bring this issue to light but to help solve it. To convince those who do not see an error with the gender inequality in the film industry, reasons other than "it should be equal" must be presented to strengthen the evidence behind the argument for inclusion. To answer why it is important that females should have equal opportunities as filmmakers we must first look at what film is in itself. In simple terms, the
cinema is the art of moving pictures, but it is what we do with those images, and those stories, that makes it important and powerful. Like the motion pictures produced by the early female filmmakers discussed previously, film can present a social and cultural representation of the world we live in, whether that be through fictional narratives or non-fiction documentaries. Film has the power to connect audiences across the globe to evoke emotions, ideas, and change. The global population is about fifty-fifty, half male, half female. If film is a representation of Earth and this equal population split, and only 7% of films being produced through the Hollywood system are made by women, then as an industry, we are clearly missing the mark.

By keeping female writers and directors out of the industry because the nurtured ideology that women cannot helm a production as large of a multi-million-dollar film, we are not only hurting the women trying to make a living doing something they love, but we are also hurting their audience. We consider the type of people who go to see feminine films niche, but this is not the case. With recent films featuring strong female lead characters, like The Hunger Games (Gary Ross, 2012), becoming incredibly popular, we are under the illusion that Hollywood is changing and being more inclusive, but this is not necessarily true. Most of the time, films like this are still written and directed by a man, and experienced female filmmakers who could have found an authentic connection to these leading lady characters were overlooked. Young children and teen females get inspiration from films, without even knowing it, and they view gender norms by what they see portrayed on screen. It’s important that women are given
opportunities to produce accurate and honest portrayals of girlhood, romance, and images of how women should be treated with respect. The same rule should go for films depicting minorities or marginalized groups.

With all those details in mind, it may seem bleak for women trying to make it big in the film industry. However, there is always a silver lining. Today there is a new crop of female filmmakers, setting the bar and paving the way for more women to join them. As of early 2017, Ava DuVernay became the first African American women to direct a film with a budget of over 100 million dollars, and Patty Jenkins is proving that women can, and want, to direct large-budgeted action films with the release of *Wonder Woman* (2017). Programs and nonprofit organizations like We Do It Together (WDIT) are working to help fund original ideas by women, and helping to create opportunities for those who may be wrongfully ignored. The change may take decades, but the potential for gender equality to grow in the film industry must start with the education of others that this is an issue in the first place. This call to action is not to push away male filmmakers from creating their craft, this is a call to work together, to push past the bounds of society and the social norms that women aren’t strong enough to help a film. It is time that both men and women receive equal treatment and consideration when pitching their films, and that women should not be overlooked all due to being stigmatized as unfit. All audiences deserve to be represented properly on screen, and that starts with those behind the camera.
Works Cited


