

HOLLYWOOD ILLIBERAL: THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY'S MISOGYNY AND SOCIETY'S BROKEN MIRROR

In a recent heated discussion I was told, "Hollywood



is liberal." That's bullshit, I said.

"But the themes they use in their stories—they're liberal," they rebutted. Again, bullshit.

The proof is in the numbers. Hollywood is a backward institution, the leadership and ownership of which are overwhelmingly white and male.

Entertainment looks as bad if not worse than most other industries in the U.S., when diversity measurements are compared. The entertainment industry in no way resembles the public to which it sells its wares, whether in front or behind the camera.

For women, a majority of the population at 51%, the numbers are grim:

- *Males outnumber females 3 to 1 in family films. In contrast, females comprise just over 50% of the population in*

the United States. Even more staggering is the fact that this ratio, as seen in family films, is the same as it was in 1946.

- Females are almost four times as likely as males to be shown in sexy attire. Further, females are nearly twice as likely as males to be shown with a diminutive waistline. Generally unrealistic figures are more likely to be seen on females than males.
- **Females are also underrepresented behind the camera. Across 1,565 content creators, only 7% of directors, 13% of writers, and 20% of producers are female. This translates to 4.8 males working behind-the-scenes to every one female.**
- From 2006 to 2009, not one female character was depicted in G-rated family films in the field of medical science, as a business leader, in law, or politics. In these

films, 80.5% of all working characters are male and 19.5% are female, which is a contrast to real world statistics, where women comprise 50% of the workforce.

[Source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media]

Boldface above is mine; the numbers are beyond absurd when it comes to female directors. The Directors' Guild of America has a folder (binder, if you'd rather) with the names of 1200 female directors. The Director's List has collected the names of 1800 female directors, even larger than the DGA's binder full of women.

But the number of women contracted by the major studios to make films is in the single digits?

That's far from liberal by any stretch of the imagination.

The lack of women behind the camera distorts what the public sees before it:

- *Only 15% of all clearly identifiable protagonists were female (up 4 percentage points from 2011, down one percentage point from 2002), 71% are male, and 14% are male/female ensembles (see Figure 1).*
- *Females comprised 29% of major characters,*

down 4 percentage points from 2011, but up 2 percentage points from 2002.

- *Females accounted for 30% of all speaking characters (includes major and minor characters) in 2013, down 3 percentage points from 2011, but up 2 percentage points from 2002.*

[Source: It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: On-Screen Representations of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2013, Martha M. Lauzen, PhD, Center of the Study of women in Television and Film, San Diego State University (White paper, PDF)]

Nor does it appear to matter whether film or television, when looking at the composition of directors. White men hold nearly identical percentages of directors' slots in either media.— roughly 70%.

What does a crowd with realistic, or even equitable representation of women look like? We can't rely on Hollywood to show us, based on this data. Our societal mirror is broken, at the expense of our mothers, daughters, sisters, ourselves.

What's particularly egregious is that even the women in Hollywood have a problem; they suffer from internalized oppression, unwilling to change the system for fear of rocking the boat and reaping even worse results.

Granted, there's anecdotal evidence Hollywood has suppressed women who have the chutzpah to ask for better, even to the point of walking away from an enormously profitable franchise

opportunity in order to avoid giving in – and even when a woman asking carefully couched her approach.

In spite of repeated studies showing little-to-no progress, and in some cases regression of gender diversity, not enough brave souls demand improvement from the system.

Take for example the DGA's meeting this past Saturday, where female members had an opportunity to ask its leadership to measure gender equity in addition to minority representation, versus the current practice of lumping together both racial/ethnic measurements with gender diversity.

The DGA voted it down, including many voting female members. A Storify of the meeting and the proposal, live-tweeted by director Lexi Alexander, can be found at this link.

Incredibly, sources say some of the women, who asked the DGA to measure gender equity in addition to minority diversity, have now been accused of racism. This makes no sense whatsoever, given data from studies which show that minority directors are far more often represented than female directors. (See page 6, Sec. 5, 2014 Hollywood Diversity Report [PDF], Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA)

How does this continued misogyny hurt us, the media viewing public, you might ask?

- It's difficult to envision a different outcome for yourself if you're a girl. Stereotypes of computer programmers and systems engineers offered in front of the camera become fact over time, as employment data shows – yet women constituted the earliest

programmers, and were then written out of history for a time. How often do young women see realistic models of themselves in a wide range of careers, including those in STEM? How often do they see role models on the other side of the lens, too?

- Women have been told to shut up for thousands of years, their concerns negated, their persons marginalized, as classicist academic Mary Beard shares from her research. The entertainment industry continues this systematic squelching of women in public by pointedly avoiding them in front and behind the camera. Is this why the voices of female whistleblowers like Bunny Greenhouse, Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski (ret), FBI agent Coleen Rowley, former Enron VP Sherron Watkins and so many others have not received adequate early attention? Or why female dissenters are so often pooh-poohed and marginalized, rather than treated as legitimate alternative voices, whose speech could save us in so many ways? Are they simply

ignored because society hasn't seen them portrayed or employed in visual media as anything but highly unusual exceptions to an unvoiced rule?

- And when women do appear, they are treated with kid gloves like rare objects. It is difficult to criticize them without appearing misogynistic. Hence director of *Zero Dark Thirty* Kathryn Bigelow as an exception in Hollywood does not receive pushback from her peers in the industry about her role in the "accidental" normalization of a war crime, having been used by the intelligence community to sanitize their torture by placing it beyond criticism. *It's just entertainment with a liberal theme, and she can't be criticized because misogyny!*
- It's also important to ask whether political leadership and policy outcomes are not also impacted, when we are not offered images consistently of women holding equity in representation. How much of the recent hyperbolic nonsensical criticism of

Hillary Clinton can be laid at Hollywood's door, for failing to show women in leadership more often in front and behind the camera, or for offering overwhelmingly white male images and leadership in the industry? It's not as if white male leadership did us any favors in the run up to the Iraq War, or the financial crash of 2008, but that's the devil we've known.

How much of the same over-the-top criticism Hillary Clinton during her husband's administration – beginning decades before she was ever elected as Senator, or appointed to Department of State – was due to white male Hollywood's failure to offer more diverse and complex images of motherhood and working women?

You can stop right there if you're going to point to Sony Pictures' Amy Pascal as an exception. She's another rare object, AND she's an example of conflicted internalized oppression. The leaked Sony emails offer concrete examples of her frequent inability to champion women filmmakers, as well as her role in suppressing women's compensation. But she's a woman! Sure – and who hired her, and who rewarded her oppressing other women? Sony's male management, of course, which failed to hold her and themselves to account when it comes to gender equity. Pascal would have continued to short women on compensation if Sony's emails had not been hacked and leaked.

What caps off this entire mess is the appearance of suppression by the DGA's leadership. There's been little to no obvious effort made to improve

gender equity by its national executive director, Jay D. Roth, who has held this role since 1995. Paris Barclay, elected to DGA's presidency in 2013, appears to lead diversity efforts in name only. There's been no real change since either man took on their current roles in DGA; the annual diversity reports look to be but a faint DGA makes at changing the status quo.

Worse, Roth is one of the highest paid labor leaders in the U.S. – yet the 1200 women in DGA's binder can't claim real representation for the dues they pay. (See 2005, 2012; for recent, see US Dept of Labor.)

Who are these men leading the DAG working for? The membership NOT in that binder? The white male-led studios?

They certainly have zero accountability to the movie-viewing public, of which a majority are women, and of which the fastest growing market segment is minority women.

What can we do, in the mean time, to increase pressure on Hollywood studios and the DGA alike, to increase the number of women in front of and behind the camera?

- Watch more films and television programs in which women are leads, and skip those in which women are just wallpaper, or used like disposable plot devices (ex: woman-in-the-fridge trope). Look for films passing the low-threshold Bechdel test.
- Watch more movies directed by women.
- Ask your streaming media provider like Netflix for more female-led and -

directed content. (Ex: 3-season mystery series *The Killing*, by showrunner Veena Sud and female co-lead Mireille Enos.)

- Invest more carefully; skip or sell stocks of media companies and funds containing these stocks, if the media companies are not making and reporting measurable increases in diversity in front of and behind the camera. And yes, being gender diverse makes money; think Disney's female-led and -directed *Frozen*, or female-directed *Selma* which made 255% of its budget, or female-led and -directed *Twilight*, of which the first film in saga made 516% of its budget. If these companies aren't seeking diversity, they're not doing their best by your investment dollars. Current major film studios: NYSE:TWX, NYSE:DIS, NASDAQ:CMCSA, NYSE:SNE, NASDAQ:VIA

Do take a look at Disney's stock in particular. Select the 5-year view of stock performance, and note carefully what happened after November 2013 – that's when *Frozen*, directed and written by Jennifer Lee and led by Kristin Bell, based on a storyline about sisterly love, released and

began to rack up a billion in revenues.

Yeah. That.

*[Graphic: mash-up, Matt Olson and Ryan Gilchrist
via Flickr]*