

Jumping Into an Orgy While Still Shaving Your Legs: On Women Filmmakers

We've all heard the latest appalling statistics regarding women in the film industry: according to a San Diego State University study, only 17% of directors, writers, executive producers, producers, editors, and cinematographers working on the top 250 grossing movies of 2014 were women. Despite the near parity of women and men receiving degrees from film schools, this statistic has remained virtually unchanged since the study began in 1998. Furthermore, in 2014 only 15% of the top grossing films featured female protagonists, and the dwindling opportunities for ageing actresses are well documented. The statistics for ethnic minorities are even worse.

In this context, the 2015 Oscar nominations were disappointing but not surprising. Ava DuVernay's *Selma* was nominated for best picture, the first black woman to receive this honor - some progress -- though she wasn't nominated for Best Director. Given that Julie Dash was the first black woman director to get a theatrical release in the USA in 1991 (for her film *Daughters of the Dust*), will we have to wait another 24 years before a black woman filmmaker actually wins an Oscar? As we head into 2015, the Academy Awards membership has confirmed that it is still a white man's world.

But it is also a big world, as the wonderfully informative *Celluloid Ceiling: Women Film Directors Breaking Through* makes clear: women directors in rising numbers are making movies far and wide. Edited by Gabrielle Kelly and Cheryl Robson, this collection of essays by journalists, critics, academics, and filmmakers delineates both geographically and theoretically the situation for women directors today, describing both their considerable successes and the challenges they face. We read about women filmmakers in North, Central, and South America, Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia, South East Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

Vast in scope, *Celluloid Ceiling* imparts abundant, fascinating information. For example, the silent era employed more women in the film industry than at any time since and paid them well. Women writers, producers, and directors were the norm and included, among many others, Frances Marion, Lillian Gish, Mabel Normand, Mary Pickford, Nell Shipman, Grace Cunard, Cleo Madison, Dorothy Arzner, Lois Weber (whose director's fee was significantly higher than D.W. Griffith's), and Alice Guy-Blaché, the first woman director and studio owner whose 25-year career produced over 1,000 films. But who has ever heard of them? Women's significant contribution to early cinema and the rise of Hollywood continues to be largely written out of

history (see [my column](#) on David Thompson's *The Big Screen*), resulting in a tremendous loss of role models for future female filmmakers and the women's stories comprised by these directors' work.

The many profiles of contemporary filmmakers range from the well known -- Kathryn Bigelow, Sofia Coppola, Jane Campion, Mira Nair, Nicole Holofcener -- to the soon to be known -- Gina Bythewood, Kelly Reichardt, Kasi Lemmons -- to the well known in their own countries -- Xu Jinglei (China), Zoya Akhtar (India), Claudia Llosa (Peru), Tata Amaral (Brazil), the Soska Sisters (Canada), Anne Mungai (Kenya) and so many more. A common theme throughout the collection is that many women producers and directors had highly successful careers as actors first, using their power, money, and influence to get projects off the ground. This is still true in Mexico, China, South and South East Asia, and, in the U.S., is exemplified by Barbara Streisand, Penny Marshall, Helen Hunt, Julie Duply, and most recently by Angelina Jolie and Reese Witherspoon.

An interview with Kathryn Bigelow, the only female director to win an Oscar (for *The Hurt Locker* in 2009), reveals her unconventional feminist approach, including her reticence to be known as a "woman" filmmaker. Like director Ida Lupino before her, she often explores social issues from a male perspective -- her films are sympathetic to men showing their psychological complexity and emotional range; the gaze is generally androgynous and uneroticized. She claims there is nothing inherently gender specific when making a film, "there is only just the filmmaker's approach."

Two excellent essays on African women directors note that African filmmaking, a post-colonial phenomenon, has emerged within a transnational context, many filmmakers having double and triple national identities. For example, Ethiopian director Salem Mekuria lives in Boston, Namibian filmmaker Bridget Pickering has a South African mother and was educated in the US, Zimbabwean Prudence Uriri now lives in Norway, and so on. Almost none of these women have only one national identity. Thus a cinema without borders has arisen where a director's national and gender identification are subordinate to his or her identity as filmmaker.

That said, Sarah Maldoror (born in 1938 in France to Guadeloupean parents and married to an Angolan), considered the mother of African cinema along with the Senegalese filmmaker Safi Faye, writes: "The African woman must be everywhere: on the screen, behind the camera, in the editing room, in every stage of the making of a film. She must be the one to talk about her problems." Faye urges African women to make films about their own stories which will, in part, address Western feminist misconceptions about African women: "It is always difficult for Europeans to see Africa, and its women, without taking sides and without bringing European notions of civilisation. Today we do a lot toward the emancipation of women. It is a subject of many of the films on our continent, but women are not as dependent, submissive or deprived of rights as one thinks."

The Iranian New Wave, spearheaded by the female poet Forugh Farrokhzad, has led to record numbers of film school graduates in Iran, many of them women: over the last twenty years, a higher percentage of women directors have made films there than in many Western countries.

In China, huge opportunities exist for female directors since under communism women and men were trained equally in the industry. Recently American director Dennie Gordon remade her 2003 romantic comedy *What a Girl Wants* at Shanghai's Chinawood Studios, claiming "in many ways I had more freedom in China than in America."

Outside of Hollywood there is a significant demand for films giving other perspectives, especially those of the marginalized. Women filmmakers worldwide, often overcoming significant hurdles to make their films, are inevitably the first to speak out against racism, sexism, and poverty, to expose the corrupt and to challenge the status quo. By contrast, white male Hollywood executives with the money to finance blockbusters and big budget films are emphatically not interested in seeing anything other than a fantasy of themselves reflected back off the big screen. Films made by women and female-driven films have consistently proven they can make the big bucks -- *Thelma and Louise*, *The Hurt Locker*, *Bridesmaids*, *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, *Frozen* and so many other game-changing films that, nevertheless, haven't changed the game. The bromance, from *Toy Story* to *The Lord of the Rings* to *Dumb and Dumber*, is a surefire crowd pleaser, as is the sisterflick depicting close female friendships. But the sisterflick is rarely made, as if the powers that be fear that the "empowerment" of such female camaraderie might lead to something dangerous like a female-dominated planet. As Sally Potter said, "Films are the most powerful medium to reflect back society's view of itself."

One big door closes, this collection attests, and women filmmakers do what they can to open many smaller ones. They raise money for their films independently, thereby maintaining their creative control. They turn to documentary with considerable success, or most recently, to television where women creatives in France, Denmark, Sweden, and the US have been flourishing, with female showrunners dominating the Golden Globes this year.

Given the terrible odds, why do women directors persist? Kathryn Bigelow says she ignores the obstacles because: "I can't change my gender, and I refuse to stop making movies." New Zealand director Jane Campion thinks women have an obligation to push on: "[Women] represent half of the population -- and gave birth to the whole world. Without them writing and being directors the rest of us are not going to know the whole story." Nia Vardalos, director of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, describes the commingled pleasure, horror, and humiliation of directing a movie -- or, I'd say, of engaging in any creative activity while female -- as akin to "jumping into an orgy while you're still shaving your legs."

In the spirit of Joanne Walsh's wonderful #readwomen campaign devised in response to the distressing Vida Count tallying how (un)often women writers are published and reviewed, I've challenged myself and my teenage sons: this year for every film we watch written or directed by a man we must watch another directed or written by a woman. Take the challenge with us and 2015 is sure to be a year of enlightenment.

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