

# The Gendered Politics of Hollywood Film Production Culture

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*I long personally for the day when that modifier [woman director] is a moot point. I anticipate that day will come. I think we're close. If 'The Hurt Locker' or the attention that it's getting can make the impossible seem possible to somebody, it's pretty overwhelming and gratifying. At least we're heading in the right direction.*

—Kathryn Bigelow

Los Angeles Times

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the cultural inner workings of the film industry and the factors that contribute to the dearth of women employed “behind the scenes” within the Hollywood Production Culture. The Hollywood Production Culture is defined as the cultural norms, practices, and economic influences functioning within Hollywood. Throughout the history of the film industry, women have been underrepresented in positions of power and influence. These positions of power and influence are labeled Above-The-Line positions and include producers, writers, directors, and cinematographers. This study focuses on finding and analyzing the contributing factors of the gender disparity in Above-The-Line positions. The methodology used to explore the gender disparity within Hollywood Production Culture is an interdisciplinary approach, using textual analysis of industry literature, scholarly studies, and data analysis.

## **Introduction and Background**

The 2010 Academy Awards was host to a historical event—for the first time in its over 80-year history, the top directorial honor was granted to a woman. Kathryn Bigelow was only the fourth woman to be nominated, and at the 2010 Academy Awards, she became the first ever to win for her Iraqi war film, *The Hurt Locker*. The female nominees that Kathryn Bigelow joins are Lina Wertmuller for *Seven Beauties* in 1976, Jane Campion for *The Piano* in 1993, and Sophia Coppola for *Lost in Translation* in 2003. The award given to Bigelow strived to dispel the notion that the film industry classically was and currently still is male dominated. The 2010 Academy Awards was groundbreaking for Hollywood and the women working within it. But in this modern climate, what is deemed as progress within the film industry shows how far behind it is. Interestingly, American society and the way in which women are employed within it is more progressive than the Hollywood Production Culture. In a recent *Los Angeles Times* article, Rebecca Keegan notes: “A woman is more likely to hold a seat on a Fortune 500 company board (15%), serve as a member of the clergy (15%) or work as an aerospace engineer (10%) than she is to direct a Hollywood movie (7%)” (1). Although it is significant that Kathryn Bigelow won this prestigious award, the plight of women within the Hollywood Production Culture continues.

By and large women are underrepresented within the industry, however, this underrepresentation is more notable in Above-the-Line positions. Above-the-Line and Below-the-Line are technical terms that are used when a producer makes a master budget for a film: he/she factors in the cost of everything, including equipment and personnel. Above-the-Line is defined as the people who have creative control over the movie production (such as director, writer, producer, cinematographer, and editor); while Below-the-Line is synonymous with the people who provide technical services for the movie production (such as sound technician, make-up artist, and costume designer). Even though this “line” is an actual black line on the producer’s budget sheet, it is commonly known as the “demarcation line between power and no power” (The Academy of Arts and Science Foundation). These Above-the-Line roles within the filmmaking process are those that have direct

creative input and control of the finished product. It is these roles that directly affect audiences in domestic and international markets. Writers conceive a story and produce a script. This script is then seen by a producer or director, who explores ways to make that idea happen. The director works in a symbiotic relationship with the cinematographer to translate the writer's script for the viewing audience. Editors create a cohesive story out of the disjointed shots that are produced by the cinematographer. However, without the vital roles of Below-the-Line workers, i.e., the structural framework that allows Above-the-Line to work creatively, films would not be what they are today. While (Above-the-Line) cinematographers interpret what the director wants visually, he/she is also in charge of a larger entity called a (Below-the-Line) camera crew. The camera crew translates creative initiatives into practical and physical realities. In order to get a film out of creative minds and onto the big screen, there has to be a symbiotic relationship between the creative Above-the-Line workers and the practical Below-the-Line workers. Women only account for 16% of these Above-the-Line positions in major Hollywood movies (Lauzen, "The Celluloid Ceiling", 2).

When exploring data, interviews, and articles about women and their roles in Above-the-Line positions, two modes of analysis are considered in this research. First is empirical analysis, which uses data and statistics to draw conclusions about women in the industry. Empirical analysis does not consider individual accomplishment. Instead, empirical analysis is in favor of viewing the Hollywood Production Culture as a holistic entity. The second mode of analysis is individualistic analysis, which takes the complete opposite approach. Although individualistic analysis acknowledges empirical analysis and its statistical data, it highlights individual accomplishments of women currently working in Hollywood. In individualistic analysis there is an emphasis on successful women within the Hollywood Production Culture. Hence, this emphasis on success overshadows dismal statistics that point to a dearth of women in Above-the-Line positions, and instead solely highlights progress. Although focusing and celebrating individual accomplishments is admirable, it often masks the broader problem.

### **Empirical Analysis**

*The Celluloid Ceiling* is a report compiled by Dr. Martha M. Lauzen, Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and professor at the School of Theatre, Television and Film at San Diego State University. Her industry-wide study, spanning 1998-2009, closely examines women and their role within the film industry. *The Celluloid Ceiling* focuses on the number of women that are working within the film industry in different positions. In the 2009 study, Lauzen reported that “in 2009, women comprised 16% of all directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers, and editors working on the top 250 domestic grossing films. This represents a decline of 3 percentage points from 2001 and is even with 2008 figures” (2). This statistic is broken down as follows: directors 7% (a 2% decrease since 2008), writers 8%, executive producers 17%, producers 23%, editors 18%, and cinematographers 2%.

When studying the *Celluloid Ceiling* and its statistics, a few factors rise to the surface. First, the number of women within Above-the-Line positions is unacceptably low. Second, these dismal numbers have stayed consistent over the course of Lauzen’s study, with a vast majority of films having no women working in certain Above-the-Line positions. An aspect extrapolated from the *Celluloid Ceiling* study to consider is the perception of gender specific job roles within the industry. Producers, which are comprised of the highest percentage of women, develop and fund a project from beginning to end. They are heavily involved with negotiating different personalities, keeping the film on schedule and within budget, and to nurture the film from start to finish. A producer’s skills are often aligned with traditionally “feminine” traits: nurturing, managing, and negotiating. Conversely, cinematographers, which are comprised of the lowest percentage of females, is an extremely technical job dealing with (but not limited to) calculating the film stock needed for a specific look, measuring light and distance, and the precise control of lens and camera techniques. Cinematographer’s skills are aligned with traditionally “masculine” traits: technical acumen, manual dexterity, and quantitative skills. It is evident that those in power within the industry rely on archaic notions about the feminine gender, and still perceive certain professions to be gender specific. Hence, within the Hollywood

Production Culture, the glass ceiling is replaced with Lauzen's "celluloid ceiling".

*WGAW's Women and Minority Report: Rewriting an All-Too-Familiar Story.* The Writers Guild of America West (WGAW) is one of the prominent labor unions functioning within the film industry. Like any union, it keeps records of all of the activities of its members and has used this information to compile the 2009 report on women and minorities within their ranks. This is the sixth in a series and each report spans a two-year period. The 2009 report examines statistical data within the years 2007-2009. These reports "have highlighted three groups of writers—women, minorities, and older writers—who have been traditionally underemployed in the industry" (Hunt 7). The *Women and Minority Report* states that female writers "remain stuck at 18% of film employment, while white males continue to dominate in the film sector" (Hunt 12). This statistic has remained constant over the course of the twelve-year study. The WGAW also reports that "the gender earning gap in film from 2007 (\$41,724) was the largest since at least 2003" (Hunt 18). What this expresses is an industry-wide epidemic of underemployment and inadequate earnings for women. They are not able to acquire and keep jobs that are easily accessible to men, and even if they do, they are being paid much less than male counterparts. The gendered ideologies regarding the worth of women's labor in the film industry is reminiscent of the classic struggle that women encounter in other American workplaces.

*Gender Oppression in Cinematic Content: A Look at Females On-Screen & Behind-the-Camera in Top-Grossing 2007 Films.* Stacy L. Smith, a Ph.D. at the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism at the University of Southern California, explains why it is important to have women in Above-the-Line positions. The *Gender Report* studies the 100 top-grossing films of 2007. Smith's *Gender Report* states: "onscreen gender roles are a function—to some degree—of the gender composition of behind-the-camera workers" (5). While examining writers, directors, and producers, Smith's study found that "17% of these jobs are filled by women: 3% in directing, 11.2% in writing, and 20.5% in producing" (6).

Smith's report also indicates that when women are present behind-the-camera, the number of actresses in front-of-the-camera increases. When films are directed by women, 44% of the characters are female, as opposed to 29.3% when directed by men. When women write a screenplay, 34.9% of their characters are female, as opposed to 28.1% when a screenplay is written by a man. A woman producer will have 30.8% female onscreen characters, while her male counterpart will have 26.4%. In all three instances, the amount of women in front of the camera rises when women hold Above-the-Line positions behind it.

The study also found that female characters become more complex when women are involved Above-the-Line. They transition from one-dimensional side characters to more complex beings, thus, more interesting and realistic. Another effect that Above-the-Line women have on actresses is the amount of sexual exploitation that they are subjected to. Smith states: "the presence of a female on the production team [is] associated with a 6.8-10.8% reduction in the percentage of characters shown with some nudity" (7). Women on the production team remove actresses from being sexual objects into being an equal within the story and the plotline. Why is having a woman in Above-the-Line positions important? The answer is that "films featuring women working as directors, writers, or producers are associated with a higher percentage of girls and women on the silver screen than those films with only men in these sacrosanct positions" (Smith 4). Smith's report demonstrates that when women are employed in Above-the-Line positions it represents a broader cultural shift. Women in Above-the-Line positions bring immediate change to the production of popular American culture by furthering the empowerment and representation of women on the silver screen.

### **Summary**

Women are consistently underrepresented in Above-the-Line positions, are often paid less when they are employed, and make a noticeable difference on female representations when they do obtain jobs. Yet why are women unable to break through the "celluloid ceiling"? One hypothesis that examines the low percentage of women within the industry asserts that women self select out in light of the rigorous

lifestyle associated with filmmaking. In a joint interview, some of the industry's most successful Above-the-Line women spoke about the issues they face. Andrea Berloff, writer/producer of *World Trade Center*, asks "Is it self-selection? I've gone after some very male-centric jobs, and I have gotten them, and I don't feel that I'm being prevented from getting them because of my gender. So I wonder why aren't more women trying?" (Traister 6). Self-selection is the notion that women are choosing not to participate Above-the-Line, and that male executives within the industry are not purposely denying women access. Kimberly Peirce, the writer/director/producer of *Boys Don't Cry* and *Stop Loss*, explains why self-selection is considered at all: "You get into your second, your third movie, and you're building a career, and it's hitting smack up against those years when you want to have a child" (Traister 3). Filmmaking is a "blood sport" that requires an extraordinary commitment of time and energy. In order to do this one has to compromise in other areas of life, and sometimes that compromise is unacceptable. Some women self select out of the industry because of the pressures that it places on their personal life.

Others, who persevere in the industry, are forced to deal with their conflicting obligations. Laura Ziskin, the writer/producer of *Hero, To Die For*, and *Spiderman*, recounts such a moment:

The birth of my daughter coincided with the beginning of my career on my own as a producer. I remember the exact spot on the Ventura Freeway where I started screaming in my car because I was trying to put a movie together, and I was racing home to nurse the baby, and the milk was coming and the car phone wasn't working. I thought, 'I am failing on all fronts: I will never have the career I want to have because I can't compete with the guys. I had to twist my head around to say that I would not be the best at anything, that I would have to make compromises.' That's a hard thing to say: that I would not be the most successful producer, nor would I be the world's best mother, and that in order to have both those things in my life, I would have to look at compromise as a positive, not a negative. (Traister 5)

Because having children can hinder them from being a competitive force within the industry, women are faced with tough decisions. Some choose to postpone family obligations in order to focus on their career. One such woman is Cathy Konrad, producer of such films as *3:10 to Yuma*, *Walk the Line*, and *Scream*. Konrad decided to delay having children until her early forties, giving her the freedom to advance her career (Traister 5).

Although executives might not be purposely closing the door on women, due to economic concerns, they certainly are not supporting them. Investors and studio heads actively seek out filmmakers who will have the largest market return. However, when budgets allotted to female filmmakers are examined, it is found that females in Above-the-Line positions often receive less financial support than their male counterparts. This lack of financial support is justified within the industry with the underlying notion that women are “bad Box Office” (Lauzen, “Contemplating the Celluloid Ceiling” 23). This ideology was strongly expressed when Jeff Robinov, the president of production at Warner Bros, declared that the studio would no longer make films with female leads (Lauzen, “Contemplating the Celluloid Ceiling” 22). This was reported in 2007, by Nikki Finke in *Deadline: Hollywood Daily’s*. Reportedly, the proclamation was a reaction to disappointing box office grosses earned by *The Brave One*, starring Jodie Foster; and *The Invasion*, starring Nicole Kidman, a film helmed by three different male directors (Lauzen, “Women @ the Box Office” 22). Although Warner Bros denied that this was the sentiment of the studio, no one expressed outrage or even surprise at this statement.

Lauzen dispels the assumption that women are “bad Box Office” in her study, “Women @ the Box Office,” focuses on the comparable grosses of women filmmakers. Lauzen ascertains that the size of the budget invested in any film, not the sex of the protagonist or the director, has a direct correlation to how much revenue it generates at the box office. Although the initial investment made is a major factor to good or bad box office revenues, when films helmed by women do poorly, it is often blamed on their sex. When men do poorly, a plethora of reasons are explored (Lauzen, “Women @ the Box Office” 2).

In “Contemplating the Celluloid Ceiling,” Lauzen states that the film industry is “indifferent, insecure, and even hostile towards women” (22).

She asserts that she is not suggesting “any conspiracy on the part of industry insiders, but rather a stubborn allegiance to the following notions: the celluloid ceiling no longer exists for women; women self select out of the business; and when women are employed, they are bad box office” (“Contemplating the Celluloid Ceiling”, 22). One of the solutions she has proposed is for executives to simply admit that there is an obvious problem. Until the “higher ups” admit that women are not being treated fairly in Hollywood, then “there is no need for discussion or change” (Lauzen, “Contemplating the Celluloid Ceiling”, 22).

### **Solutions**

In response to the dearth of women Above-the-Line, the WGAW started to be proactively involved with mentoring programs. These programs target young female filmmakers and place them with experienced filmmakers in internships. Women who want to break into the industry are finding this option helpful because it “really has more to do with access, networking, and opportunity than with a shortage of talent” (Hunt 41). Mentoring and internships improve this access and both are active solutions that have been adopted by the WGAW and many other organizations hoping to advance women within the industry. The Women in Film Organization is one of these entities. This organization is based in the heart of Hollywood and boasts a large population of Above-the-Line women as members. Women in Film works to be proactive in advancing women within the Hollywood Production Culture and invests funds to promote female filmmakers. Each year, over one million dollars goes directly into a “Finishing Fund,” which is made available to women who need help finishing films.

The women who do push forward have a hard road ahead of them, but it is worth it to have their voices heard. Lynda Obst, producer of such films as *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* and most recently *The Invention of Lying*, is one example. Her website, (lyndaobstproductions.com) hosts a page entitled, “Women in Film.” Her introduction states:

Women face unique professional challenges in Hollywood. There’s plenty to lament about. But that misses the point and the opportunity. There continues to

be enormous and unprecedented prospects for women in Hollywood.

Instead of solely trying to fix the problem of gender inequality, Obst gives up-and-coming women filmmakers the practical tools needed to survive under current conditions.

Within the last few years great strides have been made for women in film, including the fact that there are more women than ever employed in the industry. But more has to be done. Analysts such as Martha Lauzen; whistle blowers, such as reporter Nikki Finke; and realists, such as Lynda Obst, contribute significantly to the furtherance of women within the film industry. And while there is still a dearth of women in film, there is also hope for future Kathryn Bigelows.

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