

BEHIND THE SCREENS: A HISTORY OF WOMEN'S ROLES IN FILMMAKING

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The following paper explores the often-ignored role of women in the film industry in both European cinema of the 1960's and the international Hollywood of today. The thesis focuses on an understanding of the underrepresented work of female directors and crew, and how this affects the current climate for women filmmakers in Hollywood as well as the future of diversity in the film industry. The paper describes the extensive contributions of such highly praised film editors as Denise De Casabianca, as well as female directors of the era (which were much fewer and further between) like Agnès Varda, who was a key player in the French New Wave. It then moves into the modern era with a statistical analysis of current Hollywood gender demographics and focus on the work of acclaimed director Kathryn Bigelow, the first woman to win the Academy Award for best director. The paper concludes on a prescriptive note, calling for the promotion and incentivization of diversity in both the stories told on screen and the people working behind the camera in Hollywood.

When Alice Guy-Blaché became the first woman to direct a film, the art form was still in its infancy. Her first project, *The Cabbage Fairy* (1896) is considered by respected author and professor of film at Columbia University, Jane M. Gaines, to be one of the first narrative films ever produced (Gaines 1300). Guy-Blaché was a pioneer of this new field and the techniques of narrative filmmaking, but these accomplishments are usually attributed to the big names of the time, like Georges Méliès and the Lumière Brothers (Gaines 1298). The work of women filmmakers has been systematically devalued by the male-dominated film industry, but their contributions have helped shape both historical movements in cinema and contemporary film. Studying and incentivizing women's role in creating cinematic culture will promote diversity and innovation in the film industry and give overdue recognition to those who came before.

While the role of editor and the importance of their work is often overshadowed by that of the director, skilled women have commanded authority in the cutting room since the early days of film. The editing style of a film can entirely change audience perception and the emotional effect a scene may have; the fact that women have often occupied this position is significant because it means that more cinema contains the contributions and perspectives of skilled women than is typically thought. Denise de Casabianca is one such example, having worked on such projects as *The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1961) and *La Religieuse* (1966). The former, directed by Robert Enrico (a contemporary of the New

Wave directors and their auteurist film theory), was made originally as a short film but was adapted into an episode of *The Twilight Zone* in 1964 ("Twilight"). De Casabianca would also bring her expertise to the television adaptation. Her work on the latter with director Jacques Rivette is full of emotional turmoil that oozes out of the screen; one can rightly infer that the distance and sobriety with which the film's lengthy scenes are cut is her doing although, like the work of many editors, these choices are usually credited to the director. This is just one example of how male-centered auteur culture in experimental cinema idolized the director while diminishing the importance of other roles, including editing, which coincidentally were often occupied by women.

One notable exception to this rule is that of Nicole Lubtchansky's work on *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (1974), one of Rivette's later but still relevant additions to the New Wave canon. The film is considered an experimental feminist classic, and critics credit much of its visual appeal to Lubtchansky's "tight" editing, calling her work "the backbone of the film" (Martin 60). Its whimsical scenes and literary references, including a few to the rabbit in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* and the films of David Lynch, are a refreshing callback to the influence of literature on French film. Lubtchansky's editing work in *Celine and Julie* left a lasting impression on the cinematic culture.

In some cases, the director and editor of a film have been one and the same. Věra Chytilová, a graduate of the Czech Film and TV School of the Academy of

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Performing Arts (FAMU), both directed and cut her 1966 film, *Daisies* (Martin 129). The editing style of the film is half ridiculous and avant-garde, half dead serious; a key feature of this is the pattern of cutting from urban to rural backdrops and from monochrome to brightly colored overlays in the middle of scenes. Her specific style is most evident in the stark contrast that exists in the film's dialogue, scenery, and presentation. The restaurant scenes specifically exemplify this, showing the girls' exploitative and mean behavior at dinner with numerous men they are pretending to date undermined with bright, happy color overlays across the frame. Chytilová was a pioneer of experimental visuals in the Czech New Wave. Like many of her circle, Chytilová faced backlash from the communist-controlled government over the subversive material of her films. *Daisies* was banned in Czechoslovakia until 1967 for its images of food waste and anti-authoritarian sentiments expressed by the characters (Rapold). Chytilová's subversive subject matter in her political and artistic works contributed immensely to the experimental New Wave culture in Czechoslovakia.

Agnès Varda is the only female director of note to come out of the French New Wave, and her influence as the so-called mother of the experimental movement was enormous. She received the Palme d'honneur at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival, an honor similar to that of the Academy's Lifetime Achievement Award which is presented to those heroes of the industry who have not previously been recognized. But why had her work been overlooked for so long? One can infer that the industry's undervaluation of art created by women had more than a little to do with it. Her most famous films, including *La Pointe Court* (1955) and *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), epitomize the movement's clean, effortless style and

conversational grace; the former actually predates (and likely influenced) the foundational films of the genre, including Jacques Rivette's *Le Coup de Berger* (1956) and Claude Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* (1958). In *Agnès Varda between Film, Photography, and Art*, a 2018 book on the renowned director, author Rebecca J. DeRoo argues that Varda's work was not only influential but served as a "projection of cultural history that illuminated multiple disciplines" through the often-ignored political aspects of her film career (DeRoo 7). Her explorations of and challenges to established aesthetic traditions and cultural politics would become part of the essential discourse of the French New Wave.

For an example of Varda's subtly infused political and visual choices, one might turn to her most well-known film, *Cleo from 5 to 7*. The main character's agonizing afternoon plays out in almost real time, an uncommon and experimental technique for the time. The political significance of the film comes in its acknowledgement and critique of the Algerian War, as the main character's unlikely companion is revealed to be a soldier headed to the front in Algiers. This backdrop of conflict is conspicuously absent from some other notable films from the same time and movement, including Jean-Luc Godard's famous 1960 film, *Breathless*. Aesthetically, the audience sees the point of view transition over the course of the film from the subject gazing at Cleo to Cleo commanding the gaze of the camera; she moves from being objectified, a woman being seen, to being the subject of her own narrative, seeing her world with her own agency (Martin 63). The innovative ideas and techniques in *Cleo from 5 to 7* and her other films make clear Varda's directorial prowess. Had she been a man, she would likely have been recognized far before that 2015 Cannes tribute.

Women have worked in film since its inception and have had their roles systemically downplayed, but things have changed in contemporary times, right? Well, not quite. In an article for The Criterion Collection, Girish Shambu notes that women were forced out of editing and directorial positions in the industry in the 1920's due to the rise of the male-dominated studio system in the United States (Shambu). The numbers of women working behind the camera in Hollywood are rising, but they're not what one might expect. An annual study published by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University (SDSU) found that, overall films produced in the 2018-2019 award cycle, women made up only 31% of staff. Specifically, only 26% of directors and 21% of Editors were women (Lauzen). This means that women currently make up less than a third of creatives in the film industry while comprising half the population. Independent films fared only slightly better, a margin of 2-3%, according to that same report. It is crucial to note here that the SDSU study did not include information on the gender composition of any major film studio or production company boards, the majority of which have been headed by men since their founding. Female directors are able to expand their work but cannot quite break even in Hollywood, and this disparity is chief among the reasons why. It appears that the culture of Hollywood (and international cinema) has not yet progressed far enough past the previous era.

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One notable example who stands out among these contemporary female directors is Kathryn Bigelow, best known for her action films including *Point Break* (1991), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). She has had a remarkable impact on Hollywood, becoming the first woman to receive the award for best director at the 2010 Academy Awards (Tikkanen). She was only the fourth woman to be nominated for the honor. The importance of Bigelow's work lies in her ability to succeed in the male-dominated field of action films; the majority of her projects are driven by rugged male characters engaging in stereotypically masculine activities, like going to war and engaging in violent criminal behavior. The few that do include prominent female characters do so without the nuance that might be expected from a renowned director. For instance, her 1989 film *Blue Steel* starring Jamie Lee Curtis is centered around a female police officer who is stalked by a murderer. While Curtis's character is the focus, she is reduced to the trope of the 'strong female character' under which she must be stoic, tough as nails, and just masculine enough to pull it off while still being attractive to men. Simply put, she gets to take her shirt off and get the bad guy all in one movie. This same pitfall can be seen in Jessica Chastain's role in *Zero Dark Thirty*, although to a subtler degree.

While Bigelow's films leave something to be desired from a feminist standpoint, they certainly have their appeal, and part of their draw seems to be their focus on popular action themes (military, crime, etc.) without the burden of contemporary politics. The most salient instance of this is *The Hurt Locker*, an Iraq War drama, which seems to glorify the adrenaline and comradery

of conflict while placing no blame on the shoulders of its American heroes (Tikkanen). Despite their flaws and what one may consider directorial negligence in the area of social conscience, these films remain exceedingly popular and continue to shape and impact action cinema. In a way, Bigelow has played the male-dominated studio system with her infiltration of the action genre to inexplicably advance the cause of female-driven filmmaking.

A slightly different way that new filmmakers can impact the current cinematic culture is by creating for untapped markets. This is almost exactly what Varda, Chytilová, and their contemporaries were doing in Europe in the 1960's: diverging from the established genres of film and experimenting with techniques, forms, and dialogue in a new way. Today, there exist numerous opportunities to stray away from the established genre landscape while centering the stories of women and minorities. One of these newly claimed niches is that of female superheroes, whose films are being helmed largely by women. Both *Wonder Woman* (2017) and its upcoming sequel were directed by Patty Jenkins. Hiring female directors seems to be one more front on which DC Comics and Marvel Entertainment are happy to one-up each other, as exemplified by the release of *Captain Marvel* (2019), co-directed by Anna Boden. Another example of this divergence from mainstream filmmaking is the recent work of Greta Gerwig, which centers familial relationships between women and coming-of-age narratives as opposed to the male-gaze specific requirement of endgame romance. In *Ladybird* (2017) for instance, the main character's romantic interest ends badly, and her sadness redirects her towards her relationship with her mother. These newly opened genres are

the best opportunities for women and minority filmmakers to bring innovation to the film industry and, in doing so, honor the history of women who were at the forefront of experimental film movements decades before.

As the film industry moves into an era of consolidation by certain large studios, there have to be certain tactics that the moviegoing audience can utilize in order to promote the works of women. The fastest way to a corporation's values will always be through its profits; thus, the best way to promote the production of female-led and centered films is for moviegoers to pay to see them. According to *New York Times* contributors Brooks Barnes and Cara Buckley, lack of financial incentive is the most cited reason for the current lack of jobs for female directors (Barnes). Film audiences have a duty to vote with their dollar and make a point to see female-led films in theaters. That is the only way more of these amazing projects will be funded and produced for us to enjoy in the future. Women have been at the forefront of experimental film and major cinematic movements throughout history, across borders and national cinemas, and have made pivotal impressions on their respective scenes. Now, the new generation has the opportunity (and one could argue responsibility) to push the industry in a new direction, towards innovation and diversification.

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