



Under Represented, Over Sexualized;

A Look At Women Behind and In Front of the Camera in the Film Industry

A.Z.

12/9/13

In order to pass the Bechdel test, a movie must have two named female characters that talk to each other about something other than men. The idea for the test, originally coined by Liz Wallace, was made famous by Alison Bechdel who used it in her comic, *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Passing seems easy, and it's true, this test is setting the bar incredibly low. However, the amazing thing is that only a few movies pass. Most movies have at least two named female characters, but interaction between those characters is rare unless it is discussing a male.

Brave, a movie written, produced, and co—directed by women, focuses on the relationship between Merida, the protagonist, and her mother. For this reason, the movie passes the Bechdel test easily. Although they do discuss love and men frequently it is far from the main topic of their conversations. Both of these leading female characters are fairly complex, and not stereotypical as far as Disney princesses often go. In addition the plot of the movie moves away from the frequently used idea that woman's greatest desire is love. In fact it is the exact opposite of that. Merida rebels against the idea of marriage. Her unwillingness to be married to someone whom she doesn't know is central to the plot of the film. Instead, she wants to be free to make her own decisions, and what's more, the ideas she is being pressured to conform to are coming from her mother, another well rounded, powerful female character. The two characters with the most essential ideas in the story are both women. In this way Brave breaks away from the usual mold of a Disney Princess film. The story is completely centered around a girl and her mother and Merida remains independent and free at the end of the film. This movie is an example of a film made by women, that stars well rounded female characters. It illustrates the fact that films made by women tend to have more realistic female characters.

The movie still has some problems though. The women in the movie generally have unrealistically small waistlines, something that although subtle, is sending the message that women and girls should be unnaturally thin. In fact, the only female character who is not extremely thin is the maid, who, not only has a very minor role, but also wears a very low cut dress, revealing a considerable

amount of cleavage. This was not the case originally. The film's first director, Brenda Chapman, a woman, was later replaced by a man. Chapman's vision for Merida was a well rounded female character whose appearance was realistic, and secondary to her personality. It was only when the film changed hands, that Merida became overly thin, and conventionally attractive. "When Disney created promotional material that portrayed the character as slimmer and sexier, Chapman chose to give CEO Bob Iger 'a piece of [her] mind.' She told the *Marin Independent Journal* that she found the new look 'atrocious' and 'blatantly sexist'"(Stampler). In addition, there are far fewer female characters than male. These aspects of the film reinforce certain stereotypes concerning men and women, and the perceived differences between them.

And yet, despite the problems with the movie, Brave is centered around a complex relationship between two female characters. These characters have realistic personalities, and defy the norm that love is the most important aspect of a woman's life. The movie's plotline is one that is rare among films with more men than women in behind the scenes positions. Although the film was made mainly by women, it still portrays women as less important than men. For instance, there are far fewer female characters than their male counterparts, and those women are thinner and more conventionally attractive than the males. This imbalance causes both men and women to subconsciously believe that the thing of utmost importance is a woman's physical appearance, rather than her intellect. It is partially because of this belief that even in films largely made by women, the female characters still have a conventional, and generally unrealistic appearance of beauty. There are fewer women working in behind the scenes positions in the film industry than men. This discrepancy is a key contributor to the lack of female characters whose intellect is valued above their physical appearance in studio produced movies with high budgets. Because of this misrepresentation children are taught contributes to view women as lesser than men.

When a film is written or directed by a woman generally there are more female characters in the

film.

A higher percentage of girls/women are shown on screen when one or more females are involved directing or writing films. In fact, a 10.4% difference is observed for on screen girls/women when one or more females are involved in the writing process[...] Overall, the results suggest that b-t-s [behind the scenes] females may be advocating for and/or casting more on screen girls/women than b-t-s males. It may also be the case that studios are more comfortable allocating 'female-oriented' stories and scripts to female writers and directors (Smith, Choueiti).

This result, combined with the fact that there are far fewer women than men working in behind the scenes positions in the film industry, leads to a deficiency in female characters. "In 2011, females remained dramatically under-represented as characters in film when compared with their representation in the U.S. population. Last year, females accounted for 33% of all characters in the top 100 domestic grossing films. This represents an increase of 5 percentage points since 2002 when females comprised 28% of characters" (Lauzen). The lack of female characters in movies represents the ultimate sexism so ingrained in our culture. It shows that we as a society, men and women included, view women as less important than men. If we held them at equal value, there would not be this imbalance.

Even in Brave, there are significant discrepancies in the amount of female vs. male characters. Merida's family has only two females compared to the four males, but what's more interesting is the number of men vs. women extras. In many scenes there are no female extras, and in the scenes where they are present, there tend to be fewer of them than men.

In addition to this base idea of fewer female characters in film, the characters that do exist are often portrayed unrealistically.

The study, released by the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism at the University of Southern California, examined the 100 top-grossing fictional films from 2012...The researchers found that 31.6 percent of female characters were shown wearing stereotypically "sexy" clothing, compared to 7 percent of male characters, and 31 percent of these women were shown partially nude, compared to 9.4 percent of the men' (Gray).

Although it is hard to quantify with data, if one pays attention while watching most movies they will notice that women more commonly have low cut shirts, short skirts, and tight pants. In addition,

women tend to be much younger than men, and have smaller waistlines. “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 male” (Davis, Smith).

It is not only female character’s physical appearance, but also their mental state, personalities, and jobs that tend to be inaccurate or sexualized.

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 (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media).

Films often also send a message contrary to what it may appear to be on the surface. In many films with working women characters, the plot is actually centered around the women’s realization that she cannot be happy devoting her life to work, but rather needs love, and often only love. “Rosalind Russell once estimated that she’d played 23 different versions of what she termed Alice in Careerland: strong working women who, deep down, actually wanted to be housewives” (Powers). The plot of a choice between work and love leads to very few women portrayed in positions of power and control, and if the movie begins with a female protagonist in one of these positions it is common for her to give it up in the end for love.

Just as with the lack of women working behind the scenes in film, the reason for the underrepresentation of women in the actual films is fairly unclear and far from satisfying. There are a number of possibilities for this inaccurate portrayal of women in film. Many people argue that it is simply because women go to the movies no matter the content, while men only go to see movies that they are interested in. According to long time producer Lynda Obst “Hollywood marketers are only concerned with catering to men in their advertising because the general attitude is that ‘women will go anyway’” (Casting Call: Hollywood Needs More Women). If this is true, it is probable that the cause is

simply our culture.

Women are used to being perceived as lesser and in many cases accept it as the norm. For this reason, they are more likely to see a movie with a male protagonist. However, interestingly, movies with the same size budget, whether the protagonist be male or female, tend to have the same total box office grosses.

When the size of the budget is held constant, films with female protagonists or prominent females in an ensemble cast earn similar box office grosses (domestic, international, opening weekend) and DVD sales as films with male protagonists. Because films featuring male protagonists have larger budgets, they earn larger box office grosses. However, the differences in box office grosses are not caused by the sex of the protagonist but by the size of the budget. Films with larger budgets generate larger grosses, regardless of the sex of the protagonist (Lauzen).

Although the media mainly markets to men, movies where the main storyline is centered around a women, or “women’s movies”, make just as much money as those centered around men. This evidence does not show how many women vs. men that go to movies with male or female protagonists respectively. It is possible that women do go to movies, no matter who they are marketed to, and yet the total box office grosses are not affected by this. So, it should not matter or have an effect on the kind of movies being made. For this reason, the argument that there are more movies with male protagonist for financial reasons is completely unfounded.

The amount of women vs. men working behind the scenes in the film industry is also greatly disproportionate. In a study by Martha M. Lauzen from the San Diego State University, it was found that “In 2012, women comprised 18% of all directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers, and editors working on the top 250 domestic grossing films. This represents no change from 2011 and an increase of 1 percentage point from 1998” (Lauzen). Not only are women underrepresented in the industry, but the rate of change in their numbers is incredibly stagnant.

There are a number of possible reasons for this inequality. It is argued that films directed or produced by women have lower total grosses at the box office, and that therefore, the lack of women in

film is strictly for financial reasons. However, one must take into consideration the size of the budget allotted to the film as well as the gender of the film maker when comparing the profits of films. Major studios generally give women not only fewer jobs as directors and producers, but also lower budgets when making movies. This is the main reason for less profits at the box office as opposed to the idea that audiences don't like films made by women. "Overall, when women and men filmmakers have similar budgets for their films, the resulting box office grosses are also similar. In other words, the sex of filmmakers does not determine box office grosses" (Lauzen).

If it is not money, then why are there so many fewer women working in behind the scenes positions in film? There are a number of ideas, none of which are very definite or satisfying. However it is not for the lack of women wanting to enter this field.

No new generation of female directors has taken root at the studio level. Even though directing programs at film schools have been 60 percent female for years now, there are still only a handful of women making big films. Most important, the few women who do break through seem to fade away much faster than their male counterparts. No one in Hollywood can say definitively why female directors have barely a toehold in studio films. Among the reasons cited are deeply embedded sexism, [and] fearful executives under intense financial pressure (Hass).

There are ideas about women that are, and have been, so deeply ingrained in our culture for centuries that they are purely subconscious for many people. The message has been drilled into both men and women so many times from outside sources that we begin to think of the ideas as our own. Prejudices and stereotypes become fact in our minds. Our society has been trained to see women as less capable than men through the media and therefore fewer women have the ambition and drive to seek out certain jobs. Although there is not a proven and definite reason for the lack of women in film, it is probable, that the main cause is prejudice reinforced by the media.

The disproportionate ratio between men and women working in behind the scenes positions in the film industry leads to fewer female roles in movies which, in turn, has an effect on the viewers of those movies. The brains of children and teens, large consumers of movies and media, are still

developing, and watching these movies with so many fewer female characters, must have an effect on how they view women and girls. “At least one previous study has shown that television and film influence children's views on [gender roles](#) and job aspirations. And, according to a 2011 [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) survey, American youth aged 8-18 consume an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes of entertainment media each day, and 71 percent of the survey's respondents had a television in their bedroom” (Bahadur). By watching movies where there are fewer female characters than male, kids gain a subconscious and incorrect understanding that women are of less importance than men. This idea is presented in very subtle ways, and yet it becomes completely ingrained in the minds of children. The perception has no boundaries, and transfers to the real world and real life situations. In an interview on NPR, Geena Davis, founder of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, said:

We just heard a fascinating and disturbing study, where they looked at the ratio of men and women in groups. And they found that if there's 17 percent women, the men in the group think it's 50-50. And if there's 33 percent women, the men perceive that as there being more women in the room than men. What we're in effect doing is training children to see that women and girls are less important than men and boys. We're training them to perceive that women take up only 17 percent of the space in the world. And if you add on top of that, that so many female characters are sexualized, even in things that are aimed at little kids, that's having an enormous impact as well (Casting Call: Hollywood Needs More Women).

The sexualization and lack of female characters affects how women and girls see themselves and how society sees them. It creates a standard for “beauty” that is not only unrealistic, but also focusses mainly on physical characteristics. Female characters are often in movies simply to be the love interest or, to provide diversity. Their ideas are often less important than men’s. In fact, it is easy, in many movies, to remove the female character with the most lines, and have no drastic plot change. Hollywood’s idea of the perfect woman is young, thin, physically attractive, weak, and willing to give up a job for love. This is not only a unrealistic, but unhealthy both physically and mentally. Because movies value physically attractive women over intelligent women, it teaches children, both girls and

boys, to have the same values. This leads to girls feeling unhappy with their bodies and not putting value on their intelligence.

In addition there is a lack of female characters who are shown in powerful working positions. This means that girls have fewer intelligent, complicated, and strong female role models to inspire them. Aspiring to be something that you have almost never seen is far harder than aspiring to be something known and familiar “Both young girls and boys should see female decision-makers, political leaders, managers, and scientists as the norm, not the exception. By increasing the number and diversity of female leaders and role models on screen, content creators may affect the ambitions and career aspirations of girls and young women domestically and internationally” (Bahadur).

There are fewer women working in behind the scenes positions in films with top box office grosses than men. There are a number of possible reasons for this imbalance. Perhaps it is because of an ingrained sexism in the people hiring, perhaps it is because the film industry is too scared to risk putting large amounts of money into films made by women, something they have tried very little. Maybe they haven't looked at the numbers showing that total box office grosses are proportional to the film's budget no matter the sex of the filmmaker or the protagonist. The movies, and other forms of media rarely, if ever, portray women as directors, writers, or producers of film, further convincing the men hiring these positions that women are not meant for these jobs. This problem could be fixed with the implementation of more successful working female characters in mainstream movies. The solution sounds simple, but one must remember that men generally create far fewer female characters let alone independent, well employed ones. Thus, it would seem to be a self perpetuating cycle. A lack of female characters leads to prejudices against powerful working women. these prejudices cause fewer female writers, producers, and directors, to be hired which, in turn, leads to fewer female characters holding these positions, returning to the original problem: a lack of female characters that successfully work in these positions.

Unfortunately even women making films create fewer female characters. Although the two main characters of Brave are both female, and have realistically complex personalities, the set of characters includes far more males than females. In the entire movie there are only four named female characters one of whom is the maid and has only one speaking line. There are ten named male characters and that's not including animals which would bring the count up to twelve. In addition, the cast of extras is almost entirely male. Most of the named males have only small parts in the movie, only there to offer comic relief. However, the difference between men and women is still obvious. The movie clearly shows an imbalance between the genders purely using the numbers of characters of each sex.

If we want to change this cycle somehow women must break through the barriers that are currently set up. Although the amount of women in other fields of work such as government and medicine are slowly but steadily gaining ground, the numbers in the film industry have remained stagnant for a long period of time. The amount of women working as writers, directors, and producers increased steadily since the beginning of film but now it seems to have leveled out, and not only that. As we see with Brave, even in movies predominantly made by women, the female characters are still fewer in numbers. If we do not want this to be the case forever, something has to change. Media literacy programs are required in many schools and independent films, which tend to have more women involved in their production, are becoming more and more accessible. If we can make the men and boys already working in film or pursuing a career in film aware that women are just as capable and qualified perhaps the change can happen.

Works Cited

- Bahadur, Nina. *Huffington Post*. N.p., 13 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Sept. 2013.
- "Casting Call: Hollywood Needs More Women." *RSS 20*. NPR, 30 June 2013. Web. 17 Sept. 2013. <<http://www.wbur.org/npr/197390707/casting-call-hollywood-needs-more-women?ft=3>>.
- Dargis, Manohla. "Women in the Seats but Not Behind the Camera." *Nytimes.com*. N.p., 10 Dec. 2009. Web. 22 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/13/movies/13dargis.html>>.
- Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media: Research*. Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2013. Web. <<http://www.seejane.org/research/>>.
- Gray, Emma. "Women In Film Are Underrepresented, Hypersexualized Despite 'Year Of The Woman' Claims (REPORT)." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 14 May 2013. Web. 14 Oct. 2013. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/14/women-in-film-underrepresented-hypersexualized-report_n_3273398.html>.
- Hass, Nancy. "FILM; For Studios, 'Director' Is A Male Noun." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 31 Jan. 1999. Web. 25 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/31/movies/film-for-studios-director-is-a-male-noun.html?pagewanted=all>>.
- Lauzen, Martha M., Ph.D. "The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 250 Films of 2012." N.p., 2013. Web. 6 Oct. 2013. <http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/2012_Celluloid_Ceiling_Exec_Summ.pdf>.
- Lauzen, Martha M., Ph.D. "It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: On-Screen Representations of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2011." N.p., 2012. Web. <http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/2011_Its_a_Mans_World_Exec_Summ.pdf>.
- Lauzen, Martha M., Ph.D. "Women @ the Box Office: A Study of the Top 100 Worldwide Grossing Films." N.p., 2008. Web. <<http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/Women%20@%20Box%20Office.pdf>>.
- Smith, Stacy, Ph.D. "Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media: Research." *Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media: Research*. USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, n.d. Web. 31 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.seejane.org/research/>>.
- Smith, Stacy L., Ph.D., and Marc Choueiti. "Gender Disparity on Screen and Behind the Camera in

Family Films; The Executive Report." University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, n.d. Web.

Stampler, Laura. "Entertainment." *Entertainment Do Animated Female Characters Need to Be Pretty Comments*. Time, 14 Oct. 2013. Web. 25 Nov. 2013.
<<http://entertainment.time.com/2013/10/14/do-animated-female-characters-need-to-be-pretty/>>.

Powers, John. "On Hollywood's Strong, Self-Hating Women." *NPR*. NPR, 31 July 2009. Web. 23 Sept. 2013. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=111419481>>.

Ulaby, Neda. "Working Women On Television: A Mixed Bag At Best." *NPR*. NPR, n.d. Web. 17 Sept. 2013.