

# WHERE HAVE ALL THE WOMEN GONE?



**BELIEVE IT OR NOT, WOMEN ONCE RULED HOLLYWOOD.**

BY KATE TREMILLS

PHOTOGRAPHER - SCOTT FOUST  
MAKE-UP AND HAIR ARTIST - LAURA FLAGER  
MODEL - KIM FROM THE AGENCY AZ

**HOLLYWOOD HAS THE REPUTATION OF BEING HIP, EXCITING, ON THE CUTTING EDGE. STARS SUPPORT PROGRESSIVE CAUSES, MOVIES BROACH RISQUÉ SUBJECTS, AND PEOPLE MAKE IMPASSIONED SPEECHES AT AWARD SHOWS. BUT UNDERNEATH THE HIP EXTERIOR, THE NUMBERS STILL BELIE ATTITUDES ROOTED IN THE 1950s. THE VAST MAJORITY OF THE TOP 250 FILMS ARE STILL WRITTEN, DIRECTED, AND PRODUCED – BY MEN. AND THE POWER TO GREENLIGHT FILMS, ARGUABLY THE ONLY REAL POWER IN HOLLYWOOD, IS STILL IN THE HANDS OF WHITE MEN.**

Contrary to today's numbers, the film industry started out with women in prominent positions. In the early 1900s, the industry was very entrepreneurial. Studios didn't exist yet and anyone with the creativity to pick up a camera could make a film. The lack of a corporate structure opened the door to women in a time when they wouldn't normally have had the opportunity.

Women like Alice Guy Blaché forged the underpinnings of today's movies. She established the notion of telling a story on film in her picture *La Fee aux Choux (The Cabbage Fairy)*, as well as creating many of the camera techniques still used today. Guy created over 700 movies during her career and directed every genre from adventure to science fiction.

From 1900 to 1920, women dominated the film industry. As Linda Seger, renowned script consultant and author, explains in *"Women Who Call the Shots,"* women wrote, directed, and produced numerous films. They created the first movie studios and generated most of the content for the films. Their numbers prospered because women already in the industry supported and mentored new women; there were over 30 women directors during this time, and women writers numbered 44 in 1918, alone. By the mid-1920s, the movie industry took an abrupt turn away from its original, independent spirit. Production and distribution were consolidated into a corporate and exclusive structure - the studio system.

The studio system began with the formation of MGM in 1924. By the mid-1930s, the studios ruled the film landscape and the independents couldn't compete. And since studios were mired in the social biases and prejudices of the day, like most bureaucratic social institutions, the door was shut on women. Once the primary players, Seger points out, women were now relegated to the wardrobe department. Kathe Kollwitz from the Guerrilla Girls, a group that uses humor and public action to draw attention to inequality in the arts, explains, "All our research shows that when a field is new, and the stakes are low, women are accepted. After it becomes big business, women are shut out. When history is written, women are often shut out, too. That's why hardly anyone today is aware of Alice Guy Blaché or other early female filmmakers."

Today, women can be found in key positions across the film industry.

Some of the largest studios in the business are led by women, directors like Mimi Leder are making big-budget films, and the number of female producers is on the rise. So why, according to Martha Lauzen's annual survey *"The Celluloid Ceiling,"* are women only 13 percent of the writers of the top grossing 250 films of last year? And only 6 percent of these films directed by women?

**STUDIO FILMMAKING AT ITS BASE IS (OR HAS BEEN TRADITIONALLY) A BOY'S CULTURE. BECAUSE THEY'RE WILDLY INSECURE**

— HOWARD RODMAN

With USC's BFA and MFA writing programs admitting classes of 50/50 women to men and the AFI's Directing Workshop for Women celebrating its 30th anniversary, where are all the female filmmakers going?

"There are many women in positions of power, even women who run studios," says Howard Rodman, chair of the Division of Screen and Television Writing, School of Cinema-Television at USC. "But there is no monolithic Hollywood making decrees. There are just individual men who feel more comfortable working with, and taking orders from, other men. Studio filmmaking at its base is (or has been traditionally) a boy's culture. Because they're wildly insecure."

Conscious or not, each gender seems to gravitate to its own kind. In *"Women Who Call the Shots,"* executive Barbara Corday, the first female president of Columbia Pictures, points out, "I don't think men feel comfortable with women around. I think the high, high level men just do not know how to deal with women in the room."

Maybe it goes back to schoolyard politics where boys were expected

**FILM INDUSTRY STARTED OUT WITH WOMEN IN PROMINENT POSITIONS. IN THE EARLY 1900s, THE INDUSTRY WAS VERY ENTREPRENEURIAL. STUDIOS DIDN'T EXIST YET AND ANYONE WITH THE CREATIVITY TO PICK UP A CAMERA COULD MAKE A FILM. THE LACK OF A CORPORATE STRUCTURE OPENED THE DOOR TO WOMEN IN A TIME WHEN THEY WOULDN'T NORMALLY HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY**

to hang out with other boys. Or maybe the top men still believe the stereotype that women are less decisive and are intimidated by large budgets. Molly Gregory, screenwriter, producer, and author of *"Women Who Run the Show,"* says, "Men hire men and women hire women. Or at least more women if not enough women. It's because women have instant communication. Judging by the many interviews for my book, and the response to my speeches, women feel more comfortable with women and the same for men."

In *"The Celluloid Ceiling,"* an annual study of women employed by Hollywood's top grossing films, Martha Lauzen from San Diego State University's School of Communications states, "On films with male executive producers only, women comprised 15 percent of those working in behind-the-scenes roles. On films with at least one female executive producer, women comprised 22 percent of those roles." Lauzen categorizes the roles as executive producer, producer, director, writer, editor, and cinematographer.

The film industry, especially the studio system, still functions according to the mores of the 1950s. New recruits start at the bottom of the ladder, must always put their jobs first, and are expected to show their ingenuity and subservience until they've climbed high enough to have people under them. The stereotype of aggressive, male business practices reigns supreme.

Certainly, not all women want to participate in that kind of environment. But if they love movies, studios are where the big decisions are made.



Stacey Snider helms the ship at Universal Studios

Many women have worked hard to show they have the business savvy to run a studio and produce top-grossing films. Amy Pascal is Chairman of Columbia Pictures and has shepherded films like *Spiderman*, *Girl Interrupted*, *Charlie's Angels II*, and *xXx*. Stacey Snider is Chairman of Universal Pictures and oversaw films like *Erin Brockovich*, *The Mummy*, and *A Beautiful Mind*. Sherry Lansing is Chairman of Paramount Pictures Motion Picture Group and has been responsible for numerous films including *The Accused*, *Titanic*, *Braveheart*, and *Forrest Gump*.

The number of female producers working on the top 250 grossing films has gone up almost negligibly, from 24 percent in 1998 to 25 percent in 2003, as cited in *"The Celluloid Ceiling."* The percentage of directors, editors, and cinematographers working on these films, however, has actually gone down. Female directors have slipped from 9 percent in 1998 to 6 percent in 2003. Female editors have dropped from 20 percent to 15 percent during the same time span. Female cinematographers went from 4 percent to 2 percent. And women writers have stayed level at the 13 percent mark. More surprising is the percentage of female executive producers went down from 18 percent in 1998 to 14 percent in 2003. Even with women in the top positions at the studios, the number of women in key above-the-line positions has declined.

Some argue the real power in Hollywood comes from being able to

greenlight a film. It doesn't matter how many people love a script if, at the end of the road, it's stopped cold. The film industry may work with creative ideas and artistic people, but the studios are a business like any other. The owners are concerned with the bottom line. Movies that get the go-ahead are movies the owners believe will make money. Lots of it. And the studio owners are still predominantly white men.

As with any business, choices filter down from the top. From content to staff, the owners get the final say. And perhaps more than anywhere else, Hollywood believes in categorization. Once a director has made a successful action movie, that's all s/he gets offered. When a writer creates a brilliant romantic comedy, don't even try to show a science fiction script. Contrary to its image of creative thinking, Hollywood loves to put people - male and female - into boxes.

These boxes extend to gender stereotypes. Both in who can do a job and in what content sells. Studio owners still believe deeply in the distinction between male and female movies. Action and horror sell to men. Romantic comedy and drama sell to women. Men's movies are perceived to make money. Women's movies are seen as soft and hard to sell. Especially if the story has a female protagonist.

Linda Seger explains, "The male-oriented film, with male protagonists who conquer, overcome evil, make the world safe, have always been around. Movies about women, with a female protagonist, told from a woman's point of view have a different history. Although they were prominent in the 1930s and 1940s, there are few stellar examples of great female-oriented films in any period of history."

## THE PROPHECY IS SELF-FULFILLING. FEMALE WRITERS AND FILMMAKERS FALL OFF THE TOP 250 CHART

When men's stories are the ones perceived to make money, the stereotype extends to the people who get to write, direct, shoot, and edit the film. Howard Rodman from USC articulates a common assumption, "There's at times a perception that men can write "chick flicks" but that women can't write "guy" movies. This is stupid and wrong."

This assumption comes full-circle. Women are seen as appropriate only for women's movies. Women's movies are not considered to be big money-makers. These movies are marketed solely to women or not marketed at all. The prophecy is self-fulfilling. Female writers and filmmakers fall off the top 250 chart.

Seger tells women, "Gather up your evidence, instead of letting somebody tell you that women ensemble movies or women directed films don't do well."

The greatest irony is that many female filmmakers just want to be respected for the work they do. They don't want to be categorized as female but rather as talented. Bronwen Hughes (*Forces of Nature*, *Stander*) believes strongly in her own talent, independent of her gender. "I think women directors should be thought of as individual filmmakers. And the only thing worth dwelling on is how unique, compelling, and

**ONCE THE PRIMARY PLAYERS, SEGER POINTS OUT, WOMEN WERE NOW RELEGATED TO THE WARDROBE DEPARTMENT**





## CONTRARY TO ITS IMAGE OF CREATIVE THINKING, HOLLYWOOD LOVES TO PUT PEOPLE - MALE AND FEMALE - INTO BOXES.

interesting the filmmaking is. You can't lump us all together. There is absolutely nothing about the job that is gender-specific."

The question then becomes, "How do we change the statistics?" Men at every level of the industry need to believe women can create every genre of movie, just as they did in the film industry's infancy. Change always lies in the hands of individuals. As Larry Turman, Director of USC's Peter Stark Producing Program articulates, "We are all equal opportunity employers. Each decision maker is a separate person. Isn't the goal to hire the best people at every level being cognizant of a desire for more women and people of color?"

This point is very logical when you take stereotypes out of the equation. In order for Hollywood to change its numbers, basic assumptions about women need to be challenged - from the belief that women aren't technical to the idea that "women's stories" don't sell. Women make up 51 percent of the population. Young women go to just as many movies as young men. In fact, they're often the ones to go to the same movie multiple times - as the blockbuster *Titanic* proved.

"Hollywood should hire more female writers, not just for diversity, but for perspective. More than half the world deserves a prominent voice," states Catherine Hardwicke, director and co-writer of *thirteen* and *Lords of Dogtown*.

Roger Corman is a shining example of someone who took action and made a difference. As quoted in *"Women Who Call the Shots,"* Corman says, "I believe in hiring the best talent and since women are 50 percent of the population, I expect them to be 50 percent of the talent. Perhaps I give a bit of an edge to women because they haven't had as much opportunity."

Changing Hollywood's stats on above-the-line talent comes down to a simple equation: hiring women in key positions regardless of genre, budget, and intended audience. With the industry's origins as a model, studio owners can take heart that the change would bring fresh blood, new vision, and box office receipts to make it worth the risk. - **MPM**