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# Hollywood and the myth of meritocracy

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Thesis

**HOLLYWOOD AND THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY**

by

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# **HOLLYWOOD AND THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY**

**CHI-TSUNG CHANG**

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the unequal employment opportunity that women and people of color face in the American film and television industry and the rhetoric of meritocracy that justifies the marginalization of racial and gender minorities in Hollywood workplace. I argue that the sanitized language of meritocracy obscures racist and sexist practice with box office numbers and assessments of competency by White and male decision makers. Using historical records of Hollywood, I begin deconstructing the racist and sexist roots of the industry. Supplemented by quantitative research cross-referencing box office performance and worker diversity, this thesis debunks the myth of meritocracy which the industry still perpetuates today. In addition, the thesis explores brand image and award shows as forces of change to Hollywood's inclusivity in a neoliberal ecopolitical landscape.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

AMPAS	Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
HBO	Home Box Office
HFPA	Hollywood Foreign Press Association
SDSU	San Diego State University
UCLA	University of California Los Angeles
USC	University of Southern California

## INTRODUCTION

During the 2016 Academy Award ceremony, host Chris Rock delivered a scathing monologue on the racism of the industry. “Everyone wants to know: Is Hollywood racist? Is it burning-cross racist? No. It’s a different kind of racist,” said Rock. “You’re damn right Hollywood’s racist, but not the racist that you’ve grown accustomed to. Hollywood is sorority racist. It’s like, ‘We like you, Rhonda, but you’re not a Kappa.’ That’s how Hollywood is.”<sup>1</sup> In the speech, Rock openly dispelled the illusion of Hollywood as a genuine meritocracy and pointed to covert racism as the cause of Hollywood’s lack of diversity, and the covertness may have played a part in the challenge of addressing inequality in the industry. According to UCLA’s research report, in 2018, the directors of the top grossing films were only 7.1% women and 19.3% people of color.<sup>2</sup> That statistics show a massive discrepancy between the Hollywood workers and the demographics of the United States, where women consist half of the population, while people of color take up roughly 40%, yet the enormous inequalities that have long existed in the industry have just recently bring brought to public awareness. Workplace discrimination in the American film and television industry is deeply entrenched—both in its ubiquity and normalization.

The concept of meritocracy permeates the American society and the film and television industry, wherein economic success is tied to individual agency. If one works

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<sup>1</sup> Griggs, Brandon. “Chris Rock: ‘You’re Damn Right Hollywood Is Racist.’” *CNN*. Cable News Network, February 29, 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/28/entertainment/chris-rock-oscars-so-white-feat>.

<sup>2</sup> Wolf, Jessica. “2020 Hollywood Diversity Report: A Different Story behind the Scenes.” UCLA. UCLA, October 22, 2020. <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/2020-hollywood-diversity-report>.

hard enough, upward social mobility is within reach for one and one's offspring, and thus the "American dream" is achieved.<sup>3</sup> This view of the workplace (and the society at large) as an unbiased judge of a person's talent and capability blinds the believers of meritocracy to the many barriers that women and people of color suffer from, and Hollywood is no exception. In one exchange between Academy Award winner Matt Damon and Effie Brown at the season premiere of HBO's *Project Greenlight* (2015), the producer of *Dear White People* (2014), Damon became defensive when Brown suggested to hire a minority director to direct minority narratives. Damon argued that the hiring process should be based "entirely on merit, leaving all other factors out of it," while neglecting the deep-seated inequality in the industry where minority workers are often turned away despite their talents and his own racial bias against minority talents when he said: "do you want the *best* director?"<sup>4</sup> Damon's misconception of Hollywood as a perfect meritocracy could not be further away from the truth. In this thesis, I argue that not only do women and people of color face unequal treatment compared to White men in Hollywood, but the corporate policies and individual decisions that disadvantaged gender and racial minority workers are often made under the guise of financial viability that perpetuates the myth of meritocracy and conceals inequality in Hollywood.

While quantitative research from universities and trade press reporting now produce documentation of industry sexism and racism on both the interpersonal and systemic

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<sup>3</sup> Ellis, Christopher. "Social Class, Meritocracy, and the Geography of the 'American Dream'." *The Forum : A Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics* 15, no. 1 (2017): 51-70

<sup>4</sup> Cooper, Brittney. "Matt Damon's Staggering Meritocracy Lie: What His 'Project Greenlight' Blow-Up With Effie Brown Really Shows." *Salon*. Salon.com, September 17, 2015. [https://www.salon.com/2015/09/16/matt\\_damons\\_staggering\\_meritocracy\\_lie\\_what\\_his\\_project\\_greenlight\\_blow\\_up\\_with\\_effie\\_brown\\_really\\_shows/](https://www.salon.com/2015/09/16/matt_damons_staggering_meritocracy_lie_what_his_project_greenlight_blow_up_with_effie_brown_really_shows/).

level, scholarship on the reasonings behind Hollywood's discrimination is scarce. First, the thesis examines the claim of meritocracy by shedding light on the formation of the institutional racism and sexism within Hollywood. Through industry studies of Hollywood, this thesis lays out the gradual naturalization of gender and racial essentialist assumptions in the industry, which in turn placed many obstacles between minority workers and career successes. In addition, in order to analyze the more enigmatic form of discrimination that is obfuscated by the false image of meritocracy, this thesis will examine Hollywood's discriminatory hiring practices through the same set of financial lenses Hollywood stakeholders use: job opportunities, budget sizes, and confidence level (measured in "bankability"). In a nutshell, ideologically-rooted bigotry is rationalized through "colorblind" and "gender-blind" business language and transformed into legitimate and socially-acceptable industry practices that discriminate against minorities but not White men, who dominate most job positions in Hollywood today. For example, *Parks and Recreation* (2009) writer Alan Yung commented on the double-standards of the "risk-averse" Hollywood that would not cast Asians in lead roles in blockbuster but put *Parks and Recreation* cast member Chris Pratt in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) and *Jurassic World* (2015) despite the lack of prior major movie credits.<sup>5</sup>

Although this thesis touches upon the quality of media representation of racial minorities and women, it is not the main objective of the thesis to survey mainstream representation in narratives. The framework of cultural hegemony is used to explore how

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<sup>5</sup> Sun, Rebecca. "Where Are the Asian-American Movie Stars?" *The Hollywood Reporter*. The Hollywood Reporter, May 9, 2016. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/are-asian-american-movie-stars-890755/>.

the dominant ideologies react and contain alternative forms of expressions. Additionally, the framework of political economy is used to tie expressions in media to economic factors and to tie the quality of media representation to minorities' access to the means of cultural production. Discrimination in Hollywood is both influenced by ideological and financial factors. By framing the investigations on discrimination through financial lenses, this thesis can contain a range of biases—explicit, implicit, interpersonal, and systemic—and meet Hollywood's discriminatory practices on material terms of employment opportunities. Ultimately, this thesis offers a rebuttal to “meritocracy” by highlighting the inequalities in the industry and making a financial case for diversity in the film and television industry.

This thesis seeks to deconstruct the sanitized rhetoric of competency (or box office draw) by employing industry and production studies of Hollywood and by accessing quantitative research on financial variables of box office performances. Firstly, the thesis points to the construction and fluctuations of gender coding in jobs to expose sexist origins of the current lopsided gender demographics. The thesis then goes on to examine the relationship between racial diversity, studio investment, and box office returns to debunk the perception that non-White projects have limited appeal. Lastly, this thesis investigates the financial factors that push corporations to improve diversity, which led to various types of inclusive expressions.

### **Literature Review**

The most direct proof of the inequality within Hollywood lies in the statistical analysis of the film and television industry's worker demographics. West coast

universities proximate to Hollywood such as the University of Southern California, University of California Los Angeles, and San Diego State University produce reports detailing the underrepresentation in various sectors of Hollywood. The three universities each approach documenting inequality differently. USC's topic-oriented research reports provide a comprehensive view of discrimination over a long period of time. For example, the "Inequality in 1,300 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ & Disability from 2007 to 2019" report produced by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative gives an overview of minority workers' quantitative representation both in front and behind the camera across major studios. Moreover, the report delves into the qualitative representation of speaking characters. UCLA adopts a recurring approach to its annual "Hollywood Diversity Report"—the yearly update allows this thesis to track progress over time, not just in the film sector but in the under-examined television industry as well. In addition, UCLA provides the box office performance of inclusive films, which is useful in examining producers' claim that minority-leads and narratives lack wide-appeal. Lastly, SDSU's annual "The Celluloid Ceiling," produced by the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film, provides unique insight into below-the-line women workers. These reports provide invaluable and up-to-date data on the state of the industry's diversity and preliminary analysis on relationships between various industry agents and representation in the workplace and on-screen narratives, such as the correlation between minority creatives and the quantitative and qualitative representation of minorities on screen. The information in these reports allows this thesis to analyze the state of Hollywood's diversity through both vertical slice and horizontal

overview.

In examining the discriminatory hiring practices of Hollywood, tracing the roots of these practices through history allows a better understanding of the logic behind the discrimination in individual job positions in the industry. *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* written by Karen Ward Mahar lays bare the history of job gendering in the American film industry. Using historical analysis and feminist film studies, Mahar not only follows the careers of important early women filmmakers such as Alice Guy-Blaché and Lois Weber, but also addresses and details early Hollywood's acceptance and subsequent alienation of women's labor—particularly in high-level creative roles and managerial positions—as the result of the industry's growing sophistication. The history of women flourishing in early Hollywood serves as the starting point to counter any essentialist notion of female incompetence in field. Mahar's account of job-gendering in a fledging industry is crucial to this thesis in understanding Hollywood's male domination as a naturally occurring phenomenon but as an artificial and deliberate process enacted by male workers in Hollywood. While the book is limited in subject (White women filmmaker) and timespan (under two decades), the research provides an important framework because Mahar does not just present the state of discrimination at any given time. Instead, the book presents a trajectory of trends, and the essay builds upon the lineage of various investigations of inequality in Hollywood.

Continuing the theme of the marginalization of women's labor but complementing *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood's* focus on top-level jobs, Erin Hill's *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* and its archive records and first-

hand accounts trace the history of below-the-line jobs such as script supervisor, editor, costume designer, and casting director—giving a comprehensive overview of women workers in every sector of Hollywood, especially in fields, such as service and secretarial work, that are often neglected by academic studies of Hollywood labor. On the other hand, Hill meticulously identifies the gender coding in various job positions and analyzed their associations to “feminized labor” outside of Hollywood using a sociological framework—connecting old occupations to newly-created job positions in Hollywood. This framework allows Hill to paint a more complete picture of labor conditions for women workers across disciplines, but for this thesis project it has limited application to non-White workers, as Jim Crow laws kept people of color from most but the lowest-level jobs in society with few connections to film production.

Jane M. Gaines’s *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* also looks the history of women’s labor in early Hollywood, however, Gaines is less interested in the content of the historical records than in how to view the records. Gaines argues that incomplete records may lead to undependable reconstruction of history and that surviving accounts themselves could be colored. For example, Alice Guy-Blaché in her memoir wrote that she directed *La Fée aux Choux (The Cabbage Fairy)* in 1896, which led to feminist film scholars crediting her as the first narrative film director, and Gaines put this claim under question for its historical significance and accuracy. (What does it mean to direct a film when the movie industry was still at its commercial infancy? Why is there no print discovered matching in both content and year according to Guy-Blaché’s account?) While there are few historical records in this book



directly related to the thesis compared to Mahar and Hill's work, the point of a skewed view of the past is taken. To err on the side of caution and caution and supplement the patchy records of early Hollywood, *Recoding Gender: Women's Changing Participation in Computing* written by Janet Abbate, William Aspray, and Thomas J. Misa provide a more complete account of gender-coding in job positions in a more contemporary industry that share many similarities with Hollywood. In addition to gender-coding, Abbate et al. view the gender shift in software engineering as a product of increasingly complex organizational hierarchy, valuation of labor, and social convention. Software development is akin to Hollywood as a creative, collaborative (and at time chaotic) industry, and the field experienced shift in gender coding that favored men even more drastic than Hollywood with few changes in work responsibilities—women were marginalized from both industries as they sought respectability. Finally, to cap off the development of discriminatory hiring practices for women filmmakers in Hollywood, *Indie Reframed: Women's Filmmaking and Contemporary American Independent Cinema* written by Linda Badley, Claire Perkins, Michele Schreiber, and R. Barton Palmer is a repository of case studies of female filmmakers facing a variety of challenges in unique industry settings.

Scholarship on racism in Hollywood primarily focuses on media representation and its textual analysis, and Maryann Erigha's *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry* represents one of the most substantial analyses of workplace racism in Hollywood. The university-produced diversity reports showcase underrepresentation of people of color across the board, and Erigha provides the framework for interpreting

the data. The book details the unequal treatment Black filmmakers face in the industry, with emphasis on the budget disparity of projects, and exposes “bankability” rhetoric as disingenuous. Although the book brings in filmmakers of other ethnicities to compare with their Black peers, the type and severity of obstacles other non-Black racial minorities face in the industry are not thoroughly discussed. This thesis extends the framework of “bankability” to other racial minorities, particularly filmmakers of Asian and Latine descent. In addition, the incorporation of both gender-coding and “bankability” can make clear the unique disadvantages women filmmakers of color face in Hollywood.

Research on the decision-making processes of executives and producers informs the analysis offered in this thesis. Scholars of media industries point to anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker’s influential *Hollywood the Dream Factory*, published in 1950, as the first substantive study of film industry labor. Powdermaker employed an ethnographic approach to studying the above-the-line workers in the industry, detailing the industry culture informing these workers’ behaviors both at the meta-level of career or business decisions and the micro-level of day-to-day routines. Similarly, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, edited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks, John Caldwell, includes multiple perspectives on and approaches to the culture of labor in contemporary Hollywood. The studies in this volume reveal the work culture and practices that perpetuate discrimination in the industry, specifically Hollywood’s culture of insularity and secrecy and producers’ intuition-based (and un-scientific) “audience knowledge” of consumer preference. Producer intuition is susceptible to personal biases

and the culture of secrecy allows biases-charged decisions to be hidden from view or stand unchallenged. In addition to drawing from trade press reporting of racist and sexist incidents in Hollywood, this thesis also utilizes legal scholarship that examines the legality and mechanism of discriminatory hiring practices and the reasonings behind them. For example, “Casting and Caste-Ing: Reconciling Artistic Freedom and Antidiscrimination Norms” by Russell K. Robinson focuses on the casting decisions that navigate between blatant violations of Equal Employment Opportunity laws and racially biased but legal casting calls. Robinson writes that court enforcement of Title VII is lax, and the difficulty in pinpointing discriminatory intentions in an obscured decision-making chain (writer, producer, casting director, etc.) provides little legal ground for plaintiffs in court.

Industry and production studies either paint audiences as passive consumers or do not consider the audience as a group that possesses influence over the industry. In investigating the discursive relationship between major studios, minority workers, and the audience in the public discourse of diversity in media representation, I turn to *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times* (edited by Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser) as the foundational text to mapping relationships between agents of political activism under neoliberalism, where the audience is positioned as an active, interpretative community. Author’s “Pay-for Culture: Television Activism in a Neoliberal Digital Age” lays down the framework for audience activism, which the thesis applies to the #OscarSoWhite twitter campaign. While Author’s “Citizen Brand: ABC and the Do Good Turn in US Television” focuses on paratextual action’s effect on brand image, the

thesis expands upon the theoretical framework and argues the text can also serve as a branding strategy in which major studios co-opt the rhetoric of inclusion to acquire goodwill.

Moreover, I draw from *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* Elana Levine and Michael Newman as another framework for corporate citizenship in the post- #OscarSoWhite Hollywood. Newman and Levine's essential text describes the hierarchies of tastes that define media's standing in society and analyzes the legitimating efforts the television industry has adopted to gain cultural cachet. The television industry strengthens its proximity to art forms higher in the hierarchies of tastes and denigrates lower media, and one of the strategies the television industry employed to demonstrate its affinity to cinema is through auteur theory. This thesis repurposes the "auteur theory as legitimation" framework and places minority creatives in the auteurist discourse that only White (and male) creatives were privileged to in the past and reconfigures the cultural cachet of (minority) auteurs as added brand value under neoliberal corporate citizenship. In a similar vein, the scholarship on HBO's "quality" television discourse focuses on a series of legitimating tactics used by the premium cable channel to distinguish itself from the rest of television and position itself as the tastemaker and trend-setter of the television industry. HBO's "quality" branding provides an alternative to corporate citizenship as "moral guardian" of publicly-accepted and accessible social values, such as how Disney positioned itself. In *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* edited by Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, Cara Louise Buckley, risk-taking is identified as a signifier of "quality." Jennifer Fuller points out in

her essay “Branding Blackness on US Cable Television” that one of HBO’s “quality” branding tactics associates Black casts and Black showrunners with risk and edginess, provide a commercial solution to ideological divergence from the cultural hegemony.

Another investigative venue of Hollywood’s neoliberal reactions to the diversity discourse is award shows. Trade press investigation of and scholarship on the Academy Award’s electoral process are used to demonstrate award shows’ ideological and public relations function. Isabel Molina-Guzmán’s essay “#OscarsSoWhite: How Stuart Hall Explains Why Nothing Changes in Hollywood and Everything Is Changing” situates the Academy Awards as the discursive site of Hollywood’s institutional racism and sexism, economic imperatives, and Hollywood exceptionalism. Molina-Guzmán writes that the economic incentives are limited in its ability in inducing structural change in the industry, but the thesis takes a slightly difference stance. While I recognize that Hollywood upholds the status quo, this thesis places Molina-Guzmán’s argument in conversation with the diversity reports and case studies that suggest an upward trend in diversity in many creative and executive positions.

To discern the superficial progress under neoliberalism Molina-Guzmán had cautioned against, Kristen Warner’s “Plastic Representation” essay serves as one metric for structural change in Hollywood. Warner writes about a mode of representation which she coined “plastic representation,” where media swaps racial groups with no changes made to the “universal” narratives. This form of representation exudes signifiers of social progress but lacks any meaningful significance. As stated earlier, this essay focuses more on employment opportunities rather than media representation, but the quality of media

representation can become an indicator of cultural producers' racial and sexual biases (or lack thereof) and executives' confidence in minority narratives. Further continuing the connection between media representation and minority employment, Dick Hebdige's writing on cultural hegemony sets up the framework to understanding the Hollywood's ideological messaging. According to Hebdige, the cultural hegemony is formed by various social groups that shape the consensus by forming an ideological alliance, and subcultures and other deviations are homogenized through containment or commodification. The neoliberal adoption of inclusivity in the industry is informed by financial and ideological factors and mediated between groups such as creatives, executives, advertisers, and audience—each with different agenda between and among themselves. Finally, Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch's conception of the cultural forum is central to understanding the discursive aspect of multiple entities mediating acceptable mainstream representation of minorities. Newcomb and Hirsch theorize television as a site of social values mediation, where shows do not present an ultimate verdict on particular social issues but form a conversation between cultural producers and interpretative communities. With award shows, the framework of cultural forum can be applied to not just a specific subject, but to the entirety of Hollywood and the social discourses contained within. In other words, the analysis of representation is performed at two levels: textual (representation in narrative) and paratextual (representation as chosen by select industry workers.)

## Chapter Overview

The first chapter is dedicated to the exploration of sexist hiring practices in Hollywood and the critical examination of gender coding in the workplace. I argue that the myth of meritocracy has obscured the harmful effects of gender coding. Gender-coding confines women to few job positions and prevents them from entering male-dominated fields. Furthermore, gender coding in the film and television industry contributes to labor exploitation and reduces fair competition. The chapter first gives an overview of the current statistics on gender inequality in Hollywood. By using industry studies of early Hollywood, this thesis deconstructs the myth of meritocracy and identifies elements of labor that were traditionally considered as “women’s work.” Gender-coded labor can then be understood as a disadvantage for women who wish to enter masculine fields and vice versa. Gender-coding can also be naturalized within and exacerbated by a corporate hierarchy due to continuous alienation and devaluing of lower-level labor, which justifies low wages. The chapter’s second part on gender-coding reviews the essentialist idea of gender affinity and its infallibility. Both the history of computer science and film production demonstrate that the change in gender-coding can (and did) occur within the same job positions. To further demystify a meritocratic Hollywood, the chapter contrasts biased treatment of male and female filmmakers and points to an industry double standard as the cause for the small number of female success stories. Finally, the case study on Academy Award-winning director Kathryn Bigelow provides a contemporary example of a successful woman filmmaker’s navigation through a male-dominated field.

The second chapter covers Hollywood's discrimination of people in color and highlights the economic disparity they face in the industry. Racial minority workers in Hollywood are subjected to extensive skepticism of their ability to bring in profit for the studios, yet the same scrutiny is not applied to White men. Since people of color were historically excluded from all creative job positions in Hollywood, their entrance into any job position first needs to be proven with "bankability" due to the presumed unpopularity of racial minorities. This chapter also sets up the examination of the "fair" meritocracy with a statistical overview of the industry's (lack of) inclusion of racial minorities and traces the roots of this exclusion to early Hollywood, the Production Code, and Jim Crow laws. The chapter uses the difference in racial inclusion between mainstream Hollywood and early Black independent cinema to demonstrate the employment and authentic representation of racial minorities are linked to the capital to produce media images—to produce the types of racial representations unseen in the studio systems, Black filmmakers finance and produce films independently without the access to sophisticated filmmaking facilities nor capital available to mainstream Hollywood. The chapter then frames racial inclusion through the passage of time as a result of ideological convergence between civil rights groups, the government, and the public. However, in the contemporary media landscape, racial inclusion faces limitations posed by the cultural hegemony of American society. Chapter two and three provide case studies of mainstream Hollywood's hegemonic preference for plastic representations over authentic ones that studio executives may deem too controversial. To tackle the industry obstacles Hollywood places upon workers of color, chapter two then starts a step-by-step process



of debunking “bankability” and Hollywood’s meritocracy that historically disadvantaged workers of color in Hollywood. I start with minorities’ challenge in building up a career track record for continuous employment, then follows by the self-fulfilling prophecy of the low “bankability,” which stemmed from low earnings caused by the lack of promotion and limited distribution. The final step in debunking “bankability” involves using box office performance of well-funded projects with minority casts or creatives to disprove the misconception that racial minority casts and narratives have limited appeal in American and international markets.

Chapter three contrasts and compares three entities—Disney, HBO, and award shows such as the Oscars and Golden Globes—to investigate how employment opportunities for women and people of color are affected amid the industry trend of embracing the discourse of diversity and inclusion. In other words, this is an investigation of Hollywood’s largescale cultural shift away from White-and-male-centric employment and media representations. Disney has a history of using corporate citizenship to accumulate goodwill through public relation strategies to improve its brand image, and in post-#OscarSoWhite Hollywood, the media conglomerate appoints itself as the uplifter of minority auteurs by hiring women and people of color to lead high-profile projects. The chapter examines the authenticity (or plasticity) of representation in such projects and how these minority auteurs are reappropriated to accumulate cultural cachet. The HBO case study delves into the unique industry position and branding strategy of the premium cable network, and then performs textual analysis on the content it produces to demonstrate the synergy between branding and inclusion. Lastly, this chapter examines

the history and political culture within the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Hollywood Foreign Press Association to explore the factors that led to different outcomes from the public discourse on the lack of diversity in Hollywood.

## CHAPTER ONE

During the Writers Guild Festival of 2017, the Academy Award-winning writer Aaron Sorkin shocked the audience when he posed a question regarding the diversity in Hollywood: “Are you saying that women and minorities have a more difficult time getting their stuff read than white men and you’re also saying that [white men] get to make mediocre movies and can continue on?” Sorkin was later reported to say that “Hollywood is a genuine meritocracy and that he was unaware of Hollywood’s existing diversity problem.”<sup>6</sup> After the article was published, Sorkin defended himself to *Variety* that he was repeating the question asked by the audience. Regardless of whether Sorkin, who privately argues that Oscar Best Actors generally deliver a higher performance standard than that of the actresses, personally believes in a meritocratic Hollywood,<sup>7</sup> the idea that the film and television industry’s hiring practice is based solely on capability and performance is far from uncommon. However, such claims start to crumble when scrutinized alongside statistics.

This chapter focuses on the barriers women face in the American film and television industry. I examine the logic of gender-based discriminatory hiring in Hollywood and explore the formation of gender coding in a budding industry. Additionally, I review how gender-coding manifests in various job positions by revisiting the early film and

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<sup>6</sup> Battle, Chelsea. “Aaron Sorkin Gets an Education on Hollywood's Diversity Issue at WGFestival.” *Variety*. *Variety*, March 28, 2017. <https://variety.com/2017/scene/news/aaron-sorkin-diversity-hollywoods-writers-room-wgffestival-1202016729/>.

<sup>7</sup> Boot, William. “Exclusive: Aaron Sorkin Thinks Male Film Roles Have Bigger 'Degree of Difficulty' Than Female Ones.” *The Daily Beast*. The Daily Beast Company, December 15, 2014. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/exclusive-aaron-sorkin-thinks-male-film-roles-have-bigger-degree-of-difficulty-than-female-ones>.

computer science history. The development of the computer science field shares many similarities to the film and television industry, and the better-documented industry history can supplant where early records of Hollywood are lacking. Finally, I will apply the gender-coding of the past to modern case studies and quantitative data regarding the demographic composition of Hollywood to lay bare the massive discrepancy of male and female workers in Hollywood and analyze the mechanism of discrimination. Using a combination of statistical analysis, industry studies, and production studies, this thesis chapter seeks to highlight how sexism becomes naturalized in the industry via meritocratic rhetoric that perpetuates systemic gender segregation in Hollywood today. I argue that the solution to changing the culture of systemic sexism lies in the leadership of the studio system.

### **The Statistics of Gender Inequality**

The film and television industry can be a hostile work environment for women, people of color, and especially women of color, who face the disadvantage of being a double minority that experiences discrimination on two fronts, hence the miniscule number of women of color in top positions. The adversities this chapter details primarily feature White women workers in the industry as case studies. While the principals of gender-coding also apply to women of color, each case of intersection of racial and gender-based discrimination may be different in its composition. Several academic institutions have sought to address the inequality within the industry: University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative and San Diego State University's Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, to name a few. Starting from

2014, UCLA has released The Hollywood Diversity Report annually in an effort to document the unequal opportunities given to female creatives and other creatives of color in the American film and television industry. From the 2020-released report, it shows that at the peak of the decade (in 2019), only 15.1% of the theatrical releases were directed by women, which is an increase from 4.1% of 2011.<sup>8</sup> On the television side, women fare better. In scripted television on broadcast, cable, and streaming platforms from 2018–2019, female show creators scored north of 20%, with female episode directors approaching 30%.<sup>9</sup> While there is a general growth trend that can be detected in the statistics, the number of women who find themselves in the director’s seat is still scarce compared to men. These statistics communicate the extreme gender inequality in Hollywood. The persistence of the myth of meritocracy is closely related to the highly competitive work environment in the industry.

The production culture of Hollywood may help explain why the concept of “genuine meritocracy” exists. John Caldwell writes that the labor environment during a shoot is fast-paced and highly demanding, that each production is essentially “a new corporation that starts up, functions intensely, and closes down in a matter of months.”<sup>10</sup> Once a shoot is finished, the production is disbanded, and the workers are out of their jobs since their

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<sup>8</sup> Ramon, Ana-Christina, and Darnell Hunt. Rep. *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods Part 1: Film*, February 6, 2020. <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2020-Television-10-22-2020.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Ramon, Ana-Christina, and Darnell Hunt. Rep. *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods Part 2: Television*, October 22, 2020. <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2020-Television-10-22-2020.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Caldwell, John Thornton. “Trade Images and Imagined Communities (Below the Line).” Essay. In *Production Culture Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, 110–49. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.

term of employment is dependent on the length of the production, so they often start looking for a new production before their current posting comes to an end. The workers' continual employment thus depends on their ability to consistently secure new contracts—Caldwell terms this mode of employment a “nomadic labor system.” However, talented industry workers do not always have to play a passive role in job-hunting. Sometimes studios seek out production teams that have produced stylistic or technical achievements that the studios would like to emulate in future projects, making attractive portfolio, or notable past work experiences, an advantage for workers seeking employment. Other times, the teams would need to communicate their strong suits and their ability to satisfy the needs of specific production requirements.<sup>11</sup> This frequent and highly selective process creates the notion of a merit-based hiring practice where a worker is “only as good as [their] last job” and the studios would look for the most competent workers to reduce risk.<sup>12</sup>

One finds an unexpected parallel in another American industry: Silicon Valley. Computer science shares many traits with the film and television industry—both are emerging industries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that heavily focus on creativity, collaborative labor, difficulty in project management due to the unpredictability of the creative process, and finally, a history of pushing out female workers that led to a workplace gender gap of today. One commonly repeated argument the proponents against affirmative action policies (or other kinds of inclusion initiatives) in Silicon Valley present is that the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Jones, Deborah, and Pringle, Judith K. "Unmanageable Inequalities: Sexism in the Film Industry." *The Sociological Review* (Keele) 63, no. 1\_suppl (2015): 37-49.

significant underrepresentation of women is the result of women’s self-selection out of the computer labs in academic and work environments (i.e., the small number of female computer scientists in the workplace is simply the result of the female population’s lack of interest in this career path.) While that may appear to be a logical deduction of cause and effect, such a statement is often a surface-level observation which overlooks the bigger picture. The statement falsely assumes two things: the decision to not enter the field is divorced from any sociological factors, and that women do not face discrimination or resistance when they do decide to pursue a career. While women are socially conditioned to avoid “stereotypically masculine activities” since childhood and avoid computer science due to the popular male geek image,<sup>13</sup> the idea that women are uninterested in filmmaking is untrue. Women make up of 50% of film school graduates,<sup>14</sup> yet from data provided by *The Hollywood Diversity Report*, the number of women working in the industry is nowhere near the film school figure. What exactly stop women from entering the film and television industry?

### **The Construction of Gender-Coding Part 1: What Is Women’s Work?**

“20th Century Fox, Paramount Have No Female Directors Through 2018,” writes *The Wrap*. “A Sea of Blockbusters and Almost No Female Filmmakers,” reports *The Atlantic*. These headlines in the trade press not only expose the rampant sexism in the

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<sup>13</sup> Abbate, Janet. “Gender in Academic Computing: Alternative Career Paths and Norms.” Essay. In *Recoding Gender: Women’s Changing Participation in Computing*, 145–76. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Sinwell, Sarah E. S. “Women Make Movies: Chicken & Egg Pictures, Gamechanger Films and the Future of Female Independent Filmmaking.” In *Indie Reframed: Women’s Filmmaking and Contemporary American Independent Cinema*, edited by Badley Linda, Perkins Claire, and Schreiber Michele, 23-35. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. Accessed February 6, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0529f.7>.

industry, but their increasing appearance is also indicative of the public's rising awareness of minority filmmakers' struggles since the inception of Hollywood. Diversity in Hollywood became a popular subject in recent years, however, the reason why discrimination in the industry only just became public knowledge is because the understanding of Hollywood's innerworkings is limited by the design of Hollywood's culture of secrecy. In illustrating the difficulties in gaining ethnographic access to the industry culture and figures within, Sherry B. Ortner describes Hollywood's reinforcement of the inside/outside divide by ways of "made-up alternative vocabulary" in trade press that emphasizes readers' insider-knowledge, the barriers of studio lots and star residence separating themselves from the outside world, and the sense of community via the physical geographies of Los Angeles and the small circle of "insiders" who all know each other. Getting in contact with industry figures who are willing to be interviewed is challenging—an attempt to set up an interview with a contact often devolves into an infinite loop of one contact deferring to another contact without responding to the questions—and to cite producer Christine Vachon's rule number 6 of the film festival survival rules: "There is always some other great thing happening that you have not been invited to."<sup>15</sup> To the workers on the receiving end of the sexism, some accept it as a price to pay for working in their dream jobs.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, executives and high-ranking creatives pressure the victims into silence with threats of future

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<sup>15</sup> Ortner, Sherry B. "Studying Sideways: Ethnographic Access in Hollywood." Essay. In *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, edited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, 175–89. New York: Routledge, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, and Pringle, 43.



unemployment from the rest of the industry. Fearing retribution, few women filmmakers dare to speak openly of the workplace harassment and discrimination they face daily.

To circumvent the potential retaliation, an anonymous Tumblr blog called “Shit People Say to Women Directors” was founded so women filmmakers would have a platform to vent their frustrations and share the horror stories they have experienced in film school and at various levels of the industry. One anonymous submission titled “Gender Neutral” describes the tremendous difficulty of job hunting as a woman:

Even with a decade of credits, a MFA on film and a successful career, I had to change my name on my resume, LinkedIn, etc. from my given name to my initials so that everything was gender neutral, just so that I could get in the door for job interviews. Twice I took phone interviews where the guy on the other end actually said, “Oh, you’re a girl” and then hung up. One producer told me I should be ashamed of myself for “tricking” him into interviewing me.<sup>17</sup>

The blog gained popularity quickly and was reported on by several entertainment news outlets in 2015. In an email correspondence with *Indiewire* journalist Paula Bernstein, the blog creator(s) wrote: “Women have been cowed into silence over these issues for fear of being further shut out, marginalized and denied networking opportunities after being labeled ‘whistle blowers’ or ‘difficult.’”<sup>18</sup> Both the personal testimonies of women filmmakers and the quantitative research produced by various institutions point to a widespread problem of sexism within the industry. The anonymous stories posted on “Shit People Say to Women Directors” have no shortage of micro-aggressions, overt discrimination, and sexual harassment that would frustrate workers to the point of

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<sup>17</sup> “Gender Neutral.” Shit People Say to Women Directors, July 27, 2015.

<https://shitpeoplesaytowomendirectors.tumblr.com/post/125185692880/gender-neutral>.

<sup>18</sup> Bernstein, Paula. “Shit People Say to Women Directors' Highlights Sexism in the Film and TV Industry.” *IndieWire*. IndieWire, April 29, 2015. <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/04/shit-people-say-to-women-directors-highlights-sexism-in-the-film-and-tv-industry-62545/>.

quitting the industry, or drive any aspiring filmmakers away, but the “Gender Neutral” story reveals another way to interpret the massive gender disparity in the industry beyond interpersonal sexism. The person in the story set up her LinkedIn—a professional networking website—profile in a way that concealed her gender as a woman, and her work experience and portfolio were impressive enough to garner interest from potential employers, but when the employers—all of them are men—learned that she was a woman, they lost all interest. The language of “get [one’s foot] in the door” from the Tumblr story also points to gender being a deciding factor apart from the filmmaker’s qualifications for the job, or rather, gender being part of the qualifications. The “Gender Neutral” story is no doubt a case of discrimination based on gender, much like the rest of the story submissions on “Shit People Say to Women Directors.” Interestingly, the woman’s résumé was attractive to the employers, and she was only disqualified on the basis of her gender, suggesting an essential distrust in a female filmmaker’s competency, and this low confidence in women workers can still persist even after they are hired. Budget data reveals that female directors are not entrusted with high-budget productions—the number of male directors helming big budget blockbusters dwarves their female counterparts. Up until 2020, there were 426 movies in history with budget north of \$100 million (not adjusted with inflation)<sup>19</sup>; among those 426 movies, only nine were directed by women, and none passed the \$200 million mark.<sup>20</sup> The nine directors

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<sup>19</sup> “Movie Budgets.” The Numbers. Accessed February 10, 2021. <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/budgets/all/401>.

<sup>20</sup> Welk, Brian. “9 Women Who Have Directed Movies With \$100 Million Budgets (Photos).” *TheWrap*, TheWrap, March 8, 2019. <https://www.thewrap.com/9-women-who-have-directed-movies-with-100-million-budgets-photos/>.

out of 426 movies translates into a meager 2.1%, which is roughly half of the 2010s decade low point of women-directed films at 4.1%.<sup>21</sup> However, women workers in Hollywood are not only discriminated against at the highest level of creative positions—gender-coding exists in various levels and fields in the studio system.

The conceptualization of organization as an abstract and intellectual structure—such as a merit-based industry where the talented would naturally succeed—obfuscates the issue of inequality. Organizational theories frames job and the universal individual who is employed for the job as “disembodied” and “gender-neutral,” but the individual is not in fact “disembodied,” but created from the male identity and perspective.<sup>22</sup> In other words, gender inequality is overshadowed by the idealized image of meritocracy (because men would not be discriminated against based on their gender), and failure to achieve masculine qualities—the normative organizational benchmark—is considered less than the model-worker in a corporate organization. To understand the gender-based evaluation of worker competency in film and television, one must first turn to the formation of the industry and examine how the jobs become gender-coded. The importance of computer science history cannot be understated, for it shares similar developmental conditions with Hollywood, and it can help fill in the gaps where early Hollywood records or research thereof is lacking. One of the most notable commonalities the film and television industry share with the computer science field is that women play an important role in the two

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<sup>21</sup> Ramon, Ana-Christina, and Darnell Hunt. Rep. *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods Part 1: Film*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Joan Acker. “Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations.” *Gender & Society* 4, no. 2 (1990): 139-58.

fields' respective early developmental stages. However, it is not to say that women's initial prosperity indicates gender coding did not exist back then. On the contrary, gender coding has existed since the inception, but the changes in gendering strategy throughout the evolution of labor division led to an increasingly hostile working environment for women.

Labor in Hollywood can be classified into two categories: above-the-line and below-the-line. The line refers to the printed line on a budget sheet that separates labor cost into "creative" and "technical."<sup>23</sup> Directors, writers, producers, and actors are above-the-line. While many of the below-the-line jobs involve an intensive creative process, they are considered "technical" for the special trade knowledge they hold. These jobs include "cinematographers, editors, production designers, costume designers, gaffers, camera loaders, body doubles, etc."<sup>24</sup> The line not only labels the types of labor, but it also marks the difference in hierarchy. For the above-the-line workers, they are able to negotiate a more lucrative contract due to their visibility to the public and cultural importance in "generating symbolic meanings."<sup>25</sup>

Below-the-line workers, as Miranda Banks has pointed out, have often been neglected by scholars and activist organizations, as statistical tracking is often focused on above-the-line women, and they "fail to take into account that many below-the-line occupations have been dominated by women."<sup>26</sup> However, the lines of work where

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<sup>23</sup> Banks, Miranda J. "Gender Below-the-Line: Defining Feminist Production Studies." Essay. In *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, edited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, 87–98. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

below-the-line women prosper are highly associated with female gender-coding and cultural and organizational hierarchies. In 1936's *Photoplay* profile titled "They Aren't All Actresses in Hollywood," women mostly occupied feminized jobs that existed prior to the creation of Hollywood, such as "seamstress, costume designer, interior decorator, waitress, hairdresser, secretary, writer, and singer."<sup>27</sup> For Hollywood-specific jobs, the feminization of clerical work is an important factor for women in administrative roles and some below-the-line jobs—jobs of a clerical nature are more open to women. The role of the script supervisor, also referred to as a "script girl" as a gendered slang, was often given to women. The reasoning was that women are thought to be better at details than men, and the usage of stopwatch and typewriter was coded as clerical work.<sup>28</sup> Beyond the explicit job description, a script supervisor is also responsible for interpersonal communication—pointing out errors made by crew members—and emotional management when friction arises from the communication.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, while the job of an editor was never dominated by women, the position became "women friendly" due to its association with clerical labor. Hand splicing film was considered "tedious and routine" by men,<sup>30</sup> and the light manufacturing at a stationary, behind-the-scenes environment—particularly the act of cutting and reattaching material—bears resemblance to the use of sewing machine. Another below-the-line job that contributes significantly to the production of meaning in film is cinematography, yet the hypothetical of physical

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<sup>27</sup> Hill, Erin. *Never Done a History of Women's Work in Media Production*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 91.

<sup>28</sup> Hill, Erin. 178.

<sup>29</sup> Hill, Erin. 183.

<sup>30</sup> Hill, Erin. 190.

proWess—whether a woman can carry the gear—and monopolization on trade knowledge have kept women away from the job. Some of this sexist logic persists today. In 2020, women comprised 18% of editors working on the top 100 films of the year, whereas women cinematographers only comprised 3%.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to clerical work, emotional management, as observed above, is by default considered to be women workers' responsibility. Costume designers, when designing the wardrobe for the production, would also need to finesse that actors' emotions and build a trusting work relationship. As television writer and producer Mike Frost describes:

The costume designer has to be a kind of geisha to the actor. They have to make the actor feel safe and protected and enhanced by what they're wearing. They have to be able to deal with people who are making themselves very vulnerable for a living, and who have a lot of emotional needs and concerns.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, continuity work shifted to a women-coded position (script girl) after industry specialization and standardization consolidated it into a singular job position due to the record-keeping (secretarial) work involved.<sup>33</sup> Both contemporary and former supervisors used words such as “care, worry, anxiety and concern” to describe their work responsibilities, for they are charged to correct errors made by other workers, who are often high-ranking male creatives.<sup>34</sup> Light manual labor and emotional management are two recurring (hidden) requirements for below-the-line women workers.

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<sup>31</sup> Lauzen, Martha M. Rep. *The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top U.S. Films of 2020*, January 2021. [https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020\\_Celluloid\\_Ceiling\\_Report.pdf](https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020_Celluloid_Ceiling_Report.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Banks, Miranda J. 92.

<sup>33</sup> Hill, Erin. 178.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 181-183.

## The Construction of Gender-Coding Part 2: Debunking Essentialism

Gender-coding a position is by no means a natural happenstance. The history of computer science shows that not only does gender-coding fluctuate in the same job position, but it also changes with the formation of hierarchy. Early computer science, just like early Hollywood, was more friendly to women than it is now. What is fascinating is that the social identity of a programmer was constantly in flux, especially during the Software Crisis—the early days of computing, when managers struggled to control budget and development time. Labor division was not as specialized as it is today. Job titles do not sufficiently describe duties, skill levels, and status.<sup>35</sup> At first, women were considered great for programming, since the (perceived) innate abilities, such as communication, patience, and attention to detail allow them to maintain a good relationship with clients and to collaborate effectively among themselves.<sup>36</sup> Some even argued that software development is comparable to “facility with language and the arts, areas in which women were traditionally expected to excel.”<sup>37</sup> The use of “software engineering” to describe software development was not popularized until 1968, when the phrase was coined by the Science Committee of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to associate the trade with the “types of theoretical foundations and practical disciplines that are traditional in the established branches of engineering,” which are traditionally male areas.<sup>38</sup> The same evolution can be observed in the role of the casting director, a

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<sup>35</sup> Abbate, Janet. *Recoding Gender: Women's Changing Participation in Computing*, 43. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 63-67.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

position now dominated by women, but it was mostly held by men from the 1950s to the 1970s.<sup>39</sup> This change in gender coding occurred as the film and television industry became increasingly sophisticated. The organizational structure evolved into “interlocking series of soft systems held together by multiple, contradictory industrial mythologies,” which caused a “chaotic” and “messy” production process along with an increase in clerical work—both the chaos and paperwork were considered women’s domain.<sup>40</sup> Labor division allowed gendered work responsibilities to converge into gender-coded jobs, while labor division created by gendered perceptions could enable gender segregation even with little to no change in responsibilities. The marginalization of women directors in the silent era of Hollywood is such an example.

In organization management, rationality—a trait stereotypically associated with men—is considered the ideal quality for a manager.<sup>41</sup> As a result, men are more likely to be promoted than women. To further entrench sexism in a corporate environment, one study shows that people automatically correlate hierarchy with the degree of skill involved—the more important the job, the higher the skill the job requires.<sup>42</sup> In other words, women are often put in positions where their work is devalued, and the segregation of gender in the workplace and women’s excellence in their positions would be explained away by the perceived feminine traits women possess. In software engineering, a field now dominated by men, governments and private companies used to

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<sup>39</sup> Hill, Erin. 196.

<sup>40</sup> Hill, Erin. 197.

<sup>41</sup> Joan Acker. 143.

<sup>42</sup> Abbate, Janet. 44.



target recruit women due to cheaper wage,<sup>43</sup> which stemmed from their devalued labor. There is financial incentive to produce and maintain gender-coding to keep women below the line and not above, or in Hollywood labor terms, a level of labor with little negotiating power. The doors that were open to women during an informal work system are now closed or closing under a departmentalized labor system, where women are pushed down the chain of command and confined to female gender-coded jobs. According to Jane M. Gaines, academic studies of women in early Hollywood are biased towards high-profile figures such as Frances Marion and Alice Guy-Blaché since new research is based upon past studies, and this often ignores the women who work below the line.<sup>44</sup> Although top-level women producers, writers, directors were pushed out of the industry, lower-level women workers remained. For example, 1920s payroll records show that many women worked as secretaries, stenographers, and clerks in the screenwriting department supporting much-better-paid men and even women screenwriters.<sup>45</sup>

For above-the-line workers, sometimes women use gender-coding to their advantage—arguing for their innate proficiency over men in certain jobs—or as the anonymous story on the “Shit People Say to Women Filmmakers” wrote: to “get in the door for job interviews.” Early women writers associated themselves with the domestic realm and argued that their gender-essential qualities helped them better write about

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<sup>43</sup> Abbate, Janet. 65.

<sup>44</sup> Gaines, Jane. *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to the Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 202.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 205-206.

emotional issues—transferring the emotion management aspect of their work onto paper. Filmmaker Alice Guy-Blaché once claimed that women are “an authority on emotions,” and writer Clara Beranger argued that “The heart throb, the human interest note, child life, domestic scenes and even the eternal triangle is more ably handled by women than men because of the thorough understanding our sex has of these matters.”<sup>46</sup> However, the power of gender code association is limited when it comes to bringing full acceptance of women in the workplace. Among the writers, there is the problem of hierarchies as well. Many women in the screenwriting department work in story research—a role that is considered clerical—and the gender hierarchy manifests there as well. Writers disassociated themselves from the use of typewriters—a tool for office work and by extension, women—and return to pencil when presenting their public image.<sup>47</sup> Gaines offers “labor redundancy” as a theoretical framework to examine the (forced) exodus of women writers which reduced their number from the estimated 50% of writing credits pre-1925 to the 17.4% of 2019. As some menial labor can be replaced by machinery, women writers are no longer needed if the “female/emotional” viewpoint that women creatives argued that they are the experts of can be replicated by men. Media corporations are mostly unconcerned with women in managerial positions, since their “primary concern about women is their role as consumers.”<sup>48</sup> As long as the story can consistently attract the female audience, it does not matter to a studio who wrote the story.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 142.

<sup>48</sup> Byerly, Carolyn M. (2015). Women and Media: Feminist Interrogations at the Control Macro-Level. In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender*, Cynthia Carter, Lisa McLaughlin, & Linda Steiner (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender* (pp. 105-115). London: Routledge.

The director's chair also sees a similar departure of women during the silent film era. Karen Mahar writes that when the studios sought to vertically integrate, Hollywood courted Wall Street for the funds to acquire theater chains.<sup>49</sup> During the process, Wall Street investors assumed more power in productions, "making the director, stars, and other movie workers mere pawns in production, of which he assumed full charge." Wall Street then asserted its influence to protect its investments by managing the projects in ways it sees fit, that is, by bringing in its own "masculine work culture and traditional ideas regarding women and business."<sup>50</sup> Hollywood was eager to adopt this mentality and reshape its structure to gain (business) legitimacy in the eyes of would-be investors. As the creative head of a film, women directors were quick to be pushed out of the industry—notable female industry figures such as Frances Marion become the exceptions to the rule.<sup>51</sup> The stereotype that women are less fit to lead a project with a large sum involved still lingers today—receiving funding remains the chief challenge for women directors<sup>52</sup>—as showcased in the single digit count of women directors given a budget over a \$100 million.

Hollywood executives—both in film and television—often showcase a bizarre disinterest in female subjects, despite women making up half the world's population. Director Susan Seidelman was told by executives that her "[women aged] fifty years and over" target demographics "would not yield enough profit,"<sup>53</sup> and CBS passed over the

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<sup>49</sup> Mahar, Karen Ward. *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood. Studies in Industry and Society*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 195.

<sup>51</sup> Gaines, Jane. 146.

<sup>52</sup> Sinwell, Sarah E. S.

<sup>53</sup> Lane, Christina. "Susan Seidelman's Contemporary Films: The Feminist Art of Self-Reinvention in a

*Nancy Drew* pilot because it “skewed too female,” despite the favorable response from a test audience.<sup>54</sup> According to executive director Debra Zimmerman of Women Make Movies—an organization created in 1972 to train women to become filmmakers—“Men making films about women get less money than women making films about men.”<sup>55</sup> In terms of subject matter, executives display a bias in hiring towards gender-coded themes as well. In the genre breakdown of the top 500 films released in 2019, women directed 27% of documentaries, 25% of comedy movies, 24% of dramas, 21% of science fiction movies, 17% of horror movies, and 14% of action films.<sup>56</sup> In narrative films, women directors are more likely to direct (romantic) comedies than action, a genre that is generally associated with masculinity. However, this perceived generic affinity can also be a reflection of women’s trustworthiness regarding financial prospects in the eyes of executives; science fiction and action are budget-intensive genres due to the use of visual effects, hence the relative fewer number of women directors working in these genres. Conversely, documentary is cheaper to produce than other genres, and so studios would suffer smaller losses should they not perform well.

The male gender coding of the director was present in Hollywood from the early

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Changing Technological Landscape.” In *Indie Reframed: Women's Filmmaking and Contemporary American Independent Cinema*, edited by Badley Linda, Perkins Claire, and Schreiber Michele, 70-86. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. Accessed February 13, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0529f.10>.

<sup>54</sup> Erbland, Kate. “CBS Passes On ‘Nancy Drew’ Pilot Because It ‘Skewed Too Female’ – Report.” *IndieWire*. IndieWire, May 16, 2016. <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/05/cbs-passes-on-nancy-drew-pilot-because-it-skewed-too-female-report-290466/>.

<sup>55</sup> Lane, Christina. 26.

<sup>56</sup> Lauzen, Martha M. Rep. *The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 100, 250, and 500 Films of 2019*. January 2020. [https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2019\\_Celluloid\\_Ceiling\\_Report.pdf](https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2019_Celluloid_Ceiling_Report.pdf)

days. Cecil B. DeMille argued that a director should be the “representative of a creative team” and an ever-vigilant overseer capable of being “dominating,” which is a quality he found lacking in women.<sup>57</sup> The physical demands of a director’s responsibilities were considered a burden women could not bear. The job of the director is analogous to a military commander who coordinates many underlings. The male gender-coding is not friendly to women on the other side of auteur theory, either. The idea of a genius auteur as the sole creative responsible for the project is coded masculine as well. Whether the “maverick director” was truly working outside or against the studio system, the auteur posits mass culture as a threat to distance one’s self from or rebel against. According to Andreas Huyssen, the formation of mass culture is linked to the visibility of the women public (producing and consuming media,) and so popular culture becomes feminized, whereas authentic art that stands apart from mass culture is coded masculine.<sup>58</sup> To sum up, women filmmakers are less likely to be seen as authentic artists due to their gender under the auteurist discourse in Hollywood, where studios co-opt auteur theory as means of promotion, or as cultural legitimation to elevate media on the cultural hierarchy by anchoring the creation of meaning to a singular artist and thereby aligning mass media with “literature, painting, and other forms of serious, highly respected culture.”<sup>59</sup>

For the women who have sat in a director’s chair, finding funding has been a consistent challenge. The phenomenon was encapsulated by the *Ishtar* effect, which

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<sup>57</sup> Mahar, Karen Ward. 196-7.

<sup>58</sup> Paszkiewicz, Katarzyna. (*Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 48-50.

<sup>59</sup> Newman, Michael Z, and Levine, Elana. *Legitimizing Television*. Florence: Routledge, 2012.

refers to the 1987 comedy action movie starring Dustin Hoffman and directed by Elaine May, who never directed a film after the box office flop of *Ishtar*.<sup>60</sup> Distrust trails women directors even after commercial and critical success. Debra Granik, who directed *Winter's Bone* (2010), which earned the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance and an Academy Award nomination, complained that she still faces many creative compromises when pitching her projects to executives.<sup>61</sup> This is due to the lack of networking opportunities in a “boy’s club” industry—quite literally so, as many business meetings and trade association gatherings in early Hollywood took place in taverns, lounges, and gender-segregated clubs, where women were barred entry except on occasional ladies’ nights.<sup>62,63</sup> Whereas White male directors can continuously receive offers even after experiencing commercial and critical failure, women are less fortunate. Colin Trevorrow was given the keys to *Jurassic World*—the sequel to the multi-billion-dollar franchise *Jurassic Park*—and signed on to direct *Star Wars Episode IX* with just one narrative feature under his belt. Brad Bird (*The Iron Giants*, *The Incredibles*) was originally approached to direct *Jurassic World*, but he recommended Trevorrow due to his schedule conflict with *Tomorrowland*, and producer Frank Marshall, husband of Lucasfilm’s Kathleen Kennedy, introduced Trevorrow to Steven Spielberg.<sup>64</sup> Trevorrow’s lackluster *The Book of Henry*

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<sup>60</sup> Murthi, Vikram. “Daily Reads: How TV Is Redefining ‘American,’ Female Directors and ‘The Ishtar Effect,’ and More.” *IndieWire*. IndieWire, November 10, 2015. <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/11/daily-reads-how-tv-is-redefining-american-female-directors-and-the-ishtar-effect-and-more-129130/>.

<sup>61</sup> Lane, Christina. 82.

<sup>62</sup> Hill, Erin. 54.

<sup>63</sup> Mahar, Karen Ward. 74.

<sup>64</sup> Sciretta, Peter. “How Safety Not Guaranteed Sold Steven Spielberg On Colin Trevorrow.” *Film*, June 12, 2015. <https://www.slashfilm.com/how-the-last-scene-in-safety-not-guaranteed-sold-steven-spielberg-on-colin-trevorrow/>.

(2017)—making 4.6 million dollars on the budget of 10 million dollars and scoring a 22% on Rotten Tomatoes—did not stop him from getting blockbuster gigs. In an email correspondence with *Indiewire*, Trevorrow writes: “Would I have been chosen to direct *Jurassic World* if I was a female filmmaker who had made one small film? I have no idea.”<sup>65</sup> The *Ishtar* effect leads to the higher difficulty for women directors to accumulate work experience than men, and as a result they appear less bankable than their male counterparts. To make matters worse, women directors on a small budget receive fewer screens than men-directed films on a comparative budget by “a ratio of 242 to 646” due to women’s lack of “bankability.”<sup>66</sup> Due to the low confidence studio executives have in women filmmakers achieving financial and critical success, they are less likely to be appointed as project leads despite proven track records. On the other hand, overconfidence in White men place them in high positions without corresponding work experience as prerequisites. In addition, the difficulty women filmmakers face in building their career records on top of the lower box office returns generated by the smaller screen count forms a vicious cycle keeping women filmmakers’ bankability low and thus reducing their employment opportunities.

### **Improving Diversity**

The problem of gender inequality in Hollywood starts from the decision makers on the top: the executives. Production culture studies about producer-audience

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<sup>65</sup> Gagne, Emily. “Jurassic World Director's Theory About Women in Film Inspire Chaos.” *The Mary Sue*, August 23, 2015. <https://www.themarysue.com/jurassic-world-directors-theory-about-women-in-film-inspires-internet-chaos/>.

<sup>66</sup> Sun, Rebecca. “Study: Films Directed by Women Receive 63 Percent Less Distribution Than Male-Helmed Movies (Exclusive).” *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 29, 2016. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/study-films-directed-by-women-907229>.

relationship theorize a social distance between the two. In addition to the inside/outside divide theorized by Ortner, class—and by extension income level and cultural status—separates Hollywood culture and the mass audience, and as a result, Hollywood “becomes its own subculture that encouraged a kind of ‘groupthink,’ providing little exposure to the outside world.”<sup>67</sup> The producers/executives are “out of touch” with the audience, yet to be a successful executive one must know the tastes of the general audience. Anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker observed that intuition is a prized ability among Hollywood executives, more specifically “instinctive feeling about what the public enjoys.”<sup>68</sup> The instinct becomes a crutch for executives to bridge the gap between themselves and the public audience created by the Hollywood subculture bubble. What also contributes to the cultural divide is the homogenous demographic makeup of executives. In the Hollywood film industry, chairs and CEOs are 91% White and 82% male, and senior executives are 93% White and 80% male.<sup>69</sup> On the television side, chairs and CEOs are 92% White and 68% male,<sup>70</sup> and to figure out audience preferences, more specifically the perceived disinterest in female subjects, the decision making is based on biased assumptions. Conversely, minority representation in the executive level can bring practical improvements. Data showcases that a woman-directed film employs

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<sup>67</sup> Zafirau, Stephen. “Audience Knowledge and the Everyday Lives of Cultural Producers in Hollywood.” Essay. In *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, edited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, 190–202. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

<sup>68</sup> Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood: the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950), 93.

<sup>69</sup> Ramon, Ana-Christina, and Darnell Hunt. Rep. *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods Part 1: Film*, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Ramon, Ana-Christina, and Darnell Hunt. Rep. *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods Part 2: Television*, 11.



more female behind-the-scenes workers. In comparing films directed or co-directed by women with films directed by men, the percentage of female writer employment is 53% to 8%, editor is 39% to 18%, and composer is 13% to 4%.<sup>71</sup> Either unclouded by mechanisms of gender-coding or consciously helping other women “getting a foot in,” women directors are creating more job opportunities than for women than men. This trend extends to on-screen representation as well; on television, stories with female creators or writers have more female characters than stories penned by men (46.1% vs 33.5% and 41.1% 30.4%).<sup>72</sup> Should the gender consciousness of women filmmakers be brought to the executive level, higher numbers of female-led projects would lead to improvement in female representation across the board.

### **The Exception That Proves the Rule: Kathryn Bigelow**

With all the obstacles set down against women filmmakers, a few have managed to rise above the rest (recall the nine women directors with big budgets.) However, these exceptions only reaffirm the existence of the rule. Among the nine women directors, not only was Kathryn Bigelow first to break the \$100 million barrier with *K:19 - The Widowmaker* in 2002, but she is also the first woman to win the Academy Award for Best Director. While some celebrate her triumph, other feminists condemned Bigelow’s masculine output—*The Hurt Locker* (2009), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012)—and her unwillingness to talk about women’s struggle in the film industry. In an interview,

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<sup>71</sup> Lauzen, Martha M. 6.

<sup>72</sup> Staff, Communication and Marketing. “From C-Suite to Characters on Screen: How Inclusive Is the Entertainment Industry?” USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, February 22, 2016. <https://annenberg.usc.edu/news/faculty-research/c-suite-characters-screen-how-inclusive-entertainment-industry>.

Bigelow remarked: “I just don’t look at filmmaking through a gender lens. . . I wish there were more women (who direct films). But to me, it’s like talking about ‘a woman mathematician’ or ‘a woman astrophysicist.’ We don’t refer to them that way.”<sup>73</sup> To praise Bigelow’s success in the action and thriller genre as transgressive, or to condemn it as pandering to masculinity, as critics did, affirms the reality of gender segregation in the film industry but edges too close to gender essentialism as well. What can be gleaned from Bigelow’s avoidance of feminist discourse in the interview is a reluctance to be locked into female gender-coded genres (and the financial limitations that come with them). While Bigelow chooses to present her career through a postfeminist and individualist lens, her public image aligns with the gender-coding of a director and an auteur. Stories told by *The Hurt Locker*’s writer and crew promote Bigelow’s prowess:

The 57-year-old director, known for her relentless, action-driven plots and her visceral depictions of male violence, once climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in sub-zero temperatures because, she said: “I like to be strong.” More recently, while filming her latest movie, *The Hurt Locker*, in the Jordanian desert, she startled fellow crew members by scaling a forbiddingly high sand dune in order to shoot a scene of a bomb being detonated. “There were lots of macho guys on the set, SAS, not to mention all these young studly actors, and all these guys were falling by the wayside,” a colleague recalls. “I said to myself, I’m not walking this hill, no way in hell. I drive up and Kathryn is already at the top. She’s beaten everyone up there.”<sup>74</sup>

Bigelow’s fortitude satisfies what Cecil B. DeMille argued as one of the important qualities of a director: physical strength. As an auteur, Bigelow too posits Hollywood’s influence as a threat to “true art.” In an interview, Bigelow says that “We knew from the

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<sup>73</sup> Lauzen, Martha M. “Kathryn Bigelow: On Her Own in No-(Wo)Man's-Land.” *Camera Obscura* (Durham, NC) 26, no. 3 (2011): 146-53.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

beginning that we had to be independent. . . We were able to keep creative control and cast it the way we wanted.”<sup>75</sup> By operating outside of the studio system, she was able to retain her creative freedom and thus her status as an auteur. In Bigelow’s gender-blind performance of a successful director, she broke into the boy’s club by acting like one, and she is not the only one. Patty Jenkins, who made the nine with *Wonder Woman* (2017), similarly rejects the label of a “lady director,” which she considered to be holding back her career. In an interview, Jenkins told *Entertainment Weekly* “every movie I make may have a female lead coincidentally, but I don’t make ‘women’s movies.’ I’m just making movies for everybody that might have female leads, you know?”<sup>76</sup> Although avoiding gender-coded labels does not guarantee success in Hollywood, both Bigelow and Jenkins understand the ghettoized women’s films (small production and limited distribution) to be an obstacle to their careers.

### **Conclusion**

The low number of women workers in Hollywood, like most male-dominated fields, is not a natural occurrence of self-selection or the result of fair competition. The history of early Hollywood has shown that women workers were numerous in various job positions, and despite the obstacles placed by their male counterparts and superiors, women workers nonetheless managed to become successful in positions they carved out with the help of gender coding. However, the growing scale of Hollywood and the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Greenblatt, Leah. “Patty Jenkins on ‘Wonder Woman 1984,’ Her Path as a Director, and the Franchise’s Future.” *Entertainment Weekly*, December 24, 2020. <https://ew.com/movies/patty-jenkins-wonder-woman-1984-interview/>.

involvement of Wall Street forced Hollywood to conform to the sexist norms of society. Gender-coding of job positions appeals to the “natural truths” associated with the female gender and limits women’s career paths based on their perceived aptitude or inaptitude, yet the shift in gender coding throughout history only reveals its artificial construction. Some of the obstacles set down decades ago are still faced by women workers today both above and below the line. Networking opportunities remain scarce, and women filmmakers are measured against a set of strict standards that do not apply to their White male counterparts. Studios placed little trust in the few women who rose to the director’s chair; the majority of women filmmakers were given small budgets, and others appeal to masculinity to prove that they are right for the chair. Sexism in Hollywood is systemic, and this problem can only be solved from the top. Statistics show that women filmmakers and showrunners tend to hire more female workers at various levels. Improving diversity at the executive level can lead to more female-led projects and thus more industry opportunities for women in Hollywood.

## CHAPTER TWO

This chapter aims to examine the hurdles racial-minority creatives face in Hollywood. Since racial minorities were excluded from all but the lowest menial labor jobs in early Hollywood and Whites dominated above-the-line positions, racial minorities who managed to rise above the line were thus measured against existing White workers. Under Hollywood's supposed meritocracy, whether a person of color's project is worth investing in is examined with the metric of "bankability," that is, whether the project would be profitable while facing the assumed financial risk posed by the deviation from the norm—where predominately White above-the-line workers create films and programming for a predominately White audience. "Bankability" subjects people of color to unequal disadvantages and whitewashes studios' discriminatory practices. In this chapter, I examine the financial language of risks and profit that "bankability" employs with budget and box office data and I argue that "bankability" is not only an unreliable metric for talent and box office performance, but it also ignores the marginalization of racial minority workers in the industry and the racial ideologies that fuel the marginalization.

The first chapter explored the gender coding of both above-the-line and below-the-line jobs and how such mechanisms bar women filmmakers from entering certain masculine-coded jobs and keep women in low-level or female-coded jobs. Using scholarship on computer science history, this chapter can supplement industry studies of early Hollywood when records are lacking. Throughout the history of early Hollywood and computer science, we discover that intricate divisions of labor and the formation of

corporate hierarchy allow gender coding to take hold and thrive in an industry—rendering it hostile to women. As a result, the number of above-the-line women filmmakers and women programmers seen in the early days in their respective industries have decreased dramatically. However, it should be noted that Hollywood’s relatively “women-friendly” origin only applies to White women—women of color were largely excluded from creative jobs as they were excluded from all but low-level physical labor in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

As Hollywood grew in scale, so did the support staffs that are responsible for accommodating the burgeoning production crews and the administrative staffs tasked with maintaining day-to-day operations. Additionally, Hollywood began to use the inside/outside division to promote itself as self-sufficient cities through press and guided tours. In the previous chapter, I described that the physical barrier of the studio complex creates an insular work environment, and Hollywood used this insularity to its benefit. On one hand, the existence of a serving class implies that “[male] studio workers could spend long days and nights in production without worrying about how they would be fed, nursed, nurtured, and so forth”<sup>77</sup>—signaling that any man that chooses to work for the studios can dedicate himself completely to the creative process without reservation. On the other hand, studios purposely display (female) bodies in service jobs in a corporate hierarchy to create the image of “full-service, self-contained movie factories”<sup>78</sup> with the aim to attract potential investors with the appearance of authority, tight management, and

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<sup>77</sup> Hill, Erin. 115-116.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

lastly, power. The insularity of a self-contained studio city encourages White men to exercise their privilege as the apex of the American social hierarchy. The studio-as-city not only kept outsiders away but also kept employees confined with the expectation that employees who suffered from daily harassment must remain loyal to their bosses, and those who seek legal recourse against their superiors would find district attorneys and the L.A.P.D. siding with Hollywood's powerful.<sup>79</sup>

The studio cities simultaneously preserved and exaggerated the power dynamics in the external society at large for the appearance of a credible business venture where the "right people" are in charge. Consequently, the employment of White women and racial minorities has been limited by sexist and racist social norms. Non-White immigrants and people of color were hired behind the scenes, but unlike White women, racial minorities were mostly relegated to service jobs, such as catering, maids, and janitors. In the April 1941 issue of the *Warner Club News*, the photo of the cover story depicts an all-Black custodial department.<sup>80</sup> Racial segregation was the norm in Hollywood, California. While White women were able to gain a foothold in certain jobs through grandfathering in preexisting female-coded occupations, or through applying gender coding to newly created jobs, the extreme marginalization of people of color in other labor markets made becoming a creative in the film and television industry challenging due to the absence of any preconceived notion of people of color in creative roles, in addition to blatant racism they may encounter to their day-to-day lives. In other words, people of color are less

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 122-123.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 67.

likely to be hired as creatives in early Hollywood since they lacked the positive stereotypes that granted them advantage, such as when White women argued that they were the perfect storytellers of emotional themes in silent-era Hollywood. The earliest creative roles people of color gained access to were actors, and they were hired based on negative stereotypes or cost-saving via wage discrimination against the competition of White actors in makeup. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that the association between women and menial labor is beneficial to employers seeking cheap labor, and people of color predominantly occupying low-level service jobs in early Hollywood reflects the common practice of racist labor exploitation. In this chapter, I will.

### **Control of Cultural Production and Representation**

Early cinema's origin can be traced to carnivals and vaudeville houses, where the technology of cinema and the sensationalist programs were enjoyed as visual spectacles. The first roles that were deemed socially acceptable for Black people to perform in were racist caricatures drawn from "literary and visual precursors" that depict the criminality or subservience of the Black race.<sup>81</sup> Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope included titles such as *The Pickaninny Dance – From the "Passing Show"* (1894), *A Watermelon Contest* (1895), *Sambo and Jemima* (1900), *Bally-Hoo Cake Walk* (1901), and *The Gator and the Pickaninny* (1903).<sup>82</sup> However, the rule of labor redundancy that women screenwriters experienced (see chapter 1) also applies to racial minority actors. D.W. Griffith's *The*

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<sup>81</sup> Massood, Paula J. "African-Americans and Silent Films." In *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, by Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon. Wiley, 2011. [http://ezproxy.bu.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/wileyhiamfi/african\\_americans\\_and\\_silent\\_films/0?institutionId=501](http://ezproxy.bu.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/wileyhiamfi/african_americans_and_silent_films/0?institutionId=501)

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.



*Birth of a Nation* (1915), attributed by historian John Hope Franklin as the inspiration for the second founding of the Ku Klux Klan,<sup>83</sup> featured many White actors donning Blackface. While Black actors were hired as extras in *The Birth of a Nation*, they only appear in crowds in exterior settings and long shots, and often given no names or spoken lines. By contrast, the roles of major Black characters were given to White people, and their screen presence was given more care in terms of costume and camera work. Even when characters of color mostly dealt in negative portrayals in accordance with the customs and laws of the time, employment was not guaranteed for racial minorities due to Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation. Similarly, the earliest popular depictions of East Asians are often portrayed by White actors in yellowface. *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929) and *Charlie Chan Carries On* (1933) (both films spawned several sequels) are examples of yellowface via labor redundancy—there was no need to scout out new Asian talents when existing White actors could do the job of portraying Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) characters with makeup. While both are literary characters created by White authors, they situate on the opposite sides of Yellow Peril. Fu Manchu—the name itself is a faux-Chinese invention—was written as a villain that plays on Orientalist anxieties. Charlie Chan, on the other hand, was penned by Earl Derr Biggers to create “a modern replacement, a heroic and ‘amiable Chinese’ to oppose what he called ‘the old stuff,’ namely the prevalent villainous yellow-peril stereotypes of the 1920s.”<sup>84</sup> This “progressive” retooling of Orientalism into a strategic

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<sup>83</sup> Franklin, John Hope. “‘Birth of a Nation’: Propaganda as History.” *The Massachusetts Review* 20, no. 3 (1979): 417-34. Accessed February 26, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25088973>.

<sup>84</sup> Konzett, Delia Malia Caparoso, and Delia Malia Caparoso Konzett. “Yellowface, Minstrelsy, and

courtship of China when geopolitical tension heightened under Imperial Japan's expansion in Asia is still performed by a White man—Swedish-American actor Warner Oland (who also played Fu Manchu in the novel series' first film adaptation) albeit with less exaggerated yellowface makeup.<sup>85</sup>

The most famous case of White actors portraying characters of color in American film history is perhaps *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) directed by D.W. Griffith. *The Birth of a Nation* premiered with polarizing receptions—glowing reviews in the press and praise from President Woodrow Wilson, but with much uproar from Black and White liberals alike. The president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) condemned the racist film as “an effort to mislead the people of this country. . . and to excite a strong feeling against the coloured people, already suffering everywhere from race prejudice.”<sup>86</sup> Members of the Black community formulated a response to *The Birth of a Nation* and the rising number of hate crimes the film inspired. Black filmmakers were among them, and Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920) was such response. Micheaux was a resourceful and driven entrepreneur. He wrote the novel *The Homesteader*, which was partly based on his homesteading life and his failed marriage, then sold the novel by going door to door. In 1918, Micheaux reorganized his book company into the Micheaux Book and Film Company in Chicago to adapt his novel

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Hollywood Happy Endings: The Black Camel (1931), Charlie Chan in Egypt (1935), and Charlie Chan at the Olympics (1937).” Essay. In *Hollywood at the Intersection of Race and Identity*, 84–102. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>86</sup> Rylance, David. “Breech Birth: The Receptions to D.W. Griffith's “The Birth of a Nation”.” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 24, No. 2 (2005): 1–20. Accessed February 28, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41053983>.

into a film after the Lincoln Motion Picture Company refused to let him direct. To finance the film production, Micheaux relied on his grassroots connections by selling the company stock to White farmers and businessmen in Sioux City, as well as the people who had bought the novel. Micheaux maximized his limited resources by using unpaid Black actors and generic footage, and for the rest of his career he would finish a film in months and travel throughout the country to promote his films and book screenings.<sup>87</sup> This silent era entrepreneur's films, such as *Within Our Gates*, targeted Black audiences and condemned the corruption of the church and the violent hate crimes committed against Black people, which the films suggest is not the result of "Black depravity" as represented by *The Birth of a Nation* but rather the result of "White greed, lust, and desire for power."<sup>88</sup>

By contrast, John W. Noble and Rex Weber directed *The Birth of a Race* (1918), another response to *The Birth of a Nation*, was met with a long (2 years) and troubled production due to White executive interference. The film's goal to showcase "the true story of the Negro, his life in Africa, his transportation to America, his enslavement, his freedom, his achievements, together with his past, present and future relations with his White neighbor" was changed into a presentation of "Judeo-Christian history from the pages of the Bible" after the involvement of multiple producers, the NAACP, and Universal Studios. *The Birth of a Race* was a critical and commercial failure.<sup>89</sup> While

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<sup>87</sup> Woodard, Aaron Robert. "FROM THE GROUND UP: Oscar Devereaux Micheaux parlayed his experiences as a pioneering South Dakota homesteader to become the father of Black American cinema." *Wild West*, October 2020, 50+. *Gale In Context: U.S. History* (accessed March 1, 2021). [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A637054850/GPS?u=mclin\\_b\\_bumml&sid=GPS&xid=e6d11caf](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A637054850/GPS?u=mclin_b_bumml&sid=GPS&xid=e6d11caf).

<sup>88</sup> Massood, Paula J., 60.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

Oscar Micheaux was prolific and financially successful, his race films were controversial due to his negative portrayals of the Black church and hate crimes and the support of interracial relationships. Prompted by the heightened racial tension, both Black and White social and religious leaders protested *Within Our Gates* and threatened censorship.<sup>90</sup> Contrasting the neutered message of *The Birth of a Race* and the controversial but popular *Within Our Gates*, we find that Hollywood studios (helmed largely by White men) have an interest in perpetuating the White dominant ideologies. If a creative of color wishes to present authentic racial characters and themes uncompromised by White interference, the creative process often has to exist outside of the system, where budget and production time are limited.

### **Hollywood's Ideological Convergence**

Depictions of non-Whites in early Hollywood ranged from well-meaning but patronizing portrayals to dehumanizing caricatures; positive and authentic representation of people of color were relegated to independent cinema, where these films were mostly bankrolled, produced, promoted, and distributed by people of color. In the following century, progress in mainstream racial representation did slowly improve. However, progress made was often the product of concession between factors such as studios' financial concerns, the changing social zeitgeist, the increasing number of racial minority workers, and the involvement of civil rights advocacy groups. In this section, I investigate how different forces negotiate acceptable mainstream representation and how progress is subjected to corporate meddling under cultural hegemony.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 60.

The outbreak of World War II provided opportunity for Black integration into all aspects of society due to the United States' opposition to Nazi Germany (and its racist ideology) and the need for Black participation in the war effort. Beginning in the 1940s, the NAACP negotiated with Hollywood for better Black representation in films as well as the increase of behind-the-scenes employment.<sup>91</sup> At the same time, Black intellectuals adopted the strategy of “Double V” for double victory: the victory over enemies in the war abroad and the victory against the domestic enemy (referring to racism).<sup>92</sup> Together, Black creatives in Hollywood produced Black-cast propaganda movies—with the backing of the Office of War Information—such as *Stormy Weather* (1943) and *The Negro Soldier* (1944), that portrayed the Black population in a positive manner but either neglected to address domestic racism or conjured a false sense of racial harmony. *Stormy Weather* (1943) set the cheerful depiction of Bill Robinson's life and career in a racial conflict-free society, where the on-screen segregation is never touched upon. The film also perpetuates stereotypes such as minstrelsy, the “mammy” caricature, and colorism. On the other hand, *The Negro Soldier*, produced by Frank Capra and written by Carlton Moss, promotes significant Black figures and their contributions to the American society, and positions America as the moral superior to the racist Nazi Germany. In one scene, Moss, who played a pastor in the film declares, “Tomorrow, what surprise the Nazis will get, when Black, brown, yellow, and White men, all Americans, land on the airfields of

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<sup>91</sup> Erigha, Maryann. “Unequal Hollywood: African Americans, Women, and Representation in a Media Industry”, 2014: 48-49.

<sup>92</sup> Seeley, Nathan. “Carlton Moss and African American Cultural Emancipation.” *Black Camera: The Newsletter of the Black Film Center/Archives* 9, no. 2 (2018): 52-75.

Berlin and Tokyo.” Producer Frank Capra thought writer and actor Carlton Moss’s first draft script to be “too militant,”<sup>93</sup> while a scene of a White nurse massaging the back of a Black soldier was removed from the finished film.<sup>94</sup> This ideological convergence—shifting from outright dehumanization depicted in *The Birth of a Nation* to WWII propaganda films improving Black images while appealing to American nationalism—proved that Hollywood’s racist agenda is not incapable of changing, but the progress is still moderated by White consideration and sensibilities, and this dynamic still holds true today.

In the television realm, the ideological course correction from White studio executives and creatives can also be observed more than half a century after WWII’s propaganda films. The case of Black Entertainment Television’s policy shift after its acquisition by Viacom illustrates that for productions situated on the industrial and ideological margins, entering the mainstream comes at a cost. Robert Johnson, co-founder of BET, stressed the importance of possessing control of independent voices via Black ownership, so “Black filmmakers can explore the diversity of African-American life...In the Hollywood system, that just won’t happen.”<sup>95</sup> In other words, he argued that the key to controlling racial media images lies in the ownership of the media. Johnson also stated that White-oriented media were inadequate at presenting information relevant to the Black audience.<sup>96</sup> The co-founder positioned BET as the only media source capable

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>94</sup> Cripps, Thomas, and Culbert, David. “The Negro Soldier (1944): Film Propaganda in Black and White.” *American Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (1979): 616-40.

<sup>95</sup> Craig, Richard T. *African Americans and Mass Media: A Case for Diversity in Media Ownership*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 21.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid

of delivering content that mainstream media could not with informational programs aimed at Black audience such as *Lead Story* and *BET Tonight*. In these programs, Black journalists addressed issues from perspectives different from the White mainstream by interrogating politicians on issues important to Black communities, or reporting on issues neglected by the mainstream press. Yet Johnson also realized the importance of leaving the margins for the mainstream by connecting Black business with “majority-owned investors” in order to grow the business while serving the interest of the audience.<sup>97</sup> However, soon after Johnson sold the controlling share to Viacom in 2001, BET ended the contract with *BET Tonight* host Tavis Smiley, and the news programming grew increasingly reliant on CBS resources through its connection with Viacom. Despite Johnson and BET executive Debra Lee’s reassurance that BET’s editorial voice would remain intact (after rumors of the network was dropping news programming in 2002), BET’s information programs were either cancelled or had timeslots reduced. By 2005, the news offering of BET was reduced to “news briefs throughout the broadcast day, with no particular half-hour or hour dedicated to information programming and supplying viewers with information programs via quarterly broadcasts.”<sup>98</sup>

As a multi-media conglomerate, Viacom’s purchase of a cable channel that specifically and explicitly targets Black audiences reaffirmed the social and financial viability of Black audiences in mainstream media since the ideological convergence that began in the 40s. However, the changing of racial norms in mainstream media is also part

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 32.

of cultural hegemony's function. Cultural hegemony refers to a dominant ruling class made up of one or more social groups, where the ideological consensus is naturalized, while opposing ideas and subordinate groups are contained and rendered safe in an ideological space.<sup>99</sup> Shows such as *BET Tonight* and *Lead Story* served a functional purpose for a niche audience—Black viewers—ignored by mainstream press. By drastically cutting down BET's news programming and thus the network's ideological specificity, Viacom homogenized BET's cultural difference. In reducing non-White culture to a purely aesthetic deviation from the dominant culture and detaching the meanings from the culture, i.e., the historical contexts that contributed to the formation of non-White culture including the inadequacy of White media in portraying non-Whites that gave rise to non-White-owned media, non-White culture can be commodified and be consumed safely. Viacom's elimination of Black-specific informational programming should not be read as the conglomerate's disinterest in Black audiences, since the network is still primarily marketed towards Black people, but that Viacom wanted to make BET more accessible for other demographics.

Viacom's differential treatment to BET's informational and entertainment programming suggests a shift from narrowcasting to multicasting. A cable network narrowcasts by targeting a small group of audience, or the Black population in the case of pre-Viacom-merger BET, and showing "commitment to one particular to one particular audience demographic;" multicast, termed by Julia Himberg to describe cable television's

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<sup>99</sup> Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1979), 198-216.



commodification of minority subjects, targets multiple distinct demographics.<sup>100</sup> While BET's entertainment can be marketed towards non-Black populations that consume Black culture, BET's news programming serves a functional purpose to only the Black audience. The rhetoric of minorities' "bankability" can also be understood as the White cultural hegemon's assumption of non-White cultures' profitability to the masses.

People of color in Hollywood and their artistic expressions often face obstruction by White executives in both television and film, and I will examine further the conditioned inclusion of racial and gender minorities in mainstream Hollywood in chapter three. In the case studies above, mainstream Hollywood is shown to be primarily concerned with appealing to the White audience even in minority-led projects. This concern of "mainstream appeal" prevents workers of color from accessing the means of cultural production, and whenever the studios hire racial minority workers or take on racial subject matters, they see them as an added financial risk due to their perceived unpopularity. For people of color in Hollywood, they would first be deemed financially viable in the eyes of White executives in order to secure employment, and that is the concept of "bankability."

### **Bankability: Track Record and Universal Appeal**

Since racial minorities in the United States historically had no foothold in the creative field, entering the field with few mentors or connections in the industry proved to be challenging. When Carlton Moss worked under Oscar Micheaux, Moss confronted

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<sup>100</sup> Himberg, Julia. "Multicasting: Lesbian Programming and the Changing Landscape of Cable TV." *Television & New Media* 15, no. 4 (May 2014): 289–304. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476412474351>.

Micheaux as to why he did not employ any Black cameramen, and Micheaux defended his hiring decision that he could not find a “black man with enough experience and training to be cameramen” easily.<sup>101</sup> The industry’s lack of diversity perpetuates itself due to the disparity of work opportunities racial minorities experience relative to White people.

In terms of casting, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) are most vulnerable to this vicious cycle. Whitewashing (with or without yellowface) is still common practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Recent examples of yellowface include Academy Award winner Guillermo del Toro’s *Pacific Rim* (2013), where Clifton Collins Jr. played Chinese-Peruvian American Tendo Choi; Emma Stone starred as Alison Ng in the 2015 romantic comedy *Aloha*. In the 2017 Hollywood remake of the cult Japanese anime series *Ghost in the Shell*, the role of Major Matoko Kusanagi was given to Scarlett Johansson, and it was reported that Paramount performed an internal screentest with the help of visual effects studio Lola VFX—famed for the aging and de-aging technology in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008)—by altering Johansson’s facial features to “shift her ethnicity” and to make her appear more Asian, however, the decision was later abandoned by Paramount.<sup>102</sup> In *21* (2008), a heist drama based on a real-life event of Asian American Massachusetts Institute of Technology math students using mathematical card-counting strategies to win money in Las Vegas, the entire cast is

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<sup>101</sup> Seeley, Nathan, 56.

<sup>102</sup> Sampson, Mike. “Ghost in the Shell’ Ran Tests to Make White Actors Look Asian.” *ScreenCrush*. ScreenCrush, April 18, 2016. <https://screencrush.com/ghost-in-the-shell-whitewashing-scarlett-johansson-vfx/>.

Whitewashed by Hollywood. Author Ben Mezrich, who wrote about the event, described Hollywood's stereotypical casting process in an MIT lecture: "a studio executive involved in the casting process said that most of the film's actors would be White, with perhaps an Asian female."<sup>103</sup> The consequence of AAPI characters being passed to non-AAPI actors or having AAPI characters being rewritten into White characters is a small talent pool with limited capacity to grow. As a result, AAPI actors are especially susceptible to the dysfunctional cycle where the lack of industry opportunities limits the building up of a track record, or "bankability," which in turn contributes to the lack of AAPI roles. In an email surfaced in the 2014 Sony hack, Academy Award winner Aaron Sorkin wrote to then Sony co-chair Amy Pascal about his skepticism regarding the studio's ability to adapt Michael Lewis's *Flash Boys: A Wallstreet Revolt*, which featured an Asian protagonist. "The protagonist is Asian-American (actually Asian-Canadian) and there aren't any Asian movie stars... Aren't you asking me to spend another year writing a movie you won't make?"<sup>104</sup> In the USC Anneberg Initiative's survey of the top 1,300 popular films from 2007 to 2019, out of 3,891 speaking characters, only 7.2% are Asians and less than 1% are Pacific Islanders, and in the top 100 films from 2015 to 2019, 198 out of 500 films do not have speaking Asian characters.<sup>105</sup>

Production studies of Hollywood revealed the unpredictability of box office

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<sup>103</sup> Der, Kevin. "MIT Alumnus and 'Busting Vegas' Author Describe Experience of Beating the House." *The Tech - Online Edition*, September 30, 2005. <http://tech.mit.edu/V125/N43/43vegas.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Sun, Rebecca, and Rebecca Ford. "Where Are the Asian-American Movie Stars?" May 9, 2016. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/are-asian-american-movie-stars-890755>.

<sup>105</sup> Smith, Stacy L., Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Peiper. Rep. *Inequality in 1,300 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ & Disability from 2007 to 2019*, September 2020. [http://assets.uscannenber.org/docs/aai-inequality\\_1300\\_popular\\_films\\_09-08-2020.pdf](http://assets.uscannenber.org/docs/aai-inequality_1300_popular_films_09-08-2020.pdf).

performance and television ratings, and in response to the fickleness of the box office, producers cultivate an “intuition” to gauge audience preference. Stephen Zifirau writes that, when interviewed, one high-level executive at a major studio said he rejected scientific research, but instead relied on his gut instinct to decide which project to send into production.<sup>106</sup> Certain executives believe that this “intuition” can be honed through the daily observations from “the overlapping spaces between ‘professional’ and ‘personal’ spaces,”<sup>107</sup> but when guesswork is drawn from the experience of the insular Hollywood culture and its homogenous demographic make-up, the “intuition” of what sells—or what is “bankable”—can be rife with personal biases.

Due to the unpredictability of box office performance, risk-averse producers would attach “proven” stars and filmmakers to a project (or combinations of “bankable” filmmaker with amateur actor, “proven” material with amateur filmmaker, etc.) in order to maximize the profit potential. However, this practice that historically benefits White filmmakers and actors is not itself “proven.” In “Uncertainty in the Movie Industry: Does Star Power Reduce the Terror of the Box Office,” a study that examined the box office mathematically, researchers concluded that the distribution of film revenue has near infinite variance, and it is thus statistically impossible to formulate an accurate revenue forecast.<sup>108</sup> The extremely successful cases that Hollywood seeks to consistently reproduce are themselves statistical outliers. Stars, as the study puts it do not have a

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<sup>106</sup> Zifirau, Stephen, 196.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>108</sup> De Vany, Arthur, and Walls, W. David. “Uncertainty in the Movie Industry: Does Star Power Reduce the Terror of the Box Office?” *Journal of Cultural Economics* 23, no. 4 (1999): 285-318.

statistically significant association with the probability that a movie will be a hit—only a few stars have a “non-negligible correlation with hit movies.”<sup>109</sup> A star’s continual success may only represent the star’s ability to choose projects, or luck.

Finally, while the rhetoric of a meritocratic selection process may appear a sound solution to the unpredictability of box office performance (despite the mathematical evidence that proves otherwise), sometimes there is no selection process at all. Casting directors usually do not have the power to decide a character’s race, since they have to adhere to the descriptions from the script, and the writers in the film and television industry are predominantly white and male; in 2019, 86.1% of writers in film were White, while 82.6% were men.<sup>110</sup> In television, show creators, who decide the race and gender of the characters, were 89.3% White and 71.9% male (scripted broadcast television in 2019.)<sup>111</sup> Even when a casting listing does not explicitly state the character’s race, the listing may use White actors as “prototypes,” or use descriptive words such as “waspy” and “pale-skinned” that exclude racial minorities, and when there are no explicit racial descriptions, casting directors often default to White.<sup>112</sup> For large projects, roles are usually given to “bankable” actors directly, bypassing the process for auditioning. The networking involved in these behind-closed-door deals not only evades public scrutiny, but the use of industry connections favors the dominant demographics in the industry.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 310.

<sup>110</sup> Ramon, Ana-Christina, and Darnell Hunt. Rep. *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods Part 1: Film*, 21.

<sup>111</sup> Ramon, Ana-Christina, and Darnell Hunt. Rep. *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods Part 2: Television*, 15

<sup>112</sup> Robinson, Russell K.. “Casting and Caste-Ing: Reconciling Artistic Freedom and Antidiscrimination Norms.” *California Law Review* 95, no. 1 (2007): 1-73.

Another challenge the American creatives of color face is that they are sometimes conflated with foreign nationals of the same ethnicity (who may be members of their respective cultures hegemony) in the conversation of diversity in Hollywood. In a broader sense, diversity became such a loosely defined term at multiple levels that it could be detrimental to minority industry workers, creatives, and audiences alike. For example, the FCC's collapsing of all Spanish speakers into one group led to the dominance of Latin American programming in the US Spanish-language TV market at the expense of domestically produced Spanish-language content. From 1960 to 1985, Spanish-language television firm Univision Communication Corporation formed financial ties with a Mexican conglomerate (owned by the Azcárraga family) with the permission of the FCC, because the Commission "recognized a boundary between 'Spanish Speakers and Whites, and thus deemed the network a minority-serving institution."<sup>113</sup> The FCC later reversed the approval after the Spanish Radio Broadcasters of America (SRBA) filed a formal complaint. SRBA argued that Hispanic American firms comprised of Hispanic Americans who face discrimination in the United States were different from and Latin American firms that sought to expand the Spanish-speaking media market. The latter would insufficiently represent the immigrant experience of Hispanic Americans, and it would hurt "Hispanic American media ventures" because imported Latin American content could operate at a lower cost due to "special policy exemptions."<sup>114</sup> Concluding thoughts

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<sup>113</sup> Mora, G. Cristina. "Regulating Immigrant Media and Instituting Ethnic Boundaries - The FCC and Spanish-language Television: 1960-1990." *Latino Studies* 9, no. 2-3 (2011): 242-62.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 253.

Broad definitions of diversity can contribute to a skewed sense of progress in Hollywood. One can see this play out when *Parasite* (2019)'s award sweep at the Oscars. Critics and journalists hailed *Parasite* as a victory against the “bamboo ceiling” in Hollywood—first Asian film to win Best Picture. However, it is a Korean production and not an AAPI one, and the film tells a story that does not necessarily reflect the experience of Korean Americans or other AAPIs born and raised in the United States. In an interview, director Bong Joon Ho hinted at his surprise at the overwhelming response from audiences around the world: despite crafting a movie full of “Koreanness” and his attempt to “express a sentiment specific to Korean culture” it was not until after a screening that Bong realizes the majority of the audience resonates with the film’s critique of capitalism.<sup>115</sup> *Parasite* does not specifically reflect the experiences of AAPI; instead its wide appeal lies in a larger socioeconomical commentary. Success stories like *Parasite* can sometimes obscure the level of marginalization AAPI filmmakers face in the industry. Throughout the 91 years history of the Academy Awards, only five Best Picture nominations were both directed and produced by Asians—*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Life of Pi* (2012), *Parasite* (2019), *Minari* (2020), *Nomadland* (2020)—and none of them were directed by AAPI with the exception of *Minari*. While Black independent cinema had provided authentic representations alternative to mainstream Hollywood since the silent film era, the first AAPI independent theatrical release did not come about until 1982 with *Chan is Missing*.<sup>116</sup> In the 1,447 films released from 2007 to

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<sup>115</sup> Alamo Drafthouse, “Bong Joon Ho | 2019 Extended Interview on PARASITE,” YouTube video, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sr9PC7yKDeY>.

<sup>116</sup> Hsing, Chün. “Asian America through the Lens: History, Representations, and Identity”. *Critical*

2019, AAPI directors account for only 3% of them. Conflating nationalities of creatives of color can warp the perception of Hollywood's diversity.

The conflation of nationalities conceals the adversities non-White Americans face in Hollywood, particularly the struggle against the bankability-experience cycle. Foreign filmmakers who belong to the ethnic majority of their home country are not only unhindered by discrimination in their local film and television industry, but their home countries can serve as steppingstones into Hollywood. In other words, foreign directors can attain “bankable” status outside of Hollywood. For example, of the seven Academy Awards Best Director nominations that have gone to Latin Americans, five belong to Mexico's Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Guillermo del Toro. The three directors—also known as the Three Amigos—all found international success after their careers took off in Mexico, and they remain the sole Latin American winners of the award. No U.S.-born Hispanics have been nominated in the category. Hispanic Americans face both declining media representation and domination of the creative market from Latin Americans. In the 1950s, Hispanics made up 2.8% of the American population, 3.9% of lead actor appearance, and 1.5% of all lead roles in the top ten scripted television shows (and 1.3%/1.7% respectively in top ten movies), whereas in 2013 Hispanics comprised of 17% of the American population yet none of the leading roles in top ten shows and movies.<sup>117</sup> From 2010 to 2013, 2.3% of directors were Latine,

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*Perspectives on Asian Pacific Americans Series*; v. 3. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998), 46.

<sup>117</sup> Negrón-Muntaner, Frances, Chelsea Abbas, Luis Figueroa, and Samuel Robson. Rep. *The Latino Media Gap: A Report on the State of Latinos in U.S. Media*. Columbia University, June 2014. <https://asit-prod-web1.cc.columbia.edu/cser/wp-content/uploads/sites/70/2020/03/Latino-Gap.pdf>.



and all of them were Latin Americans. Likewise, half of the Latine producers (2.7%) were Latin Americans, while three quarters of Latine writers (6%) were Latin Americans.<sup>118</sup> Hispanic Americans are facing an uphill battle in controlling their media image in the Hollywood—not only are work opportunities declining, but they also face competition from Latin American above-the-line workers.

By the same token, Academy Award winner Ang Lee, now one of the most accomplished AAPI filmmakers in Hollywood, first established his career elsewhere. Lee remained unemployed for six years after receiving his MFA degree in film production at New York University. In what Lee described as the most depressing period of his life, he penned and rewrote scripts that were lost in the proverbial development hell. In 1988, Lee was attached to direct *Neon*, starring Vincent D’Onofrio, Dylan McDermott, and a 19-year-old Julia Roberts, but the project was not greenlit.<sup>119</sup> It was not until *Pushing Hands* (1991) and *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) started receiving award attention in Taiwan that Lee felt as if “his luck started to turn.”<sup>120</sup> Ang Lee made his first feature films *Pushing Hands* (1991), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) (colloquially known as the *Father Knows Best* trilogy) in Taiwan, which won several nominations from the Golden Globes, the Academy Award, and the BAFTAs. Lee started gaining international renown, and what Lee assumed as good luck was actually his growing “bankability.” Lee’s first Western film was the British classic *Sense and*

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>119</sup> Chang, Jinn-Pei. *Ten-Year-Slumber for a Movie Dream* [十年一覺電影夢]. (Taipei: China Times Publishing Co, 2002), 51-57.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

*Sensibility*, and it is worth noting that Jane Austin’s novels are time-proven properties that receive film adaption every decade. Furthermore, actor Emma Thompson was also attached as the screenwriter, so the story is “bankable” even if Lee is not. Producer Lindsay Doran approached Lee for the project because the British directors (who all grew up on Jane Austen) had no interest, so she searched for foreign directors instead.<sup>121</sup> Lee’s career in the West did not begin until after he built up his track record in his native country of Taiwan, where the disadvantage in “bankability” a non-White creative usually experience in Hollywood does not apply. After he received critical acclaim for his Taiwanese productions, offers from the West started appearing. For the rest of Lee’s career, all of his films were based on existing properties—most of them award-winning literature.

Ang Lee’s ethnicity simultaneously made him the “alternative” choice to established (White) directors yet preferable due to his cultural difference. Alison Owen, producer of *Jane Eyre* (2011), espoused a similar rhetoric when she approached Cary Fukunaga, a Japanese-Swedish-American, to direct: “I didn’t want to go the establishment route, because sometimes they’re a little cowed by English history and too worried about being faithful to the Brontës. You need to shake things up a bit.”<sup>122</sup> The accounts reveal on the producers’ part an assumption of an essential quality to the films made by ethnic filmmakers, even for someone born and raised in the United States such as Fukunaga, but this assumption is not entirely incorrect. Just as women writers and

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 154-6.

<sup>122</sup> McGrath, Charles. “Another Hike on the Moors for ‘Jane Eyre.’” *New York Times*, March 4, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/06/movies/06eyre.html>.

directors are shown in the previous chapter to be conscious of their underrepresented status and hire more women, directors of color do the same. Asian-directed films have a higher percentage of Asian speaking characters on screen (27.3%) than non-Asian-directed films (5.9%.) Likewise, speaking Black characters in Black-directed films (53.1%) are more prominent than non-Black films (12.1%.)<sup>123</sup>

### **Bankability: Investment**

The lack of budget is a recurring theme in films directed by racial minorities. Racial minorities who work outside of the Hollywood studio system to retain creative freedom must also work without the resources of the Hollywood studio system. For those who work within the system, the process of cultural homogenization imposed by studio executives indicates a lack of confidence in their appeal—and by extension profitability. Contained ideological difference is nonetheless difference in the eyes of the executives. Since producers believe racial subjects have limited appeal to a wide audience, and racial minority filmmakers tend to elevate racial representation above those of White-directed films, producers may see filmmakers of color as intrinsically less “bankable” than White filmmakers. These producers assume that racial minority content could only be enjoyed by racial minority audiences while the White experience has a wider appeal. As a result, racial minority filmmakers are often given lower budgets for their projects than their White counterparts. In essence, race-based discrimination in Hollywood is justified with financial concerns.

This assumption of a segregated audience base is reflected in the marketing tactics

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<sup>123</sup> Smith, Stacy L., Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Peiper, 4.

of Hollywood studios. Producer “intuition” assumes that the primary audience for Black-cast films are firstly the Black population, then followed by the Latine community, thus the studios target their marketing towards those demographics—radio or television programs featuring Black hosts or actors—but neglect to promote the movies to the rest of the public.<sup>124</sup> Producer “intuition” also marks Black-directed films “unbankable” in the international market, so Black filmmakers often struggle to have their films released overseas, while in comparison White filmmakers have more access to the international box office.<sup>125</sup> The combination of low marketing budgets and limited distribution contribute to poor box office performance, which in turns perpetuates the myth of “unbankability.”

“Race-ing” an ethnic appeal reveals the Hollywood studios’ underlying rhetoric of Whiteness as the ideologically-absent universal experience and codes racial minorities as the ideologically-loaded “Other.” Movies with majority Black leads were described as “Black-cast;” likewise, the release of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) was celebrated as the first Asian-cast Hollywood film in decades following *The Joy Luck Club* in 1993, yet a majority White-cast film—which is most Hollywood films—is never referred to as such. Consequently, films relating to the racial minority experience are pigeonholed into their own category. The “*Ishtar* effect” that plagued women filmmakers (see the previous chapter) applies to racial minority filmmakers as well. Director Russ Parr suggests that “a big problem in Hollywood [is] they put us all in the same box. If a Tyler Perry film

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<sup>124</sup> Erigha, Maryann. *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019), 59.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 102-7.

comes out and doesn't do well, you won't see a Black film for four or five months."<sup>126</sup> Conversely, White male filmmakers are not subjected to the same effect. Because the hegemonic social group (White men) and its ideology appear "natural,"<sup>127</sup> White films are not racialized, and thus any box office success or failure is an individual event unconnected by race.

The budget breakdown of Black-directed films from 2000 to 2016 shows that not only did the number of films decline exponentially with the increase in budget, but the number of Black-cast or multi-racial-cast films decreased as the budget went up—3 out of 124 movies had over \$100 million budgets and all 3 were White-cast.<sup>128</sup> "Bankability" wielded by majority White and male executives leads to a budget growth inverse to racial representation, where the high budget commercial projects are White. Spike Lee's first feature *She's Gotta Have It* debuted at Cannes film festival with a micro-budget of \$175,000 to the praise of "Godardesque" small production,<sup>129</sup> but the funding is closely related to his racial subject matter. In an interview with Lee about his film *Red Hook Summer* (2012), Lee described that he had to fund the project himself to make "the movie we wanted to make," suggesting that major studios were not comfortable with the subject matters he was trying to tackle, and so he had to go independent. When Lee was asked about alternating between commercial projects and racial films, Lee replied: "I am trying to stay away from this position of me 'returning to my roots.' As if my roots are that I'm

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>127</sup> Hebdige, Dick, 205.

<sup>128</sup> Erigha, Maryann. *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*, 70.

<sup>129</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Spike Lee." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Accessed March 6, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Spike-Lee>.

only comfortable working on low-budget, small films. That's not the case at all. I think if people looked at my body of work, they'd see a great breadth of work."<sup>130</sup> As one of the most prolific and influential Black filmmakers in American history, Lee could only maintain creative freedom at the margins of the industry, where only limited resources are available. The rhetoric of "bankability" led to the "ghettoization" of racial films' budget and promotion, and the constraints of independent filmmaking (and distribution) is a taciturn reflection of studios' devaluation of non-White workers and narratives. As BET co-founder Robert Johnson had argued, the only solution to accessing studios' infrastructure without the trade-off in the quality of representation is the direct control over the means of cultural production.

### **Bankability: Return**

Racial minority filmmakers often have to work with a small budget, and the rhetoric of "bankability" works as a self-fulfilling prophecy that prevents them from attaining "bankable" status. Similarly, non-White actors are generally considered to have less star power than that of Whites to "open" a film, and non-White actors have fewer casting opportunities to build up a track record. The box office numbers, however, put another dent in the myth of "bankability."

Data show that in 2019, films with 41% to 50% of overall minority cast had the highest median global box office revenue at \$76.1 million, whereas films with 11% minority cast or less performed worse than any other films. Domestically, films with 31%

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<sup>130</sup> Morales, Wilson. "Spike Lee TALKS 'RED HOOK SUMMER' and Black Cinema," January 20, 2012. <https://www.blackfilm.com/read/2012/01/spike-lee-talks-red-hook-summer-and-black-cinema/>.

to 40% minority cast took the crown at \$44.5 million (median), but the least diverse films still performed the worst. In terms of lead actors, the difference in the median global box office of White-led films and Black-led films are small: \$53.7 million and \$48.8 million, respectively.<sup>131</sup> These data directly contradict that only White-led films have mainstream appeal.

Filmmakers of color are given meager budgets, while White directors can be attached to direct blockbusters with little experience or continue to be employed after box office bombs. Analysis of budget and box office performance reveals that non-White-led projects are very budget-efficient. Many minority directors' films performed three or four times the production budget despite the “unbankable” label—Rick Fumiyawa's *The Wood* (1999) grossed \$25 million on a \$6 million budget, *Brown Sugar* (2002) grossed \$27 million on a \$8 million budget, and *Dope* (2015) received nearly twenty-five times return of its \$700,000 budget.<sup>132</sup> These outstanding return ratios are often ignored due to the overall small box office revenue, which is established earlier to be constrained by budget. On the blockbuster side, the return ratio continues the trend of the previous paragraph, where the least diverse movies perform the worst. The highest median return on investment in 2019 is between 31% and 50% minority cast share at 2.6 times.<sup>133</sup>

### **The Exceptions that Prove the Rule**

“Bankability” applies to filmmaker, actor, and subject matter. The overall

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<sup>131</sup> Ramon, Ana-Christina, and Darnell Hunt. Rep. *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods Part 1: Film*, 28-35.

<sup>132</sup> Erigha, Maryann. *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*, 82.

<sup>133</sup> Ramon, Ana-Christina, and Darnell Hunt. Rep. *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods Part 1: Film*, 30.

“bankability” of a project varies based on different combinations of these three elements. On one hand, White directors can make movies with a Black-cast with a high budget—Michael Bay’s *Bad Boys II* (2003) had a budget of \$130 million, and Michael Mann’s *Ali* (2001) was made with \$107 million. On the other hand, minority filmmakers can evade the racialized “unbankability” by reducing racial specificity, as Viacom has done to BET’s information programming. Director of *Girls Trip* (2017), Malcom D. Lee, says: “I’m a Black filmmaker and I fully acknowledge that I tell stories with African-American actors and characters. But they are all very universal. It’s not just a movie for African-American audiences. It’s a movie for everyone.”<sup>134</sup> To Lee, removing racial specificity was necessary to escape the budget pigeonhole producers place Black stories in.

Directors of color entrusted with large budgets in Hollywood are few and far between, and fewer still if one excludes directors who started their careers overseas. Although Justin Lin’s massively popular *Fast and Furious* entries feature a mixed-race cast, these action-crime-thriller films do not touch upon racial issues. Among Spike Lee’s prolific body of work that examines racial relationships in American society, only *Da 5 Bloods* (2020) came close to the \$45 million budget of *Inside Man* (2006). M. Night Shyamalan, who was once given the title “The Next Spielberg” by *Newsweek*, hired few racial-minority leads throughout his decades-long career: himself—in his debut feature *Praying with Anger* (1992)—Samuel L. Jackson, and Will Smith. Shyamalan’s most expensive film, *The Last Airbender* (2010), was adapted from the popular Nickelodeon series, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005–2008), which featured characters drawn from

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<sup>134</sup> Erigha, Maryann. *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*, 144.



East Asian, South Asian, and Inuit cultures, but the film adaptation featured a majority White cast. Shyamalan offered some of the roles to White actors in a casting call which Shyamalan claimed to be an open and inclusive call that requested “Caucasians and other ethnicities.”<sup>135</sup> However, the founding president of Media Action Network for Asian Americans, Guy Aoki, contested Shyamalan’s claim and declared that the original casting call “stated a specific preference for white people” instead.<sup>136</sup> After the cast was announced, the whitewashing came under criticism, and Shyamalan defended his decision by claiming that he casted the film in a “color blind way where everyone is represented”<sup>137</sup>—thereby justifying the act of Whitewash and concealing the racist history of Hollywood behind a seemingly “meritocratic” hiring process.

### Conclusion

People of color have historically been excluded from the film and television industry in the U.S.. With few opportunities to access the means of cultural production, racial minorities are quantitatively underrepresented as entertainment industry workers. Additionally, they suffer from offensive or plastic representations on-screen. Racial minority representations in front of and behind the scenes in early Hollywood were controlled by White executives and creatives. Even when Hollywood grew more

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<sup>135</sup> Lee, Chris. “A Whitewash for ‘Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time’ and ‘The Last Airbender.’” *Los Angeles Time*, May 23, 2010. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-may-23-la-ca-racebender-20100523-story.html>.

<sup>136</sup> Lee, Mark. “Movies: Racebending: Guy Aoki on ‘The Last Airbender’ Casting Controversy.” *Overthinking It*, July 13, 2010. <https://www.overthinkingit.com/2010/07/13/racebending-guy-aoki-the-last-airbender-boycott/>.

<sup>137</sup> Hudson, John. “Is ‘The Last Airbender’ Racist?” *The Atlantic*, October 26, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2010/07/is-the-last-airbender-racist/344982/>.

acceptant of minority workers and narratives over time, corporate decision making was still subjected to the effect of cultural hegemony. Another gargantuan hurdle workers of color face is the rhetoric of “bankability”: White executives assume racial minority creatives, actors, and subject matter lack wide appeal based on intuition—a Hollywood practice used by producers to predict audience taste and box office performance. A lack of “bankability”—low confidence in non-White workers and narratives—prevents minority-led projects from getting greenlit, and when they are approved, these projects are given smaller budgets than their White counterparts. However, “bankability” and producer intuition are not statistically proven. The lack of marketing and domestic and international screens that stemmed from the low budgets limit the box office performance of minority-led projects, which in turn transforms minorities’ low “bankability” into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### CHAPTER THREE

In the previous chapters, I have discussed how “bankability” is constructed and how it affects minorities. While gender and racial minority workers above the line had historically been able to produce and distribute stories about minority experiences without the support of big studios, they nonetheless exist on the margins—constrained by limited resources and a small audience. This chapter is focused on how the major institutions in Hollywood react to the emerging discourse of diversity and inclusion, and I use Disney, HBO, the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to examine how their respective industrial conditions and brand identities influence the different approaches to inclusion—how the needle is moved in mainstream representations. I argue that, on the one hand, Disney embraces diversity as part of its branding, the media conglomerate’s mission to grow and maintain a massive global audience subjects minority creatives to the power of cultural hegemony to avoid potential controversy stemmed from the deviation from dominant ideologies. On the other hand, HBO’s prestige branding and the exclusive viewer base the premium cable network cultivated makes it poised to profit from authentic minority representations on screen. Finally, major award shows such as the Oscars and the Golden Globes represents the consensus of (some) industry workers and critics, who serve as the tastemakers of the largest culture industry in the world—influencing the public’s consumption behavior through accolades. In other words, award shows can potentially create demands for minority-led films and television shows telling minority stories.

### Neoliberalism and the Corporate Social Responsibility

Though the Supreme Court placed film as a medium under the protection of First Amendment in the 1952 *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson* case, Hollywood continued with self-censorship with the Production Code that enforced heteronormative and White supremacist media representations until its abandonment in 1968, and the government remained uninvolved in regulating the progression or regression of minority media representations. During a news conference in 1986, President Ronald Reagan said: “The nine most terrifying words in the English language are, ‘I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.’”<sup>138</sup> This quip exhibits the anti-government sentiment of neoliberalism that would define the Reagan administration. The laissez faire economic policies of the administration had a profound impact on industries of every field. In entertainment, deregulation paved the way for large scale vertical integration via corporate consolidations, and the free market that the Chicago School economists believed to bring fair competition instead brought about what the former FCC (Federal Communications Commission) Commissioner Nicholas Johnson called “the annihilation of competition.”<sup>139</sup> In addition to the diminished competition, the prime economic directive of the Reagan administration and of succeeding administrations also undermined the FCC’s regulatory power, with Commissioners such as Ajit Pai, a former Verizon attorney and an alumnus of the Chicago School, dismantling Net Neutrality among other acts of

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<sup>138</sup> “Transcript of President Reagan’s News Conference,” *The Washington Post*, August 13, 1986. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1986/08/13/transcript-of-president-reagans-news-conference/bceaa7d7-a544-4c4e-8af1-51f303a00e25/>.

<sup>139</sup> Holt, Jennifer. *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980–1996*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2011. Accessed March 21, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjgd1>), 3.

deregulation.<sup>140</sup> However, even before deregulation became the norm, the relationship between the FCC and the industry is paradoxically adversarial yet intimate. While the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) at one point accused of the FCC for being a “dictatorship,” Commissioner Johnson famously called the FCC the “graduate school for the regulatory subgovernment,” where many commissioners rapidly joined the industry they were regulating in quick succession.<sup>141</sup>

Neoliberalism promotes the idea of free market and individual power, and in the entertainment industry, this ideology exacerbates the industry’s existing disdain towards any form of government intervention and bolsters corporations’ preference to self-regulate. In the tug of war for power between the FCC and the private sector, the entertainment industry continues to gain ground. It is the FCC’s policy that broadcasters must uphold the “public interest” and refrain from broadcasting any “indecent” content.<sup>142</sup> However, “public interest” and “indecent” were and remained nebulously defined, and broadcasters could not risk varying interpretations of those terms to impact their programming. As early as 1951, television networks formed trade associations to self-regulate content and combat censorship. The NAB (National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters in 1951), in particular, framed television as “the exercise of democracy and free expression,” and the industry’s agency in defining what is decent

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<sup>140</sup> Hendel, John. “Trump’s FCC Chief Leaves Legacy of Deregulation and 5G Fights.” *Politico*, November 30, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/30/fcc-chief-ajit-pai-to-depart-agency-the-day-biden-is-sworn-in-441379>.

<sup>141</sup> Jaramillo, Deborah L.. *The Television Code: Regulating the Screen to Safeguard the Industry*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018. Accessed March 24, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central), 115-137.

<sup>142</sup> “Obscenity, Indecency and Profanity.” Federal Communications Commission, June 24, 2018. <https://www.fcc.gov/general/obscenity-indecency-and-profanity>.

demonstrated the corporations' role as "moral guardians" of the American society.<sup>143</sup>

Just as government welfare is slowly replaced with individual philanthropy under neoliberalism, the entertainment industry takes up their social responsibility to contribute to the "public interest," albeit motivated by commercial benefits. Laurie Ouellette writes that under the Clinton and Bush administrations' "communitarian models of 'governing through community'," programs such as ABC's *Big Give*, Fox's *American Idol Gives Back*, and MTV's *Think to Planet Green* mobilized civic resources towards social issues by combining entertainment with the "public interest," and thereby contributed to society in the neoliberal spirit of privatization and in the celebration of the market's self-regulating power.<sup>144</sup> Though communitarianism is motivated by the neoliberal market, the aspect of public service moderates neoliberalism's emphasis on self-serving individualism. As the "moral guardians," showcasing ethical values became a battleground for brand differentiation for media corporations. ABC in particular switched gear in 2002 from the "TV is Good" campaign in which the network branded itself as "a venue for the hedonistic consumption of trivial entertainment" and scoffed at any other purpose other than generating venue, and started the Better Community campaign where television stars made public announcements to bring awareness to social issues.<sup>145</sup> Ouellette argues that Better Community's communitarian governing is inseparable from the network's branding, so when proactive viewers—in contrast to the passive

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<sup>143</sup> Jaramillo, Deborah L., 53-79.

<sup>144</sup> Ouellette, Laurie. "Citizen Brand: ABC and the Do Good Turn in US Television." In *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*, edited by Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser, 57–75. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 63-66.

consumer—perform their civic function under Better Community, the social and material effects generated by viewers—and guided by the social values of the network—can be reincorporated into ABC’s branding.<sup>146</sup>

Disney, ABC’s parent company, engages in the same branding tactic across its corporate holdings. Furthermore, Disney’s approach to corporate social responsibility also extends to content existing outside of the media conglomerate’s various social campaigns. Being the “moral guardian” on the global scale, as the matter of diversity in media became increasingly relevant in the public consciousness, Disney also reacted to the trends in discourses in the company’s media output. In the next section, I will examine Disney’s hiring of gender and racial minority above-the-line talent and the minority representation in film and television.

### **Disney Values: Minority Auteur Uplift and Branding**

In 2016, *Vanity Fair*’s Yohana Desta announced in an article titled “The Year Disney Started to Take Diversity Seriously” that Disney, at the height of the conglomerate’s resources and reach, can now reflect the diversity of its global audience. Desta pointed to a number of recent outputs to demonstrate this change: the Black-cast *Black Panther* (2018), *Coco* (2017) and its Mexican culture, and *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018)—the young adult novel adaptation of the same name—which featured a biracial protagonist and was directed by Ava DuVernay, a Black woman.<sup>147</sup> The interview with director Ava DuVernay in particular showed the resolve of Disney’s commitment to

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>147</sup> Desta, Yohana. “The Year Disney Started to Take Diversity Seriously.” *Vanity Fair*, November 23, 2016. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/11/disney-films-inclusive>.

diversity:

They are really killing it across the board in terms of the depth of the bench and the commitment to an inclusive slate,” DuVernay told *Vanity Fair*. “You have an amazing executive of color, Tendo Nagenda there. And you’ve got this really, really forward-thinking Sean Bailey [president of production] and Alan Horn [chairman of Walt Disney Studios] . . . they don’t even have a conversation about a movie unless they’re talking about how it should reflect the world.<sup>148</sup>

When one examines this pledge of diversity with statistics, the numbers tell a slightly different story. While Disney was already leading the pack in television as far back as 2014 (in terms of quantitative inclusion of female workers), the breakdown of female and other underrepresented demographics in characters and above-the-line jobs in Disney 2019 film releases shows that the conglomerate trailed behind both Universal and Paramount.<sup>149</sup> Disney, however, took the crown in box office take with female and other underrepresented leads and co-leads, and the company’s box office success was concentrated in a few high profile projects. Walt Disney Studio’s 4 female-led movies grossed \$4.1 billion, while Universal Pictures took second place at \$896 million with 9 films. Similarly, the studio took in \$2.7 billion with 2 underrepresented leads, and Universal Pictures achieved the second place of \$1.6 billion with 8 films.<sup>150</sup> Disney’s diversity effort is highly visible but confined to a few films and does not reflect the studio’s film output as a whole.

Disney makes visible strides in both on-screen and behind-the-scenes quantitative representation, and the visibility could be part of the media conglomerate’s marketing

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Smith, Stacy L., Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Peiper, 6.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 7.



strategy. Julia Himberg writes that in the modern media landscape “diversity” becomes one of the metrics of quality, and media companies often rely on publicity regarding the diversity of their work culture and content to attract a wider audience.<sup>151</sup> On-screen diversity becomes a tactic to court the global audience, and *Moana* (2016) was used by former Pixar Chief John Lasseter as an example to “reach out and find origins of legends all over the world.”<sup>152</sup> However, Disney sometimes struggles with authenticity when presenting cultures from around the world. *Mulan* (2020) received criticism after director Niki Caro, a White woman, defended the absence of an Asian director for the film by citing her ability to balance Chinese culture and “the culture of Disney.”<sup>153</sup> The comment drew further scrutiny of the almost all-White crew. A month later, Bina Daigeler, the costume designer, drew public ire when she said she went to “[European] museums that had a Chinese department” for research<sup>154</sup> and drew her inspirations from the Tang dynasty,<sup>155</sup> two centuries off (at least) from when *The Ballad of Mulan* took place, which caused much uproar from Chinese netizens.<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, executives from various

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<sup>151</sup> Himberg, Julia. *The New Gay for Pay: The Sexual Politics of American Television Production*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018), 78-79.

<sup>152</sup> Desta, Yohana.

<sup>153</sup> Ford, Rebecca. “Inside Disney’s Bold \$200M Gamble on ‘Mulan’: ‘The Stakes Couldn’t Be Higher.’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 27, 2020.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/inside-disneys-bold-200m-gamble-mulan-stakes-couldnt-be-higher-1280999>.

<sup>154</sup> Li, Sara. “Why Did the ‘Mulan’ Costume Designer Go to Europe to Research the Film?” *Teen Vogue*, March 19, 2020. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-mulan-costume-designer-bina-daigeler-comments-say-about-chinese-representation>.

<sup>155</sup> Nguyen, Terry. “Mulan’s Costumes Are Bright, Dramatic, and (Mostly) Historically Accurate.” *Vox*, September 2, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/21409124/mulan-costume-designer-chinese-fashion-expert>.

<sup>156</sup> 林君穎. “【雙面花木蘭】中國觀眾不收貨的一大原因：漢服復興運動.” *HK01*, September 19, 2020. <https://www.hk01.com/中國觀察/524533/雙面花木蘭-中國觀眾不收貨的一大原因-漢服復興運動>.

arms of Disney periodically reaffirm their commitment to inclusion in the trade press. John Lasseter announced at a news conference for *Inside Out* (2015) that “It’s very important to us ... to have female and ethnic characters.”<sup>157</sup> Disney’s Motion Picture Production President Sean Bailey told *The Hollywood Reporter* that “inclusivity is not only a priority but an imperative for us, and it’s top of mind on every single project.”<sup>158</sup> Lucasfilm President Kathleen Kennedy in a *Variety* interview framed the studio as talent scout for women, who historically haven’t been given “many opportunities.”<sup>159</sup>

Disney brands its role in the industry as the uplifter of minority filmmakers, and Disney’s goal for visibility in big projects translates into high budgets. Up until 2020 only a total of nine women filmmakers in Hollywood had been given a budget over \$100 million. Among the nine, four of them achieved the rank with funding from Disney: Jennifer Lee (co-directed with Chris Buck) with *Frozen* (2013), Ava DuVernay with *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018), Anna Boden (co-directed with long-time collaborator Ryan Fleck) with *Captain Marvel* (2019), and Niki Caro with the 2020 live action version of *Mulan*. At \$200 million (for *Black Panther*), Ryan Coogler has the second highest budget ever given to a Black filmmaker. But while Disney would trust minority filmmakers that are usually deemed “unbankable,” the highly visible platform Disney provides to them

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<sup>157</sup> Setoodeh, Ramin. “John Lasseter Says Disney/Pixar Wants More Diverse Characters.” *Variety*, May 18, 2015. <https://variety.com/2015/film/markets-festivals/john-lasseter-disney-pixar-more-diverse-characters-1201499414/>.

<sup>158</sup> Ford, Rebecca. “Black Santa and Hip-Hop ‘Oliver Twist’: Disney’s Diversity Push.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 2, 2016. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/black-santa-hip-hop-oliver-twist-disneys-diversity-push-942983>.

<sup>159</sup> Lang, Brent. “‘Star Wars’: Lucasfilm Chief Previews ‘Rogue One’ and Han Solo Spinoff.” *Variety*, November 22, 2016. <https://variety.com/2016/film/features/star-wars-rogue-one-lucasfilm-jj-abrams-kathleen-kennedy-1201923806/>.

does not guarantee unfettered expression.

As Wahneema Lubiano argued, “If a production has to return a profit in the millions of dollars, the likelihood of that production’s remaining oppositional or subversive with regard to race might well be in inverse proportion to the extent the film relies on the support of a large (of whatever races), politically uncritical audience to turn a profit.”<sup>160</sup> The cultural homogenization effect of Disney could not be discounted. Disney’s executive power, like most other film studios, is still mostly in the hands of White men, and these executives see the mass audience (which they assume to be White) as the only audience worth courting and unoffending messages as the optimal way to court them. To examine the depth of media representation, Kristen J. Warner coined the term “plastic representation” to describe a numerical representation as a surface-level measurement of societal progress, where the “universal” narratives and interchangeable demographics in such narratives divorced “plastic representation” from the specificities that provide meaningful depth.<sup>161</sup> Criticism of *A Wrinkle in Time* echoed patterns displayed in Viacom’s dismantling of BET’s race-specific information programming, where some of the race-specific story details in the novel were absent from the film adaptation. *Uproxx* writer Vince Mancini writes that despite DuVernay’s claim of the film being “a love letter to Black girls,” the director’s “personal touch” gets lost in a film that preached “universality.”<sup>162</sup> Tasha Robinson of *The Verge* calls the protagonist’s “curiously

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<sup>160</sup> Erigha, Maryann. *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*, 155.

<sup>161</sup> Warner, Kristen J.. “In the Time of Plastic Representation.” *Film Quarterly* 71, No. 2 (2017): 32–37.

<sup>162</sup> Mancini, Vince. “‘A Wrinkle in Time’ Is a Series OF Affirmations in Search of a Story.” *Uproxx*, March 7, 2018. <https://uproxx.com/filmdrunk/a-wrinkle-in-time-review-disney-ava-duvernay-oprah-winfrey/>.

underplayed” biracial identity a “missed opportunity” when the rest of the film does not shy away from broadcasting its messages.<sup>163</sup> *A Wrinkle in Time* opened to mixed reviews and underperforming box office numbers, but the unprecedented scale of the project led by a Black female director dominated the conversations, or as Yolanda Machado of *Marie Claire* put it in her meta-review: “This film is more than a film. It’s more than its reviews—good or bad.”<sup>164</sup> Several reviews echoes the criticism of plastic representation in *A Wrinkle in Time*’s, and Machado’s defense against the film’s negative reviews still falls in line with what Warner describes as surface-level quantitative difference as “indicator of progress.”<sup>165</sup> A Black woman in the director’s seat of a Disney blockbuster is a major milestone for employment opportunities for non-White women workers in Hollywood, and despite *A Wrinkle in Time*’s lackluster critical and commercial performance, DuVernay continues to be active in the industry. At last, a female director of color not only broke free of “unbankability,” but also the *Ishtar* effect of a flop ending a director’s career.

For most of Disney’s major movie outputs (from Disney Animations, Pixar, Marvel, and Lucasfilm,) the media conglomerate takes the *Fast and Furious* route where diversity is taken for granted and not addressed within the diegesis. Publicity is factored into Disney’s minority talent hiring, and the company utilizes several tropes of auteurism to

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<sup>163</sup> Robinson, Tasha. “A Wrinkle in Time Isn’t for Cynics – or Adults.” *The Verge*, March 9, 2018. <https://www.theverge.com/2018/3/9/17100816/a-wrinkle-in-time-movie-review-ava-duvernay-storm-reid-oprah-winfrey-reese-witherspoon-mindy-kaling>.

<sup>164</sup> Machado, Yolanda. “A Wrinkle in Time Isn’t a Great Movie, but That’s Completely Irrelevant.” *Marie Claire*, March 7, 2018. <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/a19135311/a-wrinkle-in-time-movie-review/>.

<sup>165</sup> Warner, Kristen J., 33.

promote movies. In writing about the cultural legitimization attempts of television, Michael Newman and Elana Levine dissected and categorized auteurism's marketing functions. Disney's penchant for hiring award-winning indie directors to the celebration of (Marvel) fans constitutes "author as guarantee of art," where the director's artistic vision is distinguished from the commercial, "assembly-line" style production.<sup>166</sup> Disney co-opts the directors' distinct styles, identities, and their prestige as artists to elevate Marvel's status from mass media entertainment—or as many culture critics, including director Martin Scorsese, deemed "not cinema"<sup>167</sup>—to (the respectable) cinema. The media cycle for the Taika Waititi-directed *Thor: Ragnarok* (2019) embodied the listed tropes. In addition to Taika Waititi's native ancestry, his unique dry humor and his eccentricities were used to promote *Thor: Ragnarok* as an atypical Marvel film. Waititi told *Business Insider* that he and actor Mark Ruffalo joked about getting fired by Marvel for the film's "unconventional" direction.<sup>168</sup> *The New York Times*, on the other hand, published a feature—titled "The Superweirdo Behind 'Thor: Ragnarok'"—on Waititi's career and the "indigenous" style he brings to the set, and *Thor: Ragnarok* as "a Taika version of one of these [Marvel] movies."<sup>169</sup> Waititi's unprecedented media presence transformed him into an interface between the public and Marvel's production pipeline, and the media

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<sup>166</sup> Newman, Michael Z., and Levine, Elana, 38-58.

<sup>167</sup> Scorsese, Martin. "Martin Scorsese: I Said Marvel Movies Aren't Cinema. Let Me Explain." *The New York Times*, November 5, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/opinion/martin-scorsese-marvel.html>.

<sup>168</sup> Guerrasio, Jason. "The Director of 'Thor: Ragnarok' Says the Movie Is So Unconventional Mark Ruffalo Joked They'd Both Get Fired." *Business Insider*, October 26, 2017. <https://www.businessinsider.com/taika-waititi-thor-ragnarok-interview-2017-10>.

<sup>169</sup> Kois, Dan. "The Superweirdo Behind 'Thor: Ragnarok.'" *The New York Times*, October 19, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/magazine/the-superweirdo-behind-thor-ragnarok.html>.

focus on Waititi's artistic vision inadvertently attributes him as the sole author of the project.

Disney brands itself as a platform where minority filmmakers can realize their artistic vision, yet an interview with Argentinian director Lucrecia Martel tells a different story. In 2018, Marvel was planning to attach a female director to *Black Widow* (2021)—the second female-led superhero movie in the decade-spanning Marvel Cinematic Universe. Martel was approached for her women-centric filmography to direct and develop Scarlet Johansson's character, however, when it came to the action sequence, Marvel told Martel "don't worry about the action scenes, we will take care of that," which Martel interpreted as the studio's sexist dismissal of women filmmakers' capability.<sup>170</sup> Martel was sought after by Disney, but not for her directing prowess, since she would only be able to direct parts of the movie. Disney is not necessarily interested in lending minority creatives a platform but co-opting the artists' social cachet.

On-screen diversity for Disney does not translate into quality representation or even quantitative representation for all marginalized demographics. As one of the most vocal advocates for diversity in the film and television industry, Disney strives to avoid any controversy that the company deems too unsafe for the "family-friendly" brand image, and as a result, Disney lags behind in LGBT representations. While the quality of media representation and the LGBT community are not the focus of this thesis, this demographic is a useful indicator of inclusion due to its precarious situation in civil rights

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<sup>170</sup> "Was Offered 'Black Widow' Film by Marvel Studios, Says Lucrecia Martel." *The Pioneer*, October 30, 2018. <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2018/entertainment/was-offered--black-widow--film-by-marvel-studios--says-lucrecia-martel.html>.

and societal acceptance. Disney has no LGBT lead or co-lead in any of the subsidiary film studios as of 2021 (with the exception of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox’s film library acquired by Disney,) and Walt Disney Pictures did not have its first gay character until 2017 with the live action remake of *Beauty and the Beast*.<sup>171</sup> Despite this inclusion, the character’s queerness was more explicit in media coverage than in the feature film itself.<sup>172</sup> Similarly, director J.J. Abrams teased Lucasfilm’s first queer characters in *Star Wars Episode IX: The Rise of the Skywalker* (2019) in the media, only for the queer moment to be a short kiss between two minor characters in the background of one scene.<sup>173</sup> In the same year, Joe Russo, co-director of *Avengers: Endgame* and a cis-gendered man, portrayed a queer character that appeared in only one scene “to ensure the integrity and show [queer representation] is so important to the filmmakers that one of us is representing that.”<sup>174</sup> Disney spares no opportunity to seize media headlines to broadcast its “inclusivity” of the LGBT community. The Disney’s frequent promotion of tokenized representation pushed Brianna Lawrence of *The Mary Sue* to publish an article titled “Congratulations to Disney’s 7th First Openly Gay Character” after the entertainment conglomerate pulled the public relations stunt again with *Cruella* (2021).<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> “World Exclusive: ‘Beauty and the Beast’ Set To Make Disney History With Gay Character.” *Attitude*, March 1, 2017. <https://attitude.co.uk/article/world-exclusive-beauty-and-the-beast-set-to-make-disney-history-with-gay-character-1/13725/>.

<sup>172</sup> Smith, Stacy L., Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Peiper, 6.

<sup>173</sup> Hibberd, James. “‘Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker’ Has Franchise’s First Gay Kiss.” *Entertainment Weekly*, December 18, 2019. <https://ew.com/movies/2019/12/18/the-rise-of-skywalker-gay-kiss/>.

<sup>174</sup> Fleming, Mike. “‘Avengers: Endgame’ Directors Joe & Anthony Russo Address Inclusion of First Openly Gay Character in Marvel Superhero Film.” *Deadline*, April 26, 2019. <https://deadline.com/2019/04/avengers-endgame-marvel-first-openly-gay-character-directors-joe-russo-anthony-russo-discuss-1202601583/>.

<sup>175</sup> Lawrence, Briana. “Congratulations to Disney’s 7th First Openly Gay Character.” *The Mary Sue*, May 26, 2021. <https://www.themarysue.com/another-first-openly-gay-character/>.

Disney's approach to branding on-screen and behind-the-scenes representation produces high-profile cases that may have help propelled the career of some minority actors and creatives to new heights. However, the authenticity of these minority representations is limited in depth, the number of underrepresented demographics, and consistency of Disney's overall output. A breakdown of 2019's movie releases shows that in the on-screen qualitative representation category Disney tied third with Paramount in female leads and co-leads at 44%, and the conglomerate ranked last for racially-underrepresented leads and co-leads at 22%.<sup>176</sup> For behind-the-scenes workers, Disney situated just behind Universal in the categories for women director (17%), writer (28%), and producer (27%), but the conglomerate ranked last again in racially-underrepresented categories for director (0%), writer (6%), and producer (10%).<sup>177</sup> In the next two sections, I will investigate diversity branding in the television landscape, using HBO as my case study.

### **It's Not TV, It's Brand Differentiation Part 1: The Material Conditions**

Media corporations nowadays use diversity as a branding strategy, and Warner Media is no exception. However, as on-screen diversity becomes normalized in the media landscape, studios often reduce the specificity of minority experiences and opt for postracial and postfeminist plastic representation. In this section, I explore how that HBO's business model and its unique position in the media landscape may allow the company to embrace diversity and uplift minority voices beyond superficial levels to the

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<sup>176</sup> Smith, Stacy L., Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Peiper, 6.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.



benefit of its business, when other studios working in both film and television have shied away from the subject matter.

HBO (Home Box Office) is known for the slogan the premium cable network ran from 1996 to 2009: “It’s not TV, it’s HBO.” This iconic slogan did not emerge until 1996, and it was one of more than a dozen slogans used since the channel’s inception. Throughout the decades, the taglines show an identity slowly taking form: “Different and First” from 1975 to 1976, “The Great Entertainment Alternative” from 1976 to 1978, “There’s No Place Like HBO” from 1984 to 1985, and “Simply the Best” from 1989 to 1990.<sup>178</sup> The brand image of HBO is rooted in distinction from the rest of television. HBO establishes this difference with the “risky” and “quality” content the network markets and delivers, and this business direction is informed by a specific set of industrial contexts.

HBO is a premium cable channel operating on a subscription model, and this gives HBO more freedom in terms of its programming. From the legal aspect, the *Supreme Court in United States v. Playboy Entertainment Group, Inc.* case ruled that since the FCC’s “indecent” rule is content-based, the Commission’s regulatory power over cable “must meet ‘strict scrutiny.’”<sup>179</sup> In other words, the Supreme Court recognized cable television’s difference from broadcast television’s pervasiveness in society, and

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<sup>178</sup> Leverette, Marc; Ott, Brian L; Louise Buckley, Cara. “Introduction: The Not TV Industry.” In *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, 25-30. Routledge, 2008; HBO “The Great Entertainment Alternative” Bumper, 1978. *YouTube*, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL1gJ5Za3zI>; Home Box Office®- No Place like HBO® (1983). *YouTube*, 2007. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVc3DPh-2iQ>.

<sup>179</sup> Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service. *Constitutionality of Applying the FCC's Indecency Restriction to Cable Television*, 2008.

thus cable television should not be subjected to the same restrictions. HBO can therefore incorporate subject matter conventionally deemed risqué in its programming in the deregulated space of cable television.

The lack of advertisements on HBO is another reason why the channel can afford to take risks that broadcasters could not take. The television industry, like the film industry, can be unpredictable, and thus executives would rely on tactics such as the rhetoric of “bankability” to reduce risk and maximize profit potential. For the networks that generate revenue from advertisements, television executives aim to generate high ratings to increase advertising income, but they also have to make sure the content is “advertiser-safe”—unchallenging to the dominant ideologies of the society—]to retain corporate sponsors.<sup>180</sup> In other words, the successful commodification of the audience depends on traffic and wide appeal. HBO, on the other hand, is less constrained by the political economy of advertisement-supported television by comparison, which removes the incentive for the channel to avoid uncomfortable subject matter that would usually upset sponsors in networks that sell advertisement spots.

Furthermore, the subscription model allows HBO to deal directly with the viewers, rather than creating high-rating timeslots to attract advertisers. This means HBO has to focus on the strength—or “quality”—of the programming itself to attract subscribers. On the other hand, HBO’s branding of itself in opposition of the rest of television encourages HBO to take risks in order to maintain the gap in the brand

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<sup>180</sup> Kelso, Tony. “And Now No Word from Our Sponsor.” In *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, edited by Cara Louise Buckley, Marc L Leverette, and Brian L Ott, 46–61. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.

differentiation, especially when premium cable channels such as Showtime and Starz pursue a similar business model and branding tactics. Amanda Lotz argues that another way the subscription model brings HBO room to experiment with content is the network's lack of imperative to become a crowd pleaser at the individual level—as long as some aspects of the programming are attractive to the subscribers, a subscription base can be maintained.<sup>181</sup>

HBO brands itself against the rest of television with the notion of “quality TV,” yet what is “quality TV?” Television as a mass medium has long been looked down upon due to its wide access and its association with the domestic space.<sup>182</sup> HBO's branding differentiation can thus be explained as dissociation with television and its mass media status. “Quality” as an artistic metric signifies high art, yet it does not have any clear definition. According to Deborah Jaramillo, “quality” is frequently used in the popular press and by interest groups with little regards to its meaning.<sup>183</sup> However, Jaramillo locates one of the manifestations of “quality” in HBO series' supposedly “authorial style” that links them to cinema, “a higher brow entertainment medium.”<sup>184</sup> Pierre Bourdieu wrote that the hierarchy of taste corresponds with different levels of cultural competence to encode and decode the media—high art references its own history while popular art imitates life, and the denial of immediate enjoyment derived from everyday experience

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<sup>181</sup> Santo, Avi. “Para-television and Discourses of Distinction.” In *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, edited by Cara Louise Buckley, Marc L Leverette, and Brian L Ott, 19–45. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>182</sup> Newman, Michael Z., and Levine, Elana, 3.

<sup>183</sup> Jaramillo, Deborah L. “The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, The Sopranos, and the Construction of a Quality Brand.” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (January 2002): 59–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859902026001005>.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

reinforces “the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane.”<sup>185</sup> HBO appeals to other media higher on the hierarchy of taste to affirm its premium status on television (or low art.) For example, HBO’s prestige series such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* identified “stylistically with the non-televisual genre of European art cinema.”<sup>186</sup>

How does the notion of “quality” interact with diversity? “Quality” can mean experimental aesthetics and form, but in terms of subject matter, it remains elusive. HBO appeals to masculinity—as opposed to the feminized day-time television—with the lack of advertisement breaks, which is generally associated with consumerism, and programming that appeals to an interpretative community equipped with the proper cultural capital to decode the content, as opposed to the feminized passive consumer. Avi Santo traces HBO’s appeal to masculinity further to shows such as *The Sopranos* and *Deadwood* that are “remarkably preoccupied with exploring White, middle-class, male anxieties”—subjects that are antithetical to the experience of minorities. However, I argue that masculinization is a method to promote the channel’s position on the taste hierarchy and not an end goal in itself; brand differentiation remains the channel’s branding imperative while cable rivals and streaming platforms (that enjoy the similar if not more freedom from deregulation) follow HBO’s proven branding strategy. According

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<sup>185</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, (1984), 1-7.

<sup>186</sup> Feuer, Jane. “HBO and the Concept of Quality TV.” In *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, edited by Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 145–57.

to Jane Feuer, “quality” as an aesthetic metric is defined by “a consensus among programme creators and liberal intellectuals.”<sup>187</sup> As diversity and representation came into the forefront of the public consciousness, quality representation of race and gender became a viable route for HBO’s brand differentiation as the tastemaker and norm-defier of the industry due to the creative restrictions surrounding sensitive social issues in broadcast television. HBO’s new focus on minority voices can be seen in its support of prominent minority-based festivals in a wide variety of communities: American Black Film Festival, Philadelphia Asian Film Festival, Miami Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, and NY International Latino Film Festival, etc.<sup>188</sup> Not only can HBO acquire social cachet from making appearances at festivals and winning awards, but also these festivals in turn becomes HBO’s promotional venues.

Another way HBO evokes the network’s affinity to art cinema is by emphasizing the authorial voice. Newman and Levine wrote that in the discourse of television’s cultural legitimation, the showrunner-auteur figure functions as a “guarantee of value.”<sup>189</sup> HBO even went as far as promoting the director position as main voice of the show over the writer-producer hyphenates in certain cases, such as Cary Fukunaga with *True Detective*, Paolo Sorrentino and *The Young Pope*, and Jean-Marc Vallée with *Big Little Lies* and *Sharp Objects*.<sup>190</sup> The cable channel attracts auteur figures from both the

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<sup>187</sup> Feuer, Jane, 148.

<sup>188</sup> Akass, Kim, and McCabe, Janet. “HBO and the Aristocracy of Contemporary TV Culture: Affiliations and Legitimatising Television Culture, Post-2007.” *Mise Au Point* 10, no. 10 (2018): *Mise Au Point*, 2018-01-15, Vol.10 (10).

<sup>189</sup> Newman, Michael Z., and Levine, Elana, 41.

<sup>190</sup> Forthun, Eric. “‘We Should Be Addressing Whiteness Less, and Affirming Blackness More’: Random Acts of Flyness, Afrosurrealism, and Quality Programming.” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 14, no. 1 (2021): 4-19.

television and film space to produce with the promise of creative freedom. Some scholars identified HBO's premium cable business model as the source of *The Sopranos* producer David Chase and thus the "quality" of the show.<sup>191</sup> HBO's corporate culture of assuring showrunners of creative freedom also helps differentiate from the creatively-and-economically-bound "regular TV."<sup>192</sup>

### **It's Not TV, It's Brand Differentiation Part 2: Synergizing "Quality" With Diversity**

The combination of HBO's business model and its unique branding strategy makes the premium cable channel perfectly situated to adopt marginalized voices. With HBO's brand differentiation, what is considered too "risky" for broadcast television or even major film studios becomes markers of "quality" to the praises of "narrative complexity and innovation" from viewers, journalists, and scholars.<sup>193</sup> However, that is not to say HBO is a progressive utopia for minorities. HBO's promise of creative freedom unfettered by commercial limitations should not be accepted at face value. The historical drama series *Rome* had its producer, Stan Wlodkowski, and director, Michael Apter, replaced after the early footage failed to meet HBO's standard and the show went over budget.<sup>194</sup> Similarly, while Black viewers comprised a large portion of HBO's subscriber base (over 30% in 1997), HBO executives first sidestepped narrowcasting by downplaying the programming's racial specificity and instead attributed the success of HBO's Black-oriented programming to its "quality."<sup>195</sup> For example, the creator of *The*

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<sup>191</sup> Santo, Avi, 32.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>193</sup> Fuller, Jennifer. "Branding Blackness on US Cable Television." *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 2 (2010): 285-305.

<sup>194</sup> Santo, Avi, 41.

<sup>195</sup> Fuller, Jennifer, 290-292.

*Wire* reframed its socioeconomical story involving the Black community in Baltimore into a purely economic one. Blackness itself became a marketing signifier to Black and particularly White viewers, for it attracts Black viewers who may have trouble finding Black-oriented programming on broadcast television and upscale White viewers with an appetite for “quality” content that tackles complex social issues in a semi-comfortable manner. However, as the public discourse of diversity and inclusion became mainstream, HBO began improving the number of minority workers and minority-led projects starting from 2016 under the newly promoted Chief Content Officer Casey Bloys. The demographics of directors diversified from 77% White men, 14% White women, and 8% people of color in the 2014-2015 season to 43% White men, 34% White women, 14% men of color, and 9% women of color in the 2017-2018 season.<sup>196</sup>

Even in HBO’s early “quality” outputs studied by television scholars, one could observe such discursive branding practice at play. *The Wire*, created by journalist-turned-television-writer-producer David Simon, depicts the War on Drugs in Baltimore. While the crime drama employs a majority-Black cast and deals in subject matter that is inseparable from the Black community, the show is sometimes framed in abstract high-concept and colorblind terms in discourse. Simon described his characters as “wonderful metaphor for what is going on in the American city, that those who are excluded from the legitimate economy make their own world. And we’re trying to depict the world that

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<sup>196</sup> Selcke, Dan. “HBO Reaches a Diversity Milestone Behind the Camera.” *Winter is Coming*. FanSided, August 13, 2018. <https://winteriscoming.net/2018/08/13/casey-bloys-talks-about-diversity-behind-the-camera-hbo-milestone/>.

they've created upon being excluded from the rest of America.”<sup>197</sup> And in explaining the symbolic meaning of *The Wire*'s title, Simon said:

The title really refers to almost an imaginary but inviolate boundary between the two Americas, between the functional, post-industrial economy that is minting new millionaires every day and creating a viable environment for a portion of the country, and the other America that is being cosigned to a permanent underclass, and this show is really about the vagaries and excesses of unencumbered capitalism and what that has wrought at the millennium and where the country is and where it is going, and it is suggestive that we going to a much more divided and brutish place, and I think we are, and that really reflects the politics of the people making the show. It really is a show about the other America in a lot of ways, and so *The Wire* really does refer to almost a boundary or a fence or the idea of people walking on a high wire and falling to either side. It really is sort of a symbolic argument or symbolic of the argument we are trying to make.<sup>198</sup>

Simon aimed to address wealth inequality and the reality of the American dream with *The Wire*, and while the sociopolitical effects caused by institutional failures disproportionately impact BIPOC communities (as it is depicted in the show), Simon divorced class from race and framed the human struggles of *The Wire* to what he referred to as “macroeconomics.”<sup>199</sup>

Nevertheless, HBO's striving for brand differentiation does provide more industrial opportunities to marginalized voices than the channel's competitors. Before Issa Rae was approached by HBO, she was a Stanford University African American Studies graduate that produced web series on the subject of race and sexuality, such as *Dorm Diaries* and *Awkward Black Girl*, and it was *Awkward Black Girl* that put Rae on the radar of HBO's Casey Bloys. Despite Rae's lack of an industry track record, HBO

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<sup>197</sup> Ethridge, Blake D. “Baltimore on *The Wire*” In *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, edited by Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley, 152–64. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 155.



was less influenced by the rhetoric of “bankability” that plagues the industry, and the channel gave her an opportunity to pitch—and later to run and star in—a series. HBO approved Rae’s script for *Insecure* in December of 2014, and she used her position as showrunner to hire non-White producers and directors “who would be intimately familiar with the milieu inhabited by her characters”<sup>200</sup>—echoing the correlation between minority project leader and the hiring of minority workers as documented in USC’s inclusion report. *Insecure* is similar to *Awkward Black Girl*’s theme of Black womanhood, and much of show deals in racial frictions and microaggressions. In the show, Issa Rae plays Issa Dee, a worker in a non-profit organization named “We Got Y’all.” One of the recurring sources of the cringe humor of *Insecure* comes from the uncomfortable interactions between Issa and her clueless colleagues, who often defer racial questions to Issa, since she is the only Black person in the office. In an early scene of the pilot, a group of White workers in a breakroom ask Issa what “on fleek” means—conflating the phrase that went viral on Vine in 2014 with African American Vernacular English, which Issa’s colleagues assume she has comprehensive knowledge of.

Unlike the rest of the film and television industry, HBO is unhesitant in cultivating authorial voices and investing in careers—beyond immediate box office or rating performance. Casey Bloys explains the reason why the channel prioritizes its working relationship with Rae is that “She’s obviously very talented, and she’s very prolific. It’s both her talent and the people that she finds and identifies that you know you

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<sup>200</sup> Wortham, Jenna. “The Misadventures of Issa Rae.” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 4, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/magazine/the-misadventures-of-issa-rae.html>.

can take a shot on. It's been very good to work with Issa personally but also as a company, because she's seeded a lot of talent elsewhere."<sup>201</sup> For HBO, Issa Rae becomes a talent scout of minority creatives through her collaborations, but the development of her career elsewhere in projects such as *The Hate U Give* (2018) contributes to Rae's profile as a creator. In 2021, Issa Rae signed a five-year deal with the network for future television series but also a first-look deal for film projects with Warner Brothers.<sup>202</sup> Rae's comment on this long-term commitment demonstrated the trust HBO placed in her: "When people believe in you and build with you, I tend to want to further that relationship. That's just been a staple of mine with so many of the people that I work with, on various projects. So I'm looking forward to seeing what this marriage looks like."<sup>203</sup> The investment in Issa Rae translates into added brand value for HBO. In Time Warner's 2017 annual report, the conglomerate cites *Insecure* and other original programming's "quality and diversity" helped differentiated HBO "from other premium pay television services, basic television networks and OTT services, while enhancing the HBO brand both domestically and internationally."<sup>204</sup>

HBO does not shirk from uncomfortable subject matter, since risk allows the

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<sup>201</sup> Jackson, Angelique. "Issa Rae's Next Chapter: How 'Insecure' Creator Is Becoming a Media Mogul with Production Banner Hoorae." *Variety*, March 24, 2021. <https://variety.com/2021/tv/news/issa-rae-insecure-hbo-hoorae-1234936020/>.

<sup>202</sup> Porter, Rick. "Issa Rae Inks Big New Overall Deal at WarnerMedia." *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 24, 2021. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/issa-rae-new-overall-deal-warnermedia>.

<sup>203</sup> Jackson, Angelique.

<sup>204</sup> Time Warner Inc. Rep. ANNUAL REPORT PURSUANT TO SECTION 13 OR 15(d) OF THE SECURITIES EXCHANGE ACT OF 1934 For the Fiscal Year Ended December 31, 2017 Commission File Number 001-15062, n.d. [https://www.annualreports.com/HostedData/AnnualReports/PDF/NYSE\\_TW\\_X\\_2017.pdf](https://www.annualreports.com/HostedData/AnnualReports/PDF/NYSE_TW_X_2017.pdf).

network to stand out from cable rivals and broadcasters that would not air such content either due to FCC regulations or pressures from risk-averse advertisers.<sup>205</sup> The pilot episode of limited series *Watchmen* opened with the depiction of the Tulsa Massacre, a two-day pogrom that destroyed the “Black Wall Street”—killing as many as three hundred people and displacing thousands more. The premiere of *Watchmen* was met with expressions of disbelief on social media—not just because of the horrific nature of the crime but because this was the first time many viewers had learned of the event.<sup>206</sup> The discourse highlighted the failure of the American education system and HBO’s function of serving an informational purpose to society. Similarly, *Lovecraft Country*, in its reimagination and reflection of Black history under Jim Crow America, explored many rarely talked-about events and constructs such as the murder of Emmet Till, “Sundown towns,” and the Negro Motorist Green Book, etc. First-time showrunner Misha Greene spoke of the allegorical function of *Lovecraft Country* in an interview, saying not only that “the monsters are the people,” but as a genre, horror can convey the adversities women and people of color face every day in modern society—“the people and the history is real.”<sup>207</sup>

The 2018 series *Random Acts of Flyness* arrived at the intersection of the textual risk from tackling race and the aesthetic complexity of art cinema. The series is created by Terrence Nance, and it consists of six 15-20 minutes episodes that varied wildly in

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<sup>205</sup> Fuller, Jennifer, 286.

<sup>206</sup> Arkin, Daniel. “‘Watchmen’ Recreates the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, Exposing Viewers to an Ugly Chapter.” *NBC News*, October 21, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/tv/watchmen-recreates-tulsa-massacre-1921-exposing-viewers-ugly-chapter-n1069426>.

<sup>207</sup> Prakash, Neha. “Misha Green on Making a ‘Big F\*cking Show.’” *Marie Claire*, August 16, 2020. <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/a33606785/lovecraft-country-creator-misha-green/>.

form: “late night talk show, documentary, comedy, claymation, animation, sketch show, and news reporting.”<sup>208</sup> *Random Acts of Flyness* confronts issues such as Blackface in media, reparations, injustice under the current law enforcement system, to name a few, and the show approached these subject matters with the narratively challenging style of Afrosurrealism. In an episode about Blackface in media, one scene showcases a series of pictures of Black faces while a narrator repeats the words “Black” and “face” until the pause between two words disappears and the enunciation resembles “Blackface.” Then the image of a White man in Blackface abruptly appears, causing the narrator to say “not Black face.”<sup>209</sup> This is an allusion to mainstream media’s occasional kneejerk denial of the practice’s blatantly racist nature to absolve figures of racist allegations. In regard to *Random Acts of Flyness*’s affinity to cinema, it is worth noting that the series is produced by A24, a studio that produces and distributes critically acclaimed independent films. The series also references Black independent cinema. For example, Mariama Diallo paid homage to Spike Lee’s *Malcom X* (1992) in her sketch “Bad Hair” by recreating *Malcom X*’s awakening scene so that people will understand the scene from the same “cinematic language.”<sup>210</sup>

Disney and HBO both adopted diversity as branding to define the unique roles they occupy in the American film and television industry. However, their approaches to inclusion are different. While Disney’s film output as a whole is similar to other major film studios in terms of diversity, Disney frequently employs women and filmmakers of

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<sup>208</sup> Forthun, Eric, 5.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

color for the conglomerate's blockbusters. However, Disney's maintenance of the brand's wide appeal subjects minority filmmakers' expressions to the effects of cultural hegemony, whereas HBO's niche viewer base and its branding to distinguish itself from the rest of television allows for "risky" productions not often seen elsewhere. To examine mainstream representation of women and racial minorities in Hollywood, I will go beyond two industry actors and turn to institutions that represent the consensus of industry workers and critics: award shows.

### **Award Show as Cultural Forum for Industry Diversity**

In 2015, the Academy Awards awarded every one of the acting nominations to White actors, and this decision prompted campaign finance lawyer April Reign to start the hashtag #OscarSoWhite to protest the lack of diversity in the Oscars.<sup>211</sup> The Twitter campaign opened up the conversation regarding the representation of women and people of color in Hollywood among journalists, critics, and industry workers. The critical examination of diversity in award shows was rejuvenated, and the same popular discourse soon spread to other award shows such as the Golden Globes and the Emmys. The #EmmysSoWhite hashtag emerged in 2019 to protest that 23 awards out of 26 categories were given to Whites. Similarly, in 2020, the Golden Globes came under public criticism, with mostly White-led television nominations, and the organization behind the award show categorized *Minari*, an American production written and directed by Korean Americans, as a foreign-language film—perpetuating the trope of the

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<sup>211</sup> Ugwu, Reggie. "The Hashtag That Changed the Oscars: An Oral History." *The New York Times*, February 6, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/movies/oscarssowhite-history.html>.

“perpetual foreigner.” Award show nominations (and wins) have become another metric for society to use to gauge diversity in the film and television industry.

The racial makeup of award shows—especially in film—has historically skewed White, and the lack of diversity in nominations and wins can be attributed to many factors that stemmed from the historic exclusion of women and people of color in Hollywood. Minorities’ lack of industry opportunities in comparison to White workers led to a disadvantaged nomination pool—fewer minority-led films or television shows mean fewer minority-led nominees to choose from. According to the University of Southern California’s report on the top 1300 films released from 2007 to 2019, only 70 of them were directed by female directors; in speaking roles aged from 21 to 39, only 38.8% were women.<sup>212</sup> To make matters worse, the voting process of award shows, such as the recruitment qualifications of the award show voting base and marketing campaign leading up to the election, pose another barrier to the recognition of minority achievements in Hollywood, since campaigning is a costly operation and minority-led projects historically had poor funding. In addition to celebrating artistic achievements, award shows also serve as a site of ideological debate, where cultural hegemony can uphold the status quo.

The Academy Awards was first started by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) in 1929 as a ceremony to award films and workers of merit. However, the AMPAS later grew into an influential institution that held sway over ticket sales and industry policies. In essence, the Academy successfully became—as the

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<sup>212</sup> Smith, Stacy L., Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Peiper, 2.

AMPAS had planned— “a forum that represented a public image of American film,” at the time when Hollywood was under criticism from censorship groups.<sup>213</sup> One pamphlet released by the AMPAS explained this newfound organization’s objective:

If we producing workers, actors, directors, technicians, cinematographers and producing executives, who have the future progress of this great universal entertainment at heart, will now join unselfishly into one big concerted movement . . . We can promote harmony and solidarity among our membership and among our different branches. We can reconcile any internal differences that may exist or arise. We can adopt such ways and means as are proper to further the welfare and protect the honor and good repute of our profession.<sup>214</sup>

The passage illustrates the intention to not only create an outward-facing and public image to protect its interest, but also a degree of consensus within the industry itself. The Academy sought to represent the entire film industry, yet the Academy itself is only a small portion of Hollywood. While the number of voting members today—8,469 members in 2020<sup>215</sup>—is far greater than the 231 members in 1929,<sup>216</sup> Academy membership remains inaccessible to most industry workers. The requirements of the membership, by contrast, have not changed much in the nine decades since its founding. Today, the expansion of the Academy still relies on invitations. A prospective member needs to be sponsored by two standing members from the same branch (actors, directors, producers, etc.) and then reviewed by the corresponding branch, before the Academy

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<sup>213</sup> Sandler, Monica Roxanne. “PR and Politics at Hollywood’s Biggest Night: The Academy Awards and Unionization (1929-1939).” *Media Industries* (Austin, Tex.) 2, no. 2 (2015).

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>215</sup> Sacks, Ethan. “Who Makes Up the Academy? A Breakdown of the Exclusive Oscars Club.” *NBC News*, February 7, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/awards/who-makes-academy-breakdown-exclusive-oscar-club-n1126866>.

<sup>216</sup> Sandler, 4.

Board of Governors can give a final verdict.<sup>217</sup> This invitational practice allowed the industry's gender and racial hierarchy to be maintained and reinforced. In 2015, only 25% of the Academy members were women, and only 8% were people of color,<sup>218</sup> and since women and people of color were historically excluded from networking opportunities, they were less likely to be sponsored compared to their White and male peers.

The voting members—Hollywood Foreign Press Association (HFPA)—behind Golden Globes was less transparent than the Academy by contrast. Where the Academy Awards stood out from other awards for having industry workers as voters instead of critics, the HFPA was founded in 1943 in Los Angeles by a group of journalists. To qualify for the membership for the HFPA, one must be a Southern California-based journalist accredited by the Motion Pictures Association of America, publish four articles in foreign publications, and be sponsored by two current HFPA members.<sup>219</sup> Yet, there is more to the HFPA membership than satisfying the aforementioned criteria. The HFPA is a small and insular organization—it is comprised of 87 members, and most of their identities are not public knowledge, as the members' names and biographies are not listed on the HFPA's website. In the memoir published by the HFPA's former president Philip Berk, he commented on the small size of the organization: “Our territorial protectionism was indeed carried to the extreme.”<sup>220</sup> Anonymous interviews with HFPA members

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Davis, Clayton. “Golden Globes Former President Admits the HFPA Hasn't Had Any Black Members in Two Decades.” *Variety*, February 27, 2021.

<https://variety.com/2021/awards/awards/golden-globes-no-black-members-hfpa-1234916590/>

<sup>220</sup> Rottenberg, Josh. “Who Really Gives Out the Golden Globes? A Tiny Group Full of Quirky



revealed that the organization had rejected applicants out of concern that they would “encroach on members’ professional turf.” In the words of an HFPA member: “We admit people that are not real journalists because they are not a threat to anyone.”<sup>221</sup> In 2013, *The Wrap* reported that Samantha Ofole-Prince, “a highly-experienced Los Angeles-based black U.K. journalist who writes for mainly African, Caribbean and black British press,” was denied admission to the association—the opponents to her admission “insinuated, Jim Crow-style, that she was unqualified based on no evidence whatsoever,” and these opponents led the vote despite Ofole-Prince’s proven experiences.<sup>222</sup>

Furthermore, the international membership of the HFPA means that the organization is less attuned to American political discourse. Former HFPA president Meher Tatna spoke to *Variety* that the association had no Black member since 2002.<sup>223</sup> Jenny Cooney, an Australian member of the HFPA, explained that the absence of Black people in HFPA “was not really anything we focused on,” because the association included people of color from around the world, so they did not “really consider [the lack of a Black member] a problem.”<sup>224</sup> Here it can be observed that the concept of “diversity” is loosely defined to the detriment of racial minorities in America. Cooney conflated people of

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Characters – and No Black Members.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2021-02-21/hfpa-golden-globes-2021-who-are-the-members>.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Waxman, Sharon. “Insider Charges HFPA With Racism After Golden Globe Voters Reject Black Applicant (Exclusive).” *TheWrap*. *TheWrap*, May 16, 2013. <https://www.thewrap.com/hfpa-racism-after-golden-globe-voters-reject-black-applicant-exclusive-9/>.

<sup>223</sup> Davis, Clayton.

<sup>224</sup> Rottenberg, Josh. “Golden Globes Fallout: HFPA Member Says Lack of Black Members ‘Was Not Really Anything We Focused On.’” *Los Angeles Times*. *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2021-03-02/golden-globes-hfpa-diversity-black-members>.

color who may be the demographic majority of their native countries with the Americans of color who are marginalized in not just various sectors of Hollywood but also in the American society due to their race. There exists a culture in the Hollywood Foreign Press Association that is apathetic or ignorant to minority representation at best and outright hostile according to trade press reporting. The alleged smear campaign against association applicant Samantha Ofole-Prince was not an isolated incident. Former president Philip Berk sent a racist email to members of the association calling the Black Lives Matter movement “a hate movement” amid the organization’s pledge to become more diverse following the public outcry of the Golden Globes’ non-inclusive nominations in 2021.<sup>225</sup>

On paper, voting members would see all the nominated films and television shows and judge the nominees for their artistic merits. Temporarily putting aside the political aspects of award shows, anonymous interviews with Academy members reveal that they do not watch all the nominees before they vote. *The Hollywood Reporter* reported that on average 5.5% of the Academy did not watch the 2015 Best Pictures nominees and 10% of the voters did not watch Ava DuVernay’s *Selma*. One voter skipped *Uncut Gems* (2019) because lead actor Adam Sandler “does not scream Oscar,” while *Little Women* (2019) screenings received little interest from male voters.<sup>226</sup> Blind

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<sup>225</sup> Perman, Stacy. “Former HFPA President Faces a Backlash Over Email Calling Black Lives Matter a ‘Hate Movement.’” *Los Angeles Times*. *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2021-04-19/former-hfpa-president-faces-a-backlash-over-email-calling-black-lives-matter-a-hate-movement>.

<sup>226</sup> Rosen, Christopher. “Do Academy Voters Actually Watch Every Potential Oscar Contender?” *Vanity Fair*. *Vanity Fair*, January 27, 2020. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/01/oscars-stephen-king-carey-mulligan-watch-the-movies>.

voting became such a problem that actress Carey Mulligan suggested that voters should provide proof that they have seen the nominees before they could vote.<sup>227</sup> Additionally, films released early in the year are prone to fade from the Academy voters' consciousness—studios often opt for releasing their award-hopefuls in December, or even November and October.<sup>228</sup> As a result of the voters' imperfect viewing habits, film studios utilize marketing campaigns to maximize exposure of their films. The practice of award season marketing dates back decades—the first usage of “[for your] consideration” was in 1948.<sup>229</sup> *Variety* reported that in 1979, Charles Powell, Universal's senior exec in charge of advertising said each of six major studios would be spending \$300,000 in award season marketing that year.<sup>230</sup> Contemporary award season spending ranges from \$3 million to \$10 million per studio on advertisements in publications like *Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, and social functions planned to court voters.<sup>231</sup> While the significantly smaller Golden Globes voter base may be easier to reach than the Academy, the HFPA members were actively courted by studios with lavish social events in five-star hotels, gifts, and exclusive press access, despite the fact that only a small portion of the voting base work for major news outlets.<sup>232</sup> In 2011, Michael

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<sup>227</sup> Setoodeh, Ramin. “Carey Mulligan Suggests Oscar Voters Need to Prove They've Seen the Movies.” *Variety*. *Variety*, January 25, 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/carey-mulligan-oscar-promising-young-woman-hustlers-little-women-farewell-1203480280/>.

<sup>228</sup> Kram, Zach. “Can a Release Date Predict an Oscar Winner?” *The Ringer*. *The Ringer*, February 28, 2018. <https://www.theringer.com/oscar/2018/2/28/17060396/best-oscar-movie-release-date>.

<sup>229</sup> Gray, Tim. “Awards Campaigns Harken Back to Oscar's Earliest Days.” *Variety*. *Variety*, December 29, 2015. <https://variety.com/2015/film/spotlight/history-oscar-campaigns-hollywood-1201667297/>.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> Lang, Brent. “A Breakdown of the 'Outrageous' Costs of 2015's Oscar Campaigns.” *Variety*. *Variety*, January 20, 2016. <https://variety.com/2016/film/awards/oscar-campaigns-cost-leonardo-dicaprio-1201682447/>.

<sup>232</sup> Perman, Stacey.

Russel, HFPA’s publicist, filed a lawsuit alleging members of the association accepted gifts and vacations “provided by studios and producers in exchange for support or votes in nominating or awarding a particular film”—the case was later settled.<sup>233</sup> Due to the lack of confidence from White studio executives in women and minority workers both above and below the line, they are often given smaller budgets compared to their White and male counterparts—believing that minority-led films would lack wide appeal. Of 123 Black-directed films from 2000 to 2016, 59 of them had budgets under \$19 million, while only three exceeded \$100 million (and all three have White-cast.)<sup>234</sup> Likewise, only nine women in Hollywood history had received more than a \$100 million budget, and among the nine only two are people of color.<sup>235</sup> Studios spend millions each year on award nominees, and they pick their candidates based on “electability”—a metric describing whether a film’s subject matter or its stars appeal to the voters and how strong the narrative surrounding the film’s “Oscar-worthiness” is.<sup>236</sup> Studios that have low confidence in minority-led films’ wide appeal would likely not bet on said films to win awards.

The nominees and winners of an award show can influence how viewers around the world interact with media; at the basic material level, the prestige that comes with the recognition from accolades increases the audience’s interest in seeing movies and television shows, as consumers look to expert opinions or peers when selecting available

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Erigha, Maryann. *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*, 70.

<sup>235</sup> Welk, Brian.

<sup>236</sup> Wilkinson, Alissa. “How to Win An Oscar.” *Vox*. *Vox*, February 21, 2019.

<https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/2/21/18229512/oscar-campaigns-for-your-consideration-events-narratives-weinstein>.

products.<sup>237</sup> While the box office performance of a film is influenced by a wide variety of internal and external factors—rendering performance forecast unpredictable—quantitative research indicates that nominations are more effective than award wins in improving initial box office performance.<sup>238</sup> However, the Academy Awards do not have significantly more impact than other critics’ choice awards or consumer awards.<sup>239</sup>

The marginalization of women and people of color in Hollywood is perpetuated by institutions such as the HFPA and the AMPAS, yet this marginalization could not be separated from the dominant ideologies of the American society. The award show functions as the representation of Hollywood, the globally dominant cultural industry, and doubles as a cultural forum that simultaneously reifies dominant ideology and discursively reflects the cultural climate.<sup>240</sup> James Carey argues that communication is “not directed toward the extension of messages in space but the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.”<sup>241</sup> When a voting body nominates (and later awards) a film or a television show, the decision process is informed by the not just the artistic merit of the candidates but also the narratives—part of the “electability” factor—constructed around the award shows. These

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<sup>237</sup> Gemser, Gerda, Mark A. A. M. Leenders, and Nachoem M. Wijnberg. “Why Some Awards Are More Effective Signals of Quality Than Others: A Study of Movie Awards†.” *Journal of Management* 34, no. 1 (February 2008): 25–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206307309258>.

<sup>238</sup> Deuchert, Eva, Kossi Adjamah, and Florian Pauly. “For Oscar Glory Or Oscar Money?” *Journal of Cultural Economics* 29, no. 3 (2005): 159–76. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-005-3338-6>.

<sup>239</sup> Gemser, Leenders, and Wijnberg.

<sup>240</sup> Gilronan, Kate. “An Examination of Culture and The Academy Awards Using Critical Discourse Analysis and a Foucauldian Framework.” *Communication Studies Graduate Publications and Presentations*. 10 (2016). [http://pilotscholars.up.edu/cst\\_gradpubs/10](http://pilotscholars.up.edu/cst_gradpubs/10).

<sup>241</sup> Newcomb, Horace, and Paul M. Hirsch. “Television as a Cultural Forum.” Essay. In *Television: The Critical View*, edited by Horace Newcomb, 6th ed., 561–73. New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000.

award show choices then represent the social values of the voting bodies, be it the AMPAS (Hollywood film workers), the HFPA (journalists, socialites, and power brokers), and the BAFTA (British film and television workers). For example, one Academy member wrote to Eliza Hittman, the director of *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), stating that he refused to watch the movie, which explores the topic of abortion, due to his “pro-life” belief. In a now-deleted Instagram post, Hittman captioned the e-mail screenshot with the accusation that the AMPAS was “monopolized by an old white puritanical male guard.”<sup>242</sup> The ballots are tools for ideological statements. Horace Newcomb argued that the cultural forum consists of more than the formation of individuals or groups with varying points of view, but it is the inclusion of a “range of responses, [and] the directly contradictory readings.”<sup>243</sup> *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*’s award campaign becomes ground for ideological battle between Academy members on different sides of women’s reproductive rights.

Similarly, the 74<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards embodied the varied range of readings. It marked a historic moment when both Best Actor and Best Actress were both won by Black people—Denzel Washington and Halle Berry. When delivering her winning speech Halle Berry invoked the names of many Black actresses and proclaimed that “this door tonight has been opened”—referring to the representation of Black workers in Hollywood.<sup>244</sup> While the wins were symbolic triumphs for racial representation in the

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<sup>242</sup> Rubin, Rebecca. “Director Eliza Hittman Calls Out Pro-Life Oscar Voter Who Refused to Watch Abortion Drama 'Never Rarely Sometimes Always'.” *Variety*. *Variety*, February 27, 2021. <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/eliza-hittman-never-rarely-sometimes-always-oscar-voter-1234916491/>.

<sup>243</sup> Newcomb, Horace, and Paul M. Hirsch.

<sup>244</sup> “Academy Awards Acceptance Speech Database.” Academy Awards Acceptance Speeches - Search

Academy Awards, the films *Washington* and *Berry* starred in “mix identifiable archetypes—‘a gangster and a ho’—with the contemporary realities of mass incarceration, police brutality, and a racially skewed death penalty;” Donna Murch argued that this mixture of “racial fictions with material fact” reinforces rather than challenges the status quo.<sup>245</sup> Using Stuart Hall’s framework of cultural hegemony and representation, Isabel Molina-Guzmán argues that award shows’ focus on exceptional individuals and events lessens pressure for the Academy, as the highlighting of the extraordinary erases the ordinary—the systemic racism and sexism that keep the minorities down in Hollywood.<sup>246</sup> It is the same ideological push and pull that enabled the Academy to elect *Moonlight* (2016) as Best Picture—the progressiveness of a Black queer story evokes the legacy of Barack Obama in the first Academy Award ceremony held under the Trump administration—and award the same honor to *Green Book* (2018)—a comforting but unrealistic tale of racial harmony—only two years later.<sup>247</sup>

### **#OscarSoWhite: Audience Activism and Award Shows**

Sitting opposite the voting bodies in the cultural forum is the audience. The award shows have a diversity problem, and audience activists have been the main driver for change. Participants in the cultural forum interpret meanings differently with the social values they are equipped with, and one of the ways communities approach public

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Results | Margaret Herrick Library | Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, March 24, 2002. <http://aaspeechesdb.oscars.org/link/074-3/>.

<sup>245</sup> Murch, Donna. “The Prison of Popular Culture: Rethinking the Seventy-Fourth Annual Academy Awards.” *The Black Scholar* 33, no. 1 (2003): 25-32.

<sup>246</sup> Molina-Guzmán, Isabel. “#OscarSoWhite: How Stuart Hall Explains Why Nothing Changes in Hollywood and Everything Is Changing.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33, no. 5 (2016): 438–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2016.1227864>.

<sup>247</sup> Wilkinson, Alissa.

discourse is activism. Henry Jenkins theorized one mode of audience activism: “grassroots fan communities” that utilize interactive technologies, such as social media, to assert influence over media producers by becoming “active participants in their media consumptive practices.”<sup>248</sup> The #OscarSoWhite hashtag was first started by campaign lawyer and entertainment enthusiast April Reign, but the Twitter campaign soon took off from the outsider space. The campaign attracted attention not only trade press, but celebrities of color, such as Chris Rock, Spike Lee, Barry Jenkins, and even former Academy president Cheryl Boone Issacs, also joined in on the advocacy for more people of color in the Oscars.<sup>249</sup> These industry workers who normally were themselves creators of symbolic meanings joined forces with an interpretative community—the audience—to examine the state of diversity in the film industry (and the society at large) through the Academy Awards. By voicing demands to increase diversity in the voting body and the recognition of talents, industry workers and activists were negotiating for more employment opportunities for racial and gender minorities in Hollywood.

Both the Academy and the HFPA have responded to the public pressure to become more inclusive in not just the nominees, but in improving the diversity of their membership as well. Cheryl Boone Issacs oversaw the effort to make the AMPAS more inclusive—the Academy launched the A2020 initiative in 2016 with the goal to double the number of women and people of color members by the end of 2020, and the initiative

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<sup>248</sup> McMurria, John. “Pay-for Culture: Television Activism in a Neoliberal Digital Age.” Essay. In *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*, edited by Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser, 254–72. New York: New York University Press, 2012.

<sup>249</sup> Ugwu, Reggie.



was partially fulfilled. In 2015, women made up 25% of the Academy while people of color consisted of only 8%, and in 2020, women rose to 32% and people of color grew to 16%.<sup>250</sup> Furthermore, the Academy instituted new requirements for the Best Picture nominees—from racial minorities, women, and the LGBT community representation quota on screen, to behind-the-scenes jobs such as department leads and the overall crew composition.<sup>251</sup>

One reason why the Academy is receptive of the call for change is advertisement income. For the 2007 tax year, the broadcast rights of the award ceremony made up \$71 million of the Academy's total income of \$84 million.<sup>252</sup> The ratings of the Oscars is correlated with the popularity of the nominated films, and the number of people who tune into the award show each year has been in steady decline since 1998, when 57.2 million people watched *Titanic* (1997) winning Best Pictures; the rating for the 2021 Oscars met a sharp 58% dive from last year—only 9.8 million people tuned in—and one survey indicated that most of the public had not heard of *Mank* (2020), which received ten nominations and brought home two awards.<sup>253</sup> The Hollywood culture creates a social

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<sup>250</sup> Keegan, Rebecca, and Ben Zauzmer. "Is the Oscars' Inclusion Push Working? Breaking Down the Surprising Academy Numbers." *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 19, 2020. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/is-oscars-inclusion-push-working-surprising-academy-numbers-1275305>.

<sup>251</sup> Davis, Clayton. "Oscars Announce New Inclusion Requirements for Best Picture Eligibility." *Variety*. *Variety*, September 9, 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/oscars-inclusion-standards-best-picture-diversity-1234762727/>.

<sup>252</sup> Edelman, Paul H. "'And the Oscar Goes to...': The Academy Awards and the Institutional Dimension of Election Design." *Vanderbilt Law and Economics Research Paper*, no. 09-23 (August 17, 2009). <https://doi.org/https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1456529>.

<sup>253</sup> Barnes, Brooks, and John Koblin. "Oscars Ratings Plummet, With Fewer Than 10 Million Tuning In." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, April 26, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/26/business/media/oscars-ratings.html>.

distance between the industry professionals and their audience,<sup>254</sup> and the exclusive membership of the AMPAS further divides the Academy's taste from that of the public. Improving the Oscars' rating performance (and ensuring the AMPAS's income) is thus a balancing act between maintaining the electoral system and making changes to cater to the public's taste.<sup>255</sup> And the Academy has considered or enacted changes, such as expanding the Best Picture nominations to ten slots to include more films and adding an "Outstanding Achievement in Popular Film" category (but this idea was not implemented).

While the HFPA also relies on award broadcast for its income—NBC paid the association \$27.4 million in the 2020 fiscal year<sup>256</sup>—the organization's entrenched culture makes it less adaptable to change. Since access to Hollywood stars is less valuable today with the proliferation of the internet and social media and powerful members in the association gatekeep the HFPA from applicants who are serious journalists, certain members think the HFPA has become "less a torchbearer of Hollywood to the wider world than a private retirement cushion for older members and a reliable income stream for nearly everyone else."<sup>257</sup> In addition to receiving gifts and participating in social events, members set up and appoint themselves and their colleagues to committees to claim compensation from the HFPA—nearly \$100,000 a month for various activities such as watching foreign films, serving on film festivals, and

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<sup>254</sup> Zafirau, Stephen.

<sup>255</sup> James, Meg. "Behind the Academy Awards' Best Picture Decision." *Los Angeles Times*. *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 2009. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-jun-25-et-oscars-tv25-story.html>.

<sup>256</sup> Perman, Stacey.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*

international travelling, even though the COVID-19 pandemic had pushed most events be held virtually.<sup>258</sup> While the HFPA had also announced plans to diversify, the details to the plans were not announced to the public. Time’s Up—the organization behind the #MeToo movement—launched a campaign along with more than a hundred Hollywood PR firms to pressure the HFPA to make “transformational change,” threatening to bar the association from events and interviews.<sup>259</sup> However, the HFPA’s internal politics stunt the progress for inclusion. In March of 2021, the association hired Shaun Harper, a professor from University of Southern California, to serve as HFPA’s diversity and inclusion director, but she soon quit after she grew frustrated by HFPA’s inaction.<sup>260</sup> The future of the HFPA’s inclusion initiative remains uncertain.

### Conclusion

In examining how the needle is moved the mainstream representation of racial and gender minorities, Disney, HBO, and award show voting bodies, such as the AMPAS, each represents a different reaction to the emerging public discourse of diversity in media. As media producers, Disney and HBO both embraced diversity as part of their brand identity—merging their roles as entertainers as well as civil leaders of social values. Under a neoliberal economy, corporations, and not the government, lead the charge for change in the industry, and the case studies of Disney and HBO show two

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Feinberg, Scott. “Golden Globes: 100+ PR Firms Warn HFPA They Will Cut Off Talent Unless There Is ‘Transformational Change.’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 21, 2021. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/race/golden-globes-150-pr-firms-warn-hfpa-they-will-cut-off-talent-unless-there-is-transformational-change>.

<sup>260</sup> Feinberg, Scott. “Golden Globes: HFPA in Crisis as Famed Fixer, D&I Adviser Quit (Exclusive).” *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 21, 2021. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/race/golden-globes-hfpa-in-crisis-as-famed-fixer-di-advisor-quit-exclusive>.

very different approaches to incorporating social progressivism into their respective brands. On the one hand, Disney hires women and non-White filmmakers and leads in hyper-visible projects, breaking down the “bankability” stumbling block that had historically plagued underrepresented demographics in the entertainment industry. However, Disney’s “family-friendly” brand image and its enormous global audience prevents the media conglomerate from deviating from the cultural hegemony. On the other hand, HBO’s niche audience and the cable channel’s brand differentiation provide financial incentive to seek out underrepresented creatives and narratives to distinguish itself from its competitors. The Oscars and the Golden Globes present a complex relationship between various agents and stakeholders in the industry. As the gatekeepers of the world’s largest cultural industry, the award shows are discursive sites of industry trends and cultural norms, with Hollywood workers, journalists (and other cultural commentators), and viewers of the program as participants in the cultural forum. Originally, meritocracy and financial concerns justified the marginalization of minority workers in Hollywood for their (perceived) lack of competency and the lack of demand for minority narratives. However, as the racial demographics and the public consensus on racial and gender inclusion in the American society shifts, the neoliberal Hollywood, such as the Academy seeking to maintain its relevancy, now has the financial incentive to diversify its output to meet the new demand. Though tokenized or plastic representation on-screen and behind-the-scenes are one of the possible outcomes of financially incentivized inclusion initiatives, women and non-White workers are beginning to escape the budget and industry opportunity pigeonhole, and this is leading to an improvement in

the quantity and quality of minority representation in media.

## THESIS CONCLUSION

In my goal to investigate discriminatory hiring practices in the American film and television industry, I have explored several forms of discrimination in race and gender. Both White women and people of color face many obstacles in Hollywood, but their situations differ based on disparate historical contexts of exclusion. While minority Hollywood workers above and below the line share a similar lack of confidence from executives, (White) women workers' career opportunities are constrained by gender coding, which stemmed from societal preconceptions of gender-essential qualities, such as inter-personal communication skills, attention to detail, and proficiency in paperwork. The marginalization of workers of color in the industry is justified by the presumed narrow appeal of ethnic talents and narratives. Women of color face a double oppression for being both the racial and gender minority in the industry, and the unique circumstances of their marginalization contributed to their severe underrepresentation in Hollywood. Due to the capital-intensive and unpredictable nature of film and television production, executives and producers adhere to "bankable" talent to reduce financial risk, yet executives' perception of audience taste is often based on gut instinct rather than facts, and statistical investigation shows that star power is not a box office guarantee. Minority workers' marginalization in Hollywood is rationalized by the rhetoric of "bankability" that has few connections with reality.

Minorities' access to the means of cultural production—being able to craft their on-screen portrayal from real experiences—in turn influences the mainstream representation of women and people of color in films and television shows. Projects led by minority

filmmakers and showrunners correspond with a higher percentage of minority workers employed on-screen, behind-the-scenes, above-the-line, and below-the-line. While this thesis mainly focused on behind-the-scenes workers, on-screen and behind-the-scenes representation are interconnected. To improve media diversity, the top-down approach of introducing a more inclusive leadership would be most effective.

Though most major studios in Hollywood have adopted the language of inclusion, different industrial conditions gave rise to various responses to the public discourses surrounding diversity in media representation. Media conglomerates, such as Disney, promote diversity by hiring minority creatives, but the power of cultural hegemony that allow biased treatment of minority workers and the portrayals on screen continue to inhibit the progress of inclusive initiatives—rendering initiatives a performance in branding rather than substantial progress towards creative freedom and authentic representation. On the other hand, authentic (and sometimes uncomfortable) representation becomes financially viable for media entities that thrive on exclusivity—whether it be a niche target audience or the association with high art, and HBO is both.

However, the power of cultural hegemony is not immutable. Studios' gradual progress in embracing minority talents and award shows' growing recognition of their artistic achievements are discursive developments under the diversity discourse. The audience of Hollywood is no passive consumer—interpretive (and fan) communities who used to engage in audience activism by demanding change from cultural producers with physical mail and phone calls are now supplied platform by social media, and as a result grassroots campaigns are easier to organize than ever. Furthermore, racial and gender

minority stars and creatives now join forces with the voices calling for a more inclusive Hollywood. However, politics was always part of Hollywood as exemplified by the Production Code, the Hollywood Blacklist under HUAC, and award show elections. American Award shows—but more specifically, the Oscars—are charged with the responsibility to select the best of Hollywood to represent industry to not just America but also the world. The AMPAS then chose to bestow honor not just on the basis of outstanding cinematic achievements but also the social values and narratives the Academy wishes to communicate to the world. As a result, award shows become a cultural forum—a site of debate regarding social issues, including sexism and racism in the film and television industry—for various industrial entities and the audience.

The financial considerations that justified workplace discrimination of women and people of color also became one of the main factors fueling the shifting demographics in Hollywood. The profitability of inclusiveness has underpinned the discourse of improving representation in mainstream media. UCLA’s Hollywood Diversity Report states that “[i]n 2019, people of color were responsible for the majority of domestic ticket sales for eight of the top 10 films, ranked by global box office, and half of the ticket sales for a ninth top 10 film,”<sup>261</sup> and *The New York Times* reported that “Hollywood loses \$10 billion a year due to lack of diversity.”<sup>262</sup> The buying power of minorities could no longer be ignored by the Hollywood, and so major studios embraced

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<sup>261</sup> Ramon, Ana-Christina, and Darnell Hunt. Rep. *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods Part 1: Film*, 36.

<sup>262</sup> Sperling, Nicole. “Hollywood Loses \$10 Billion a Year Due to Lack of Diversity, Study Finds.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, March 11, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/11/movies/hollywood-black-representation.html>.



diversity—if only superficially—while the AMPAS sought to maintain its relevancy (ratings) with the organization relied on for its income.

### **Future Research**

There are many potential areas to explore beyond the scope of this thesis. Besides racial and gender minorities, there are other demographics in Hollywood who also face discrimination in the workplace and struggle to represent themselves authentically on-screen—the LGBT community is one such demographic. Despite Hollywood’s liberal slant, discrimination against queer and trans people is still rampant. According to a report from the UCLA and the SAG-AFTRA, 53% of LGBT workers believed that “producers and directors are biased against LGBT performers in hiring,” and more than half of LGBT performers had heard anti-LGBT comments on set.<sup>263</sup> The intersection between queerness and race and gender is also worth studying—how is the pay gap affecting queer men and women? How many industrial opportunities do queer people of color receive compared to White LGBT members? The intersectionality of queer representation in particular has much room for improvement. One *Saturday Night Live* (1975-2021) short called “Lesbian Period Drama” lambasts the homogeneity of lesbian representation on screen—repressed White lesbians in period settings—seen in films such as *Ammonite* (2020) (directed by Francis Lee), *The World to Come* (2020) (directed by Mona Fastvold), and *Vita & Virginia* (2018) (directed by Chanya Button). On the other hand, *Moonlight* (2016)’s success was extraordinary in the sense that the film was a remarkable

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<sup>263</sup> Badgett, M.V. Lee, and Jody J. Herman. Rep. *Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity Diversity in Entertainment: Experiences & Perspectives of SAG-AFTRA Members*, September 2013. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/SOGI-Entertainment-Sep-2013.pdf>.

step forward in non-White queer cinema, but unusual in the industrial conditions in which the film was produced and judged. Barry Jenkins based the script on a semi-autobiographical play penned by playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney—lending the auteurist aura from personal experience—and the film associates itself with a prestigious artform by emulating the three-act structure of a play. A24’s reputation as the prestige indie studio and distributor aided *Moonlight*’s Oscars campaign in a sensitive political climate.

Neurodiversity in mainstream representation is also often overlooked. Films and television often (inaccurately) pathologize villainous characteristics or utilize neurodivergence as a plot mechanic. One popular trope is the “Mildly Autistic Super-Detective,” where the autism spectrum acts as a superpower that allows characters to detect patterns unseen by neurotypical characters. The crime drama trope depicts the spectrum with superficial descriptions such as “cold-blooded,” “mind-blind,” and “rude”—these damaging stereotypes present autism as “abnormal.”<sup>264</sup> Popular singer Sia’s directorial debut *Music* (2021) received criticism from autistic viewers and autism advocacy groups for the film’s depiction of stereotypical mannerisms that are often used to mock people on the spectrum. The film also endorsed the use of prone-restraint—a dangerous practice of forcing autistic people down on facing the floor. Sia responded to the internet controversy that she had partnered with Autism Speaks as a consultant on the film, however, Autism Speaks also has a long history in the autism community for its

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<sup>264</sup> Loftis, Sonya Freeman. “The Autistic Detective: Sherlock Holmes and His Legacy.” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v34i4.3728>.

ableist language and obstructing autistic people's rights to represent themselves.<sup>265</sup> The *Music* controversy shows the same plight women and people of color suffer from—the lack of access to the production of their own image leads to inauthentic or even harmful representation on screen.

One avenue of research that can be pursued is inclusion initiatives external to the studios. Women Make Movies, for example, is a New York City-based non-profit organization that provides aids in funding, production, and distribution for films made by women-identifying filmmakers on women subject matters. On the other hand, ARRAY (formerly African-American Film Festival Releasing Movement), founded by Ava DuVernay, specializes in marketing and distributing films made by non-White filmmakers. These organizations help combat the “bankability” rhetoric studios employ by offering alternative industry opportunities, and future studies can focus on their impact on the industry and limitations.

The ever-shifting media landscape changes the relationship between the industry workers, executives, and the audience. New means of distribution lead to new modes of production and new labor conditions. However, one cannot lose sight of Hollywood stakeholders' influence over the industry in the age of streaming. The neoliberal deregulation of the past decades that allowed horizontal and vertical corporate consolidation paved the way for the streaming wars. Traditional studios followed Silicon

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<sup>265</sup> Luterman, Sara. “Perspective | The Biggest Autism Advocacy Group Is Still Failing Too Many Autistic People.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, February 20, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/02/14/biggest-autism-advocacy-group-is-still-failing-too-many-autistic-people/>.

Valley startups such as Netflix and Amazon into streaming with new consumer options such as HBO MAX (Warner Media), Disney Plus (Disney), Paramount Plus (Paramount), and Peacock (NBC). The COVID pandemic's impact on the entertainment industry is far and wide reaching. With many of the theater chains shuttering, streaming platforms have become de facto first-run theaters. Coinciding with the overturning of the Paramount Decrees—the court ruling in 1948 that prevented studios from vertically integrating theater chains—before the pandemic began, major studios now hold unprecedented influence over the industry with the newfound distribution power. The combination of the old industry actors in a new frontier poses an interesting question: how will inclusivity in mainstream films and television look like in the oligarchic Hollywood with minimal legal and industrial restraints?

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**CURRICULUM VITAE**



