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Women Filmmakers in the West

Lisa French

As a woman you have a unique and different vision.

It's good that these voices are heard in the world.

Jane Campion (in Andrews, 2003)

Female social identity is complex, affected by a whole host of experiences and perspectives (including class, race, and ethnic origin). While women do not constitute a single, homogenous group, and have a diverse range of experiences, perspectives, aesthetic approaches and interests, what women share collectively is the knowledge of gendered experience, that of being women in a world that is deeply patriarchal. As Judith Mayne has observed, although it might be tenuous, fractured, or complicated, 'there is a connection between the writer's gender, her person hood, and her texts; and ... there exists a female tradition ... whether defined in terms of models of mutual influence, shared themes or common distances from the dominant culture' (Mayne, 1990, p. 90). The understanding of being a woman is central to female experience, and it follows that women filmmakers might find gestures, enactments, and significations to explore that experience. Thus what women represent in their films, and the modes of representation, may well differ to that constructed by men (and vice versa). If women are not given access to, or find

it difficult to produce films, potentially female aesthetic approaches and worldviews will not be expressed.

In the current climate this is a real possibility given that the participation of women in key creative filmmaking roles in Western industrialised countries has generally declined or remained static over the past decade. Where they do participate they do so with considerable success, but numerically they have not been making substantial progress, and in some areas there are fewer women in the new millennium than there were a decade before. The gains women made and the momentum they once achieved have not been sustained.

Equity and social inclusion are essential for civil society but there is also a myriad of other reasons that are important: business, ethical, social, cultural and legal reasons that make it vital for global Western industrialised film industries to ensure women achieve equal participation. As Cutler and Company (2008) has observed, high quality human capital is critical to productivity and innovation. In order to achieve productive, diverse and innovative industries, equitable participation is essential because as Bell has found, persistent patterns of gender inequality impact ‘negatively on men as well as women by narrowing choice and reinforcing historic workforce patterns’ (Bell, 2009, p. 10).

This chapter undertakes a number of explorations in order to examine the current status of Western women in film, beginning with a perspective on the participation of women in film industries in selected Western industrialised countries (the United States, Australia, United Kingdom, Canada, Denmark, and New Zealand¹). Following this is a particular case study, proffering an outline of the current participation of women in the Australian film industry. The chapter concludes with observations of what women filmmakers bring, and offers some

¹ Due to space restrictions here, other parts of Western Europe, Japan, and South Africa, which are also Western industrialised countries, have not been included.

strategies for improving the participation and status of women. Throughout, this chapter reflects on the effects of the decline of women's representation in major creative areas of film, what it means for Australian and global film industries, and the textures and sensibilities brought to filmmaking by women filmmakers.

Part 1

Women in film and television internationally

There are women in the Senate, women heading studios and busloads of young women emerging from film school. So why are 96 percent of films directed by men? (Goldberg, 2002, p. 1)

When the action director Kathryn Bigelow became the first and only woman to win an Academy Award for Best Achievement in Directing in 2010 (for *The Hurt Locker*, 2008/9), the international status of women in film fell into sharp relief.² While Bigelow has made films that have virtually excluded women (*Point Break*, 1991, for example), she also made *Blue Steel* (1990) critiqued by Yvonne Tasker as 'an attempt to put "a woman at the centre of a movie predominantly occupied by men"' (Tasker, 2002, p. 63). From a feminist perspective, Tasker also argues the interest of Bigelow's work 'has as much to do with its capacity to underline the limitations of thinking about certain kinds of genres and styles as "masculine"' (Tasker, 2002, pp. 60–61).

While Bigelow's success placed a spotlight on the issue of gender, researchers in recent times have also increasingly turned their attention to gender in relation to filmmaking (and other media industries). In what follows, I examine international research that finds across a number of Western industrialised countries that women have not achieved equity (through equal

² There have only been three other female nominees in the history of the awards: Lina Wertmüller in 1976 for *Seven Beauties*, followed in 1993 by someone who acknowledges Wertmüller's influence: Jane Campion for *The Piano*, and in 2003, Sophia Coppola with *Lost in Translation* in 2004.

opportunities, or proportional opportunities for participation), and the status, or representation, of women in these film industries has generally remained static or declined.

An American survey (Lauzen, 2008) found that women represent between 4 and 23 per cent in any of the following: director, executive producer, producer, writer, cinematographer and editor (thus remaining significantly under-represented). They had made very few substantial gains in achieving employment in top grossing American films, and in several areas they have been losing ground (writer, executive producer/producer, editor). In all categories, women's participation declined in the period after 1998 and up to 2007. While this appears to be improving again in the current period, this dip in participation in the early 2000s has also occurred in other countries, such as Australia (discussed later in the chapter).

Lauzen's 2008 survey of the employment of 2706 individuals working on the top 250 domestic grossing films in America (excluding foreign films), found that 22 per cent of films released in 2008 did not employ any women in the key creative roles of director, executive producer, producer, writer, cinematographer or editor. A comparison over ten years (1998-2008) showed that women's employment as directors and cinematographers had remained stable while percentages of female writers, executive producers, producers, and editors had slightly declined. Further, the researcher also noted a decline from 2001, but that this began to increase again from 2007, indicating the decline in women's participation in the early 2000s (referred to above).

A study conducted in the United Kingdom in 2007 (Bhavnani) indicated that women were under-represented in the film industry in relation to the general UK workforce. It found gender inequity in screenwriting, camera, and technical areas. The researchers concluded that:

... under-represented groups in the film industry are not always equitably represented or treated, whether in the workforce, among audiences, or in portrayal. The sector is dominated in leadership

positions by white, male middle-aged, able-bodied men. However there is a business case for greater diversity in the industry, as well as a legal and ethical case.

(Bhavnani, 2007, p. 9)

An example of this lack of equality can be seen in a 2008 study (Skillset) of the film and television workforce in the United Kingdom. It revealed a pay equity gap, finding that the earnings of men and women in the industry were different, with women earning ‘on average substantially less than men – £29,016 per year compared with £34,669’.

Sinclair et al’s 2006 study of women screenwriters (1999–2003) in the UK found that although films written by women were as likely to gain release as those written by men, and that although the box office return on a British film with a female writer was slightly higher than films with a male writer (Sinclair et al, p. ix), women screenwriters were still only credited on less than 15 per cent of UK films. The study found that women wrote in all genres, were overrepresented (compared to their industry participation) in industry-accredited screenwriting courses, and cinema audiences were approximately evenly balanced between men and women – so none of these factors (experience in genre, training, or audience demographic) could explain the finding that women writers made up only 26 per cent of the total writing for film, and 38 per cent of the total in audiovisual media other than film. It also noted that only 8.6 per cent (47 of 549 films) had a female director, and 70 per cent of those had a female writer as well, but that the majority (24 out of 33) were writer directors (only 9 out of 33 were directors working with women writers) (p. 10). This would suggest that a significant pathway to directing for women is to also be the writer on the project.

A Danish study of gender and work in relation to Danish feature films (Knudsen & Rowley, 1992–2002) revealed a marked imbalance. In film, women made up 0 per cent of cinematographers, 17 per cent of screenwriters, 19 per cent of producers, 20 per cent of directors

and 38 per cent of editors. In television it was a similar picture. The Board of Directors (1991–2003) in Denmark’s main public service TV station, DR, had only 17 per cent women; and 4 per cent on the Executive Board (1992–2002). The study also found female ghettos in children’s documentaries (which appears to have discriminated against men), with 83 per cent of female employees. However, for children’s features, no women were hired for 14 out of 20 years. There was evidence of a decline in female participation: ‘[a]cross the board there were 78% men and 22% women in 1992, and 80% men and 20% women in 2002. The number of women in positions of influence in the world of Danish feature films decreased from 1992–2002’ (Knudsen & Rowley, 2005). This indicates that the dip in participation found in America and Australia in the early 2000s is possibly a global phenomenon, although the Danish study³ (1992–2002) noted despite the decline in most areas, women had improved their representation as directors (to 20%). While it is still a low figure, it varies from the decline shown in women directors’ participation in Australia and New Zealand. A study of New Zealand films released into New Zealand cinemas (2003–2007) found that only 8 per cent were written or directed by women (Evans, 2008), and figures from Screen Australia (2009) established that 18 per cent of films were directed by women (1990/91–2008/09), a decline from the 1992 survey (Cox & Laura) which found women constituted 22% of directors.⁴

Women in Western film industries experience numerous common barriers to progress and success in the film and related audiovisual industries. For example, Sinclair et al (2006), who aimed to highlight priority areas for further research and action in relation to screen writing in UK television, found a number of barriers. These included a poor record on diversity in many

³ All material in this paragraph is drawn from a summary of this study: Mette Knudsen, *Update on Women in the Industry*, WIFT Summit, Los Angeles 28/10–1/11/05. I am indebted to Knudsen for sending me this given that the Knudsen and Rowley survey is in Danish and not available in English.

⁴ This survey concluded this from a survey of the actual industry, not solely from credit lists, which was how Screen Australia collated the data.

areas of the workforce affecting women, as well as ethnic and disability groups, in content and portrayal. In hiring, there was found to be indirect discrimination, including that men in positions of power were more likely to hire men, and those making decisions about hiring writers believed myths, 'possibly unconsciously', that women 'do not write the sorts of stories that sell' (Sinclair et al, p. xii). Where track record was required, it was more difficult for new players, many of whom are women. Women more often did not make the most of work cultures, failing to capitalise on networks, to feel comfortable to sell or promote their work, and often women were dissuaded more easily by early criticism, finding 'this process more difficult than men as they tend to have less confidence in their work and are less tenacious' (Sinclair et al, p. xiii). In general, there was a lack of access, a paucity of support, and few efforts to improve gender imbalance.

The international situation provides evidence that women are generally significantly under-represented in Western film industries. Not only have they stopped gaining ground, in many instances their numbers have declined. There is some evidence of a dip in participation in the early 2000s, but a slight recovery in the second part of the decade. In many key creative roles female participation is well below representation in the wider workforce, and gendered ghettos in some fields still exist (which are most often the technical or camera areas). Despite a trend for women to over train, evidence suggests that they are often paid less. It appears that films with female directors are more likely to have female writers, often because women are able to direct a film because they are writer/directors. In summary, the declining status of women is a major concern for global film industries. As Tobias has observed:

As far as many of today's female screenwriters know, right now is the best it's ever been for women in Hollywood. It's a vast improvement over the situation even 20 years ago. What they don't know is

that their ideal future, the one in which at least 50 per cent of screenwriters are women, came and went nearly 70 years ago.

(Tobias in Sinclair et al, p. 1)

Why is equality important?

When the products turned out by our media are mainly created by men, it's not only a pity for the women in the business; it's a pity for all of us. Because the consequence is that all of us – both women and men – miss out on a lot more multi faceted and much more interesting stories about our lives.

(Knudsen, 2005, p. 7)

There are business and cultural arguments that demonstrate that equal representation in leadership positions in film and related industries such as television are essential. As outlined in a 2004 report on the Australian television industry, if 'leaders are chosen from only half the population it will be harder to get the best person for the job every time', and 'if the industry misses out on all these potential leaders, this certainly represents a real waste of talent, skills and experience' (AFC/Morgan, p. 8). There are implications for lack of diversity for content because when 'decision makers come from only one part of society, they will only draw on a narrow range of experiences ... [and it] will be harder for them to take into account the diverse television audience when they make decisions on programming and production' (AFC/Morgan, p. 8).

Where there are more women in leadership positions there is evidence that more diverse leadership styles are possible. The 2004 AFC/Morgan Australian report on television found that men and women are freer to choose to use communication styles that suit them – often involving both masculine and feminine perspectives – and so inflexible styles that existed before are now not rigidly necessary in order to gain success (dominance, competitive behaviour and toughness).

This points to a benefit for those who work in the industry, although it must be noted that men and women may not necessarily have different leadership approaches given that ‘women in senior leadership will have been selected and socialized to conform to the dominant organizational structure’ (p. 10). On the other hand, some research has shown (Rhode) that women perform well in more interpersonally sensitive or collaborative approaches (as may some men). Rhode has noted that conventional gender roles have encouraged women ‘to develop interpersonal skills and sensitivities, which increase their comfort level with participatory styles’ (Rhode, 2003, p. 20), and it follows that this would imbue changes in workplace cultures if such styles flourished.

There is arguably a link between the gender balance of a workplace and the retention of women. Bell has observed, ‘there is ample and consistent evidence that the organisational culture of the workplace plays an important role in retention and career advancement, especially for women’ (Bell, p. 39). It could be observed from this that retaining women in audiovisual industries may be dependent, or directly related to, achieving a gender-balanced workforce.

A 2006 UK study of screenwriters outlined a business argument for improving the representation of women in the screenwriting role. It observed that data showed ‘women write the sort of films that do well in the UK, that the films they make are as likely to gain a release and their films are actually dollar for pound marginally more financially effective’ (Sinclair et al, p. 15). The report also argued that the industry was potentially missing out on ‘new and interesting ideas, stories and storytelling innovation’, and also causing social effects, for example, a lack of female perspectives resulting in the perpetuation of stereotypes (Sinclair et al, p. 15). It can be deduced from this that if film industries increase diversity (not just in terms of

women's participation, but the participation of other minority groups), national cinemas will be less heterogeneous, and international cinema will be richer.

The proposition that increasing the number of women working on a film directly leads to an increase in female-centred stories has been evidenced by an American study (2010) which found that where women were equally represented as decision-makers behind the scenes, 'the number of female characters in a film increases', and 'the number of female actors grows' (Smith, 2010). Other studies have supported this conclusion. One 2007 UK report observed, 'when women are involved in writing, production and directing, they create more female characters' (Bhavnani, p. 12). If one considers films that have women in these roles it is evident that they not only create more female characters, but characters who make an outstanding contribution to the exploration and visibility of female experience, as well as tending to have more women than usual on the crew.

An example of the above can be seen in the films of Jane Campion; *The Piano* (1993), for instance, has women in major creative roles: it is written, produced, directed, edited and has costume design and casting by women. In addition, it has been described by Dana Polan as inspiring 'intense and divided reaction from cinema audiences (often splitting them down gendered lines)' (Polan, 2001, rear cover). Polan has observed how women, in particular, profoundly bonded with the film, which he says 'has come to be seen as one of the supreme signposts of an art of feminine sensibility' (Polan, 2001, p. 7). Laleen Jayamanne has written that it 'strikes a chord for young women' (Jayamanne, 2001, p. 25) and Barbara Klinger has observed that '[e]very so often a film appears that has the ability to mesmerize its spectators, taking up sustained residence in their imaginations and emotions. A dozen years ago that film, at least for some female viewers, was ... *The Piano* ...' (Klinger, p. 19). Stephen Crofts has written that

there 'was a significant gender dimension to the film's audience demographic. Discussions with distributors and anecdotal evidence worldwide suggests that the primary audience has been women' (quoted in Margolis, 2000, p. 139).

Part 2

Women in the Australian film industry

While women directors in film industries around the world are still seen as anomalous (if mainstream) or marginalised as avant-garde, the Antipodes have been home to an impressive cadre of female film-makers who negotiate and transcend such notions. Before the promising debuts of Ann Turner (Celia) and Jane Campion (Sweetie), Gillian Armstrong blazed a trail with My Brilliant Career. (Sarris in Barber, p. 6)

Entering the first decade of the new millennium, Australian women filmmakers in the 2000s continued to achieve great success. In a variety of industry crafts Australian women made a substantial contribution on the international stage, many winning international accolades such as Academy Awards (for example, actors Cate Blanchett and Nicole Kidman). Australians achieved international recognition in other key creative roles such as producer Jan Chapman (*The Piano, Lantana*), editor Jill Bilcock (*Moulin Rouge!, Romeo & Juliet*), screenwriter Laura Jones (*The Portrait of a Lady, Brick Lane*) and production designer Catherine Martin (*Moulin Rouge!, Australia*). Although still a minority in all major creative positions, women shone at the Australian Film Institute Awards in the 2000s. In the feature categories over the last decade, 'Best Film' was won 80 per cent of the time by women producers (who are only 33 per cent of the workforce); 'Best Direction' awards went 40 per cent of the time to women directors (who are only 18 per cent of the workforce); and 'Best Original Screenplay' awards went 50 per cent

of the time to women writers (who are only 20 per cent of the workforce⁵).

Despite these successes, Australian census figures indicate that women have been leaving the film, television and audiovisual industries at a greater rate than men, and that the participation of women in the key creative areas of directing has slipped dramatically over the last decade. While many women work across both the film and television industries in Australia, television is equally difficult for women (if not more so given it was established in the 1950s, and has evolved as a more masculinised culture⁶). Data from the EOWA Census of Women in Leadership (2004) observed only one director of television is a woman (although it should be noted that in Australia there are only a small number of such jobs); and that 8.3 per cent of media sector board directors are women (lower than the Australian average of 8.6 per cent). However, women in the media sector hold 15.4 per cent of ASX2000 executive management positions, compared to the Australian average of 10.2 per cent (AFC/Morgan) and women hold a significant proportion of the head positions in state and federal government film funding agencies (in 2010, women are head of Screen Australia, Film Victoria, and Screen NSW).

Today, women in the Australian film industry are integrated at all levels; there are no longer affirmative action programs, such as women's film units (e.g. The Women's Film Fund run by the Australian Film Commission in 1976–1988), and there is no separate feminist filmmaking (as was visible in the 1970s with feminist filmmaking groups⁷) – which is not to say that feminism is not alive and well, but rather that it is expressed in the textures, sensibilities and viewpoints of the work. Women felt that the female filmmaking collectives and organisations

⁵ Figures for the per cent of workforce by producer, director and writer come from Screen and the per cent of award wins were calculated by the author of this chapter.

⁶ The Australian film industry was revived in the 1970s when the government funded the industry (which it does to this day). This meant the industry did not have an entrenched masculine culture that had been there for years, it was influenced by the feminism of the period, and government agencies required that equal opportunity policies were in place.

⁷ For further on this history, and the history of women's filmmaking in Australia, see French, 2003, pp. 12–13.

marginalised or ghettoised them, that women were talking to themselves, and that there was a need to enter the mainstream (although given the poor status of women in global industries, many of these affirmative action programs and support groups are arguably still required). Since the 1980s, women filmmakers in Australia have worked within the structures of mainstream film production. As Michelle Citron has observed, this created ‘the opportunity to reach a larger audience [and] the potential of using mainstream culture to critique or subvert it’.⁸ As Thornham has noted, recent films of Sally Potter and Jane Campion (*Orlando* and *The Piano*) reflect concerns central to feminist theory, ‘the relationship of women to language, and to public and private histories; sexual difference ... the limits and possibilities of desire; the relationship between women...’ (Thornham quoted in Gamble, p. 82).

Contemporary Australian women filmmakers have made a particular contribution as female authors interested in representing female experience, female subjectivity, and portraying relationships between women. Notably, these are also the most successful and internationally well-known Australian filmmakers, such as Gillian Armstrong, whose career has been dominated by her films about female experience, for example, the features *Little Women* (1994) and *Charlotte Gray* (2001), or the five ‘seven-up’ documentaries beginning with *Smokes and Lollies* (1975).

There are many other contemporary Australian women filmmakers who have made cinematic explorations from female perspectives, making ‘women’s films’ in the sense that they explore the cultural construct of the ‘feminine’, and what it is to be a woman in the depicted society. Notable for their explorations of female experience are films examining the tensions and connections between sisters (*Little Women*, *The Last Days of Chez Nous*, *Radiance*, *Love Serenade*, *In the Cut*); the bonds between mothers and daughters and sometimes grandmothers

⁸ Michelle Citron quoted in Sarah Gamble (ed.) *The Routledge companion to feminism and postfeminism*, p. 82.

(*Looking for Alibrandi, How To Make An American Quilt, High Tide, The Piano*); the strange nature of some female friendships (*The Well, The Portrait of a Lady*); and the hold that romantic myths have over some women (*Love Serenade, Walk The Talk, An Angel At My Table, In the Cut*). The great talents that women bring on their merits as skilled filmmakers are significant and vital to the success of a global film industry. These stories, of sisters, mothers, daughters and female friendships are those that male filmmakers would be less likely to make, and the kinds of stories that, despite their success, are those at risk if fewer and fewer women are able, or make the choice, to work in the film industry.

Women's participation in the Australian film industry is still, according to a recent survey and research project (French, 2010), declining (for example, directors have slipped by 11 per cent over nearly 20 years). Preliminary results of the study, which will be completed in 2011 and have a focus on the Australian state of Victoria, indicate that gender issues in the industry include: gender segregation in some areas (technical areas are still more difficult for women to gain a foothold); sexism; women don't have the same confidence and opportunity that men have in putting themselves forward (or networking); the industry is not flexible or family friendly; structurally there is little career planning or mentoring; and ageism (for both women under 25 and over 48). In summary, the issues found in the last major survey of the Australian industry (Cox & Laura, 1992) have not been addressed, and this may explain the Australian census figures indicating women are leaving the industry.

Moving forward, it is important that researchers collect qualitative and quantitative data that maps gender imbalance in order to provide overdue evidence bases for action. Further research is needed globally to gather and analyse key issues, examine industry practices, and look to the support mechanisms. Support that might be significant in turning around the minority

participation of women might be initiatives such as more flexible workplaces and support for career interruption due to child rearing. Programs to encourage women to better plan careers and have the confidence to aim high and to understand their leadership potential are also important, along with mentoring. Recognition of what women contribute to the field, for example, via public awareness of contributions by women filmmakers (or further research on this), is also significant in fostering women's belief in themselves, as well as developing a larger picture of women's work.

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