

Madam With A Movie Camera: Gender, Industry and Cultivating Creativity

By Lucy Randall

Teaching film in practical studies is oftentimes preparing students for a ruthless, commercially driven industry with an increasingly integral relationship with technology. It is an industry that, for those at the creative helm, is largely male - while many of our film students are female, the statistics are telling, with women frequently falling below the 10% mark as commercial directors in a given year.¹ Film educator Gillian Leahy (*My Life Without Steve*, 1986) revealed at a recent talk that in her classes, female students are rarely the first to pick up the camera and take the authoritative role.² If this is the case in students' university years, how sturdily will their career be formed? Film, the "reimagined, reinvented version of the real"³, is inevitable if not essential in shaping the ideas of young people and in turn we must tread delicately in teaching the art of filmmaking, nurturing the needs of young filmmakers whose creative, cultural and physical identification is as female.

In the film *Swimming with Sharks* (1994), a Hollywood parody on Hollywood, its antagonist Buddy, played with Kevin Spacey states: "Avoid women directors, they ovulate. Do you have any idea what that does to a three month shoot?"⁴

In 2010, for the first time in a history which began in 1927, a woman was finally awarded an Academy Award for her best direction, for a film in which there was merely one speaking role for a woman. The winner, Kathryn Bigelow, is a director known for her male-orientated action pictures (*Blue Steel*, 1989, *Point Break*, 1991, *K-11: The Widowmaker*, 2002), and despite a relatively long career of making big-budget films, was virtually unknown by name until *The Hurt Locker*. Before her, only three women in more than eighty years had been nominated for Best Direction: Lina Wertmüller for *Seven Beauties* (1976), Jane Campion for *The Piano* (1993) and Sofia Coppola for *Lost in Translation* (2003).

Bigelow, Campion and Coppola arguably define three stereotypes of the female director: the invisible director, the feminist director, and the Hollywood glamour girl, whose foray is usually

appearing before the camera rather than behind it. Bigelow, prior to her Academy Award winning success, was not largely known by name despite having regularly directed large budget, male-oriented (featuring male protagonists in action and crime narratives), action features, over the years since her feature debut, *The Loveless*, in 1982. These films were marketed without Bigelow's name attached.

Jane Campion, on the other hand, is well known but as been defined by her focus on gender in her films, *The Piano* (1993), *Holy Smoke* (1999), *An Angel at my Table* (1990) and *Sweetie* (1989), as film academic Fincina Hopgood describes. "Debate, perhaps even controversy, has characterised the reception of Campion's films since the premiere of her first feature *Sweetie* at Cannes in 1989, where it was greeted with boos and hisses... Many critics have seen Campion's persistent concerns with gender politics and the disempowerment of women within the domestic sphere as evidence of a feminist sensibility. Certainly, while Campion may not regard herself as a feminist director, her films have been enthusiastically taken up by feminist film critics for their depiction of strong female characters rebelling against the roles expected of them by patriarchal society."⁵ Campion was recently recruited as president of an all female jury at the 2010 Mumbai Film Festival, elected "in light of the number of upcoming women directors here that have been making their presence felt recently".⁶

By contrast, while some find Campion's themes a little hard to stomach, it is not rare to find Coppola gracing the pages of a Vogue fashion spread. Sadly, the greatest strain put on any film today is financial backing, and it is no surprise that one of the most famous contemporary filmmakers is Sofia Coppola, the daughter of Francis Ford, Hollywood directing royalty. Despite a short career in film (director of four features, each with a substantial budget and a celebrity cast), Coppola was the first filmmaker given permission to shoot a film in the Palace of Versailles, indicative of her (inherited) pull.

The recent splash made by *Bridesmaids*, considered to be the “female-centric comedy broke down the Hollywood gates”⁷ is only indicative of the industry’s gender prudery. Along with a string of famously “female-centric”, even feminist classics, *Bridesmaids* was made with a male director at the helm and women writers behind the scenes: *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004) and *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007), are all mainstream examples. All too often, women writers and producers will be behind such films, with male directors gaining much of the control and the kudos. In his analysis of the success of *Bridesmaids*, film producer David T. Friendly (*Little Miss Sunshine*, directed by Jonathon Dayton, Valerie Faris, 2006) explains “getting female-driven comedies to the big screen has been as hard as selling Disney an X-rated movie... [however]...if the *Bridesmaids* Effect really takes hold, imagine the possibilities.”⁸

Imagine the possibilities: women appealing to a mainstream audience, in 2011? This statement has been made at a time when producers make decisions such as this: “Last year, the president of production at a major studio allegedly pronounced that the company would no longer produce films with female leads. He suggested that such films are bad box office bets.”⁹ In spite of this blatantly sexist approach to industry filmmaking, it has been proven that the sex of a director does not determine box office takings.¹⁰

Filmmakers in the making more and more are looking to tertiary studies to successfully enter the industry in Australia. In recent years, there has been a steady, overall increase of those working in the industry having gained a relevant tertiary qualification, while the proportion of men and women working without a qualification fell. In 2006, census results indicated that 47 per cent of men and 42 per cent of women overall in 2006 working with secondary qualifications, with 25 per cent of women working in the audiovisual industry had a bachelor degree or higher, a significant increase from 16 per cent in 1996.¹¹ On a broader scale, women comprised 16% of people working in

production roles in 2010, including directors (a mere seven per cent), executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers, and editors of the 250 highest grossing domestic films in the United States.¹² This leaves students with few visible role models.

Film shapes the minds of people, young and old, regardless of their gender identity. Consider how this notion of the industry shapes young filmmakers entering tertiary studies. Film is much like no other medium: many try to discredit the medium as commercial, beyond the point of artistry or intellectual credibility. Regardless, there is no doubting its potential to speak to people, as described by theorist bell hooks: “Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of a filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean lessons are not learned. It has only been in the last ten years or so that I have begun to realise that my students learned more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature I was urging them to read.”¹³ Students of film thus are doubly affected: representation on screen and behind the camera undoubtedly shakes the confidence of women entering tertiary film studies.

The Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS), regarded as one of the best film schools in the world¹⁴, have wider range of modules, including Alternative Storytelling, Creative Leadership and Relationships, Creative Research, Innovations in Form, Running Your Own Creative Business¹⁵ - overall, technique and strategy towards forming a business savvy student, before the student enters the industry. However, the application process to AFTRS is highly competitive and will not be the convenient, even cost-effective choice, of every student. Meanwhile, not every university will have the resources of a specialised institution such as this one.

My undergraduate studies focused on film theory: with a strong desire to delve into my passion, I took on a Masters of Film and Digital Image; here, my classmates and I were taught the importance

of the pitch, the one line synopsis, the one paragraph synopsis and its one page counterpart - overall, the sale of an idea. From here, students were asked to develop an idea, their creative direction gently moulded towards marketability. At this stage of postgraduate study, unless students were studying film as a branch of art, our filmic concepts are shaped toward narrative clarity and further away from experimentation.

During my postgraduate studies, I have found the greatest challenge in filmmaking for me is muscle, authority and ego. The demands of production mean that every filmmaker encounters a range of spirit-crushing ordeals, which may simply be for a woman not having the physical strength to manage all her equipment. I was saddened as I found myself constantly in need of the assistance of the male members of my mixed crew in the handling of equipment. This is not to say that a woman's difficulty producing a film will be dependent on her physical strength, as film is reliant on simply so many factors, and in the case of a good film usually, many *people*. As one of two women in my class, I simply felt dwarfed, it was very hard making demands from my cast and crew, regardless of their sex and age. The power of consultation, the art which many women are agreed to possess, is possibly a quality students should be taught to appreciate.

Arguably, the steps to combat such ingrained problems within the industry is to empower all students, male, female and all other identities. Students must be taught beyond the ideal pitch or the marketable narrative, they must learn a scope effective strategies. Students should be encouraged, if not already, to be taking advantage of social networking mediums to connect with each other; not for the purpose of commiseration, but in order to build relationships and simply learn to ask one another for a favour. Students should also be encouraged to move beyond what is marketable and learn to propel their films themselves. Along with learning to network and aid one another as crew members, when students in passed years grew together as a community, co-operatives emerged, as is the way many festivals began.

In 2008, I started a project called Seen & Heard, which began as a collection of writing published online on women in the film industry, which later became a festival, run consecutively for two years, and continues in development. This was a no-budget event, with most tasks, such as venue liaisons, artist call-outs and press release were all conducted by e-mail. The motivator? Shameless optimism, the only way in which the voice of revolution can blossom.

Women who have entered their films in the festival have often strongly identified with its purpose, writing to me to remark on the struggles they faced in making films. Some audience members, regardless of gender, are puzzled by this purpose: why would I choose to be exclusive in my curation? Is this form of discrimination really going to solve a problem? At this stage sadly, as far as I am concerned, the answer has to be yes in order to stop the perpetuation of a genre of women's films in contrast to the broad range of films made by women.

Created for the purpose of supporting women in film alone, there are more than 40 festivals around the world that exclusively showcase films by women.¹⁶ There are dozens of film festivals that tour Australia focusing on cultural identity, sexuality, disability or have their basis in human rights (the Human Rights Arts and Film Festival), retrospectives and film history, or even simply recreation (such as the Bicycle Film Festival). In Australia, many of our film festivals are directed by women, for instance, as of 2011, Clare Stewart completed five years directing the Sydney Film Festival,¹⁷ the Melbourne International Film Festival is currently directed by Senses of Cinema editor, Michelle Carey¹⁸. Festivals are the portal by which the wider public are exposed to more challenging films, such as documentaries and experimental cinema. Not only are festivals not often enough incorporated as an element of the student's learning experience, but festival application should be essential to young filmmakers' studies.

Do your students know their way around government websites, grants and fellowships and what opportunities they can derive from them? Financial backing need not be for production alone, but alternative means of distribution. When the brief commercial exhibition of *Men's Group* (Michael Joy, 2008) came to a close, its producer, John L Simpson, developed a plan which won him the 2008 Fellowship Project grant awarded by the Australian Film Institute (AFI). This plan was to tour the film in Australia's regional areas, exhibiting the film at local venues, such as community halls, churches, prisons and even oil rigs. His tour also included regional cinemas for one-off screenings.¹⁹ Simpson was awarded \$25,000 to realise this strategy, however, this need not discourage students who do not achieve the same success - while completing the project, Simpson developed what he called a Digital Screenings Map, a nationwide listing of venues (including regional cinemas) around Australia which can facilitate a screening.²⁰ The Digital Screenings Map has been made available as a free resource online by Titan View.²¹

What is encouraging further still is the nature of the film: as the title suggests, the film is about a male support group, an improvised drama, each scene the first and final take, methodist rehearsals and collaborative character development.²² While unconventional, *Men's Group* was largely well received by audiences, striking a chord with regional areas.²³ Simpson's response to the Australian film industry - like many, a nervous one when it comes to experimentation - should inspire students: after having more than 75 similar projects pitched to him, Simpson began to suggesting to filmmakers that they simply take on the task themselves, asking the questions: "Why don't you start with your own cast and crew screening in your town? Would it be so hard to get a digital projector? And why not sell the DVD on the night, and sell them on your website?"²⁴ Simpson's emphasis on remaining proactive should be put forward to students, but can only be done so with encouragement and creative nourishing.

It is not enough to say to students that some years ago one student of their degree and institution had achieved notable success: students value face time, and for the most part, small-time filmmakers who have achieved notable success are happy to share their stories and speak to classes. Simpson himself, following the national tour of *Men's Group*, gave talks to audiences of filmmakers encouraging them to use the Digital Screenings Map and to do the same for their films, whether they had been distributed at the cinema or otherwise.

To wade through the many number of scholarships, fellowships and grants that may or may not be available to a single student is not only an arduous task, but a deeply intimidating one, and application writing and to sustain confidence during the application process are invaluable skills. that should be taught to students. The importance of a student portfolio can not be undervalued, and even portfolio development is an essential skill that rarely takes a primary focus in film studies.

The indisputable gender divide when entering the industry can be deeply intimidating if not discouraging. There are indeed practical skills lacking in some students and their studies, such as portfolio development, grant application processes, and festival entry skills, all of which we can improve upon. Beyond this, students, regardless of their gender, also require a dose of shameless optimism in order to truly cultivate their creativity.

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