Representations of Women in Popular Film:
A Study of Gender Inequality in 2018

Ian Kunsey

Cinema and Television Arts
Elon University

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

Abstract

While much attention has been drawn to the lack of diversity in Hollywood, many minority groups still lack equal opportunities in the film industry. Roles for women, in particular, have grown slowly, leaving developed female characters far below proportionality. This study looks at the representation of women in the top-five grossing live-action movies directed by men and the top-five grossing live-action movies directed by women in 2018. Based on background quantitative data as well as a qualitative content analysis, this paper found that portrayals of women are much more positive in movies directed by women and that female directors frame female characters much more positively. These positive portrayals are largely affected by the presence of a critical actor behind the scenes.

I. Introduction

Even in the rapidly changing media landscape of the 21st century, movies have remained an integral part of American popular culture. While methods of consumption have changed, millions of Americans still flock to theaters every year to see stories played out on the silver screen, with the U.S. domestic box office grossing $10.7 billion in 2018 (Statista, n.d.). Concurrently, the Academy Awards, the world's most prestigious cinematic awards, draws millions of viewers each year. The sustained prevalence of film in popular culture positions the medium as a key cog in American society and popular culture (Simonton, 2004).

Yet, even in the year 2019, many Americans are not proportionally represented in film. These inadequacies in cinematic representation both on screen and off screen have prompted a number of social movements over the past few years, including the #OscarsSoWhite campaign. The movement, which centered on the lack of racial diversity among Oscars nominees, resulted in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences vowing to "double the number of women and people of color in the Academy's membership by 2020" (Reign, n.d.). The #MeToo and "Time's Up" movements shifted the focus to promoting awareness and advocacy for sexual assault victims—especially women. Yet even with these social outcries, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the film industry as a whole still do not adequately represent women on and off screen. Stereotypic portrayals and the lack of complex female roles remain common in Hollywood and the media as a whole (Milburn, Mather, & Conrad, 2000).

These negative depictions have implications that reach far beyond the entertainment industry. Because the role of film in popular culture and society, "motion pictures largely reflect prevailing cultural attitudes about gender roles, norms, attitudes and expectations" (Simonton, 2004, 781). In the same vein, depictions of minority groups in film and the media can be influential in the dissemination of stereotypes (Bazzini, McIntosh, Smith, Cook, & Harris, 1997). This dual cause-and-effect often results in a vicious cycle as societal stereotypes influence primarily male filmmakers who in turn create art that adds to said stereotypes (Simonton, 2004). While this is not the end-all-be-all of misrepresentation in media, this cycle is important to consider when evaluating portrayals of minorities in film.

Although representations of women in film have improved in recent years, this growth has been mitigated by the fact that there has only been a 3% increase in female employment in the 250 top-grossing films since 1998 (Lauzen, 2018b). The lack of significant progress is arguably most evident in the Academy Awards nominees and winners, with just one woman awarded "Best Director" in the 91-year history of the awards. In 2019, in the midst of social change and the #MeToo movement, zero female directors were nominated for "Best Director" and zero female directors were nominated for "Best Picture." Additionally, each of the top 30 grossing movies in the U.S. in 2018 were directed by men (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). Through this research paper, the top-five grossing live-action movies directed by men and the top-five grossing live-action movies directed by women in 2018 were analyzed to better understand how women are depicted in popular film and how behind-the-scenes representations affect these portrayals.

II. Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the current representation of women in Hollywood, critical mass theory and critical actor theory, as well as a discussion of male and female stories, all of which seek to analyze how women's roles in the film industry affect their representation on screen.

Current Representation in the Film Industry

A vast pool of prior research, empirical and otherwise, proves the existence of sexual discrimination in Hollywood. The term "actress" itself is laden with subtle sexism, as the suffix "-ess" implies that the roles of actor an actress differ as performed by men and women (Simonton, 2004). While not intentionally malicious, this small difference points to inherent discrimination in the film industry. Discrimination theory bases itself upon the idea that "members of a certain group are preferred, even when the work of these group members is indistinguishable from that belonging to another group " (Lauzen, 2012b, 311). By differentiating, and seemingly preferring, male actors from female actors, the film industry shows its discriminatory tendencies.

By employing these tendencies, the film industry discourages women from entering the field and thus influences decisions to hire male workers instead of female workers (Lauzen, 2012b). "This has led inevitably to a situation in which the films… are most often written, directed, and produced by men" (Orwin, 2002, 271). This is evident by the vast amount of quantitative research conducted on employment in the film industry. In 2018, women accounted for only eight percent of directors at the helm of the top-250 grossing films in the United States, down one percent from 1998 (Lauzen, 2018b). Additionally, one in four films employed either zero women or one woman in the roles of director, writer, producer, executive producer, editor, and cinematographer. Only one percent of films employed ten or more women in those roles, compared to 74 percent of films employing ten or more men (Lauzen, 2018b).

In addition to this lack of proportionality, "the cultural devaluation of women is reinforced by the fact that they do not receive star billing as often as men" (Lincoln & Allen, 2004). According to Lauzen's "It's a Man's (Celluloid) World" report, only 36 percent of all major characters in 2018's top-100 grossing movies were women (Lauzen, 2018a). While that number is up nine percent from 2002, female stars appear in far fewer films than their male counterparts and thus infrequently become movie stars (Lincoln & Allen, 2004). In this way, films inherently tell audiences that "men are more important, in all kinds of contexts, than women" (Lincoln & Allen, 2004).

These issues have a clear solution: give female filmmakers more, and equal, opportunities. When women are hired as directors and writers, more female characters are employed (Sutherland & Feltey, 2017). "In films with at least one female director and/or writer, women comprised 43 percent of all speaking characters,"

a number much more proportionate to the U.S. population than the 32 percent of female speaking characters present in films with exclusively male directors and writers (Lauzen, 2018a). This disparity shows the effect that employing female filmmakers has on gender representation. However, female filmmakers tend to face far more unjust criticism than men when they are given positions (Kennedy, 2010).

One of the most prominent of these criticisms is the idea that female filmmakers present more of a financial risk than male filmmakers. When faced with large budgets, studio executives tend to fall back on directors who have had box-office hits in the past (Lauzen, 2012b). These directors are often male. This presents a bit of a paradox in which women are not hired for positions that require them to have previous jobs to prove their worth.

In reality, films that employ at least one female director, executive producer, producer, and/or writer garner approximately the same domestic box office sales as do films with exclusively male representation in those roles (Lauzen, 2008). Despite this, women are rarely afforded the same resources and budgets as men. This can partially be attributed to the emergence of the superhero genre—generally the highest-grossing movies in modern day Hollywood. Since the mid-2000s, when these films became widely popular, the genre has been dominated by male directors. Until 2017's *Wonder Woman*, directed by Patty Jenkins, no woman had directed a movie released by Marvel or DC, the two preeminent comic book studios in the film industry. While this trend seems to be changing with the upcoming releases of Cathy Yan's *Birds of Prey*, Patty Jenkins' sequel to *Wonder Woman*, Cate Shortland's *Black Widow*, and Chloé Zhao's *The Eternals*, the lucrative, high-budget genre has largely benefited men, leaving women to contend with small budgets and less box office influence.

In 2018, these super hero movies and other "action" films accounted for 34 percent of the year's box office gross (The Numbers, 2018). Additionally, all nine superhero movies released in 2018 were directed by men. This disparity present in the superhero genre alone can partially explain why films directed by women do not have budgets as large as movies directed by their male counterparts. While the sample size is small, women have succeeded at the box office when placed at the helm of big budget superhero films. Both *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel,* the only two modern superhero movies directed by women, have grossed over $800 million, with budgets over $120 million.

The disparity between gender representation in the director's chair also carries over to the Academy Awards. The Oscars hold a great deal of importance in the film industry. On the surface, it appears as though women are granted the same number of awards, with one Oscar for best actor and one Oscar for best actress, as an example. Yet women are rarely, if ever, nominated for other awards - only one woman has won "Best Director" in the 91-year history of the Academy. Outside of "Best Actress" and "Best Actress in a Supporting Role," only 15 women earned nominations out of a total 107 nominees in 2015 (McCarthy, 2015). This issue is compounded when considering the makeup of the Academy. In 2018, 69% of voters in the Academy were male (Statista, 2018). This number is down from 77% in 2015, partially in response to the #OscarsSoWhite movement. Even still, the lack of representation in the awards and in the Academy has serious repercussions. With men winning most of the awards at the film industry's most prestigious ceremony, the Academy places more importance on male filmmakers, thus granting them more opportunity.

Critical Mass and Critical Actor Theories

Mass social movements such as #OscarsSoWhite and #MeToo have begun to shed light on this issue. In addition, a number of prominent figures in Hollywood have pushed for "inclusion riders," or stipulations included in contracts that guarantee a certain level of gender diversity on set (Dwyer, n.d.). Even still, progress has been slow. To add to that, very little academic research has been done regarding possible solutions to gender inequality in the industry. Because of this, this literature review examines two gender equality theories prominent in politics and applies them to film. These theories do not intend to be all-encompassing solutions to gender representation, but seek to shed light on how roles behind the scenes can influence portrayals on screen.

Referring to an irreversible turning point, critical mass theory states that representation in film is dependent on numeric designation. Some scholars in this area suggest a certain proportion of representation – perhaps 30% – is necessary before a minority group can see real change within the film industry (Dahlerup, 2006). According to the theory, a considerable minority is much more likely to make an impact than a few token individuals (Childs & Krook, 2009). Once a critical mass has been achieved, women will theoretically be able to push for substantial changes and legislation. In addition, a greater focus on feminist issues can result in men and women in the industry paying more attention to women's issues (Childs & Krook, 2006).

Critical mass theory has its weaknesses. It does not account for institutional pressures that may compel women to conform to masculine practices (Childs & Krook, 2009). Essentially, increased numbers of women in the film industry may facilitate coalitions, but sheer numbers do not guarantee equal on-screen representation, as women are not guaranteed to represent other women in gender issues.

This complication of the critical mass theory can be seen in Academy Award-winning director Kathryn Bigelow. Despite becoming the first and only woman to win an Oscar for "Best Director" for her 2008 film *The Hurt Locker*, Bigelow has been extremely resistant to discuss gender politics in the industry (Lauzen, 2011). Unlike many women in Hollywood, she made her name directing and producing action and war films such as *Point Break* and *Zero Dark Thirty*. In essence, Bigelow attempted to fit into the "male-dominated business of film directing by distancing herself from gender issues, while simultaneously aligning herself with traditionally male-identified traits, including toughness and the desire for control" through her tough on-set attitude and intense subject matter (Lauzen, 2011, 147). Bigelow's position and refusal to address inequality and gender politics in Hollywood show the inadequacies of critical mass, as not every individual in a group is willing to advocate for change (Lauzen, 2012a).

Critical Actor theory, on the other hand, suggests a different solution to gender inequality in the industry. The theory rebukes critical mass, citing that individuals, not the mass, bring about change. Essentially, change depends on the acts of individuals within minority groups. According to the theory, critical actors are those who push forth change and inspire others to join in. Critical actors do not need to be a part of the minority group, with men playing a crucial role in the advancement of equality (Childs & Krook, 2009).

These two theories will be used to filter this study's analysis of the films at hand, considering both the number and agency of women in each film analyzed. With five of the films helmed by men and five of the films led by women, critical mass and critical actor theories will be used to evaluate how, and if, these filmmakers address inequality and promote feminist issues, and whether or not the mass or the individual most contributes to these causes.

Male Versus Female Stories

The inadequacies of Critical Mass theory suggest the need for women in Hollywood goes far beyond simple representation. Diversity in filmmaking also diversifies the type of stories told. Typically, women tell inward stories, in contrast to the very outward, masculine hero's journey (Orwin, 2002). While it is important for women to be able to tell a varied degree of stories, feminist films "explicitly or implicitly challenge, rather than subscribe to, dominant representations of female identity," thus differentiating itself from traditionally masculine films (Hankin, 2007, 60).

While men can, and sometimes do, tell female stories successfully, they often fail to empower women. Male filmmakers who are perceived to be unbiased still fail to tell truly feminist stories (Sutherland & Feltey, 2017). Compared to filmmakers like Sofia Coppola, male filmmakers almost never tell truly successful female stories (Kennedy, 2010). One of the foremost examples of this failure is the Bechdel Test, which tracks whether or not two female characters with names talk to each other about something other than men in a film (Sutherland & Feltey, 2017). This test, along with other benchmarks of feminist film, were used to determine whether or not women's stories are represented in the films analyzed.

III. Methods

A qualitative content analysis was used to examine female roles in the selected films. This method was selected due to the complex nature of portrayals in film. While quantitative findings provide context for the study, a qualitative content analysis better lends itself toward the nuances found within the representations in each film.

For the purpose of this study, the top-five grossing live-action movies directed by men and the top-five grossing live-action movies directed by women in 2018 were analyzed. These ten films were chosen because of the influence that high-grossing movies have on the industry and its audiences. Because they earn the most money, they are often the most influential, given that they are exposed to the most people.

The films analyzed in this study are *Black Panther*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, *Deadpool 2*, *Mission: Impossible – Fallout, A Wrinkle In Time, Blockers, I Feel Pretty, The Spy Who Dumped Me,* and *On the Basis of Sex.* These films deal with a wide range of subject matter and genres and will

give a sense of how women are portrayed in popular films directed by men and women.

In this analysis, minor quantitative background data was also used to gauge how films with varying levels of budgets, gender representation behind the scenes, and other contexts may affect representations on screen. Quantitative analysis in this study is comprised of domestic and worldwide gross, budget, the number of women in key roles behind the scenes (director, writer, producer, executive producer, editor, cinematographer) as defined by Lauzen, female protagonists, top-billed female characters, and whether or not the film passes the Bechdel Test (Lauzen, 2018). This information was used to supplement the qualitative content analysis.

Each film was viewed in its entirety and coded. The representations and roles of women in each, as well as their connotation, the agency and actions of women, and notable quotes in each film were recorded. After viewing each film, these coded results were then analyzed and filtered into trends. All of these results were then examined through the quantitative elements discussed earlier to further search for patterns and to analyze the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the films in question portray women?

RQ2: How does gender representation behind the scenes influence gender representation on screen?

RQ3: How does Critical Mass theory and Critical Actor theory impact representations on screen?

IV. Discussion

At the surface level, the five male-directed movies performed far better at the domestic box office than the five movies directed by women, as seen in Table 1. *Black Panther* was the top overall grossing film in 2018, with just over $700 million earned at the U.S. box office, while the top-grossing female-led film, *A Wrinkle in Time,* placed 33rd overall, with just over $100 million gross sales. Additionally, *A Wrinkle in Time* was the only movie directed by a woman in 2018 to make over $100 million at the U.S. box office. The remaining live-action male-directed movies ranked two, four, six, and eight overall. Meanwhile, the remaining live-action, female-directed films placed 47th, 59th, 83rd, and 96th at the box office. Furthermore, male-directed films had much larger budgets than female-directed films. Table 1 demonstrates the issue of women generally directing fewer high-budget movies than men (Lauzen, 2008).

Table 1: Box Office Performance and Budget

Title	Domestic Gross	Worldwide Gross	Budget
Male-Directed			
Black Panther	$700,059,566	$1,347,071,259	$200,000,000
Avengers: Infinity War	$678,815,482	$2,048,709,917	$321,000,000
Jurassic Park: Fallen Kingdom	$417,719,760	$1,309,484,461	$170,000,000
Deadpool 2	$324,591,735	$785,046,920	$110,000,000
Mission Impossible – Fallout	$220,159,104	$791,107,538	$178,000,000
Average	**$468,269,129**	**$1,256,284,019**	**$195,800,000**
Female-Directed			
A Wrinkle in Time	$100,478,608	$132,675,864	$100,000,000
Blockers	$59,839,515	$93,665,491	$21,000,000
I Feel Pretty	$48,795,601	$88,426,082	$32,000,000
The Spy Who Dumped Me	$33,562,069	$42,898,313	$40,000,000
On the Basis of Sex	$24,622,687	$18,348,761	$20,000,000
Average	**$53,459,696**	**$75,202,902**	**$42,600,000**

In measuring on-set roles, this research considered the six roles noted by Lauzen in her research: director, writer, producer, executive producer, editor, and cinematographer (Lauzen, 2018). Production design was also considered in this research. As seen in Table 2, in the five films directed by men, women made up 13% of these positions, compared with 37% in films directed by women. *Blockers* was an outlier among female-directed films with just 17% representation. Among male-directed films, *Black Panther* was an outlier with 31% representation. The next highest percentage associated with a male-directed movie was 11%. The highest representation among all films was found in *A Wrinkle in Time*, with 60% of key roles filled by women. The movie, as stated, was the highest grossing female-directed film and the only female-directed film to surpass $100 million at the box office.

Table 2: Gender Representation in Key Roles Behind the Scenes

Title	Total Female	Total	Percent
Male-Directed			
Black Panther	4	13	0.31%
Avengers: Infinity War	1	16	0.06%
Jurassic Park: Fallen Kingdom	1	11	0.09%
Deadpool 2	2	19	0.11%
Mission Impossible – Fallout	1	12	0.08%
Average	**1.8**	**14.2**	**0.13%**
Female-Directed			
A Wrinkle in Time	6	10	0.60%
Blockers	3	18	0.17%
I Feel Pretty	8	24	0.33%
The Spy Who Dumped Me	7	16	0.44%
On the Basis of Sex	4	12	0.33%
Average	**5.6**	**16**	**0.37%**

The number of on-screen roles for men and women also differed greatly depending on director. As seen in Table 3, all five female-directed films featured a female protagonist, while none of the male-directed films featured a woman as its main character. In female-directed films, women accounted for 67% of top-billed characters compared to 20% in male-directed films. Additionally, all five films helmed by women passed the Bechdel test, which is defined as two named female characters speaking about something other than a man. In comparison, three of the five films directed by men passed the Bechdel test, with *Deadpool 2* and *Mission: Impossible – Fallout* not fitting the criteria.

Table 3: Gender Representation On Screen

Title	Protagonist	Top Billed	Bechdel Test
Male-Directed			
Black Panther	Male	2 Male 1 Female	Yes
Avengers: Infinity War	Male	3 Male	Yes
Jurassic Park: Fallen Kingdom	Male	2 Male 1 Female	Yes
Deadpool 2	Male	2 Male 1 Female	No
Mission Impossible – Fallout	Male	3 Male	No
Total	**0 Female/5**	**3 Female/ 15**	
Average	**0%**	**20%**	
Female-Directed			
A Wrinkle in Time	Female	3 Female	Yes
Blockers	Female	2 Male 1 Female	Yes
I Feel Pretty	Female	3 Female	Yes
The Spy Who Dumped Me	Female	1 Male 2 Female	Yes
On the Basis of Sex	Female	2 Male 1 Female	Yes
Total	**5 Female/5**	**10 Female/15**	
Average	**100%**	**67%**	

These figures show that live-action movies directed by men generally outperform movies directed by women at the U.S. box office. That said, the five films directed by men in this study had budgets averaging $153 million more than the five films directed by women. *Black Panther* and *Avengers: Infinity War* each had budgets higher than all five female-directed movies combined, with each exceeding $200 million. Additionally, high-grossing movies directed by women involved more women behind the scenes and included more female characters than high-grossing movies directed by men. While the quantitative portion of the research does not necessarily provide any groundbreaking revelations, it gives context to the portrayals of women on screen.

After viewing the ten movies in question, a number of trends can be observed concerning the portrayals and roles of women in popular film.

Male and Female Stories on Screen

When reviewing related literature, it was noted that female stories typically differ from stories told by their male counterparts. As defined earlier in this paper by Hankin, feminist films "explicitly or implicitly challenge, rather than subscribe to, dominant representations of female identity," thus differentiating themselves from traditionally masculine film (Hankin, 2007, 60). In terms of the ten films in question, a trend emerged regarding the types of stories being told. Generally, in the five movies directed by women, the directors subvert traditionally male stories and turn them into feminist ones.

While *A Wrinkle in Time* is not necessarily an overtly male or female story in a traditional sense, it acts as a representation of equality. The protagonist of the film, Meg, is a strong and independent young girl with a strong intellect and a passion for science, a representation rarely found in Hollywood. Almost all the ancillary characters are also female, including three all-knowing, magical characters who guide Meg on her journey to find her missing father (DuVernay, 2018). While the content of the film is not overtly feminist, the magical characters, played by prominent and famous women (Oprah Winfrey, Reese Witherspoon, and Mindy Kaling), all maintain their feminine qualities while playing roles typically filled by men (DuVernay, 2018). In doing this, the film challenges traditional depictions of femininity.

The film also subverts the expectations of a blockbuster. As mentioned, high-grossing movies in the United States, at least in 2018, tend to be directed by men. By making a traditional blockbuster and filling 60 percent of the key crew positions with women, the director of *A Wrinkle in Time*, Ava DuVernay, subverts the expectations of a male blockbuster. The film had a budget of $100 million, $60 million higher than the next film

directed by a woman, making it a clear outlier. Both its high budget and high total gross make it more akin to a traditional popular movie. In doing so, the film and DuVernay display an ideal where women can direct mass-appeal projects with injections of feminist film.

The other female-directed films subvert male stories in a more direct way. *Blockers* and *The Spy Who Dumped Me* take traditionally male stories and inject them with clear feminist ideologies. *Blockers* challenges the traditionally male story of losing your virginity in high school, found in movies such as *Superbad*, a raunchy, masculine comedy about two male high school seniors trying to have sex before graduation (Cannon, 2018). Even though *Blockers* has the lowest number of women in key roles behind the scenes among the five female-directed films examined, director Kay Cannon turns the film into a female-driven feminist story. While the film is still, in many ways, a raunchy popular comedy, it contains overt feminist qualities and uses its platform to convey a distinct message. At one point, the father of a girl who decides to lose her virginity on prom night is challenged by his wife for his traditional views of female sexuality (Cannon, 2018). In a telling moment, the woman points out that men losing their virginity is celebrated, while women losing their virginity is seen as taboo and a loss of innocence. Moments like these, and the agency of women in the movie, make *Blockers* an overtly feminist story.

In the same vein, *The Spy Who Dumped Me* subverts the trope of a masculine espionage thriller. The film opens with male-on-male gun violence and a traditionally handsome male lead. When the film introduces its two main characters Audrey and Morgan, played by Mila Kunis and Kate McKinnon, they are generally helpless and without agency, as the actions of men influence their decisions, or lack thereof, as Fogel (2018) notes. Throughout the course of the film, Audrey and Morgan are tied up in an international plot to recover a flash drive containing vital intelligence information. But, by the end of the film, they are not reliant on men to save them and have complete agency over their actions and decisions. This evolution can be seen in a main plot device used throughout the movie. The McGuffin, or an object that drives the story forward without having much or any significance, of the film is a small flash drive containing vital intelligence. At the start of the film, the drive is hidden in a fantasy football trophy, a symbol of masculinity and men's control of the plot thus far. Toward the end of the film, Audrey hides the flash drive in her vagina, a comedic yet clear symbol of femininity and her newfound agency (Fogel, 2018).

The two other movies directed by women also challenge typical portrayals of women and femininity. *I Feel Pretty* follows a female protagonist who struggles with her body image and points out the importance of sexuality and appearance that society forces upon women (Kohn & Silverstein, 2018). *On the Basis of Sex* also deals with traditionally feminine themes and follows the true story of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her struggles with systemic gender inequality (Leder, 2018). The five male-directed films, on the other hand, all deal with men and their stories. While films like *Black Panther* contain strong female characters and more representation behind the scenes, they are still about men and their problems. Based on these ten movies, it can be assumed that men, at least in popular film, almost exclusively tell male stories, while women choose to tell female stories.

Agency of Women

Another distinct pattern that arose from the ten movies analyzed was the differing depictions of agency among female characters in movies directed by men and women. Through qualitative analysis, it was found that women have much less agency, or the capacity to act, in movies directed by men than in movies directed by women. In the male-directed movies, women often need saving or fail to act in high-stakes situations, and are often manipulated by men. In *Deadpool 2*, a movie which does not pass the Bechdel test, women almost never take action and frequently need saving. The film centers around the lewd superhero Deadpool and his quest to protect a young superhero from Cable, a time-traveling super-soldier. The film's plot is kickstarted by the death of Deadpool's girlfriend Vanessa. Without superpowers, Vanessa is helpless and dies within the first fifteen minutes of the movie. While her death acts as the inciting incident of the movie, her character does nothing besides move the plot forward. Even female superheroes in the film rarely have agency. Domino, a strong, independent female character, does have some agency in the film (Leitch, 2018). However, her "superpower" is simply that she is lucky, limiting her ability to directly act in the film. Whether this element is intentional or not, it is representative of the lack of agency women have in the film.

In addition, among the films analyzed, the majority of characters with superpowers tend to be men, thus making the characters with the most agency male. While there are some strong female characters, they rarely have the same god-like powers that their male counterparts do. Characters like Black Widow, Gamora,

and Nebula do not possess the same classical "superhero" powers that men do (Russo & Russo, 2018). Men are constantly the ones to show true, unbridled strength in these movies. Actions like Thanos' snap, which wipes out half of life in the universe, and Thor's crucial rampage in the climactic battle scene, in which he wields a legendary weapon that can control thunder and lighting, are rarely, if ever, replicated by women (Russo & Russo, 2018). Even in a movie such as *Black Panther,* where female characters generally have agency, men, specifically the king of the fictional country Wakanda, and his rival and challenger to the throne, are the only characters with traditional superpowers (Coogler, 2018). The absence of these powers among female characters is a prime example of the lack of agency they have in many popular male-directed, live-action movies.

In the five films directed by women, however, females almost always have agency and the ability to act. At the end of *A Wrinkle in Time*, the protagonist Meg completes the final task and saves her father alone without the aid of male characters (DuVernay, 2018). In *On the Basis of Sex*, Ruth Bader Ginsburg wins her final case because of her own actions and merits (Leder, 2018). Throughout the movie *Blockers*, the three main characters' parents, two of whom are men, try to stop them from losing their virginities, thus taking agency away from them (Cannon, 2018). By the end of the film, all three characters realize that they must stop trying to make decisions for their daughters, showing the flaws in limiting female agency.

In contrast, *The Spy Who Dumped Me* arguably centers on female agency. The film starts with the main character Audrey stuck in a job she doesn't want after being dumped by a man, two actions relatively out of her control. The story quickly turns into a classic espionage thriller. For the first portion of the movie, only men have guns and take action, often protecting or threatening Audrey and Morgan. However, the first major turning point of the film comes when Audrey shoots and kills someone who tries to attack her. After this action the two gain agency in the story as they constantly outwit male assassins. Regardless, the men around them, especially Audrey's ex-boyfriend and the titular spy, constantly attempt to take control of situations that the two are in and feel the need to save them. In the end, Audrey and Morgan end up defeating and outsmarting Audrey's ex-boyfriend who turns out to be the villain of the story, displaying ultimate agency on their part (Fogel, 2018). The film subverts both the traditional spy thriller genre and the idea that women lack agency in such films.

The Role of Critical Mass and Critical Actor Theories

Agency plays another key role when it comes to portrayals of women in these ten films—the agency of critical actors behind the scenes. Background quantitative data presented earlier was conducted, in part, to assess the role of critical mass theory and critical actor theory in the films analyzed. While critical mass has been criticized, as discussed in the literature review, the number of women working behind the scenes in movies does seem to play a role in on-screen representations. As noted earlier, women comprised 13% of the crews on male-directed films that were analyzed, compared to 37% on female-directed films. These numbers may have a role in the depictions of women on screen. The one male-directed film with more than 11% representation behind the scenes, *Black Panther*, has the most positive across-the-board depictions of women of the five male-directed films.

While critical mass theory may play a role in these positive depictions, critical actor theory is possibly more indicative of positive portrayals of women across the ten movies. While *Black Panther* certainly did benefit from a large number of women involved behind the scenes, a large part of that was because of a critical actor. Director Ryan Coogler actively sought women to fill behind the scenes roles during development of the movie. The film, which featured women in four out of thirteen key behind-the-scenes roles, falls in line with the gender diversity of movies directed by women. Notably, of the ten films analyzed, *Black Panther* was the only film to feature a female cinematographer. Acclaimed costume designer Ruth E. Carter also cited that Coogler "fostered an environment where women could thrive," displaying his role as a critical actor (Richards, 2019).

This diversity behind the scenes and the role of Coogler as a critical actor is evident on screen. Women in the movie, unlike in many other male-directed movies, have a great deal of agency. Many of the warriors of the fictional nation of Wakanda, where the movie is set, are incredibly strong women (Coogler, 2018). Additionally, women in the film are rarely tied to men. Many male-directed films use women to service male characters. Deadpool's girlfriend Vanessa in *Deadpool 2*, Ethan Hunt's ex-wife in *Mission: Impossible – Fallout*, and Iron Man's wife Pepper Potts in *Avengers: Infinity War* are all generally one-note characters that exist solely to give their male counterparts emotional stakes. This is not the case in *Black Panther*. When

asked at the beginning of the movie, King T'Challa's ex-girlfriend Nakia refuses to stay in Wakanda just for him. Toward the end of the film, once the people of Wakanda have turned against each other because of the actions of the villain Killmonger, Okoye, another Wakandan warrior, tells her boyfriend that she would kill him "For Wakanda? No question" (Coogler, 2018). The women in the film are truly independent, unlike those found in many other male-directed superhero films. While these positive depictions should not be completely credited to Ryan Coogler, his role in hiring women to fill behind the scenes roles and his fostering of a positive on-set environment certainly played a part in forming on-screen depictions, thus making him a critical actor.

The immense success of *Black Panther* is an indication that Hollywood studios' aversion to risk when it comes to diverse casts and crews in high-budget movies is at least somewhat misguided. While Coogler showed his ability to create a successful blockbuster in 2015's *Creed*, his role as a critical actor in *Black Panther* and the film's domestic-gross at the box office shows that gender and race diversity are not liabilities.

Like Coogler, many of the female directors use their platform to promote gender equality in film, making them critical actors. Ava DuVernay used her large budget to tell a mass-appeal story with injections of feminist film in *A Wrinkle in Time* (DuVernay, 2018). While *Blockers* featured the lowest percentage of women in key roles behind the scenes, director Kay Cannon subverted a classic male story to make a feminist film (Cannon, 2018). *On the Basis of Sex* portrayed a critical actor on screen with Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Leder, 2018). While often acting alone and not in critical mass, these female directors are able to enact positive change towards gender equality.

V. Conclusion

Depictions of women on screen are often dependent on roles behind the scenes. Female directors tend to hire more women in key roles and depict women in a more positive light than men. All five movies directed by women could also be classified as female stories, with plots directly subverting traditional male stories. While there are strong women in many of the five films directed by men, women in these movies tend to have less agency than in the movies directed by women. Films directed by women were also much more likely to feature a female protagonist and to pass the Bechdel test.

With all of that said, *Black Panther* shows that a male director can act as a critical actor just like many of the female directors did. The movie's depictions and number of women in key roles behind the scenes closely mirror that of a female-directed film. *Black Panther's* success at the American box office highlights that inclusive films can succeed. That said, male-directed films, despite their lack of gender equality on screen and behind the scenes, still receive higher budgets.

This research suggests the need for more critical actors in popular film. The highest- grossing movies directed by a man and by a woman each featured a prominent critical actor at the helm in Ryan Coogler and Ava DuVernay. The financial success and representations of equality of both *Black Panther* and *A Wrinkle in Time* show that critical actors can make a difference in Hollywood. More prominent figures pushing for inclusion riders in the industry could make a difference as well. Above all else, however, the financial success of these films could demonstrate to studio executives that diversity sells.

The research also displays the clear gender gap still present in the film industry. Aside from *Black Panther*, the next four highest grossing live-action films directed by men featured just nine percent of women in key roles behind the scenes. In addition, only two of the four remaining movies passed the Bechdel test. These two elements, along with the general lack of female agency, dominance of male stories, and lack of critical actors in the films, display the inequality in Hollywood both on screen and off screen.

To expand upon this research, more films should be studied. While a vast amount of quantitative research exists in regard to gender equality in 2018 films, not much qualitative analysis exists. Because of limited resources, this research was restricted to a relatively small sample size. Future studies could also expand upon more specific elements of the representation of women in popular film or focus on another subsection of the film industry such as independent cinema, where women and female stories are more prominent.

Along with a small sample size, this study was limited in its lack of multiple coders. Because a lone researcher analyzed all ten films, the qualitative findings could contain unchecked biases. Including multiple

watchers of each film could confirm findings and help to eliminate bias in future research. Due to time limitations, each film could also only be watched once. Watching each movie multiple times in future studies could shed light on more subtle, nuanced portrayals of women. Regardless, the research shows the effect that gender representation behind the scenes has on portrayals of women on screen.

Acknowledgments

References

Abad-Santos, A. (2018, December 11). 2018 belonged to Black Panther. And it could change Marvel's future. Retrieved from https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/12/11/18119694/black-panther-success-2018-marvel

Bazzini, D. G., McIntosh, W. D., Smith, S. M., Cook, S., & Harris, C. (1997). The aging woman in popular film: Underrepresented, unattractive, unfriendly, and unintelligent. *Sex Roles; New York*, *36*(7/8), 531–543.

Box Office Mojo. (n.d.). 2018 yearly box office results. Retrieved from https://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?p=.htm&yr=2018

Cannon, K. (2018). *Blockers*. Universal Pictures.

Childs, S., & Krook, M. L. (2006). Should feminists give up on critical mass? A contingent yes. *Politics & Gender 2*(4), 522–530. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X06251146

Childs, S., & Krook, M. L. (2009). Analysing women's substantive representation: From critical mass to critical actors. *Government and Opposition*, *44*(2), 125–145. Retrieved from JSTOR.

Coogler, R. (2018). *Black Panther*. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Dahlerup, D. (2006). The story of the theory of critical mass. *Politics & Gender 2*(4), 511–522. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X0624114X

DuVernay, A. (2018). *A Wrinkle in Time*. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Dwyer, C. (n.d.). What's an inclusion rider? Here's the story behind Frances McDormand's closing words. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/03/05/590867132/whats-an-inclusion-rider-here-s-the-story-behind-frances-mcdormand-s-closing-wor

Fogel, S. (2018). *The Spy Who Dumped Me*. Lionsgate.

Hankin, K. (2007). And introducing ... the female director: Documentaries about women filmmakers as feminist activism. *NWSA Journal*, *19*(1), 59–88. Retrieved from JSTOR.

Kennedy, T. (2010). Off with Hollywood's head: Sofia Coppola as feminine auteur. *Film Criticism 35*(1), 37-59,120.

Kohn, A., & Silverstein, M. (2018). *I Feel Pretty*. STX Films.

Lauzen, M. M. (2008). *Women @ the Box Office: A Study of the Top 100 Worldwide Grossing Films*. Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, San Diego State University. Retrieved from https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/Women%20@%20Box%20Office.pdf

Lauzen, M. M. (2011). Kathryn Bigelow: On her own in no-(wo)man's-land. *Camera Obscura, 26*(3), 146-153.

Lauzen, M. M. (2012a). Bridesmaids and Bigelow: Debunking their "effects." *Media Report to Women, 40*(3), 22-24.

Lauzen, M. M. (2012b). Where are the film directors (who happen to be women)? *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *29*(4), 310–319. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509201003601167

Lauzen, M. M. (2018a). *It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top Grossing Films of 2018*. Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, San Diego State University. Retrieved from https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2018_Its_a_Mans_Celluloid_World_Report.pdf

Lauzen, M. M. (2018b). *The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 100, 250, and 500 Films of 2018*. Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, San Diego State University. Retrieved from https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2018_Celluloid_Ceiling_Report.pdf

Leder, M. (2018). *On the Basis of Sex*. Focus Features.

Leitch, D. (2018). *Deadpool 2*. 20th Century Fox.

Lincoln, A. E., & Allen, M. P. (2004). Double jeopardy in Hollywood: Age and gender in the careers of film actors, 1926-1999. *Sociological Forum*, *19*(4), 611–631. Retrieved from JSTOR.

McCarthy, N. (2015). Gender inequality rife at the Oscars. Retrieved March 13, 2019, https://www.statista.com/chart/3254/gender-inequality-rife-at-the-oscars/

Milburn, M. A., Mather, R., & Conrad, S. D. (2000). The effects of viewing R-rated movie scenes that objectify women on perceptions of date rape. *Sex Roles 43*(9/10), 645–664.

Orwin, A. (2002). Women's stories, women's films: Integrating women's studies and film production. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *30*(1/2), 271–284. Retrieved from JSTOR.

Reign, A. (n.d.). #OscarsSoWhite is still relevant this year. Retrieved from https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/03/oscarssowhite-is-still-relevant-this-year

Richards, K. (2019, January 11). Ryan Coogler on power of working with female department heads on "Black Panther." Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ryan-coogler-women-filmmakers-crew-black-panther_n_5c38ade9e4b0c469d76d8130

Russo, A., & Russo, J. (2018). *Avengers: Infinity War*. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Simonton, D. K. (2004). The "best actress" paradox: Outstanding feature films versus exceptional women's performances. *Sex Roles 50*(11/12), 781–794.

Statista. (2018). Distribution of voters at the Academy Awards by gender 2018. Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/statistics/321286/voters-academy-awards-gender/

Statista. (n.d.). Box office in the U.S. Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/study/45979/the-us-box-office/

Sutherland, J.-A., & Feltey, K. M. (2017). Here's looking at her: An intersectional analysis of women, power and feminism in film. *Journal of Gender Studies 26*(6), 618–631. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1152956

The Numbers. (2018). Market share for each genre in 2018. Retrieved from https://www.the-numbers.com/market/2018/genres