

THE CELLULOID CEILING

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ABSTRACT

'The Celluloid Ceiling' is a research project into female filmmakers, based on interviews with directors from all over the globe. Having successfully carried out five interviews in the USA and four interviews in the UK, I now plan to develop the documentary over the next year, interviewing more French and British directors. I will then edit the interviews to make a short documentary presenting all the different works and opinions of the directors. I found the interviews to be incredibly varied and the directors only seemed to share one view: that the industry was tough to crack and even harder for women.

INTRODUCTION

The research I carried out was broad and open-ended; it can be best understood as a continuing dialogue with directors about their film works, their filmmaking practice, the notion of a 'women's cinema' and the variation between different film industries. I also opened a conversation around the strategies used by women to secure their place in these industries. One clear aim of the project was to pose new questions to the directors and avoid inscribing them to a single category of 'women directors', but rather shed light on their great diversity and talent. A key way in which we can change the archaic gender bias in the film industry is through giving greater visibility to women currently making fantastic, often overlooked films. Therefore, one of the obvious reasons for researching this subject and making a documentary about it is to draw attention to the directors and their work.

Over the past few years there has been a growing reaction to the serious lack of women directors in the UK. Academics frequently write on the subject, such as Sophie Mayer for Sight and Sound,¹ and Gabrielle Kelly in her book 'Celluloid Ceiling: women film directors breaking through'. Dazed Digital created a 'Females First' campaign, which showcases films made by women, and includes interviews with directors. In the film industry itself, real change seems to be taking place, with the highest number of female directors ever screening feature films at this year's London Film Festival (LFF).² Similarly, Bloomberg Television released the documentary 'Celluloid Ceilings: Women Directors Speak Out'³, which concentrates specifically on Hollywood. I intend for my documentary to be a continuation of this work, addressing similar questions to those brought up in the former works, however presenting it in film form and including an international scope. What is more, my documentary will be from the perspective of a young filmmaker, seeking practical advice on making films and finding a place in the industry, as well as offering a political commentary on the gender bias in the industry.

METHODOLOGY

TEXT-BASED RESEARCH

Prior to travelling around the UK and USA to interview the filmmakers, I carried out text-based research into their works, the feminist theory surrounding it and previous interviews with them. I also researched the history of women in film, using

¹ <http://www.bfi.org.uk/people/sophie-mayer>

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-34453005>

³ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2015-06-19/celluloid-ceilings-women-directors-speak-out>

mainly online articles as my source. Much has been published online recently about 'women in film,' particularly in regards to Hollywood, however I discovered that there was very little printed literature that focused directly on this topic. The Guardian proved a useful source for a selection of articles on gender and the UK film industry, thanks to a sustained interest in the increase of women directors over the past few years. This method of text-based research provided me with background knowledge and helped to prepare the questions I would ask.

EXPERIENTIAL RESEARCH

Aside from written sources, the key sources of information that provided the focus of my study were the interactions I had with the filmmakers. Through interviews and informal conversations I came to have a clear understanding of how the UK and US film industries contrasted, as well as how each director approached the art of filmmaking. Over the course of my travels I developed a basic strategy when filming each subject. I would spend the first 10-20 minutes discussing their work, why I chose to interview them, and the Celluloid Ceiling project. This allowed me to get to know each director before interviewing them.

I then carried out an interview with the director, asking them to outline their background in film, the process of making their films, and then moving on to discussing how representing women could redirect meaning, as well as the rich potential of working with other women on set. Here is an example of the questions I asked to Lizzie Borden, which demonstrates the rough template I used to approach interviews:

1. What made you want to make films, how did painting influence filmmaking?
2. Describe process of making *Born in Flames*, from the conception of the idea to getting on set?
3. How do you feel about this work now, and how might its significance have changed over the past 30 years?
4. The media and TV play an important role in *BIF*, as propagandistic & patriarchal. How does representing marginalised women 'redirect meaning and reclaim language'?
5. *Working Girls* focuses on sex workers, who are at forefront of the battle between capitalism, sex and women's bodies. How can filmmaking reclaim and reimagine female bodies through the moving image. Is visual representation a trap?
6. Do you specifically look to work with other women?
7. Transition to Hollywood, from \$40k to 6m budget, independent to studio?
8. You said in an interview 'the issues I believe in – social issues, feminist issues, radical issues – are difficult to finance, even independently' & in your first email you mentioned feeling like an outsider. How radically feminist could a feature ever be, when operating within the film industry?
9. Do you consider there to be specific obstacles to women in film distribution and have you any experience of this?
10. Mary Lambert said 'It's always a little annoying to be labelled a woman film director because men are just "directors".' How do you feel about your films being categorised as 'women's cinema' and you as a 'woman film director'?
11. What are the necessary conditions to make great work? Is Virginia Woolf's emphasis on a room of one's own still pertinent?
12. What advice, if any, would you give to young a filmmaker?

I drew upon my own experience of filmmaking to find out more about the different aspects of their practice. Many of the conversations I filmed were in depth but

informal, creating a conversational tone that I sought in order to best depict the relationship I built with the directors. I also carried out several interviews with women involved in the campaigns for greater representation of women directors and greater opportunities for those starting out.

The contrast between each of the interviews and indeed each director was great, and I found moving in quick succession from one interview to the next drew attention to this (as was the case in LA). My understanding of the different approaches to making films was very much informed by this comparative process. I continuously recorded my observations in note form, and was able to discuss my observations with a travel partner, as well as various filmmakers. It was ultimately the interviewing process that forced me to scratch deeper beneath the surface and understand the different directors' filmmaking technique. In order to write this report and edit the documentary, I watched the interviews back and found many points of agreement emerging in what the directors stated, as well as great variations in their approaches to filmmaking.

CHRONOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

2015

January – June: Initial planning, continued research and contacted filmmakers, confirmed dates for interview

April: Interview with Rita Stantic and Sally Potter

8-20th September: Travel to New York, interview Jennie Livingstone, Martha Rosler, Josephine Dekker and Gabrielle Kelly

20 Sept- 15th October: Travel from New York to Los Angeles, interview Lizzie Borden, Zia Anger and Maria Giese

15th October: Travel back to London

15-20th October: Edit US interviews

15th December: Submit summary of research

2016

January – February: Travel to Paris, interview Virginie Despentes, Claire Denis and Agnes Varda

20th February: submit first cut of short film

Continuing: interviews with UK filmmakers

RESULTS

As it happens, 2015 has proved to be a very significant year for women in film in the USA and UK. Criticism of Hollywood has built in the USA, with many actresses and directors speaking out in support of equal opportunities and equal pay in the industry.⁴ There has also been a legislative battle in the Director's Guild of America (DGA) that resulted in getting the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and state and federal agencies to take on the cause of women directors. Maria Giese spearheaded this effort in the Guild and outlines the struggle in her blog and in my interview with her.⁵

Therefore, despite many of the directors highlighting the systematic discrimination against women directors and the challenges they personally face, they often spoke

⁴ <http://www.ew.com/article/2015/10/26/jennifer-lawrence-actresses-fight-back>

⁵ www.womendirectorsinhollywood.com

with a tone of defiance and optimism. All the filmmakers I spoke with were engaged in feminism on differing levels, and this extended to their film practice. They all spoke of the importance of having strong female leads to help change the gendered stereotypes that exist both in dominant film culture and extends to the 'real' world. Clearly, representation in itself is a tool for change, and representing women in new lights often tends to be the directors' main feminist manifestation. Several women surround themselves by a predominantly female team, pairing up with female cinematographers and producers for the duration of most of their practicing career. All of the directors I spoke with outlined the great difficulty they experienced receiving financial support for their films, and they have all adopted different methods to try to overcome this obstacle. Some directors even spoke of being placed in film jail, or being totally at a distance from the film industry. They had a background in theatre, photography and fine art, and were introduced to filmmaking through these early artistic influences. Interestingly, both Martha Rosler and Lizzie Borden noted being influenced by Godard.

Here is a summary of the key remarks made by each director:

Kim Longinotto

- Women are more likely to go into directing documentaries than fiction because it means a smaller budget, less responsibility and less pressure. This is comparable to the question of who stays at home to look after the children- if men wanted to, they would.
- She does not fear making a documentary that doesn't please the characters she films, but rather fears not making the documentary her funders are looking for.
- She consciously breaks the silence around stigmatised issues, particularly those related to gender. That said, she doesn't want to tell bleak stories, as the protagonist must bring hope.
- She is disciplined and works without an ego when making films, and often chooses to work with people who haven't made films before.
- She sees herself as collaboratively making films with the characters in her film.
- She is motivated to make specific films because of the story and the characters.
- Luck, flexibility and vulnerability make for a great documentary.

Martha Rosler

- Works with a whole range of mediums to give her ideas greater freedom and to avoid being restricted by the time-based element of film.
- Semiotics of the Kitchen was initially celebrated, then went out of fashion throughout the 80s and 90s, at a time when women's video art was sidelined by men's films. Came back into fashion in the late 90s and has since received many student and artist responses.
- Public and private spaces are defined in relation to each other, with women in a liminal space between the two.
- Her work will never appeal to a mass audience looking for entertainment, she chooses a 'cheap' aesthetic, revealing the origin of her work through its formal qualities.
- She doesn't pay attention to conventional dissemination channels.
- The number of women whose work is currently exhibited is small in comparison to the number who are making work.

Zia Anger

- Film school is a way of buying time, not worth paying for as there are plenty of scholarships.
- She collaborates with the same cinematographer on all of her projects.
- Being a jock helps make films, you have your team.
- Uses familiar female characters and puts them through a challenging experience, breaking the catharsis of cinema.
- Aims to break down the patriarchal way of telling stories.
- The most truthful way for her to tell a story is not by cohering to the traditional Aristotelian narrative structure.
- “Thematically I’m constantly looking at being female and so the semantics [of being named a woman director] are like smoke and mirrors”.

Lizzie Borden

- Inductive filmmaking, rather than deductive, growing from “a small seed into branches”
- Reaction against long takes, ‘Born in Flames’ as anti-intellectual, soundtrack with a pulse
- We must reframe representation, especially in porn
- Financed ‘Born in Flames’ through sex work, developed next film ‘Working Girls’ based on her own experience of this
- Films as interactions with people, agitprop, led her to meet with people in sex work
- In Hollywood, didn’t have control over the script, awful experience, went into film jail, has since learnt how to write her own scripts
- Next feature on collective of women illegally carrying out abortion procedures in 1950s
- Agitprop possibly as only way to make next film, no funding for radical features
- The middle ground of funding (\$1-3m) doesn’t exist in USA, hence Hollywood not hiring women directors
- Women from her age group haven’t helped other women enough, whereas in the black community or the younger communities of women there are better examples of this
- Women’s careers stand or fall based on the big Hollywood blockbusters they make

CONCLUSION

Any attempt to trace the patterns and neatly place female filmmakers within certain chapters or categories is bound to be reductive. As I planned this project, my ever-expanding list of sub-categories of female directors (based on their work, background, career trajectory) grew increasingly blurred. However, on paper, I found that certain patterns emerged. Part of my interest in interviewing the filmmakers was to hear how they might describe the emergence of recurring styles and subjects in their oeuvre, and within broader national and international movements. Of course, not all women self-define as a feminist or even a ‘woman filmmaker,’ and I wanted to question the importance of these titles and why it tends to be the first question posed to a woman making films. What’s the importance of inscribing people to categories? Does it help with recognition, or does it limit it?

I was keen to be flexible in the interviews, leaving the conversation to take its own direction. Although I posed many of the same questions to each director, our conversations varied greatly. Almost all the directors spoke of the difficulties involved

in finding necessary funding to make a short film and they confirmed the view that a serious gender bias exists in the industry, which proves unfavorable to women. As for the question of being labeled a 'woman director', most women were hostile towards simplistic categorisation, but also underlined their consistent interest in female subjects and creating a new anti-patriarchal cinema, incorporating a female gaze, as opposed to a male gaze. However, it is worth noting that many of the women who agreed to speak with me were less reluctant than other directors to discuss the matter of feminism, cinema and the film industry.

The process of editing the interviews has proven to be a complex process, as I have many more interviews to go, and plan to carry out one interview a month for the foreseeable future. Therefore, I am resisting trying to assert a fixed structure onto the documentary edit, so that I can bring together all of the directors' reflections and create a coherent narrative using many voices. I have learnt that good research takes time, and the more interviews I have done, the more rounded the final work I produce will be. I have learnt a great deal about the differences between the UK and US film industries, concluding that while both are highly competitive, Hollywood is even more of a hostile, cut-throat environment for women. I am currently in communication with various online media platforms, as well as feminist film festivals planning the dissemination of the final documentary, in addition to disseminating it in the Warwick University circuit.

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