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No Awards to the Academy for Diversity

How Women and People of Color Fare at the Movies

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Broadcasts of the Academy Awards are second only to the Super Bowl in bringing the most Americans together to watch a televised event in real time. In 2014, 43 million viewers tuned in to the show, and 19 million related tweets went out, including Ellen DeGeneres's "selfie," the most retweeted tweet in Twitter's history. Despite the "Who will win?" fever that infects every media outlet in the first two months of the year, the outcome of the Academy Awards has never, ever been in doubt: Far more men than women will win the golden statuette and far more white people than people of color. Far. More. For example, a recent study shows that from 1927 to 2010, 226 women won the award out of the 2,357 that were conferred (not including acting or foreign film categories). In the 84-year history of the awards (the study was produced in 2011), nine women of color and 14 men of color have won in the acting categories.

The show, and the awards themselves, are a national tradition, upheld by members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, who choose the nominees and winners. In 2013, the membership was comprised of 6,028 voters who, based on a *Los Angeles Times* analysis, were 93 percent white and 76 percent male. Jessica Goldstein writes that a notion of "tradition" is key to understanding the lack of diversity: "members of the Academy (like all humans) feel safer being told stories they already know, stories that confirm the vision they have of themselves as inherently good, triumphant people. That's why World War II movies get nominated so often. That's why it's easier to celebrate *12 Years a Slave*, a movie about what feels like America's ancient past and on a subject about which we can all agree—slavery = bad—than it is to acknowledge the tremendous feat of filmmaking that is this year's *Selma*, a movie about America's all-too-recent past that includes scenes of bloodshed at peaceful protests that look just like footage from Ferguson."

Though Goldstein thinks that the academy "wants to be relevant," she points out that their approach to the kind of inclusion that would allow the show to represent the country as a whole is blinkered. For example, a vast gulf exists between who is buying movie tickets and who is celebrated for making them. Statistics from the Motion Picture Association of America, Inc. show that women in the U.S. and Canada made up 52 percent of moviegoers and 50 percent of ticket purchasers in 2013, yet the ratio of men to women nominees (not including acting categories) is 5 to 1 for the 2015 cycle. There are seven categories in which no woman is nominated at all (directing, writing—original or adapted screenplay, cinematography, original score, visual effects and sound mixing). In fact, from 2012 to 2014 no women were nominated in three of those categories—directing, cinematography and visual effects.

Likewise, this year has been dubbed #OscarsSoWhite because there were no nominees of color in any of the acting categories. A study of 600 popular films from 2007 to 2013 by the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California shows that 5 percent of the characters with speaking roles in those films were Latino/a, 4 percent were Asian, 1 percent were Middle Eastern, 1 percent were from "other" races/ethnicities and less than 1 percent were American Indian or Alaskan Native. Yet from 2009 to 2013, movie attendance was highest among Latinos (6 times per year) and blacks and other people of color (4 times per year), and lowest among white moviegoers (3 times annually).

What do the Academy Awards represent?

Aside from popularity, what does it matter that the Academy Awards are primarily decided by and conferred on white, straight men? Potential answers to this question arise from how one understands the role of media, storytelling and representation.

Scholars and media pundits vary in seeing value in the Academy Awards. The competition is at times derided as entertainment about inconsequential things. Others see the annual collection of nominees and winners as litmus tests for progress on gender, race and other forms of difference in the film industry as a whole. As A. B. Wilkinson, professor of history at the University of Nevada–Las Vegas, recently wrote in the *Huffington Post*, "Even though films serve the purpose of entertainment, they also serve to educate. If we had more accurate images of U.S. society reflected on the big screen perhaps some people wouldn't be so shocked when characters of color are cast in important roles—or hold top positions in society."

Media organizations—from the Representation Project to GLAAD to the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media—have long asserted that the way gender is treated in film, television, gaming and web-based platforms strongly influences how young people and adults perceive gender and gender equity. According to the Women's Media Center, media, including film, is "the single most powerful tool at our disposal; it has the power to educate, effect social change, and determine the political policies and elections that shape our lives." Robert de Vries, a sociologist at the University of Oxford, agrees that how media represents gender "matters because people will likely 'meet' more people through the media than they ever will in real life. From the earliest age, their perceptions about what things girls and boys should like, what they should aspire to, how they should be as people, are informed by" media.

Diversity in the film industry's beginnings

It wasn't always thus that white men controlled so much of U.S. film production. In the silent film era, "there were over twenty studios headed by women," according to scholar Christine Acham. In a recent documentary on women in Hollywood, Acham sees moviemaking before 1927 as "new and so exciting that people really hadn't defined roles in terms of what was masculine and what was feminine." Linda Seger, a highly regarded script consultant and writer who interviewed women in the film industry for her book *When Women Call the Shots*, says that women were involved in all aspects of the business early on: "In 1918 alone, some forty-four women were employed in the film industry as scenario writers. Many of these women were considered the top screenwriters of this period, and the women directors were considered equal to, if not better than, their male colleagues. During this period, there were many women fulfilling more than one role. Many of the most famous actresses had their own production companies."

Similarly, over the last 40 or so years, Separate Cinema Archive has, in their own words, "shed light on a little-known existence of a black-owned and operated film industry in the early 20th century, in which black directors

reigned, and where black characters were the leads, unrestricted to demeaning, stereotyped roles common to Hollywood productions."

In the film (and television) industry, there is a historic pattern: diversity in the pioneer era of a medium or genre is followed by consolidation and exclusion. Screenwriter Catherine Turney told Seger: "Each time something new happened in this business, things started out so promisingly for women, and then the squeeze came." There are a variety of responses to that narrowing.

In 1927, studios sought to counter the charge that people in the entertainment business had loose morals. For example, comedic film star Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, in what has been called the first Hollywood scandal, was accused of raping and murdering actress Virginia Rappe after a week of heavy partying and debauchery in 1921. The negative publicity from his arrest and subsequent trial smeared his reputation and that of the industry as a whole. Newly consolidated studios under white male leadership wanted less scandal and more profit, so many agreed to a new set of moral guidelines for cinema called the Hays Code. Against this backdrop, the Academy Awards and its ceremony were launched, with a formal upper-middle-class banquet featuring several professors as invited speakers.

Why women don't "call the shots" anymore

Evidence points to the likelihood that a more diverse, inclusive film industry would produce more diverse, inclusive representations. In "Gender Bias Without Borders," a study commissioned by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, Stacy L. Smith concludes that when women are behind the screen as "content creators" (that is, as directors or actors), there are 10 percent more female characters on screen. This could mean not only more female characters, but more diverse roles. However, in Manohla Dargis's recent *Times* article, Maria Giese, of the Directors Guild of America, described the process through which the industry keeps women and people of color in token positions by grouping all who are not white and male in a general "diversity" box. Rather than leading to more inclusion, limited slots are filled by a rotating selection of "others" that gain little traction across the industry. For example, when Kathryn Bigelow won best director, people anticipated a "Bigelow effect," including more female-headed projects getting the "green light." But that effect is not evident in recent studies on the industry overall.

Many of the women film industry veterans Linda Seger interviewed in 1996 explained why a few in powerful positions were relatively powerless to advance inclusion. At that time, attorney Janet Sott said, "There aren't enough women in the business to counteract the effect of men not caring, not noticing, or just deciding there's enough and it's not necessary to do more. And without enough women, those who are in power may take fewer risks in hiring women. All their energies may go to just keeping their jobs." Nancy DiTomaso's research on the barriers that African Americans face in the job market exposes the great extent to which family and friend networks determine hiring. People who hire do not see this favoritism, which rewards the majority in any company or industry, as biased or unethical. Many of the women in Hollywood who Seger interviewed pointed out the fact that a white male–dominated profession fosters a network of collegiality and trust among white men—crucial perhaps not just to obtaining entry-level positions, but to advancement.

The lack of diversity in leading industry positions correlates to a lack of diversity in on-screen roles. Ryan Wong argues that "there are not enough Asians on the production side of media" to influence the whole to bring more Asian Americans into lead role and beyond the stereotyped sidekick. In his recent post in the *Examiner*, Ed Moy describes further incidents of the casting of white actors in the roles of characters originally conceived as Asian American (for example the movie *Dragonball Evolution)*. Instead of a "Bigelow effect," we have an abiding effect of a different kind. In her 16-year study called "The Celluloid Ceiling," Martha M. Lauzen found that women

occupy a very small percent of leadership roles in the film industry. For example, only 6 percent of the top 250 films of released the year after Bigelow won (2013) were directed by women. In another example, many call 2002 a breakthrough year for actors/actresses of color because several were nominated for or won Academy Awards: Halle Berry and Denzel Washington were best actress/best actor winners; Will Smith was a best actor nominee; and Sidney Poitier received an Oscar for lifetime achievement. A UCLA study—"Not Quite a Breakthrough: The Oscars and Actors of Color, 2002–2012"—found no bump for actors/actresses of color in subsequent years. There were no Asian/Asian American actresses and just two Latinas were nominated for best actress between 2002 and 2011. Likewise, Oscar-nominated actors of color during the same time period appeared in an average of 1.52 films, as compared to their white counterparts who averaged 2.03 movies.

And following this year's unveiling of nominees, there has been a critical outcry about the disproportionate representation of black people in Hollywood that echoes similar outrage in 1996 when Pam Lambert's report on the lack of African Americans in U.S. film was published in *People Magazine*. Quoted in media critic David Carr's article in the *New York Times*, Sasha Stone, who reports on the film industry, says that after the 2014 year of "the black Oscars" (for *12 Years a Slave*) "the academy has snapped back, like a rubber band, to what they know, to films that are made in their own image."

The mixed role of the red carpet

The beauty, fashion and entertainment industry come together at the Oscars on the red carpet (and at proms and weddings), where a focus on women's looks connects to big money: in this sense, at least, "A-list" female actresses are earning more than their male counterparts. The Academy Awards were first televised in 1953, and we seem to be in a retro moment. Thumb between the pages of *Academy Awards Illustrated* from the 1950s to the 2000s, and it's all dresses with fitted bodices and bare shoulders. It is interesting to note that along with the recent study on gender disparity in the film industry, many nominated actresses have contracts with beauty, jewelry and clothing companies such as Chanel, Bulgari, L'Oréal and Lancôme.

We may see complex characters on screen, but on the cookie-cutter red carpet, a "high femme" look seems compulsory. Women best be thin: Melissa McCarthy could not get the top designers who made dresses for other actresses to make one for her. But not so thin that they don't glow: Jennifer Connelly was described as looking starved and miserable on the red carpet in 2005, leading a *Variety* reporter to write that Academy Awards prep might be oppressive and even damaging. And beware of difference: Viola Davis's choice to "wear" her natural hair on the 2012 red carpet was hotly debated and celebrated.

Seemingly behind-the-scenes images of women preparing for the awards on Vogue.com make this seem like if it's work to get ready for the Oscars, it's fun, or at least a highly pleasurable requirement. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler displayed stark ambivalence about compulsory dress and grooming at the Golden Globes, with Fey describing the three hours it took her "to appear in the role of Human Woman." Both women, in the words of a *Jezebel* writer, "looked fucking impeccable." Hadley Freeman at the *Guardian* offered an equally frank assessment of the red-carpet hullabaloo of awards season: "celebrities [are] paraded on it like race horses while the public pulls up their lips and inspects their teeth."

It wasn't always this way for actresses. In the first decades of the awards, judging from the photos in Robert Osborne's history of the awards, there seemed to be a mix of professional dress and "high femme" evening dresses. Some—like Claudette Colbert and Mary Pickford — wore dark blazers, while others —like Jeanette MacDonald—wore the sort of glossy gowns that have become de rigueur. Sissy Spacek accepted her best actress award in 1981 in a black jumper. Joan Rivers lamented the cookie-cutter quality of the awards in the 2000s and attributed it to the rise of the stylist. (See *Vanity Fair*'s history of the red carpet). Those stylists are

key players in linking red carpet appearances to contracts. On the 2010s red carpet, femininity and its relationship to earnings were thrown into sharp relief. (While Jennifer Lawrence was paid less than her male counterparts in *American Hustle*, Bradley Cooper does not have a contract with Chanel.) And this, following Acham and Seger, is quite different than it was in the early days of film.

A path to changing the diversity ratio

Lest anyone think there are no other options, it's important to note that 50 percent of the films screened for the U.S. dramatic competition at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival were directed by women. We could see this as a telling legacy of the independent film movement. From that movement, Sandra Schulberg founded First Run Features, which helped to bring the work of directors Spike Lee and Rose Troche to audiences.

Performers, writers and directors are taking to cable, Vimeo and other outlets. Ryan Wong writes that the popularity of Asian American videos on YouTube "Proves the existence of a huge audience, largely Asian American, who want to see the experiences and talents of Asian people in popular media." With cable television and Vimeo, success can mean a much smaller audience than what is required of a big-budget Hollywood film.

But what will it take to get a more diverse group of directors, writers and executives through "the big squeeze" and in control of large budgets at major studios? One initiative, headed by Jane Campion and Helen Mirren in 2014, awards grants to women to make short films. Campion claims that "Girls lack confidence to pick up a camera because they think they need to be technical but a director is just someone who has a story to tell and can tell it clearly."

In early 2015, Geena Davis, founder of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, announced she was launching a new film festival that will be located in Bentonville, Arkansas, and designed to showcase diversity. "What's important to me is that the festival is not just talking about making a movie starring a woman, making a movie starring a person of color; it's great when people do, we're very glad and grateful for that," she said in a recent interview. "But my message is to look at the world of the movie and make whatever you were already going to make, already planning to write—maybe it's already written—but before you cast it, go through and change a bunch of first names to women, figure out where you can add characters of diversity and, bam, you've really improved the film and broadened the audience and probably made it much more interesting than it was in the first place."

Getting the Academy Awards to reflect the sort of diversity we see in other areas of entertainment would require the industry to take an approach that recognizes and responds to this sort of implicit bias. Equal opportunity procedures in hiring and advancement provide more reasonable hope than notable exceptions on awards night. But since implicit bias continues to sustain Hollywood tradition in the worst sense, we might do better to think harder about whether to spend your movie dollars on movies that are made by and feature more women and people of color. Seen any good ones? Share your recommendations with us.

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