**Feminist Film Theory:
The Impact of Female Representation in Modern Movies**

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Abstract:
In contemporary American cinema, the representation of women remains disproportionately limited despite significant social movements advocating for diversity and equality. This study examines the depiction of women in top-grossing films of 2018, contrasting those directed by men with those directed by women, to understand the influence of gender dynamics on cinematic portrayal. Analyzing the top five highest-grossing live-action movies directed by each gender, this research utilizes critical mass and critical actor theories to evaluate the impact of female filmmakers on the representation of women both on and off-screen. Findings reveal that films directed by women feature higher percentages of female characters and crew members in key roles, yet face substantial budgetary and box office disparities compared to their male-directed counterparts. Despite some progress, the film industry continues to exhibit systemic biases, necessitating further structural changes to achieve genuine gender equality in cinematic storytelling. This study underscores the need for increased opportunities and resources for female filmmakers to foster a more inclusive and diverse cinematic landscape.
Keywords: modern women in film, gender representation, female roles in cinema, film industry inequality, women in filmmaking, women's narratives in film, women's representation, gender equality in film.

1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of 21st-century media, motion pictures maintain a significant presence within American popular culture (Simonton, 2004). Despite shifts in consumption methods, cinema continues to draw millions of viewers to theatres annually, with the U.S. domestic box office grossing a substantial $10.7 billion in 2018 (Statista, n.d.). Concurrently, the annual Academy Awards, renowned as the pinnacle of cinematic recognition, garners considerable attention from audiences worldwide. The enduring prevalence of film in popular culture underscores its pivotal role as a cornerstone of American society and cultural expression.

However, even in contemporary times, the representation of various demographic groups within film remains disproportionate (Milburn, Mather, & Conrad, 2000). Such inadequacies in

cinematic representation, both on and off screen, have spurred numerous social movements in recent years, exemplified by initiatives like the #OscarsSoWhite campaign. This movement, which highlighted the lack of racial diversity among Oscars nominees, prompted the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to pledge to "double the number of women and people of colour in the Academy's membership by 2020" (Reign, n.d.). Similarly, the #MeToo and "Time's Up" movements have sought to raise awareness and advocate for sexual assault victims, particularly women. Despite these social initiatives, the film industry as a whole, including the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, continues to fall short in adequately representing women both on and off screen. Stereotypical portrayals and the scarcity of multifaceted female roles persist as common features within Hollywood and the broader media landscape.

The ramifications of these negative depictions extend beyond mere entertainment, resonating deeply within societal attitudes and cultural norms. Given the pervasive influence of film within popular culture and society, motion pictures often mirror prevailing cultural attitudes regarding gender roles, norms, and expectations (Simonton, 2004). Similarly, representations of minority groups within film and media can significantly shape the dissemination of stereotypes (Bazzini, McIntosh, Smith, Cook, & Harris, 1997). This reciprocal cause-and-effect dynamic perpetuates a cycle wherein societal stereotypes influence predominantly male filmmakers, who in turn produce art that reinforces these stereotypes (Simonton, 2004). While this cycle does not singularly account for all forms of misrepresentation within media, it remains a crucial consideration when evaluating portrayals of minorities in film.

Despite some strides in recent years, the progress in representing women within film has been tempered by persisting disparities. For instance, there has only been a modest 3% increase in female employment in the top 250 highest-grossing films since 1998 (Lauzen, 2018b). The dearth of substantial progress is particularly conspicuous in the nominations and awards of the Academy Awards, where only one woman has ever been awarded "Best Director" in the awards' 91-year history. In 2019, amidst societal shifts catalyzed by the #MeToo movement, no female directors were nominated for "Best Director," nor were any female directors nominated for "Best Picture." Furthermore, each of the top 30 highest-grossing movies in the U.S. in 2018 was directed by men (Box Office Mojo, n.d.).

In light of these observations, this paper seeks to delve deeper into the portrayal of women in popular film and the impact of behind-the-scenes representation on these depictions. Specifically, an analysis will be conducted on the top five highest-grossing live-action movies directed by men and the top five highest-grossing live-action movies directed by women in 2018. Through this examination, a more comprehensive understanding of the representation of women in popular cinema and the influence of gender dynamics within the film industry will be elucidated.

2. 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 and 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 superhero 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. Feminism can be defined as a belief system advocating that women suffer discrimination due to their sex, have specific needs that are currently unmet, and that addressing these needs necessitates a significant transformation (potentially even a revolution) in the social, economic, and political structures. However, beyond this foundational agreement, the discourse becomes considerably more complex.

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

Female narratives frequently delve into themes of identity, relationships, and personal development, while often confronting conventional gender roles and stereotypes. These narratives resist patriarchal norms and the common sexist representations of women in mainstream media, which typically perpetuate traditional depictions of women as passive, nurturing, or subordinate to male characters. By diversifying the range of stories presented, feminist films not only offer a platform for diverse female experiences but also critically examine and dismantle the sexist and patriarchal foundations inherent in traditional storytelling. 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.

3. 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).

The data comes from Kunsey's article who researched representations of women in films (Kunsey, 2018).

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**

Table 1: Box Office Performance and Budget

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.

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%**

Table 2: Gender Representation in Key Roles Behind the Scenes

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.

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%	

Table 3: Gender Representation On Screen

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.

4. Deconstructing the Modern Female Image: A Critical Analysis of 'Fleabag'

"Fleabag," a British television series conceived by the prolific writer and actress Phoebe Waller-Bridge, intricately weaves the narrative fabric of a young woman's journey through the labyrinthine alleys of an unconventional existence in London. Waller-Bridge herself assumes the mantle of the central character, embodying Fleabag with a magnetic allure that draws viewers into her world, replete with the poignant cadences of sardonic humor, profound personal losses, and an unyielding quest for self-definition amidst the ever-shifting sands of contemporary societal mores.

The series stands as a testament to Waller-Bridge's creative prowess, earning widespread acclaim for its innovative storytelling, razor-sharp script, and performances that pulsate with an

authenticity rarely seen on screen. Notably, "Fleabag" clinched a coveted Emmy award, affirming its status as a veritable tour de force in the realm of television.

At the heart of "Fleabag" lies the enigmatic figure of its titular character, whose psyche unfurls across the episodic canvas, unraveling a tapestry woven with threads of inner conflict, familial dynamics, and the labyrinthine corridors of past traumas. Fleabag emerges as a potent symbol of defiance against the ossified strictures of societal expectations, offering viewers a compelling glimpse into the nuanced emotional landscape traversed by women in contemporary society.

The series deftly navigates the thorny terrain of female sexuality, eschewing the tired tropes and stereotypes that often plague portrayals of women on screen. Fleabag's unapologetic embrace of her own agency and sexual autonomy serves as a potent rejoinder to entrenched societal norms, culminating in a candid monologue on masturbation that stands as a clarion call for unabashed self-expression.

The familial dynamics depicted in "Fleabag" serve as a microcosm of broader societal pressures and expectations imposed upon women. Through her fraught relationship with her sister Clare, Fleabag becomes a prism through which to examine the confluence of tradition and modernity, tradition and rebellion, and the perennial struggle for self-actualization in a world rife with gendered expectations.

Humor emerges as both a shield and a sword in Fleabag's arsenal, wielded with a finesse that belies the depth of emotional turmoil beneath the surface. The series'signature direct address to the camera imbues the narrative with a confessional intimacy, inviting viewers into Fleabag's inner sanctum and fostering a profound sense of empathy amidst the laughter and tears.

In its unflinching portrayal of female bodies and appearances, "Fleabag" eschews the narrow confines of conventional beauty standards, celebrating the diverse spectrum of femininity in all its raw, unvarnished glory. Fleabag's unapologetic self-appraisal in the aftermath of a sexual encounter stands as a powerful testament to the series' commitment to challenging societal norms and promoting body positivity.

Beyond its surface charms, "Fleabag" serves as a trenchant critique of the patriarchal structures that underpin contemporary society, shining a harsh light on the insidious manifestations of toxic masculinity and gender inequality. Through its incisive storytelling and unflinching gaze, the series emerges as a potent vehicle for social commentary and cultural critique, challenging viewers to interrogate their own complicity in perpetuating systemic injustices.

In the grand tapestry of contemporary television, "Fleabag" stands as a towering achievement, a bold and audacious testament to the power of storytelling to effectuate meaningful change. By juxtaposing traditional depictions of female characters with Fleabag's indomitable spirit and unapologetic complexity, the series serves as a harbinger of a new era in which women's voices are amplified and their stories celebrated in all their multifaceted glory.

5. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this research paper underscores the enduring challenges and complexities surrounding the portrayal of women in popular cinema. Despite the strides made by social movements like #OscarsSoWhite and #MeToo in advocating for greater diversity and representation within the film industry, significant disparities persist in both on-screen and behind-the-scenes roles.

The quantitative examination of the top-grossing live-action films of 2018 directed by men and women reveals a stark contrast in terms of box office performance and budget allocation. Male-directed films generally outperformed their female-directed counterparts, often commanding larger budgets and securing higher domestic box office grosses. However, it's crucial to note that this discrepancy in financial success does not reflect the quality or cultural impact of the films themselves, but rather systemic inequalities in resource allocation and market access.

Furthermore, the qualitative analysis of the films reveals nuanced differences in the representation of women on screen and the involvement of women behind the scenes. Female-directed films tended to feature more diverse and multifaceted female characters, passed the Bechdel test more frequently, and exhibited greater gender parity in key production roles compared to male-directed films. This highlights the importance of diverse voices and perspectives in shaping authentic and inclusive narratives that resonate with audiences.

The case study of "Fleabag" offers a compelling example of how storytelling can challenge societal norms and conventions, offering a nuanced exploration of female identity, sexuality, and agency. Through its unflinching portrayal of complex female characters and incisive social commentary, "Fleabag" serves as a beacon of progress in the landscape of contemporary television, pushing boundaries and sparking important conversations about gender dynamics and representation.

In conclusion, while significant strides have been made in recent years to address the systemic inequalities within the film industry, much work remains to be done. By fostering greater diversity, inclusion, and equity in both on-screen portrayals and behind-the-scenes decision-making, the film industry can aspire to more accurately reflect the rich tapestry of human experience and empower marginalized voices to tell their own stories. Only through collective action and a commitment to change can we truly create a cinematic landscape that celebrates the full spectrum of gender identities and experiences.

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