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Social Oppression and Transformation: Adapt A Module

**Compelling Unit Question:**

How is the film industry supporting underrepresentation of women?

**Text Set:**

**TED. (2016, Dec 6). *The Women in Film Revolution Begins with You* | Naomi Dougall-Jones [video]. YouTube.** [**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gj2pWl1vjCY**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gj2pWl1vjCY)

Naomi McDougall-Jones begins her Tedx talk by telling an anecdote about her life. She tells the audience about her childhood and her desire to be an actress. She shares her love of storytelling and her background in feminism thorough her mother. Naomi graduated from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and began auditioning, but as she did, she realized how bad the parts for women are. She begins to share how the industry works and what she and we are/can do to fix it. She shares the motto that she has been given by males and females alike in the film industry, “it’s just the way it is”. She expresses her anger at this statement and then uses data to show female underrepresentation in the film industry. Then she goes on to describe her four-point plan for the revolution of changing underrepresentation of women in film. First, she wants us to watch movies by female filmmakers. Then she asks female filmmakers to be brave, fight the odds and actually make movies. She wants everyone to invest in each other, creating a perpetual cycle of progress for women. Lastly she wants us to disrupt Hollywood biases through business. She summarizes her experiences and asks us to do what we can to help.

**TED. (2015, Dec 20). *#GirlsInFilm* | Alicia Malone [video] YouTube.** [**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kk\_5KQzstew**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kk_5KQzstew)

This Tedx talk by Alicia Malone discusses the concept of women in the film industry. Specifically, she delves into the top films of 2012 and 2013 and shows data to support her point that women are underrepresented in both the films themselves and the creative teams behind the movies. She begins by discussing her history and enamoration with classic movies. Malone tells her story of going to school and realizing that her peers did not have the same background and knowledge as her in these movies. She tried to share her love of classic movies with her peers through her film club, but despite many attempts at promotion and sharing at school assemblies, no one was interested. She hated public speaking, but by speaking about something she loved, she realized that she was able to do difficult things if she put her mind to it. After that, Alicia Malone shares about her career and how she promotes and illustrates her love of movies in her life as a film reporter. This is how she realized the discrepancy in women representation in the films and the industry itself. She spends the rest of the talk sharing data and statistics to prove her point.

**Smith, S. (2016, October). *The Data Behind Hollywood’s Sexism* [video]. TED Conferences.** [**https://www.ted.com/talks/stacy\_smith\_the\_data\_behind\_hollywood\_s\_sexism**](https://www.ted.com/talks/stacy_smith_the_data_behind_hollywood_s_sexism)

Stacy Smith’s TED talk about Hollywood sexism is a presentation describing the underrepresentation of women in films. She begins by discussing some of her recent studies that have researched gender inequality. Smith spends several minutes describing statistics of 800 movies from 2007 to 2015 and the saddening statistics of the lack of women and other minorities. Within those 800 films, there were 886 directors and only 4.1% of those were women. She goes on to talk about the top 100 films of 2015 and the number of movies with minority groups in them and then further, the depiction and portrayals of women in those movies. Finally, she spends the last few minutes presenting several possible solutions to this lack of representation, including hiring female directors, encouraging A-listers to promote representation for women and refuse to support Hollywood movies or directors that further this issue.

**Lauzen, M. (2022). *The Celluloid Ceiling in a Pandemic Year: Employment of Women on the Top US Films of 2021*. Advance Online Publication.** [**https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2021-Celluloid-Ceiling-Report.pdf**](https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2021-Celluloid-Ceiling-Report.pdf)

This article, by Dr. Martha M. Lauzen, copyrighted in 2022, begins with a summary of the key findings of their research. Then, the article goes back to summarize the background information on women in film over the last 24 years. Then the article states how it will be divided into sections for each part of the study. The first part discusses the results found when reviewing the top 250 films of 2021 in terms of number of women in creative team roles. The next section delves further and more specifically focuses on the top 100 movies of 2021. The last section investigates the top Watched at Home movies and their effect on underrepresentation of women in film, acknowledging that many movies overlap with the top box office movies. This article uses charts and diagrams to depict the serious lack of female participation in the film industry.

**Kunsey, I. (2018). *Representations of Women in Popular Film: A Study of Gender Inequality in 2018*. [Undergraduate Capstone project]. Elon University** [**https://eloncdn.blob.core.windows.net/eu3/sites/153/2019/12/03-Kunsey.pdf**](https://eloncdn.blob.core.windows.net/eu3/sites/153/2019/12/03-Kunsey.pdf)

This paper was written as a senior capstone project and discusses the representation of women in film in 2018. This paper uses research from many different sources to discuss the gender inequality in movies throughout history and specifically in 2018. The paper begins with an introduction of recent history of women in film, then continues with a review of current research and literature about underrepresentation of women in the film industry. The paper then discusses critical mass and critical actor theories, the research methods of this paper and the results and discussion of that data. Following, it gives examples of male and female stories in film. Lastly, it concludes with some suggestions on future research and what audiences can do to help this crisis.

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Adapt a Module

Professor Seider

May 2, 2022

Movies and film are one of the most influential aspects of the world for a young child in the process of growing up. Watching movies that all share similar ideas of the world and how we are supposed to work and live within it influence our thoughts, ideas, and beliefs. When movies constantly promote a lack of female representation, that becomes regularized and young people begin to think that it is acceptable to assume that men are more important, powerful, or successful than women. Movies affect our hobbies, identity, relationships, careers, and even our marital status (TED, 2016). For a young child, especially a young female-identifying person to be immersed in a culture that assumes men’s prominence over women, it affects how they grow up and how they perceive the world around them. Sexism is so prevalent in our reality that to see it so present in the world of imagination and creativity is a real example of how problematic this is.

Why is this the reality that our children are growing up in? How is the film industry supporting the underrepresentation of women? In many ways, actually. Hollywood and the whole film industry has a history of and continues to exclude women in large numbers from their movies and their creative teams behind the films. The text set chosen here, all written or spoken by women, demonstrates the lack of women in film and the similarities in their research over recent years shows how prevalent this issue is and has been.

Alicia Malone’s Tedx talk called, “#GirlsinFilm”, the earliest text from this set, discusses the concept of representation of women in film and the film industry in 2012-2014. She discusses the top 100-grossing films of 2012 and acknowledges that only 4.1% of directors were female. Furthermore, she described the lack of “interesting female characters”. Within the top 2014 films, only 12% contained female protagonists (TED, 2015). Malone explores further into the film industry by mentioning the wage discrepancies between men and women in the industry. For example, Matt Damon is ranked as the number twenty highest paid male actor. If he were a woman, however, he would be ranked number three (TED, 2015). That just shows how significant the wage differentials are between male actors and female actresses. Her presentation, from the perspective of a film reporter currently working in Hollywood, delves into the underrepresentation of women in films, and the inequality that they are faced with in the industry itself. I chose this text because I think it was an interesting take to see a female film reporter, someone who watches and analyzes movies for a living and then discusses her thoughts and observations with people in the industry.

Actress Naomi McDougall-Jones, takes many of the same points as Malone and expands on them. McDougall-Jones begins with her history, qualifying her reliability for the rest of her research. As an actress, she has faced struggles getting parts that she considers worthy of a hard-working woman. She wants to play complex female characters and is left with nothing more than a few lines and fewer clothes. After being told, “it’s just the way it is” by her agent and several male and female Oscar-nominated and Oscar-winning directors and performers, she decided to change “the way it is” (TED, 2016). McDougall-Jones begins addressing the problem of inequality with some statistics. 95% of films are made by men, and 80-90% of the leading characters are male. In the last five years, 55% of women in movies were often naked or scantily clad. This addresses systemic beliefs about who can make a good movie and what makes a good movie. As McDougall-Jones points out, women graduate film school at the same rate as men– 50% each year, but by the time we get to the big-budget films, only 5% of filmmakers are women. From 2016-2018, 20th Century Fox and Paramount did not have any movies by female directors (TED, 2016). If we truly believe that women are 5% as talented as men are, then this would make sense, but one would be hard-pressed to find a substantial number of people in society who believe that this is true. So, why is this the case? Especially when female-made or female-oriented films actually do better! Films made or about women make twenty-three cents more per dollar than other films (TED, 2016). Furthermore, both Malone, McDougall-Jones, and another source in this set, Stacy Smith all found in their research that approximately 51% of all movie tickets are bought by women, yet there is still little to no recognition or representation for women in the film industry itself. (TED, 2016; TED, 2015; Smith, 2016). McDougall-Jones presents her four-point plan to the revolution for everyone to participate in. For audience members, step 1. Watch movies by female filmmakers. For female filmmakers, step 2. Be brave and make your movies. Share your stories. For everyone, step 3. Invest in each other. And for business people, step 4. Disrupt the system (TED, 2016). These steps that she outlines will begin the process of changing our societal beliefs about the film industry and begin to hopefully give women more representation in all aspects of film. Watching this presentation by a female actress in the industry was significant to hear her story and how she has struggled in the industry. Furthermore, we heard her first-hand experiences of gender inequality and how she is trying to combat that. I thought this talk was appropriate and beneficial for the text set to get an inside perspective on the film industry.

Stacy Smith, a researcher who spends much time and energy focused on the gender inequalities in our world presents some fascinating and saddening truths about women in the film industry. She found in various studies that in 800 movies from 2007 to 2015, these containing 32,205 speaking roles, less than one-third of the roles were girls or women. This study replicated the results of a similar study from the years 1946 to 1955, demonstrating no change in over half a century. Within these 800 films, there were 886 directors, only 4.1% of which were women (Smith, 2016). Smith also researches the representation of other minorities in films and found that in the top 100 films of 2015, 48 of them contained not one black or african-american character, 70 contained not one asian or asian-american character. 84 had no female characters with disabilities and 93 of them contained no characters who identified as LGBTQ+. In these same films, only 32 of them contained a female lead or co-lead character. Within these female characters, they are much more sexualized and similar to McDOugall-Jones, she found that they were often scantily clad (Smith, 2016). All of these statistics point to the systemic problem of underrepresentation of women in films and the film industry. Smith presents two ways to help this issue. Similar to McDougall-Jones, female directors need to direct their movies and we need to promote them and hire them. She also advocates for help from A-listers and other stars (Smith, 2016). The movement has to start somewhere, so why not start at the top? Stacy Smith’s presentation was used in my Build A Module project as well. I used her data to emphasize the statistics of underrepresentation of women (and to a lesser extent minorities) in films. I wanted to expand upon that and compare her findings to some other research which is why I brought her presentation back into this text set as well.

For their capstone project at Elon University, Ian Kunsey wrote a paper titled *Representations of Women in Popular Film: A Study of Gender Inequality in 2018*. In this paper they researched into the top 250-grossing films of 2018. What they found was that one-fourth of those films hired zero or only one woman in a higher position on the team, such as director, writer, producer, executive producer, editor, or cinematographer. Only 1% of the films had ten or more women, compared to the 74% with ten or more men. There has only been a 3% increase in female employment in the top-grossing films since 1998. This is further exemplified by the fact that in its 91-year history, one one woman has been awarded “Best Director” at the Academy Awards (Kunsey, 2018). Within the top 100-grossing movies of 2018, only 36% of all major characters were women. Within the top movies of 2018, the top 5 directed by men had no female main characters and the top 5 directed by women had all female characters. It has been shown over and over that when there are more women directors or writers there are more female characters. When there is at least one woman director or writer, 43% of the speaking characters are female, compared to 32% when the positions of director or writer are held by men (Kunsey, 2018).

Dr. Martha M. Lauzen, whose earlier research has been cited by some of the other texts in this set, has done extensive research on gender inequality and female underrepresentation in the film industry. Her article, in 2021, shows that only 25% of the 250 top-grossing films had female directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, or cinematographers. Breaking that down, 94% had no women cinematographers, 92% had no women composers, 82% had no women directors, 73% had no women editors, and 72% had no women writers (Lauzen, 2022). These percentages show a significant portion of the population not being able to have any say in the stories being told or the way they are being told. This allows for inequality and misrepresentation or underrepresentation of women in films. In 2021, 61% of films had zero to four female roles. Only 8% had ten or more women. Only 4% had zero to four men, while 72% had ten or more men (Lauzen, 2022). The almost opposite statistics here show just how drastic of a discrepancy there is between male and female representation in movies. Both Ian Kunsey’s paper, from the perspective of a college senior, and Dr. Lauzen’s article, from the perspective of an experienced researcher, were more detailed descriptions of the facts and figures of women in film. They provided more of an objective side of this project and I thought that they supplemented the stories and personal experiences of the presenters from the TED talks well.

In this memo, I attempted to articulate the significance of gender inequality through underrepresentation of women in the film industry and in films themselves. By using anecdotes and stories of people in the industry supported by facts and figures by researchers, I collected this text set to provide a more detailed description of the problem facing our society. In addition, several of the texts present solutions to try and help fix this problem. By spreading awareness and doing what we can, hopefully we can make the film industry a more gender equitable industry and a place that young girls and women can aspire to be part of and then can actually succeed in.

References

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