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Half the Picture

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Half the Picture* (2018), directed by Amy Adrion.

Keywords

Female directors, Hollywood, sexism, feminism

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



Half the Picture (2018), dir. Amy Adrion

Although half the students in film schools are female, only a small percentage of these are allowed to become directors. Between 2002 and 2014, only 4.1% of the directors of the 1300 top grossing films were women. And in 2014, only 7% of the directors of the top 250 grossing films were women, and this number is 2% lower than in 1998.¹

This film addresses that issue head on. Amy Adrion interviewed a wide variety of female directors of film and television, including Lena Dunham, Rosanna Arquette, Ava DuVernay, Jill Soloway, Miranda July, Gina Prince-Bythewood, and many others. They tell their stories, including the obstacles they have faced and how they have dealt with them. If one was to generalize, all the women were determined to be directors: they had confidence in their abilities, and had the drive to follow their dream. And yet women have not succeeded in breaking the glass ceiling of Hollywood. Although this could be said about many industries, it seems that the film

¹ Martha M. Lauzen, *The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 250 Films of 2014*, San Diego State Uni. Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film 2015, 1-2 (2014); see also Brent Lang, *Number of Female Directors Falls Over 17 Year Period, Study Finds* (Jan. 13, 2015), <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/number-of-female-directors-falls-over-17-year-periodstudy-finds-1201402686/>.

and television industry is especially sexist, still. All of the women interviewed tell stories of how the system is built for women to fail. At all levels, women are passed over, viewed as inappropriate for certain projects, viewed as unable to lead a film. And yet they have directed a wide variety of films: romantic comedies, action movies, dramas—showing that there is no reason to think women are unable to direct any genre of film. Minority women experience even more obstacles, and even fewer succeed. There is no lack of women who are interested, but a lack of people willing to give them experience or financing. Brenda Chapman tells the story of how she was brought in to direct the Pixar film *Brave*, clearly a story of a strong female character, and yet she was replaced by a man midway through who was viewed as more “appropriate” for the film. Other women tell of how they succeeded in the independent market, were able to direct a major film, but then were not hired to do any more major projects after that. Even if they show that they can succeed and deliver a fine movie, Hollywood still turns them away.

This is especially odd given the fact that many viewers do not know or care if the director is male or female. Female directors can produce profits as well as male directors if given the opportunity. And, as one of the women points out, this isn’t just a question like why there aren’t more women as executives in the toothpaste industry: movies express an artistic vision, and if women are systematically excluded from being storytellers, our culture is thereby impoverished. The stories of women, and in particular minority or lesbian women, do not get told. Our cultural stories—our cultural myths, if you will—are told mainly by white men, not because they represent the whole of society but because the industry favors and funds them.

These women could despair about this. They could give up. But they do not, because they want to direct films. They all tell stories of entering this artistic profession in spite of the challenges, just as anyone does who enters an artistic career path with no guarantee of success.

They are willing to take their chances, but they deserve a fair chance. The fact that the industry is so sexist may be less surprising but no less horrific in the wake of the revelations of #MeToo that began in October 2017 with multiple accusations against film producer Harvey Weinstein. This film must have been almost complete by then, and no one makes reference to the Weinstein revelations and their aftermath. Although that issue is more about sexual harassment and other sexual crimes, it is not hard to connect the dots to the issue of discrimination against hiring women in leadership positions in Hollywood. While there are many industries in which gender discrimination clearly exists, it seems especially egregious that talented women are denied the ability to tell their stories in a medium with so much reach and effect.

Amy Adrion does the interviews with particular humanity, as she does not hide behind the camera but shows the filming of the interviews and herself responding. These directors are a community formed by their connections to one another, and their relationships show. Some of them become emotional, but that only enhances their strength. One comes away hoping that more women are given the chance to direct and give their distinctive perspectives on film and television: many have done so with great success, but so many more have not been allowed to the table. I for one am looking forward to seeing a lot more from female directors, if Hollywood can just open up that glass ceiling. I can't wait to hear their stories.