

**Just Out of Reach:
How Visual Framing and
Hegemonic Ideologies Marginalize Women in Film**

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Introduction

While films are intended for all audiences, the behind-the-scenes awards environment often leaves women's storytelling contributions unrecognized. Throughout history women have always been subject to marginalization through political, societal, and cultural influences that maintain male dominance. The historical impacts that have upheld these beliefs have been translated into various industries such as the film and entertainment industry where women must work harder to gain positive recognition for their work. Factors that maintain male dominance in industry have been criticized, but due to hegemonic ideologies that maintain a foundation of traditional norms and male dominance, women struggle to overcome societal expectations. This norm is also maintained in the film industry through visual framing which influences audience interpretations and perceptions through visual representation. Societies resistance to change is rooted in exaggerated or stereotypical visual representations that leave industries stagnant in their efforts to expand their perspectives and challenge what is "safe".

The focus of this essay is to be centered around awards shows that represent the entertainment industry. Where the industry is lacking proper representation in films, there is a more obvious disconnect shown during the awards season that better highlight discrimination and inequalities. While there are many struggles faced by female pioneers in the industry, their efforts to continue fighting against hegemonic ideologies is providing the opportunity for valuable change to occur for audiences and professionals. With growing opportunities for women to share and represent their stories, change is slowly occurring. The film industry, influenced by hegemonic ideologies creates an environment where female led and directed films lack recognition for their creative works as visual framing generates a framework where audience perceptions are influenced by tailored images and narratives.

Industry Background

While there is evidence of women having success during awards season in the entertainment industry, there are still limitations to their success compared to their male counterparts. From the establishment of the Oscars in 1929 to the recent year of 2022, only 3 women have won the recognition for best director leaving the previous 90 awards to men (Karniouchina, 2022). There are many categories oriented towards separate female and male distinctions, but with mixed categories there is significant inequality. In many cases, the nominations are dedicated towards the best talent in the category leaving room for subjective qualifications. Yet, from outside sources such as box office success or audience reaction there is no apparent influence that translates into nominations and awards designations. There could be significant differences in awards shows if changes to the nominations process were made.

As a highly coveted awards show with a deep history, the Oscars is arguably the biggest stage movie creators and stars can be on to represent their craft. A mainstream presence to that degree provides a platform for inequalities to be analyzed as the presence of traditional biases is evident. While there are checks and balances in the democratic process of the Oscars, the votes provided by qualified Academy members are skewed by social biases and gender discrepancies. Out of Academy members that can vote, less than one-third of them are women (Carollo, 2024). While there are some female voices included in the voting process, an unequal split between gender leaves room for subjective biases that can impact the success of female leads. These disadvantages are not just visible in the awards process but have been visible since the early years of the entertainment industry that have historically limited female voices. From a study taken by USC Annenberg, between the years of 2007 and 2022 there were 88 women that directed films in comparison to 833 male directors (Smith, 2023). Even with female pioneers in

entertainment, much of their work goes unnoticed because of the lack of preservation, financial support, and onscreen visibility they have received. This leaves less resources for women to take on leading roles behind the scenes, and that gap differential is far from closing.

Theoretical Frameworks

To understand the struggles that women may face in a male dominated industry, it is important to analyze the structures that maintain inequality in entertainment which is reflective of reality. Most of the interactions people experience shape their unconscious interactions with those around them, including forming subconscious stereotypes and power dynamics. This psychological interaction described as hegemony sustains a deep societal idealization of power dynamics that is often maintained and in support of male domination over other marginalized groups. It is an ideology that perpetuates inequalities and can only be changed if a significant societal shift is made (Jewkes, 2015). With a notable lack in representation of women, there have been many “tests” developed to understand how women are portrayed in film. For example, the Bechdel test is used to measure how women are represented in film. It utilizes parameters such as: Does the woman have a name? Do women speak to each other? Is their dialogue related to a man? (Yang, 2020). While simple, these parameters are rarely met in film, showing a significant lack of proper representation that maintains hegemonic ideologies on and off screen.

The concept of visual framing further emphasizes the presence of hegemony by specifically connecting it to the media and entertainment industry. It is more rooted in a journalistic framework, but it can be interpreted onto other media landscapes that incorporate visual components. With the help of framing, certain interpretations of visuals can influence how something is perceived by its audience. With its subjective nature, visual framing captures the intention of the creator to “influence perception, cognition, and behavior” (Geise, 2024).

Journalistic mediums often utilize visual framing to change the interpretation of certain social, political, or economic trends to inform viewers of current events. When it comes to the entertainment industry, the narratives that are being told are constructed by the director in a visual way that audiences interpret. Based on the visuals that are being presented on the screen, a director can change the way that audiences perceive certain things through the visual elements they choose to incorporate. In many cases, this fine tuning supports the presence of stereotypes as the director's choices impact audience perceptions. With a similar concept intertwined called the cultivation theory, it is apparent that exposure to media influences how an individual perceives reality. Considering this, if a woman is perceived as helpless in mainstream narratives people are more likely to adopt that understanding of how a woman is. This then constructs a hierarchy where women need to work harder to break away from the perceptions that are made about their capabilities.

Industry Analysis: Case Study

A valuable case study that reflects the unfair perception of women is Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, where her and lead actress Margot Robbie were not nominated for their standout film. Many claimed that they were "robbed" from awards opportunities because of its box office success and the cultural commentary it provided on the male gaze of women and an overly sexualized doll (Burke, 2024). This lack of nominations generated backlash from heavily influential figures because of the clear lack of female representation in male-centered categories. As a recent event, this "award robbery" generated a platform for women's inequality to be shown for the reality that it is. As an industry, entertainment is something that is rooted in traditional ideologies of cultural, social, and economic significance making it difficult to challenge the norm. As norms are further generated and adopted by society, people are less willing to accept screenings of things that

challenge their beliefs. This then roots in the concept of visual framing where people are less likely to support and appreciate narratives that are new or uncomfortable to them. With *Barbie*, this unconscious reaction of discomfort from Gerwig's outward criticism on society is likely what left the blockbuster film with less awards recognition. Depictions of over sexualization of women, America Ferrera's iconic speech about the female experience, and criticisms on male stereotypes, the film was taken far from a traditionally acceptable story.

Barbenheimer: Barbie vs. Oppenheimer

Prior to being nominated into the Academy Awards, two films *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* were at odds with one another. Melding into one to become the social craze "Barbenheimer," these films gained a significant amount of social media recognition, yet in the end *Oppenheimer* triumphed in success. This in part is due to hegemonic ideologies that maintain male dominance but also the visual framing that took place in the film to further support the hierarchical framework of male dominance. Traditionally, women are depicted as the more desperate or weak gender where men are depicted as the saviors of the narrative. With this in consideration, the narratives of *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* reflect the female struggle perfectly, both in an exaggerated and realistic way.

Oppenheimer, directed by Christopher Nolan highlighted a male dominated cast that depicted a historical event centered around violence, destruction, and victory while portraying female side characters in an overly sexualized way. This being a more traditional narrative that highlights a male driven story, *Oppenheimer* ended up being the most successful film at the 2024 Oscars with 7 wins. In contrast, *Barbie* directed by Greta Gerwig highlighted a female led cast that includes dialogue pushing back against the patriarchy in a comedic empowering way, but it only received one award for "best song." It can be interpreted that this film gained less awards

recognition because of the controversial messages that criticized worldwide issues that maintain inequality. The traditional visual framing that occurs in the industry was challenged in a way that revealed the harsh reality of how women feel and how they are normally portrayed in the media. Since it was a blockbuster that received such mainstream recognition, it became a threat to the system that maintains dominance aligning with hegemonic ideologies.

Cycle of Exclusion

Since much of history is built upon the success of men and their dominant power, threats of change are something that reveals flaws in the system. With women gaining more success and recognition in various industries, power dynamics and perceptions of gender are beginning to change. While this change feels significant, the progress is slow due to the cycle of exclusion. There is this idea of a “segregated reality” that makes it so that women and other marginalized groups are placed within positions that limit their ability to work up the ladder (Wildman, 1998). This is rooted in hegemonic ideologies that generate assumptions upon the capabilities of individuals to complete tasks or supply innovation. It is difficult to prove such discrimination as the system is supported by subconscious biases, yet disadvantages are evident in the statistics that reveal men having more opportunities. For the Oscars, the statistic that two percent of women have been nominated within the category of best director shows clear discrimination against the talents of women in a category heavily represented by men (Smith, 2023). It is difficult to climb the ladder to success if the system does not allow.

Relevance

As an already flawed system, the Academy Awards relies on its male-centered operations to maintain dominance over the industry and society. Films are incredibly influential forms of

media that construct how individuals perceive their reality. If changed to a more female led perspective, the traditional narratives that uphold the industry are in jeopardy of being brought down. This type of action could alter societal perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors with the support of visual framing that depicts reality rather than stereotypical portrayals (Geise, 2024). The psychological aspects of media theories behind visual framing, the cultivation theory, and cycle of exclusion have significant impacts on audience interpretation of the world around them, leaving questions as to how different society could be if equality were to be achieved. Visual media is an incredibly powerful tool, so with significant changes made to the entertainment industry to ensure equality in production and in the nomination process, the recognition gained and audience perceptions would be impacted dramatically for both men and women.

Conclusion

With an industry as relevant as entertainment, it is difficult to look past the inequalities that are so clearly displayed during the awards season. Even with female pioneers that are breaking past the norm and creating narratives that support marginalized communities and unheard stories, there are limited resources given to support women in leading roles. Throughout history, women had to work harder to gain positive recognition because of societal structures that limit them from breaking out of the system. Whether that be through hegemonic ideologies that are rooted in the foundations of society generating male dominance or visual framing that further supports hegemonic perceptions, women are at a disadvantage. For change to occur, there needs to be a significant shift in societal perception to allow marginalized voices to be heard and shared. Without change, women will continue to be portrayed in ways that limit visibility and continue to skew audience perceptions. More female recognition and equality in all industries, including entertainment, can break the cycle that generates harmful perceptions and stereotypes.

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