Women on screen

Do the roles women play on screen reflect their positions in real life? Does it matter if they don’t?

Women on television

A report produced by the Communication Research Group for Channel 4 in 2016 covered 500 hours of television on all the main UK channels. It found that men were twice as likely to appear on TV as women, and that older women were especially poorly represented. Female characters were also five times more likely to suffer sexist abuse on screen than men, mainly in comedy shows. Sport and news programmes have the greatest underrepresentation of women: just 2% of sports presenters or pundits on TV are female.

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Women behind the camera

Recent research on the British film industry (see Further reading) has looked especially at the underrepresentation of women among creative personnel and film directors.

The study looked at a total of 2,591 UK films released between 2005 and 2014. Although females made up 50% of all university film students in that period, only 14.4% of screen writers and just 2% of actors were female. Female directors were also five times more likely to suffer sexist abuse on screen than men, mainly in comedy shows. Sport and news programmes have the greatest underrepresentation of women: just 2% of sports presenters or pundits on TV are female.

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What kind of roles do women typically play in films? Admittedly, counting up what women do in films, without some wider context, may be misleading. However, mainstream American films still seem to be rather conventional in the roles that female characters typically play. Secretaries’ and nurses’ roles in films are dominated by women, but women play only 5% of screen engineers and just 11% of lawyers (see Figure 3).

The world seems to have changed very little here, at least in the eyes of film-makers. Directors may argue that they are simply reflecting the world as it is, with all its inequalities. But perhaps we are also getting, overwhelmingly, a men’s-eye view — a male gaze — of the world.

Female roles in films

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Further reading


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