

A Mainstream Aesthetic for African American Female Filmmakers

Authors : Tracy L. F. Worley

Abstract : This presentation explores the environment that has limited leadership opportunities for Black women in cinema and advocates for autonomy among Black women filmmakers that is facilitated by strong internal and external networks and cooperative opportunities. Early images of African Americans in motion pictures were often conceptualized from the viewpoint of a White male director and depicted by White actors. The black film evolved in opposition to this context, leading to a Black film aesthetic. The oppositional context created in response to racist, misogynistic, and sexist representations in motion pictures sets the tone for female filmmakers of every hue – but especially for African American women. For them, the context of a male gaze, and for all intents and purposes, a White male gaze, forces them to create their own aesthetic. Theoretically, men and women, filmmakers and spectators have different perspectives across race, ethnicity, and gender. Two feminist theorists, bell hooks and Mary Ann Doane, suggest that female filmmakers are perceived as disparate from male filmmakers and that women, in general, are defined by what men see. Mary Ann Doane, a White feminist film theorist, has focused extensively on female spectatorship and women (White) in general as the object of the male gaze. Her discussion of the female body, male perception of it, and feminism in the motion picture industry support the suggestion that comprehending the organization and composition of Hollywood is critical to understanding women's roles in the industry. Although much of her research addresses the silent film era and women's roles then, Doane suggests that across cinematic periods, the theory assigned to "cinematic apparatus" is formulated within a context of sexuality. Men and women are viewed and treated differently in cinema (in front of and behind the camera), with women's attractiveness and allure photographed specifically for the benefit of the "spectatorial desire" of the male gaze. Bell Hooks, an African American feminist writer and theorist with more than 30 published books and articles on race, gender, class, and culture in feminism and education, suggests that women can overcome the male gaze by using their "oppositional gaze" to transform reality and establish their own truth. She addresses gender within the context of race by acknowledging the realities faced by African American women and the fact that the feminist movement was never intended to include Black women. A grounded theory study led to the development of a leadership theory that explains why African American women are disproportionately represented in a mainstream motion picture leadership. The study helped to reveal the barriers to entry and illuminated potential strategies that African American female motion picture directors might pursue to reduce this inequity. Using semi-structured interviews as the primary means for data collection, the lived experiences of African American female directors and organizational leadership's perceived role in the perpetuation of negative female imagery in major motion pictures led to the identification of support strategies for African American female motion picture directors that counter social stereotyping and validate the need for social networking in the mainstream.

Keywords : African American, cinema, directors, filmmaking, leadership, women

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