Be(com)ing Reel Independent Woman

An Autoethnographic Journey Through Female Subjectivity and Agency in Contemporary Cinema with Particular Reference to Independent Scriptwriting Practice

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

Women exert only a modicum of production power in 21st century cinema despite its growing accessibility and spectatorship through the developing technologies of the digital era. In 2007, of the top 250 grossing films in Hollywood, only 10% were written, and 6% directed, by women, and just 16% contained leading female protagonists. Why, after the gains of the film feminist movement, is there such a significant gender imbalance in mainstream film, and an imbalance that is only increasing over time? More significantly, what are the possibilities and limitations for reel woman’s subjectivity and agency, in and on screen, in this male-dominated landscape?

As a female filmmaker in this current climate I conduct an autoethnographical scriptwriting-based investigation into female subjectivity and agency, by writing the feature length screenplay Float, which is both the dramatic experiment and the creative outcome of this research. The exegesis works symbiotically with my scriptwriting journey by outlining the broader contexts surrounding women filmmakers and their female representations.

In this self-reflexive examination, I use an interdisciplinary methodology to unravel the overt and latent sites of resistance for reel woman today on three interdependent levels. These comprise the historical, political and philosophical background to woman’s treatment both behind, and in front of, the camera; my lived experiences as an emerging writer/director as I write Float; and my representation of the screenplay’s central female character.

I use the multiple logic of screenplay diegesis to explore the issues that have a bearing on women’s ability to be active agents in the world they inhabit, including: the dichotomising of female desire, the influence of familial history, the repression of the mother, the dominance of the male gaze, the disavowal of female specificity, and women’s consequent dislocation from their self-determined desire. These obstacles are simultaneously negotiated as I map my process of writing Float and deal with the challenging contexts in which the screenplay was created. In the course of my scriptwriting investigation, film feminist and French poststructuralist paradigms are considered and negotiated as I experiment whether it is possible for female filmmakers, and their female characters, to overcome the seemingly insurmountable odds facing women’s actualisation today.

My research brings to light the critical need for more inclusive modes of practice across the film industry, discourse and pedagogy that are cognisant and respectful of reel women’s difference, and allow them to explore their own specificity. The thesis argues that it would be advantageous for female filmmakers to challenge their ‘fixed’ status in phallocentric discourse, and to deconstruct their patriarchal conditioning through engagement with forms of identity and writing resistance that recognise the fluidity of their subjectivity, and the consequent potential for change. I also highlight the importance of an accessible and affirmative feminist cinema pertinent to the 21st century, to integrate feminist ideals into the mainstream, and finally bring reel woman out of the margins.
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Dedication

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