

# *Visual Culture of Gender Inequality in Hollywood Films*

Yanlingxi He<sup>1,a,†</sup>, Shuyao Meng<sup>2,b,\*</sup>, Yawen Tong<sup>3,c,†</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Art, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York, the United States*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Sociological Studies, The University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield, United Kingdom*

<sup>3</sup>*School of Journalism and Communication, Zhongyuan University of Technology, Zhengzhou, Henan, China*

*a. yhex78@pratt.edu, b. smeng5@sheffield.ac.uk, c. tyw20011128@163.com*

*\*Corresponding author*

*†These authors contributed equally.*

**Abstract:** The main content of this paper is to explain how the visual culture of gender inequality is reflected in Hollywood films. This paper refers to current research and reports about Hollywood and analyzes some specific movies, including *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, *Spider-Man*, *Iron Man*, and *Hulk*. The paper concludes that the visual culture of gender inequality is mainly reflected in the differences between men and women in the distribution of time, work, and income. Specifically, compared to men, women get fewer chances to play in a film, have lower positions in the film industry, and earn less. Furthermore, it is found that most movies apply the perspective of men and repeat gender stereotypes. Therefore, this paper hopes that more people can pay attention to the interests and situation of women.

**Keywords:** gender inequality, Hollywood film, visual culture

## **1. Introduction**

With the emergence of feminism, more and more people are becoming aware of the importance of gender equality. However, gender inequality still persists in visual culture that guides people's mindsets. The visual culture of gender inequality revealed in many films is subliminally reinforcing the cultural norms of the audience. According to Dowd, cinema is a teaching machine, especially the way in which it socializes people in a subtle way and provides informative representations of how people should behave [1]. The messages of gender inequality and visual culture are implicit in many Hollywood films, which are becoming very popular with the audience.

Based on the theories of feminism and visual culture, this paper briefly explores how the visual culture of gender inequality is reflected in Hollywood films, focusing on three aspects, namely the unequal representation of men and women in the films, the imbalance of male and female film workers and their incomes, and the predominance of male perspectives in Hollywood films and the gender stereotypes.

Hollywood has also focused on gender equality for a long time. Several scholars in academia have shown that in the early days of film history, men and women were equal and women played a key role in the film industry. Stamp said that in the silent era of film history, women occupied key positions, like directors, writers, and producers [2]. Hill's *Never Did* describes the various important

tasks that women performed behind the scenes of the film industry in the beginning. He argued that the persistence of feminized areas of labor in the film industry today, such as work casting, script supervision, publicity, and editing, is mostly based on women's "creative service" in the early days of the film industry [3]. Smyth told that the heyday of the film business was run by women [4]. Despite the significance of women in the history of cinema and the gender equality they showed, today's cinema still has many inequalities between men and women. This exemplifies the changing positions of women in the film industry and the growing gender inequality. This paper, therefore, examines the issue of gender inequality in visual culture, focusing on a few representative Hollywood films and using relevant statistics to demonstrate how gender inequality is reflected in the visual culture of Hollywood films.

## 2. The Inequality between Men and Women in Hollywood Films

In today's innovative, open and inclusive film industry, women still possess fewer positions and achieve less income compared to men.

### 2.1. The Unequal Time Distribution

In Hollywood movies, the time male actors occupied is almost twice as long as female actors. These data are obtained through the machine learning system. The machine learning system is jointly developed by the University of Southern California, Gina Davis media Gender Research Institute, Google charity, and other organizations. This system uses language recognition and faces recognition algorithms. It can distinguish the gender of actors in a film and record their appearance time. Because of a lot of training, the system can be accurate in seconds. According to the statistics, in the three years from 2014 to 2016, there were 100 live-action films with the highest box office in Hollywood, and female actors only accounted for 36% of these films [5]. In most films, male actors occupy a dominant position in terms of the number of people and the responsibilities they undertake. Male actors occupy the dominant power, so their discourse power is more, and their importance is higher than that of women, leading to the relatively low sense of the existence of female actors in films and the marginalization of female roles.

In Hollywood, there are many films with the theme of women, for example, *Ant-Man and the Wasp* is a film that can be said that men and women have equal status [6]. As a female superhero, the hornet woman has the same ability as the male superhero. Her destiny is in her own hands, and she does not need to rely on the protection of others. This phenomenon is extremely rare in films. *Ant-Man and the Wasp* is also known as a film in which female characters in Marvel have occupied the longest time. However, even so, the heroine van Dane's appearance time in this film is only 35 minutes [7]. Therefore, although gender equality is constantly improving with the development of the times, it is still not the mainstream idea, and gender equality is only reserved at the theoretical level, not practical. In Hollywood movies, most of the protagonists are male. The study *The Film World of Men* using a sample of 2,300 characters from the top 100 domestic box office films of 2013, found that 85% of the leading characters in Hollywood films in 2013 were men [8]. This is especially true in action movies, in this genre. Movies like *Spiderman*, *Iron Man*, and *Hulk* all have male heroes [9-11]. IMDB's top 20 movies are almost exclusively male. Stacey Smith, a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, looked at the films of 2014 and found that only 21 of the top 100 grossing films had a female lead or co-lead [12]. In Hollywood movies, the camera setting is usually dominated by the male protagonists, and the angle of view is also guided by them. Male characters act as the gods of Hollywood movies.

## 2.2. The Unequal Distribution of Work behind the Scenes

According to a research report released by the Annenberg Foundation and the School of Communication of the University of Southern California, from 2007 to 2018, there were 1335 directors in the 1200 films with the highest box office receipts in the United States, of which only 4% were women, and there was only one female director in every 23 directors. In the past 12 years, the number of female directors did not exceed 10% each year. In 2008, the number of female directors reached the highest, accounting for 8%. In 2018, female directors accounted for only 3.6% [13]. Men also account for the majority of behind-the-scenes positions in photography, editing, props group, film dubbing, and so on. This situation has not been improved compared with more than ten years ago. The long-term gender discrimination has a negative impact on the female behind-the-scenes staffs. Even most people think that in the behind-the-scenes work of the film, women will only act as assistants, clothing designers, and makeup artists. According to the 2015 Hollywood diversity report, 83% of the senior executives of major Hollywood film production companies are male, and more than 6000 members of the Academy of Film Arts and Sciences are all male. Only 22.8% of Hollywood's top-level workers are women and less than 6% of them are non-white women [14]. The ability of female behind-the-scenes staffs is equal to that of men. They can even create greater value, but the ability of women is often ignored. This kind of thinking does not mean that women and men have physiological differences, but that women are not able to undertake this job. Women are deprived of the right to obtain fair social distribution.

## 2.3. The Income Gap between Male and Female Actors

In Hollywood movies, the income gap between male and female actors is also incredible. American actress Natalie Portman, who won the best actress award at the 83rd Academy Awards, said publicly after she starred in the film *Wireless Love*, that her remuneration was only one-third of that of the actor Ashton Kutcher [15]. In the 2013 film *American Hustle*, the remuneration of the female stars Jennifer Lawrence and Amy Adams was far lower than that of other male supporting roles in the film [16]. During the film's release, the roles of actresses in propaganda were far greater than those of male actors, but they still received much lower salaries than male actors. In recent years, more and more actresses have come forward to speak for the issue of "equal pay for equal work" for Hollywood actors and actresses. At the same time, many films showing strong female images have emerged endlessly, but they have not really changed the current situation of gender discrimination in Hollywood.

## 3. Gender Stereotypes in Hollywood Films

Gender stereotypes can be reflected in the plots portrayed in many Hollywood films. Women are often portrayed as inherently weak characters who are dependent on their men. Moreover, they are also the representatives of sex. Dowd argues that sex and desire are central elements in the portrayal of women in the Hollywood filmmaking system [1]. Denzin thinks that classic Hollywood films have never been kind to women, and women have always been given stereotypical roles, either good women or bad women, good mothers or bad mothers, sinners, or saints [17]. Das discusses that women are often depicted as traditional roles, such as family members, companions, sex partners, and janitors, and their positions are subordinate to men [18]. Greenberg argues that women are also portrayed as thin and sexualized [19]. This shows that gender stereotypes can be deeply reflected in traditional Hollywood films.

However, Hollywood films do not really eschew gender stereotypes. With the influence of feminism, Hollywood films have not directly portrayed women as completely dependent on men for survival, but gender stereotypes and gender inequalities can still be seen in the films. The portrayal

of female characters is still bound by gender stereotypes in terms of dress and pursuits. Many people consider the film *Legally Blonde* to be clearly a feminist film and a big step forward in Hollywood's portrayal of women as strong, independent, and critical thinkers. However, according to *History in Politics*, the film is still full of stereotypes of women [20]. For example, women like pink, and the pursuit of love is a woman's main goal in life and investing in fashion and beauty is a woman's second goal in life. While the film does attempt to attack the "stupid blonde" stereotype, other stereotypes of women persist.

In terms of the plots that shape the destinies of women, Hollywood films still cannot escape gender stereotypes. Wartenberg states that an adventurous and independent woman in the first ten minutes of a Hollywood film is likely to evolve into a more submissive and supportive assistant to the man over the course of the film [21]. Such plots are evident in classic Hollywood films such as *Pretty Woman*, in which the resourceful Vivian, is far more excellent in the early stages of the film than wealthy businessman Edward, but she gradually changes into a more traditional supporter of Edward after she loves Edward [22]. In the film *The Maid of Manhattan*, the female protagonist in the film named Marissa is a single mother working as a maid in a four-star Manhattan hotel [23]. Despite the low status of her job, Marissa is resourceful, intelligent, and friendly, and is admired by her peers. She is also a loving presence in the life of her precocious young son. Things change, however, when she meets an up-and-coming politician, Christopher Marshall. When he leaves her in the second act, her world falls apart. When her son intervenes with Christopher and asks him to forgive his mother for her mistake, the politician brings her back and Marisa becomes a successful businesswoman. The film embodies the default gender stereotype that women's success depends on the intervention of a male sponsor. Thus, gender inequality persists in Hollywood films. Women are always the objects of sight and behavior of male protagonists in movies. The female figure is shown from the male perspective. The audience's viewing angle is male because the frame of the film is always focusing on male protagonists. The male gaze phenomenon is particularly prominent in Hollywood films. The male gaze refers to the view from the angle of heterosexual men through whom females are sexually objectified to please male audiences. Research published by the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism also found that female characters are more often used as "sex objects" in films than men. Nearly 28 percent of all female characters appeared in sexy costumes and only 8 percent of men did this. Only 9.1 percent of male characters showed nudity, while 26.4 percent of female characters showed nudity [24]. For example, in the movies *Spider-Man*, *Hulk*, and *Iron Man*, the heroes rescue the female characters in trouble to show their strength and bravery. The *Film World of Men* found that only 15 percent of Hollywood films last year featured female protagonists. The researchers said that female characters in films mostly exist to serve male characters and are rarely portrayed as leaders [8].

Overall, the gender stereotypes portrayed in Hollywood films did not disappear with the advent of feminism. On the contrary, gender equality in Hollywood still has a long way to go.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has argued that in Hollywood films, the visual culture of inequality between men and women is mainly reflected in the distribution difference between men and women and their representation in films.

By observing some Hollywood movies, a series of phenomena show that women are still treated unfairly in Hollywood movies. This shows that in Hollywood movies, there is still a long way to go to achieve real equality between men and women. Although the theoretical framework is not systematic, this study can make more people aware of the unequal treatment women face. Some phenomena reflected in Hollywood movies are closely related to mainstream ideology. Because women are in an unequal position in society, the images of women in the movies are also unequal.

With the power of film culture, more people can pay attention to the interests and situations of women. Future studies can look into female filmmakers who show and give play to their abilities, contribute to the film industry, and let the audience in front of the screen feel the power of women.

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