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Inspired Women: Changing the Face of the Film Industry

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**Inspired Women:
Changing the Face of the Film
Industry**

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Candidate for B.F.A. Degree
in Film-drama with Honors

May 2007

APPROVED

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Abstract

The Honors Capstone project I created explores the inequalities women face in a predominantly male film industry. The focus was on how gender identity permeated their own artwork, their inspiration and drive, and the need for female voices to be heard.

The documentary was filmed in New York City, Los Angeles, and Syracuse. It was shot on Mini-DV and edited using Final Cut Pro. The film includes both interviews with female film professionals and students juxtaposed with my own life experiences.

The project was a journey of discovery, understanding, and inspiration. The film chiefly illustrates how collaboration, respect and assistance between women can bring change to a male dominated field. These women represent hope to an emerging generation of female filmmakers.

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Advice to Future Honors Students

- Start thinking about your Capstone project early (Sophomore year).
- Do not set ideas in stone. Time and circumstance will change the shape of your project.
- Come up with a strong concept that you're truly passionate about.
- This is a lot of time to put into one subject, so pick something that intrigues you or could be useful to your future career.
- Find an advisor and reader that you can work and collaborate with. They will be your constant support throughout this process, and you should not be afraid to talk with them about ANYTHING!
- Get to know the individuals working in the Honors Department because they are your allies during your Capstone project!
- If you are interested in funding, start your application early. It is important to have the application looked over by other individuals

before handing it in.

- Get your family, professors, and friends interested in your project! They are around to support you, and the more involvement others have in your work, the better. Your quality of work will improve as the number of people working with you increases.
- If possible, make your Capstone project a creative one! It really allows you the freedom to explore subject matter in unique and individualized way.

Acknowledgments

My Honors Capstone Project is dedicated to all the women who have inspired me personally as an artist and human being; without your guidance, influence and example, this documentary would have never been created.

To my Mother, Rose Mary McManus, my original supporter and number one fan. Thank you for allowing me to follow my dreams of being the first woman director to win an Oscar. You have always been there when I needed you and I will never forget all the sacrifices you have made to make me the person and artist I am today. I appreciate the time you gave to this project and for traveling with me to Los Angeles, not once, but twice.

I would like to thank Shannon McManus, my sister, for traveling to New York City with me. I will never forget the adventure we shared together and I am proud to have you as my sister. Thanks to my brother, Joe McManus; you are my best friend and toughest critic. I appreciate you

pushing me harder toward my dreams and goals. I grew into a mature adult and artist because of the summer I spent taking care of my Grandma Norma Boroski. Thanks Grandma, for loving me so much and inspiring me toward greater goals. Special thanks to Michael Bailey for his constant love and support; I could not ask for more in a boyfriend, I have been complete since I found you. Thanks to Ray Ballard for always supporting me, even at times when no one else did (especially about USC!), and for making the two trips to Los Angeles possible. Thanks to all my family and friends who have been a part of this incredible journey. I love you all very much.

To the two people in my life I lost this past year: My Grandfather Chester Czerwinski & my Aunt Margaret "Peggy" Kibler. I miss the both of you so much and there is a void in my heart since you have been gone. Everything I do artistically in your memory and I love you

Thanks to the participants, organizations, and colleges: Jennifer Warren, Stephanie Young, The Alliance of Women Directors, Mira Nair,

Claire Scoville, Georgia Lee, Laura Neri, Anne Beatts, Lisa Leeman, Karen Ludwig, Dorothy Lyman, Corinne Wedlake, Christina Kolozsvary, Iram Parveen Bilal, Iman Shervington, Tess Ortbals, Beth Spitalny, Robert Kositchek, Paula Bird, Kate Roughan, Jules DiBiase, Jessica Rotondi, University of Southern California: School of Cinematic Arts, Columbia University: School of the Arts, and Syracuse University: Visual and Performing Arts School. All of you are inspirations to the film industry and myself, and I hope you will continue toward our dream of gender equality in the film industry.

I would like to thank the Renée Crown University Honors Program and Eric Holtwartz for all their time and support. The grant I received by being selected as a Crown Scholar funded my research and documentary, and none of this would have been possible without that assistance. Eric, you helped make several of my dreams come true, and I consider you an honorary adviser on my Capstone project and life. I appreciate all your contributions to my documentary and my hopes of

becoming a film director.

To all three of my advisors: Miso Suchy, Laura Heyman, and Soon-Mi Yoo. Thanks for navigating my journey, there are no words to express my gratitude. Your support toward my project was endless, and I could not ask for a stronger trio of artists and teachers. You are all the best!!!

Sofia Coppola, you are the reason I have decided to become a director, thank you for inspiring women everywhere to become writers and directors. I hope one day to make a work of art comparable to your cinematic brilliance. Every person has his or her hero, I am proud to say you are mine Sofia.

Inspired Women: Changing the Face of the Film Industry

Reflective Essay by

Allison McManus

I. Introduction

Unbeknownst to me, my capstone project started its development my first day amidst film students, four years ago. As a female artist working in a predominantly male industry, I have been constantly aware of the physical and emotional gender differences between men and women. Since the first day of film school at Syracuse University, I have been looked at as simply a woman and not as an individual artist. Though the themes and topics I chose to explore as a woman may be different from a man's, it does not make me unequal to men as human beings; I can compete on the same level as any man in my field.

My vision as a filmmaker is to create pieces

of art that will be visually compelling, narrative driven, and memorable. Documentary was a form that I had never used before to express my art. For the past two years I have picked up photography as a hobby and another artistic outlet. There have been several occasions I have taken a camera into my hands and just captured the world as it occurred, but I'd never shot or directed a film without a script. Writing stories is something that comes natural to me, but with this film I wanted to tell a story about women who are inspiring change in the "Old Boys Club" of the Hollywood film industry. A lot the skills I adopted with photography I utilized while filming my documentary. I quickly learned that the best moments are the unexpected and least fabricated.

Female representation in the film industry is significantly less than many other professions. The number of women who direct American released films each year is approximately 4 out of every 100, and for cinematographers, the number drops to 2 out of every 100. However, the discrimination that plagues women filmmakers begins in college.

Male discouragement in my field is something I have been the target of, and it has given me a preview of the obstacles I will face trying to make a career as a filmmaker. This issue was a topic of papers I wrote for my Writing 205 class, which ultimately became a reference point for my project and started my research into the discrimination women face in the field of film.

II. Research

How many women directors are there in Hollywood, Bombay, Rome, London, Berlin, or any other city with a significant studio system? What is the number of actual female directors an average person can recognize by name? How is it possible, in this so-called liberal 21st century, women can be openly discriminated against in the world of cinema? These are just some of the questions that fueled my intense research on the subject of women filmmakers and directors.

Martha Coolidge, female director and first

woman president of the Director's Guild Association, applied to New York University's film school more than 30 years ago. Coolidge was told that she could not become a director because she was a woman. Though Coolidge was accepted into the program anyway, her road was still made difficult because of her gender. One would like to think things have improved since then, yet according to Christina Choy, chair of the graduate division of NYU's film school, the mostly male faculty there still discourage female students in unconscious ways, for male faculty regularly "cannot relate" to the work created by their female students.

In the hallways of San Diego State, says Martha Lauzen, "I have heard male professors say to female students, 'Don't even think about directing or being a cinematographer. Get into producing'". How are women ever going to establish themselves in the field of directing if they are being discouraged by professors, who are supposed to be their teachers and mentors? I believe this is one of the main reasons the percentage of female directors has not risen

higher than 4%.

In my research I have found that the rules for women directors differ vastly from those for men. Women have a more difficult battle to receive funding, garner a good distribution deal, and achieve bankable or historical status as a director, all problems reaffirmed to me in my interviews. Although women have been enrolling in film school at a rate almost equal with men for the past five years, they remain far less likely to be offered jobs in the industry or to be able to make movies, either within the studio system or independently. And financially, women are still not earning pay equal to men.

Over and over, female directors say they have run up against the Hollywood assumption that girls and women are not a sufficiently profitable market. This is despite the overwhelming success of chick flicks such as *The First Wives Club*, *Waiting to Exhale*, *Something's Gotta Give*, *Clueless*, and *Bridget Jones's Diary*. It is not surprising that a study done by Women Make Movies found that "women who were trying to make films

about women were getting the lowest amount of money" of any prospective filmmakers.

Of course, all women are not attempting to make specifically female focused films, but they will still be confronted with other problems regarding the material that interests them.

"Many, many times I've gone to a studio or producer with the idea of doing a movie that I'm passionate about and found that they cannot conceive of a woman doing material that is not completely chick-centric," says Coolidge.

Regardless of what type of film women make, there's no evidence to suggest these films earn less in the domestic market than those made by men. Women directed 7% of the top-grossing 100 films released in 2000, which is really impressive considering they only directed 4% of the total movies produced. It would be interesting to note just how much females could impact the market if they were given equal opportunity and monetary backing as men.

Women's films remain the unaccredited cameos of international cinema. When women directors

actually do achieve success, film critics and historians often neglect to mention it. While researching directors in the library, I found that out of every book that listed "Greatest Directors Ever," not one female's name was listed. Do you know how many films classes I have sat in where we spent the entire semester watching films and not one was directed by the fairer sex? It took Syracuse University until my Senior year to have a full time female professor in Soon-Mi Yoo.

It is appalling to me, especially as a soon to be film graduate to think that women are being discriminated against within their career choice because of their gender alone; unfortunately, the hurdles begin early with discouragement in film school. This led my research in the direction of Columbia University, University of Southern California, University of California at Los Angeles, The New School and New York University. My findings at these schools led to my decision to include established filmmakers in the film industry, students still earning their film degrees, and recent graduates in my final cut.

III. The Turning Point

I faced life-changing events during the making of *Inspired Women* that altered my documentary and made its vision and point of impact stronger and more accessible. I decided to make an Honors Capstone project in addition to a Senior thesis, therefore I have been working simultaneously on two projects. They are radically different styles, but are both equally important to me. My goal was to shoot my entire Senior thesis in the Fall semester and conclude shooting on my Honors Capstone project over the winter break. This would allot me the entire Spring semester to edit both films. There were many unavoidable obstacles that caused my plans to alter.

I had technical difficulties with the film camera I was using for my Senior thesis, and ended up having to reshoot the entire project over a week of winter break. Yet before I even got to

that shoot, my grandfather Chester Czerwinski, passed away December 17, 2007. It was unexpected even though he had been hospitalized for Leukemia and Cancer. I was devastated, as was my entire family. Somehow I found strength inside myself and renewed passion for my art. I concentrated on my two projects, and ended up completing a successful shoot for my Senior film.

Afterwards, I concentrated my efforts onto my pending trip to California. I was going to Los Angeles to visit with students and professors from the University of Southern California and University of California at Los Angeles, and meet with women filmmakers from the Alliance of Women Directors. These interviews were to compose the majority of my documentary, and I was highly anticipating meeting with some great, inspiring women.

I decided to bring along my Mom and her boyfriend Ray, because this was my first experience in Los Angeles, and I was nervous about driving and navigating the city. This was also my first time past Ohio, and basically a journey to

my future home. I was beyond excited, but I also needed a source to relieve the stress and depression of my life. We arrived in Los Angeles on a Monday, and everything about the trip was going smooth; the hotel was fantastic, and I knew as soon as I saw a palm tree that I wanted to be a part of this film world.

When we woke up Tuesday morning, we were raring and ready to start our California adventure. Then my brother called. He said "I don't want to be the carrier of bad news, but Aunt Peggy passed away this morning." We were at a complete loss. Peggy is my Mom's only sister, and my only Aunt. She had battled breast cancer on and off the twenty years, and had a terminal cancer tumor on her neck, but we were not ready to lose her. We lost all control of our thoughts and emotions. We flew home immediately to be there for my Grandma, Uncle and cousins.

I called all my scheduled appointments and canceled them immediately. My family is extremely important to me and we are all very close. They have constantly supported and been a part of my

film projects. I knew that it was necessary for me to be with them in their time of need and in our time of healing. I did not know, and could not anticipate at that time that I had made the right decision in putting my Honors Capstone on hold.

The whole shape of my project shifted focus when I came back to Syracuse; my artistic voice altered because of the reality and depression in my life. Eric Holtwartz, who has been my constant Honors support, advised me to take a week off during the semester and travel back to Los Angeles. When I went to my advisor Miso Suchy, he suggested I film the traveling experience and allow the relationship between my mother and I to be an integral part of piece.

My mom is one of my biggest influences and supporters, and it made sense I should capture the time we were traveling together and interweave that into the story of strong females attempting to change the film industry. Soon-Mi Yoo influenced the change in the types of questions I planned on asking my subjects. My project became more about women's inspiration and how their

gender identity permeates their own work.

IV. Inspiration

Every work I create as an artist is influenced in some way, shape or form from my own personal experiences. The thematic material obviously came from the difficulties I was having as a woman filmmaker, however there are many directors and artists that have impacted my style choices.

Filmmaking is my passion; it has been since Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*. Sofia Coppola has had an advantage over most female directors, being that her father is famed director Francis Ford Coppola; that family tie has aided and hurt her in this industry. When she began filmmaking, critics were suspect to her debut *The Virgin Suicides* and questioned her directing capabilities. James Greenberg, a writer for Los Angeles Magazine, stated, "Nepotism is a dirty little word in Hollywood, and almost no one admits benefiting from it. But it's safe to assume Sofia

Coppola didn't have as tough a time getting to direct as most women... so the *Virgin Suicides* looks great, but does she have any talent as a director? The answer is a resounding maybe." Greenberg was not enthusiastic, but *The Virgin Suicides* was my inspiration for applying to film school and pursuing my dreams of working in the film industry.

However in 2004, Coppola showed everyone her true potential. Coppola became the first American woman to be nominated for an Oscar for Best Directing with the success *Lost In Translation*. At the Academy Awards, Coppola won Best Original Screenplay, the "consolation prize" as they usually refer to it in the entertainment world. I found *Lost In Translation* to be the pinnacle of women directing in the history of film. The stride she made in one year and her achievements have greatly advanced women's opportunities in the film industry.

Coppola's creativity and vision influenced my decision to become a director. Her works influence everything I do and I hope to one day meet Coppola

or get the opportunity to work on one of her films. It takes a driven individual like Coppola to bring hope to aspiring filmmakers like me.

During Sophomore year, through the Honors program, I was granted the opportunity to have dinner with Mira Nair. As an artist, to speak with a woman who has such a presence in both independent and mainstream film worlds was truly amazing. Nair is highly selective about the films she makes, and always finds a way to incorporate her life and Indian heritage. Of course she inspires not only film students in the United States, but Nair has also opened a film school in Africa to support artists that do not have the means to make films. The topics we discussed together and the personal input she brought to my Honors Capstone project created a basis for the questions I asked other directors and film students and greatly inspired my direction.

I consider filmmaking a journey. There is so much that you do during the making of the film that people don't see in the end result. Your films are small representations that do not

showcase all the time that really went in to making them. There were a number of people I met along this particular journey that changed the way I looked at documentary filmmaking and women in film.

The Alliance of Women Directors is an organization that was created by women to support women in the film and television industry. Filmmaking is a collaborative medium, and I was inspired by this organization's readiness to recognize the inequalities of the film industry and aid females in achieving success. Through contacting member Stephanie Young, I was put in touch with Jennifer Warren, an actress, producer, and director who formed and is an active board member of The Alliance of Women Directors.

I had a chance to visit Warren's home in Bel-Air and as we spoke about what inspired her to create the organization, I realized how important it is for women to support their female peers; if there is any chance to change the industry, women need to band together. Warren teaches a class at the University of Southern California that

specifically aids women in transitioning into a male dominated field. She spoke openly about her acting experiences, which led to a certain level of respect in men's eyes, and therefore enabled her to receive the money she needed to direct two independent features. Warren showed me that there are feminists in this industry that will not tolerate the way women are treated and she inspired hope that females will succeed is breaking open the film industry- eventually.

Lisa Leeman, another professor at USC opened my eyes to different ways I could film interviews and insert pieces of my journey into my film. I had not filmed a documentary before and she suggested some books to read that really focused my direction and made *Inspired Women* the film it is today.

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