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Gender Matters at the Toronto International Film Festival

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THIS SUMMER, Warner Bros.'s *Wonder Woman* handily tied up the distinction of highest-grossing domestic release. With a female superhero headlining, and the highest budget ever entrusted to a woman director, the movie's front and back ends shared the gender equity spotlight. Writer-director Angela Robinson's indie film, *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in September and opens October 13, shifts the focus away from spectacle to the cultural workers who created the icon, taking a more nuanced approach to questions of gender, power, and what it means to direct a scene. This year's edition of the festival did the same, lending both glitz and heft to an important transnational conversation about women's filmmaking.

Each year, Martha M. Lauzen's report "The Celluloid Ceiling" tells a familiar story: in 2016 women directed only seven percent of top grossing films in North America ("domestic" box office statistics fold in Canada). But from a global perspective, top grossing Hollywood feature films are hardly an appropriate control group for assessing the achievements of women filmmakers.

At TIFF, where less profit-driven modes of production are featured — art cinema, documentary, independent cinema, and even premium television — a full 33 percent of 340 films this year were directed by women. This includes established filmmakers getting their due in the prestige economy. Eighty-nine-year-old Agnès Varda won the audience award for

documentary for *Faces Places*, her near-magical collaboration with street artist JR. Hungarian Ildikó Enyedi returned after nearly 20 years with Berlin Golden Bear–winning *On Body and Soul*, a surreal love story set in a slaughterhouse. Films by young directors in the Discovery section included Jenna Bass’s *High Fantasy*, shot on an iPhone, in which a multiracial group of young South Africans switch bodies for a day; *Waru*, a ground-breaking omnibus film by eight Maori women, several of them first time filmmakers; *The Swan*, an adaptation of a realist novel about a young Icelandic girl sent to the countryside; and *Village Rockstars*, the story of a village girl in northeast India who dreams of playing in a band and cuts a guitar out of Styrofoam. Filmmaker Rima Das, who wrote, shot, directed, edited, and produced the film herself, has the same DIY spirit.

As for auteurs reaching the top of their game: Lucrecia Martel was back after a nine-year gap with the trippy, subversive *Zama*, about a colonial administrator in 18th-century Paraguay who is waiting for a transfer out of his backwater post. I was taken aback when the guy next to me confronted me and my companion, feminist critic B. Ruby Rich, for chuckling with appreciation during a film that was “not in any way a comedy” — even more so when he chose to express his frustration by calling us the c-word. Martel’s film actually opens with women’s offscreen laughter. Don Diego de Zama (Daniel Giménez Cacho) follows the sound to a mixed-race group of women bathing on the beach, hiding in the dune grass till one shouts: “Voyeur!” I could only conclude that the guy was rattled by the film’s distinctive, and not unsympathetic, portrait of the decay of European male entitlement.



Daniel Giménez Cacho in “Zama” (dir. Lucrecia Martel)

Maybe the transition to an anti-sexist art-house sector won’t be as effortless as TIFF’s Canadian optimism can make it seem. Certainly, numerical representation of women in film needs to be backed up with attention to formal representation. TIFF’s competitive Platform strand featured films by festival favorites and emerging talents Barbara Albert (*Mademoiselle*

Paradis), Clio Barnard (*Dark River*), and Iram Haq (*What Will People Say*), reaching gender parity through “no grand design,” according to artistic director Cameron Bailey. While there weren’t specific targets, he said, “programmers are competitive, and they beat last year’s numbers.” Many of these films were beneficiaries of expanding attempts worldwide to offer opportunities for women directors: new policies, funds, talent campuses, co-production schemes, and industry players. Bailey continued, “Festival directors will sometimes say that we don’t make the movies, we have to choose from what’s presented to us. Honestly, that’s bullshit. We do have a serious role to play. When we show a certain filmmakers’ work — that has a knock-on effect to the all the other aspects of the film industry.”

TIFF’s place in the ecosystem is clear not only in the variety of programming but also in the festive hubbub of industry events and PR campaigns, where gender is now squarely on the agenda. Increasingly, policy directives aimed at gender equity and diversity are shaping national film industries, which are already subsidized to ensure that particular stories, particular languages, don’t get trounced by global Hollywood. At the Swedish Film Institute, CEO Anna Serner enacted policies that brought production to 50 percent women filmmakers within just a few years. She gave a Mogul talk in the TIFF industry side bar about looking beyond quotas to what she called quality. Norway-based Haq received Swedish funds, as did Platforms writer-director Lisa Langseth for her English-language debut, *Euphoria*. Beautifully acted, the film chronicles the relationship of two estranged sisters (Eva Green stars opposite Alicia Vikander, who also produced) during their stay at an exclusive resort that provides euthanasia services to chronically ill consumers. The somewhat preposterous premise — who would choose to spend their last days in the company of random rich narcissists, even if your personal attendant was Charlotte Rampling? — unfolds within a posh mise-en-scène that underscores the insularity of the characters and suggests certain limits to the spaces opened by state feminism. Gender quotas and assumptions underlying the definition of quality can leave other kinds of needed resource redistribution unaddressed.



Alicia Vikander and Eva Green in “Euphoria” (dir. Lisa Langseth)

Still the Swedish example has moved the needle, inspiring initiatives in Australia and Ireland, and prompting Telefilm Canada’s promise at a TIFF 2016 panel to build a “feature film portfolio that better reflects Canada’s population.” Called out in a 2015 report by Women in View for funding only 17 percent women directors, Telefilm has now joined the National Film Board of Canada in aiming to fund 50 percent women-led projects: 50/50 by 2020. Since multiculturalism is also state policy in Canada, we can hope to see ongoing support of established Canadian women filmmakers like Deepa Mehta, Alanis Obomsawin, and Mina Shum, who both exhibited new work at this year’s festival, as well as emerging directors like 19-year-old Carol Nguyen, two-time winner of TIFF’s young filmmaker showcase.

Nguyen joined Mehta and others as “ambassadors” for TIFF’s own “Share Her Journey” campaign, prominently advertised during the festival as part of a five-year “commitment to increase participation, skills, and opportunities for women behind and in front of the camera.” The specifics and the relationship to other Canadian initiatives remain to be worked out, but the optics embrace TIFF’s position at the intersection of art, commerce, and politics. Thus “Share Her Journey” ambassadors include Bollywood/Hollywood star Priyanka Chopra, a red-carpet draw for the opening soirée, and Jill Soloway, creator of *Transparent*, backing up a commitment to gender diversity that is lacking in most such initiatives. (“The future is female identified” reads one overview.)

To put Toronto’s statistics in perspective, Women in Film LA and the Sundance Institute studied 11 years of Sundance festival programming and found the overall percentage of US feature-length films directed by women to be just under 25 percent — a number the initiative has set out to increase through a range of mentorship programs, research, and advocacy efforts. While far more congenial to underrepresented groups than the mainstream industry, the US independent scene still runs by the profit motive, lacking the state support that

defines film production in virtually every other nation. TIFF 2017 included several strong US indies by women of color, whose financing stories point to the lack of sustainability in the prevailing model. Tracy Heather Strain's Lorraine Hansberry documentary, *Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart*, was supported by public and foundation funds, including the Independent Television Service and Ford Foundation, but still needed a Kickstarter campaign to get over the finish line. Chloé Zhao turned to a multinational entertainment company to finance her sophomore feature *The Rider*, an assured and affecting neorealist portrait of an injured rodeo rider, shot in South Dakota and the winner of the top Directors' Fortnight prize at Cannes this year. Most talked about was Dee Ree's highly anticipated Netflix release *Mudbound* (November 17), a project of Charles King's Macro, founded to produce media for underserved audiences, which showed in the Gala section after I left.

As the largest film festival in North America, one that is now firmly ensconced as an Oscars-race launchpad, TIFF is a showcase for US independents that also stands between world cinema and the North American market, featuring highlights from the year's festival circuit and previewing promising fall releases for the awards season ahead. While women's films fare better in the former than the latter category, red carpets increasingly feature female directors alongside female stars — ambassadors on their way to becoming *auteurs*.

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I crammed 17 films by women into my short visit, and there were many more I wish I could have seen. I did catch one of the buzziest women's indie films at Toronto: Greta Gerwig's pitch-perfect directorial debut, *Lady Bird* (November 3), financed by Scott Rudin and released by A24, which took *Moonlight* from Toronto to the Oscars last year. Though more implicitly than films like Shirin Neshat's *Looking for Oum Kulthum* or Naomi Kawase's *Radiance*, *Lady Bird* is a film about being a woman director. Saoirse Ronan stars as an eccentric high school senior who longs to get away from Sacramento (if she times her cough right, people think she's saying she's from San Francisco). She also wants to get away from a mom who always manages to say and do exactly the wrong thing (and since she's played by Laurie Metcalf, says and does this in exactly the right way). Gerwig's production notes echo Adrienne Rich's 1976 feminist classic, *Of Woman Born*: "The romance between a mother and daughter is one of the richest I know," and the film uses rom-com conventions to portray the two as contentiously twinned and entwined. Gerwig's excellent script builds on co-writing credits with Joe Swanberg and Noah Baumbach on films in which she memorably starred. Here Ronan plays the lead with a Gerwig-esque intelligence and awkward grace. *Lady Bird* is the lead character's "given name" — "given to me, by me," a portrait of the artist as a young girl.



Saoirse Ronan and Greta Gerwig on the set of “Lady Bird”

A companion portrait can be found in *Mary Shelley*, a costume drama with feminist intentions and a transnational production history. Based on a script by Emma Jensen, a founding member of the Gender Matters taskforce that launched the initiative to address gender bias in the Australian screen industry, and produced by the British team behind *Brooklyn*, the film received funding from the British Film Institute Film Fund, operating under its new Diversity Standards, and was financed through US producer Amy Baer’s Gidden Media, the first such incubator company headed by a woman. Haifaa Al-Mansour, whose Saudi girl-power film *Wadjda* earned her international attention in 2012, directs with confidence if little recognizable presence. Star recognition remains crucial for financing “risky” independent films by and about (and for) women, hence Elle Fanning as the eponymous character.

Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a gothic masterpiece with philosophical reach, has been read as an allegory of male appropriation of female creative powers, and the film tells part of its backstory. Shelley expresses outrage at the bias of publishers who insisted *Frankenstein* be published anonymously, as if commenting on conversations about gender and authorship circulating in the film world. If her language is slightly anachronistic, the liberal argument for equality is not: Shelley’s mom, Mary Wollstonecraft, published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* way back in 1792. Wollstonecraft died shortly after giving birth to Mary, and the legitimacy of the offspring’s claim to recognition is a central question of the daughter’s novel, which Shelley began writing when she was only 18.

While acknowledging a monstrous creativity shaped by the woman writer’s conflicts with patriarchal society, *Mary Shelley* is neither deconstructionist nor materialist. In keeping with Romantic ideology, the author’s work arises directly from her experiences of heartbreak, social censure, and grief. The film’s makers cannily capitalize on the gendered appeal of the costume drama — Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s alliance is the very definition of

Romantic — and the youthful appeal of its cast. Dreamy lads Douglas Booth and Tom Sturridge play Shelley and Byron in ruffles and eyeliner, and dangerous liaisons play out amid the decadent decor of Byron’s Swiss villa. If the film lacks the authorial vision of Jane Campion’s film about John Keats’s lover Fanny Brawne, *Bright Star*, it shares its commitment to female solidarity. When the already-married Shelley convinces Mary to run away with him, she takes along her step-sister Claire Clairmont (Bel Powley), and the three set up their ménage together.



Elle Fanning in “Mary Shelley” (dir. Haifaa Al-Mansour)

In one of the fortuitous intimacies festival programming fosters, Frankenstein’s monster meets Wonder Woman at TIFF, as *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* plumbs the autobiographical significance of another mass culture fantasy figure. As the film recounts, with grace and glee, the crucible for the Amazonian superhero’s creation in 1941 was a full-on, high-functioning ménage à trois, consisting of discredited Harvard-trained psychologist, male feminist, and bondage aficionado William Moulton Marston (Luke Evans); his Mt. Holyoke and Boston University–educated wife Elizabeth Holloway (Rebecca Hall); and former student Olive Byrne (Bella Heathcote), whose mom Ethel Byrne co-founded the birth control movement with her sister, none other than Margaret Sanger. Presumably by choice, the women had two kids each with Marston; Elizabeth worked as a secretary to support the household, while Olive raised the children. After Marston’s death, they remained together 38 years.

Marston thought of his comic as propaganda for his ideas about female supremacy and the psychology of dominance and submission; the golden lasso was a version of the lie detector test he is credited with inventing. Like *Mary Shelley*, Robinson’s film tangles up questions of women’s sexual liberation with intellectual and professional ambitions, often by putting words

in characters' mouths. As befits the origin story of Wonder Woman, the erotics of costume are front and center. Olive's matching bracelets and the rope trim on her sailor shirt are early cues to the big reveal: Olive in full on BDSM gear, a direct inspiration for Wonder Woman.



Bella Heathcote, Luke Evans, and Rebecca Hall in "Professor Marston and the Wonder Women" (dir. Angela Robinson)

But unlike *Mary Shelley*, which follows a feminist blueprint, this film bears the auteur's touch. One of few black lesbians working in the industry, Robinson is a comics lover who has exploited the subversive power of genre since her earliest LGBTQ film festival shorts. Her first feature, *D.E.B.S.*, set in a spy academy for girls with exceptional gifts, was a PG-13-rated lesbian film, and camp and horror marked her take on the intersection of race and gender as executive producer on *The L Word* and *True Blood*.

Robinson's script moves briskly and with balance (lessons well learned from premium television), and scenes are framed with the efficiency and iconicity of comic book panels. With his chiseled features, Professor Marston is portrayed as affable and charming, enabling the film to lean in to the characterization of his collaborators. Rebecca Hall's Elizabeth is the heart and heat of the triangle — a plain-spoken, ambitious top who accepts Olive into her marriage, and her suburban home, with dawning consciousness of her own desires. Tall and dark-haired to Olive's petite blonde, showing off slim '40s career-girl fashions with a sardonic fold of the arms, Elizabeth pulls the type of supporting character played by Eve Arden out of the closet into a lusty leading role.

Hall herself put out feelers about the rights to the story after reading [Jill Lepore's feature in *The New Yorker*](#), "The Last Amazon," and found that Robinson had been working on the script before the 2014 release of Lepore's book, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. That it took so long to get the film made and released indicates that more than lip service needs to

be paid to diversity and inclusion in the US film industry. Change is coming from the margins. The film's veteran producer of LGBTQ features, Andrea Sperling, works on *Transparent*, and showrunner Soloway has an executive producer credit on *Professor Marston*. But Annapurna's release of the film certainly has something to do with the Justice League's proven popularity at the box office. If the film rides in on Wonder Woman's cape, touches like Nina Simone on the soundtrack during a hot sex scene remind us who is behind the camera.

These English-language films by women directors testify to the ways that the intellect, affect, and lifeworlds of creators enliven their creations. They appeal to an emergent, self-identified feminist generation capable of following up *Wonder Woman*'s tentpole success with some specialty cinema box office credibility. As for all the other female-directed films in other languages featured at TIFF this year, the time is right for them to share the journey.

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