

# THE MYTH OF THE TWO PERCENT

WHY THE INDUSTRY'S SHIFTING UNDERSTANDING OF FEMALE CINEMATOGRAPHERS COULD BE GOOD NEWS FOR INDIE MOVIEMAKERS

by Heidi Honeycutt

ALEXIS KRASILOVSKY, WHO TURNED HER 1997 BOOK, *WOMEN BEHIND THE CAMERA: CONVERSATIONS WITH CAMERAWOMEN*, INTO A 2007 DOCUMENTARY

In issue 35 of *MovieMaker*, David Geffner interviewed seven of America's "hottest female cinematographers" of 1999. He began the article by promising that "... there will come a time in Hollywood, and it won't be long, when the whole 'gender thing' is history." Sixteen years later, the whole "gender thing" is still an issue. Gender discrimination continues to be a problem in the film industry, and gender roles behind the camera continue to be one of the most glaring examples.

As the industry becomes increasingly variegated, both in terms of budget and in the proliferation of mediums and platforms, the picture gets more complicated. With a clear divide between female cinematographer representation in the studio and independent sectors, can traditional discrimination have an inadvertent plus side? More importantly, how can women cinematographers get seen even by the most blinkered?

## WHAT WOMEN CINEMATOGRAPHERS?

The reason most people picture a man when they hear the word "cinematographer," some argue, isn't gender bias so much as it is

an accurate demographic representation. In 2013, the New York Film Academy released a series of statistics about the number of women working in the 250 top-grossing films of 2012. Only two percent of the cinematographers were women—the lowest number of all the professions examined. But does that number reflect the reality of the entire industry?

"I can't tell you how many times I have met someone who said, 'Wow! I've never met a woman DP before!' I reply, 'Wow, that's amazing—because I know about 100 of them!'" says cinematographer Jendra Jarnagin. "I know too many to name."

Alexis Krasilovsky is the author of *Women Behind the Camera*, a documentary film of the same name, and the upcoming book, *Shooting Women: Behind the Camera and Changing the World* (to be published in 2015). Krasilovsky has made it a point to make women cinematographers more visible to studios and to audiences. Like Jarnagin, she has no trouble finding women actively working as cinematographers. "My co-editor, Harriet Margolis, and I interviewed over 90 female cinematographers for our forthcoming book.

And that was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the camerawomen working in the U.S. and abroad today."

The American Society of Cinematographers (ASC) has a startlingly low number of female members—14 out of 372, or 3.7 percent. Members of the invite-only ASC must fit specific criteria and are voted in based on personal reputation. Some believe it remains an "old boys' club" system. As Bob Fisher, the co-author of Vittorio Storaro's book *The Art of Cinematography* and a cinematography-specialist journalist of nearly 50 years, says, "There aren't a lot of visible female role models who inspire young women to follow in their wake."

The lack of women members certainly limits the selection of female cinematographers when studios are looking at the ASC roster for potential DPs for big-budget films. In 1919, the society was organized as a way for cinematographers to network and collectively refine the standards of their art. In 1980, Brianne Murphy was invited to become the first female member. She was also the first female member of the International Cinematographers Guild (ICG), organized

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in 1928. (Fisher believes that Murphy was allowed to join the ICG in 1973 only because feminist activist Gloria Steinem demanded a female camera crew to shoot an NBC-TV documentary about the women's movement in the U.S.)

Professional organizations have yet to shake off the fact that women have been marginalized by industry peer groups that could provide them with visibility and connections. Even director Catherine Hardwicke (*Thirteen*, *Twilight*), who worked with DP Mandy Walker on 2011's *Red Riding Hood*, was only able to name three other women cinematographers off the top of her head in our interview. It seems, then, that the problem lies not in a scarcity of women, but in the fact that people just don't know how to find them—especially the people with hiring power. And that's even more true (as that two percent demonstrates) of the people with hiring power in the major studios.

#### STUDIO MYOPIA, INDIE VISION

While there are few women working on studio blockbusters, the rest of the movie-making universe shows healthier vital signs. "As Dr. Martha Lauzen's studies on indie films have shown, more women are getting hired as directors and cinematographers on indie films than on studio films," says Krasilovsky. "Talented, hardworking, qualified female cinematographers are available at all levels of film and television production."

All this female talent has risen to the top of the indie pool, frequently outshining its male counterpart. In 2014 alone, women won three out of four cinematography awards at the Sundance Film Festival (Rachel Beth Anderson for *E-TEAM*, Nina Bernfeld for *Happiness*, and Ula Pontikos for *Lilting*)—though no female cinematographer has ever been nominated for an Academy Award. And moviemakers who hire these women, such as indie cinematographers Reed Morano (*Frozen River*), Polly Morgan (*The Truth About Emanuel*), Jessica Gallant (*Scenes From Oblivion*), and Stephanie Paris (*Message From Earth*), are getting the best for cheap.

Of course, this talent won't always be such a bargain. As cinematographer Elle Schneider (*I Am Divine*) says, "The statistic is not that two percent of people shooting movies are female, it's that two percent of people *being paid to*

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shoot movies are female. There is a huge difference. 'Working' means earning a living as a cinematographer and being able to support one's self with one's craft. There are virtually no women cinematographers who are able to do this, and it's what I'm actively trying to change."

#### GENDER-BASED TECH LITERACY

"Women behind the camera are discriminated against first by the assumption that they are not technically proficient enough to be in charge of an army of technicians,"

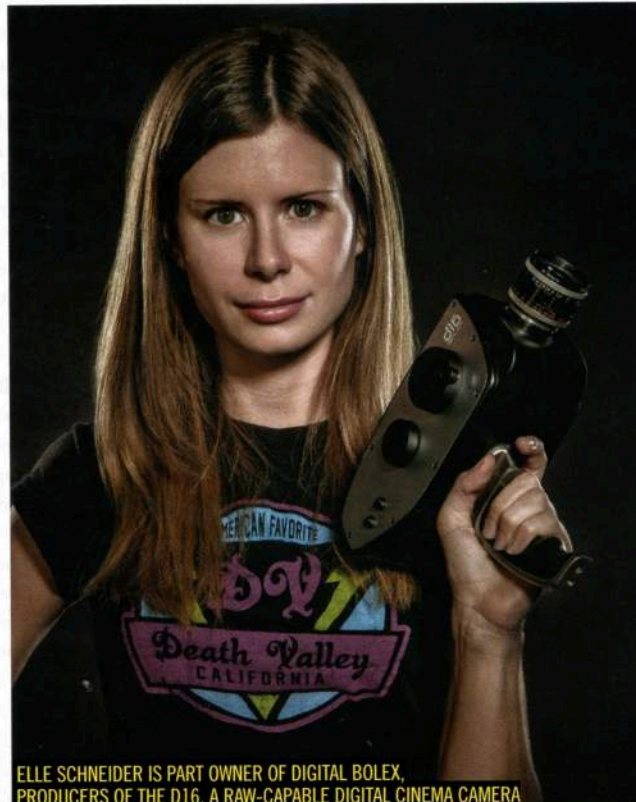
Schneider—who co-created the popular Digital Bolex camera package—said. "And second, by their likeliness to not own equipment. These two issues, rather than any question of talent or drive, are what keep women out of the camera department." Even if we look past any obviously unsound correlations between gender and technical ability, it's strange that in this age of compact, streamlined technology—cameras built for the most amateur moviemaker to use with ease—professionally-trained women are met with skepticism about their technical skill set.

#### A CULTURE OF COMPETITION

In "No Debate," a 2012 article that appeared on *ICG Magazine's* website ([icmagazine.com](http://icmagazine.com)), cinematographer Jim Denault was complimentary towards his female camera crew on the political satire *The Campaign*, while his loader, Tonja Greenfield, expressed surprising hostility: "I was a little apprehensive when I heard that both firsts and seconds were female, because that's a lot of estrogen... women can be catty and competitive."

Sexism is only half of the puzzle. Female studio executives and top directors have traditionally been reticent in vocally discussing the proverbial glass ceiling. At the indie level, women are far more explicit about the topic. In a recent blog post on her website ([lexialexander.com/blog/2014/4/25/omfg](http://lexialexander.com/blog/2014/4/25/omfg)), director Lexi Alexander called out Universal's Donna Langley and

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ELLE SCHNEIDER IS PART OWNER OF DIGITAL BOLEX, PRODUCERS OF THE D16, A RAW-CAPABLE DIGITAL CINEMA CAMERA

Photograph by Robyn Von Swank



Sony's Amy Pascal on the issue of studio-level gender discrimination. "Why don't Amy and Donna, the two women amongst the 18 mentioned green light big-shots, solve the whole gender inequality issue for us?" she asks. She goes on to say that "token women" at studios are less inclined to hire other women.

Schneider thinks that criticism alone only goes so far. "I don't recall ever seeing [Alexander] retweet a female filmmaker's Kickstarter project, or shout out a women filmmaker who wasn't courting her praise specifically. We need to be concerned with every other woman's job prospects as much as our own, otherwise there is no chance for success."

Hardwicke met *Red Riding Hood* DP Walker through channels of praise. "Baz Luhrmann spoke highly of her and she was very impressive in the interview. Then she was approved by Warner Brothers." Just as DP Amy Vincent got her break working with director Kasi Lemmons on *Eve's Bayou*, and was the first woman ever featured on the cover of *American Cinematographer*, it takes woman-to-woman support to break the studio ceiling.

#### SEXISM'S LEGACY

"Of course there's a bias," Krasilovsky says. "The studios continue to be dominated by men who hire mostly men. If studio producers were to look at cinematographers' reels in a gender-blind process similar to the WGA's Diversity Access Program, it's likely that more women and minorities would break through the barriers to top-budget opportunities."

"If studio execs think a woman can't do a job," says Jarnagin, "it's because of the mindset in which they were raised. But people who are coming into their careers now, who have been raised by empowered feminist mothers and fathers, don't have the same gender bias that older generations do. You see women shooting student films and indie films at much higher numbers."

Pointing out that "Roland Emmerich has done a number of huge films with [DP] Anna Foerster," Schneider nevertheless suggests a different attitude towards men and women when it comes to

studio hiring: "Women are judged more on what they have done, while men are judged on potential. How dare women just want to do something cool? Many men, like Marc Webb with the *Spider Man* franchise, for example, are hired on projects they have no related experience for, but have a gung-ho energy that's convincing enough."

#### ENDING MISCONCEPTIONS

Reversing the insidious media and industry fallacies about women cinematographers by creating visibility may be the answer. "The studios have to be blind and completely wrapped up in cocoons at this point if they claim not to know of any women cinematographers on the planet. Many other countries have societies of cinematographers as well, with notable members such as Mexico's Hilda Mercado, who is also in the union in L.A.," says Krasilovsky. "There's also the British Society of Cinematographers: Sue Gibson has served as the BSC's President. Another female DP, Inês Carvalho, served as president of the Society of Cinematographers in Portugal." With her books and documentary, Krasilovsky herself has been instrumental in creating visibility for women cinematographers.

The Internet is a major source of visibility for women in all aspects of the film industry, allowing women an equal playing field to market themselves and their careers. Professionals in smaller film markets can connect and find jobs with an ease that was previously impossible. Online resources include Facebook groups (like Camerawomen L.A.), websites like Women in Film - Los Angeles and Women Directors in Hollywood, and 'watchdog' blogs like The Bitch Pack and Indiewire's Women and Hollywood. "People want to support the underdog," Jarnagin says. "They think it is fantastic that I am an established, successful woman DP. People pay attention to my career and what I am up to."

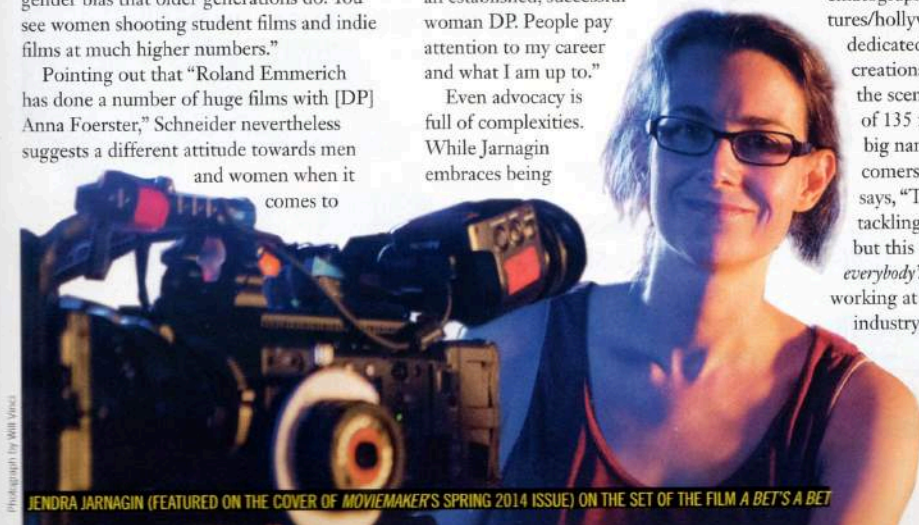
Even advocacy is full of complexities. While Jarnagin embraces being

termed a "female cinematographer" because of the promotional possibilities, some women don't feel the same way. "I don't like being labeled as a female cinematographer, myself, unless it's in the context of a discussion about gender and cinematography," says Krasilovsky. "We're no longer in the 19th century, talking about 'lady poets' or 'lady painters,' right?" She admits to an element of hypocrisy. "On the other hand, I was a proud member of Behind the Lens: An Association of Professional Camerawomen (which disbanded in 1996). Currently I'm an enthusiastic participant in Women in Film, the WGA's Committee of Women Writers and the Alliance of Women Directors. We are actively pushing forward a women's initiative to address imbalances in hiring practices, as well as reaching out to our associates in the DGA."

"No one wants to have an asterisk next to their name, to be the best in a marginalized subcategory," Schneider explains. "No one wants to be the 'best gay rock star,' or a 'good black president.' But the larger the marginalized group becomes, the more normalized, and the greater of a voice the group has and the more opportunity is available to everyone."

Schneider's grant for female cinematographers, the Digital Bolex Grant, is an excellent example of using power—in this case, financial—for immediate change. The grant offers free camera kits with \$10,000 in additional gear and accessories on a rolling basis to narrative short and feature film projects that plan to use a female cinematographer.

"Gender shouldn't even be an issue but I'm afraid that until we approach some kind of balance, professional and informal initiatives like this will have to continue," says Fabien Hurelle, a French journalist who runs a Pinterest board called "Hollywomen - Cinematographers" ([pinterest.com/ScribeVentures/hollywomen-cinematographers](http://pinterest.com/ScribeVentures/hollywomen-cinematographers)), dedicated to "highlighting the faces and creations of the women working behind the scenes." The board contains pins of 135 female cinematographers, from big names like Ellen Kuras to up-and-comers like Rachel Morrison. As Hurelle says, "There are several organizations tackling this, mostly led by women, but this is also a male problem. This is everybody's problem. Having more women working at important roles means a better industry." **MM**



Photograph by Will Vance

JENDRA JARNAGIN (FEATURED ON THE COVER OF MOVIE MAKER'S SPRING 2014 ISSUE) ON THE SET OF THE FILM *A BET'S A BET*