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SPECIAL FEATURE SECTION

# JOBS FOR THE GIRLS?

## AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN THE AUSTRALIAN FILM INDUSTRY



In the last ten years there has been a significant reduction in the number of women working in key areas of the film industry, particularly in senior artistic and technical roles.

**B**Y THE SAME TOKEN, there has also been a reduction in the amount of support and positive discrimination aimed at women who want to increase their skills or cement their position in the industry. In the past, the relative lack of women in key creative categories in an industry that has generally prided itself on its prominent female filmmakers, has sparked action and activism. For example, lobbying from women filmmakers and interested organizations in the 1970s made possible the Federal Government initiative known as the Women's Film Fund. However, as the number of women involved in film has steadily dropped since 1996, and our representation behind the scenes has been eroded, there has been no commensurate activist response.

### The Current Situation

Of the 7700-plus people who stated that they worked in film and video production in the 2001 census, only 38% were women.<sup>1</sup> This was a decrease of 4% across the board, from 42% in 1996. However, the number of women who gained a qualification of Bachelor Degree or higher in film and video production increased by 6%. In 2001, 35% of women in the film and video industries reported having a relevant tertiary qualification, while only 25% of their male counter-

parts reported the same.<sup>2</sup> Over time, it seems women have become increasingly more qualified, particularly in relation to their male peers, yet are significantly less likely to find paid work.

The decrease in women's representation in film is not fixed across all areas of the industry. For female artistic directors the numbers are very healthy: a 127% increase from 1996 to an even 50%. This is the only arena of work where men and women are evenly represented. In traditionally female-dominated roles such as make-up artistry, our numbers are still high - 89% are women. It is in the senior artistic and technical areas that the absence of women is most noticeable. The number of female screenwriters has plummeted since 1996 from 50% to 39%. Female editors have dropped from 26% to 21% and the loose classification of 'other directors, other production department heads' has also decreased by 15%. In the technical realm, never a stronghold for female workers, the numbers are even more disturbing. Only 9% of technical directors and 13% of sound technicians are women. Most alarmingly, while the number of female camera operators has increased slightly to 5%, the number of female Directors of Photography has plummeted by a massive 40% in the last nine years. In 2001, only 4% of DOPs were female.<sup>3</sup> This

obviously begs the question - where did all the women go?

### The Absence of Women

The easy answer is to blame women's lifestyle choices. In the film industry, as in many other fields, women have found it more difficult to commit to full-time work over a lifetime. Quite apart from the issues of skill and proficiency levels, women are more likely to take breaks in their employment arc to raise children, or look after elderly parents. Julia Overton has had a high-profile career as an independent producer on major feature film projects such as *Fistful of Files* (Monica Pelizzari, 1996). She is now a Project Manager at the Australian Film Commission (AFC). Julia has direct experience with the difficulties of parenting and working in the film industry.

*My partner is a freelancer, and having two independent filmmakers together, and having a family, is very difficult. We take it in turns. At the moment I'm in here as the bureaucrat, while he's an independent filmmaker. And it's difficult with children. Being on set with a child is almost impossible.<sup>4</sup>*

Sexism is also a hard situation for women to cope with, particularly since the freelance nature of the job means that there

is very little official recourse for a woman victimized in terms of harassment or discrimination. Erika Addis is an award-winning cinematographer with thirty years experience in the Australian film industry. She says of sexism, 'It's invisible. Because it's a freelance business it's very hard to establish that it actually happened.' Jessie Doring is a graduate of the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) and currently works as a freelance Director of Photography. She has also borne the brunt of sexism throughout her career. Although she declined to name names for this article, off the record she tells of 'malicious rumours' and on-set gossip that implied she had used her feminine wiles to further her way in this male-dominated field. These rumours were complete fabrications.

In terms of the recent decline of women in film, childbearing and sexism as motives are arguably immaterial. Women have

discrimination has been a feature of the Australian film industry in recent decades, women played a prominent role in earlier periods of Australian film history. In the first decades of Australian film, when our industry was thriving, a significant number of women were involved in the key technical and production areas of feature filmmaking. Lottie Lyell, the McDonagh sisters and Louise Lovely were all involved as writers, directors, producers and stars. Sixteen feature films produced or directed by women were released between 1921 and 1933, a number that would be considered impressive today.<sup>3</sup> When sound production took hold, and the American film market began to increase output, local production decreased and as a result, roles for women declined. The overall number of people employed in film dropped, and as a consequence, women were increasingly sidelined into more traditionally 'female' roles such as make-up,

prompted the Whitlam government to provide financing for film as part of its 1975 International Women's Year activities.<sup>4</sup> The investments included \$100,000 set aside for a television project by Germaine Greer on human reproduction. When Greer did not take up the TV series, the money was held in trust. Despite pressure from women filmmakers to use the money for women's film training, the dismissal of the Whitlam government and subsequent political upheaval meant that the money was not allocated. In 1976, Ian McPhee, the Minister for Women's Affairs under the Fraser government, ensured the money was used to establish the Women's Film Fund. A total amount of \$160,000 was contributed to the Fund.<sup>5</sup>

### The Women's Film Fund

The Women's Film Fund (WFF) was formally established in 1976, and by 1980

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always left the industry to have children, experienced sexism and lamented the freelance nature of the business. These things have not changed significantly over the last ten years. If anything, women are having fewer children now than they were ten years ago. Australia's birth rate has been declining steadily since 1990, reaching an all-time low in 2002.<sup>6</sup> There are more programs now through the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) for freelance women to voice their complaints and concerns about discrimination and harassment. These may not be viable in the real context of women's work, but recourse is nonetheless available. If issues of pregnancy and discrimination at work are assumed to be constant, they cannot explain the recent decline in the participation of women in the film workforce. Again, this begs the question - where did all the women go?

### A Tarnished Past

While female under-employment and

Perhaps the higher-paid work was more likely to be given to men, as they were considered more financially needy. This reflected the more general socio-economic trend in the 1920s and beyond, where 'men's work' meant paid employment and 'women's work' meant unpaid work in the family.<sup>7</sup>

After the late 1930s, local drama production slowed significantly. From then until the late 1960s, the Australian feature film was practically extinct. The intervention of the Gorton and Whitlam governments, in the form of massive cash injections, subsidies and tax benefits in the early 1970s, rejuvenated film production. Between 1970 and 1985, Australians produced nearly 400 films, more than had been made in the previous seventy years.<sup>8</sup>

During the same period, the global women's movement was acquiring new strength. The growth of feminist filmmaking coincided with the revival of the Australian film industry. Vigorous activism and lobbying from groups such as the Sydney Women's Film Group

the Australian Film Commission had assumed full responsibility for its administration. It suffered the teething problems that any new government enterprise faces, and was particularly criticized by women filmmakers for failing to fulfil its perceived duties. There was criticism of the fact that the WFF invested \$50,000 in *The Picture Show Man* (John Power, 1977) and \$10,000 in *Daen* (Ken Hamran, 1977), both of which were produced by women but directed by men. In 1980, Viki Molloy was appointed as the first full-time WFF project officer, and in the next three years the WFF clarified its purpose and initiated ongoing consultation with women filmmakers. As well as supporting film production, the fund was also active in the distribution and exhibition of women's films, research, and the training and employment of women in film.

As a direct result of money from the WFF, other initiatives were introduced for women. In 1984 under the auspices of the Commonwealth Training Program, the Women's Film Units in Victoria and NSW were established. Although nomi-



itally established to provide production experience for relatively experienced women filmmakers, they were regarded by many as a training venture.<sup>11</sup> The newly established Australian Film and Television School also responded with on-the-job training schemes for women. These programs created opportunities for women to secure serious paid employment in areas other than traditional, female-dominated jobs such as make-up artistry. Specific attention was given to women working in non-traditional technical fields, such as cinematography. Erika Addis is very clear about the role that the WFF and subsequent programs for women had on her career:

*I started working in the film industry in 1975. I was in that early push. I worked in Adelaide for about eighteen months and then I studied at the film school for three years. Originally my training in film production was in a women's workshop that was run by the Film and Television School. It was 16mm production, and within my group I did all the camera work.*

In the early 1980s, a preliminary Affirmative Action program for various male-dominated industries, including film, was started under the Hawke government. By 1985, the Australian Film Commission began to develop programs that positively discriminated for women filmmakers. This meant that every AFC financing program would 'have a responsibility to consider the participation and representation of women in their funding activities'.<sup>12</sup> This affirmative action commitment resulted in the AFC's direct financial participation in a large number of independent women's films. As Erika Addis states, 'There were a number of affirmative action programs that I was employed on ... which were SAFC (South Australian Film Commission) financed through the Women's Employment Fund. So they had federal money. One of those projects was Gillian Armstrong's documentary *Smokes and Lollies* (1976), a film that helped launch Armstrong's career.'

### The AFC Women's Program

In 1990, the WFF was replaced with the Women's Program, and the emphasis shifted from direct financial investment to professional encouragement. The support included research, policy development

and programs aimed at broadening the participation of women in all areas of the media, including film. Women who were mid-career were particularly targeted, and programs such as directing and screenwriting workshops were created to augment women's professional skill development. Other programs in this period included the Film Technicians Support Scheme, which provided funding for women to upgrade their skills in technical areas such as camerawork. During the 1990s, Australia also saw an unprecedented boom in the film industry. From 1988 to 2001, Australians produced eight films that were in the top ten at the local box office, including *Strictly Ballroom* (Bar Luftmann, 1992), which was number one with earnings of \$58.73 million locally.<sup>13</sup> This success was reflected in the stellar career progress of local women filmmakers such as Jan Chapman, Jocelyn Moorhouse, Jane Scott and Debra Chate.

### The Beginning of the End

It is difficult to track exactly where the support and financing for women filmmakers went in the late 1990s. According to researchers at the AFC, the Women's Program was integrated into their mainstream activities in 1999.<sup>14</sup> In 2000, the Women Working in Television Project was formalized, and continues, although this is exclusively for TV. There was no formal reason given for why the general Women's Program was assimilated. Julia Overton:

*I think there was a conscious decision to end it. You know, at that time the industry was thriving and there were a lot more women working in the industry. It fulfilled its purpose.*

Erika Addis confirms this:

*There was a definite push that came through very clearly from the AFC. It was stated as an articulate policy that women were clearly making inroads and headway and didn't require that level of financial support any more, and that therefore the Women's Program was going to be dissolved.*

According to Australia's national film training body, this may well have been true. In 1999, there were forty-nine graduates in various film programs from the Australian Film, Television and Radio School. Of these, twenty-eight were women and

twenty-one were men, a female majority of 57%. However, in all other areas of the industry, women were still not achieving equal representation. According to the 1996 Census, the only production category that saw an even 50% split between genders was screenwriting. In 2001, the only even split is in the category of artistic directors. There was significant gender disparity in many areas: 90% of technical directors, 94% of cinematographers, and 97% of camera operators and lighting technicians were men. Erika Addis was surprised that the numbers of women entering her field evaporated:

*I just assumed there would be this whole continuum of women who would be coming along afterwards, women thinking 'Fantastic, we can get into the film industry, we can be cinematographers'. It just wasn't like that; it's always been a very small number.*

Funding specifically for women in film was finished. By the year 2000, and despite the 1999 Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act, there were no government affirmative action programs on record supporting women in employment or the financing of film projects.<sup>15</sup> In 2005, the situation remains unchanged. Julia Overton again:

*... when the Women's Unit was disbanded I think it was because there was no need for it. I don't know if we need to reinvent it, or what we need to do. At the moment our brief is that the state of the industry as a whole is pretty far gone.*

Since 1999, Australian film production has been experiencing a slump not seen since the 1930s. Federal government money is decreasing, and in 2004, no Australian films appeared in the top fifty films at the local box office.<sup>16</sup> Last year only twelve Australian feature films were released locally, and Australian films earned just 1.3% of the total local box office takings of over \$90.7 million dollars.<sup>17</sup> While the film industry experiences this crash, it seems very unlikely that women will be targeted for specific affirmative action. 'The thing is at the moment that it's hard for everyone', says Julia Overton. 'Men and women alike, there's no work.'

### Where to From Here?

In order to divine the future for women in

the film industry, it may be best to look at our students. Of the forty-one AFTRS graduates in 2004, twenty-eight were men and thirteen were women. This 32% female representation makes the 1999 57% female intake at AFTRS seem like an overly optimistic and already distant statistic. It seems apparent to the author that there needs to be some serious lobbying from representative organizations regarding the situation for women in the film industry. Women in Film and Television (WIFT) has existed since 1982. Part of the WIFT NSW Mission Statement assures readers that WIFT aims to 'enhance women's professional development' and 'ensure Equal Employment Opportunities for women'.<sup>14</sup> However, despite repeated requests for a statement for this article, representatives from WIFT NSW had not replied by deadline. Jessie Doring and Erika Addis were both actively involved in WIFT, but are now no longer members. Neither is the author.

At the bureaucratic end of the spectrum, women are achieving some representation, although again this is not necessarily equal. Julia Overton notes that, 'In the project managers here at the AFC we have four men and four women. We try to keep the gender fairly evenly split.' Despite this, she says that it is still men who maintain their influence. 'I think that notionally there's a perception that there are more women in bureaucratic positions at the AFC than men, but it's still men with the real power. All the federal funding agencies are run by men.' Indeed, the chief executives of the AFC, Film Finance Corporation, AFTRS, and Film Australia, are all male. Perhaps it is more helpful to ask why the gender imbalance seems to be a non-issue in the film industry despite obvious and alarming evidence to the contrary. Erika Addis is pragmatic about the subject:

Thirty-year-old women don't see affirmative action as an issue that they need to take up, because they grew up with everything that affirmative action, or their mothers, provided. They take it all for granted and have no experience that this is actually something that can be very easily taken away.

Jessie Doring was not aware that affirmative action had ever existed. She has never knowingly received work or support because she is female, but she

is also very clear about women's future in the industry. 'I can't see a future for women on the same level as men unless funding is pushed into the industry as a whole', she states. 'I think there's a place for positive discrimination for any minority working in any industry.' Only time, and the 2006 Census, will tell.

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Monica Davidson is a film and television producer with over fifteen years experience. She is the Creative Director of TwoShot Media where her work includes producing and directing documentaries, short films, music videos, EPKs, television and corporate work.

#### Endnotes

1. These are the most recent figures to date from 'Occupations: By Gender', in *Get The Picture*, from the AFC website at <http://www.afc.gov.au/gtp/occupiegender.html> Accessed 29 March 2005. Figures compiled by the Australian Film Commission using unpublished data from the Census of Population and Housing, 1996 and 2001.
2. 'Patterns: Qualifications by Gender', in *Get The Picture*, from the AFC website at <http://www.afc.gov.au/gtp/occupiegender.html>, op. cit. *ibid*.
3. All quotes from women filmmakers in this article were taken directly from interviews conducted by the author. Julia Overton was interviewed by telephone on Monday 4 April, Erika Addis was interviewed in person on Wednesday 6 April, and Jessie Doring was interviewed by telephone on 7 April 2005.
4. 'Australia Records Highest Annual Birth Rate in Nine Years', in *Asia* - AFP News: [http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=afp/20050330/wf\\_asia\\_afp/australiapopulation](http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=afp/20050330/wf_asia_afp/australiapopulation) Accessed 7 April 2005.
5. Annette Bionaki, 'The Women's Program', in *Shared Visions: Women in Television*, Annette Bionaki and Hilary Glow (eds), Australian Film Commission Report, Sydney Australia, 1999, pp.10-11.
6. Helen Marshall, 'Gender: Women's Place in Australian History and Society', part of Lecture 5, School of

Social Science and Planning, RMIT University, Melbourne, 2002: [http://www.australiasoc.info/lectures/marshall\\_06.html](http://www.australiasoc.info/lectures/marshall_06.html) Accessed 6 April 2005.

7. 'Film in Australia', on the Australian Government Culture and Recreation portal: <http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/film/> Accessed 6 April 2005.
8. Jeni Thornely, 'Past, Present and Future: The Women's Film Fund', *Don't Shoot Darling! Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia*, Annette Bionaki, Barbara Creed and Freda Freiberg (eds), Greenhouse Publications, Melbourne, 1987, pp.61-68.
9. Bionaki, op.cit.
10. Annette Bionaki and Freda Freiberg, 'Double Trouble: Women's Films', in *The Australian Screen*, edited by Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan, Penguin Books Australia, Melbourne, 1989, pp.191-215.
11. Thornely, op. cit., p.65.
12. 'What Australians Are Watching: Top 50 Box Office Films 1990-2003', in *Get The Picture*: <http://www.afc.gov.au/GTP/wctop54.html> Accessed 7 April 2005.
13. Telephone conversation with researchers at Australian Film Commission on 7 April 2005.
14. Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act (1996) requires private sector companies, community organizations, non-government schools, unions, group training companies and higher education institutions with 100 or more people to establish affirmative action programs.
15. 'Contributions of Various Types of Investor to Australian Feature Films, 1965/6 to 2003/4', from *Get the Picture*, <http://www.afc.gov.au/gtp/mpfeaturesinvestors.html> Accessed 7 April 2005.
16. 'Australian Films' 2004 Box Office Share', 27 January 2005: [http://www.afc.gov.au/newsandevents/mediarelease/2005/rellease\\_350.aspx](http://www.afc.gov.au/newsandevents/mediarelease/2005/rellease_350.aspx). Accessed 7 April 2005.
17. 'About Us', WIFT NSW: <http://www.wift.org/about/index.html> Accessed 7 April 2005.