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The Women Behind the Camera

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This was going to be the last article ever on woman cinematographers. It shouldn't be news in 2003 that women are making movies—gorgeous, stunning, provocative movies—and with Ellen Kuras shooting big-budget Hollywood films like *Analyze That*, can anyone still argue that the gaze is male?

But consider this: According to the annual “Celluloid Ceiling” study conducted by Martha Lauzen at San Diego State University, only two percent of the cinematographers working on the 250 highest-grossing films of 2001 were women, down from four percent in 1998 and 1999. In the top grossing 100 of 2001, only one percent were shot by women, down from two percent in 2000 and three percent in 1999. Compare this to the percentages of women in some of the most “macho” professions: The Department of Labor reports that in 2001, 5.3 percent of truck drivers, 6.7 percent of stevedores, and a whopping twenty-one percent of metal-plating machine operators were women.

Clearly, the film business still has a long way to go to catch up with such “unenlightened” industries. Although independent film has been hospitable to women for many years, Hollywood is still reluctant to put a woman in charge of photography. “I think when you get to a certain level of budget, people have a tendency to trust men more than women,” says Maryse Alberti, who's shot on a diverse group of indie hits including *Crumb*, *Happiness*, and *Velvet Goldmine*. And many cinematographers would gladly trade the freedom of independent filmmaking for a bigger box of toys. “I want to shoot big Hollywood movies,” says Tami Reiker, the director of photography on *High Art* and *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love*. “Ellen's busting open that ceiling for all of us.”

But will an ambush of female cinematographers come rushing in after her? “Even to this day, there's a real bias about women shooting studio features,” says Nancy Schreiber, whose résumé includes *Your Friends and Neighbors*, *Visions of Light*, and *The Celluloid Closet*. “We run three departments: grip, electric, and camera. It must be scary for guys to relinquish that kind of control. I think on some very subliminal level it's cultural.”

The economy hasn't helped matters. “Since the tech market crashed and the threatened strikes of last year, there are fewer independent movies,” says Schreiber. “When times are tough, people hold in the reins and they get really conservative. There's a lot of fear, so the first ones to go are women and minorities.”

Schreiber lives in Los Angeles but keeps her apartment in New York because she prefers shooting smaller, independent films. “I think it's more difficult in Los Angeles. I am glad that I came up in the business in New York, because anything goes there. It's not a company town—the stakes are not so high.”

“I was in LA for ten years,” says Joey Forsyte, whose first film as a DP was Henry Jaglom’s *New Year’s Day*. Since then she’s shot seventeen features. “Three of them were in a movie theater for three weeks. I think they’re good movies. Because the distribution world fell apart, and there are so many movies competing for those few slots, my work just didn’t get that exposure. And without that kind of exposure, it’s really hard to move ahead.”

When Forsyte enrolled at NYU, she was the first female student who wanted to shoot features. “Every single teacher told me, ‘Women don’t shoot movies.’ I got thrown out of the only cinematography class worth anything at that school because I was female. But I came of age at a time when women were facing obstacles of all kinds, and we just didn’t listen to any of it.”

Neither Alberti nor Schreiber went to film school. Alberti, who started off photographing the Plasmatics and Iggy Pop for the *New York Rocker*, got her first movie-set job shooting stills on a pornographic film. “At that time, a lot of the crews were young students out of NYU or people like me, and the producers and directors were all Jewish or Italian men with wigs.” Schreiber got her first production assistant job by answering an ad in *The Village Voice*. By the end of the shoot, she was an electrician. Forsyte also started in electric, but it took her two years to get a job. “I did mostly construction during those two years; the male-chauvinistic construction industry was much more open to women.” The films she finally got hired on weren’t bad—she worked as a gaffer on *Blood Simple* and as best boy on three Robert Altman films.

Women who chose the camera assistant route found obstacles as well. “Very early on,” recalls Alberti, “this first AC was such an asshole with me, and it was obviously because I was the girl. I went to the bathroom and cried a few times, but I kept on doing my job. And now he’s still a first AC and I’m a DP.” Propositions and sexist remarks came with the territory. “There were definitely moments where I would just walk away and under my breath be like, ‘Remember my name,’” says Reiker. “You just maneuver around it and keep going.”

Nancy Schiesari, whose work includes the documentaries *Warrior Marks* and the Oscar-nominated *Regret to Inform*, studied filmmaking at the Royal College of Art in London. Her first job was on the all-woman crew of Sally Potter’s film *The Gold Diggers*, as first AC to Babette Mangolte. She endured a “grueling” meeting to get a union card: “All these cameramen were around this huge oak table. One asked, ‘Could you carry a 35mm camera up a mountain?’” With her union card, Schiesari worked steadily for three years as one of the only two female camera assistants at the BBC at the time. “One day one of the gaffers said, ‘You’ll be an assistant for your whole life if you stay here,’ so I took his word and got out of the BBC.” Schiesari, who now teaches at the University of Texas in Austin, got an Emmy nomination last fall for John Cleese’s *The Human Face*—produced for the BBC.

Schreiber found that making the leap from electric to camera meant directing her own documentary short, *Possum Living*. “I saw that the other DP’s that were women were getting work mostly in documentaries. I had come up in features and commercials, but I had to really hone my handheld skills. It was sort of ironic because later, people thought I came out of documentaries.”

How documentaries became “women’s work” is hardly a mystery. “You don’t do a lot of talking,” says Schiesari, “you do a lot of sitting on the outside, watching.” At the same time, she notes, “You’ve got to be assertive to get a film made. You’ve got to have all those so-called ‘male traits’ to get things done. If you’ve experienced oppression or marginalization, and you develop the qualities that our capitalist society has fostered, then you can use that sense of oppression to work for you, and have that sensitive eye.”

But being perceived as “sensitive” can limit your career. “Kathryn Bigelow and Mimi Leder direct action,” says Schreiber, whose latest documentary, *Robert Capa: In Love and War*, premiered at Sundance in January 2003. “They broke that stereotype. Why do people think we can only do certain kinds of stories?” Many female DP’s are not particularly drawn to scripts about three generations of women making a quilt. “You have all the clichés that women are more nurturing,” says Alberti. “I am more interested in the strange, the dark, the sexual, the edge of society.”

Younger cinematographers can’t afford to be so picky. “I’ve always worked; that hasn’t been a problem,” says Therese Sherman, whose films includes the 2001 Oscar-nominated documentary *Legacy* and a documentary on the photographer Hansel Mieth, directed by Nancy Schiesari, which premieres on PBS May 27. Still, thirteen years after graduating from Columbia College in Chicago, she’s shooting *Fear Factor*. “I gauge my career by the people I went to film school with, and the women are still shooting independent features and reality TV for money, and some of the men are shooting Oscar-winning movies. No one ever calls you up and says, ‘You didn’t get that job because you’re female,’ but that happens enough and you get older and then you don’t get the next job because you’re competing against people that have had more experience because they’ve gotten those opportunities.” Sherman’s started a TV commercial production company and finds she’s getting more into producing. “The women I talk to, we really don’t understand it. We try so hard, we’re all so very good, but it just doesn’t matter.”

None of the features Sherman has shot have been theatrically released. “Young women who are shooting now,” says Forsyte, “we probably don’t even know who half of them are because we’re not seeing their work. You’re never going to get to shoot a \$100 million feature if you don’t shoot a million dollar feature.”

Of course, getting that million dollar feature has never been easy. “One of my agents once did a little test and fast-forwarded my reel a few minutes ahead and got it back from a potential employer in the same position,” recalls Schreiber. “Then there was an agent that wanted me to just put my initials on the reel.” Joey Forsyte found that her first name got her interviews—only interviews. “I went for one interview, and the producer called me after it was over. He said, ‘I hate to tell you that until you walked in the door, this director was going to hire you.’ There have probably been a half-dozen times where somebody has called me to tell me that, which is a courageous thing to do because it’s not legal.”

Schreiber notes that it can be another obstacle to maneuver around. “I cannot focus on thinking that I didn’t get work because I was a woman,” she says. “It’s tough for everybody. The chemistry was just better with somebody else. It’s just like finding a mate in a relationship. That’s the healthiest attitude I can have.”

Once they’re on the set, women are expected be on their best behavior. “It’s really hard for us to be big swinging dicks,” says Sherman, “and we can’t afford to have that really common male cinematographer’s ego—not to say they all have it—because our jobs are so fragile.” Schreiber agrees: “There’s a fine line between assertive and aggressive. Guys can be assholes as DP’s and get places, but women have to watch their step. We have to be better than the guys; we have to work faster, be more creative, not step out of line, not get moody.”

With a generation raised by working mothers, and a growing number of female producers and studio heads, you’d think opportunities would be increasing. But experience has shown otherwise. “When there’s already a production designer in place and it’s a woman, we often don’t get hired,” says Schreiber. Forsyte has seen equally skewed hiring practices. “Men who are younger than me and men who are gay have been the most likely to hire me,” says Forsyte. “Either women are the most likely to hire me, or the least likely.

In the major feature world, they are so nervous about their own positions that they're terrified of taking a risk. They will take a guy who's shot a small movie and put him on a big movie, but they're unlikely to do that with a woman."

In the indie world, it's a different story. "There've been female producers and directors that have helped me a lot," says Reiker, who, she says, found her NYU connections invaluable. "I shot Maria Maggenti's film *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love*, and my friend Dolly Hall was the producer. Dolly then produced *High Art*, which I shot, and then Maria wrote a movie called *The Love Letter*, so now she was hanging out with the Spielbergs and writing this script with Kate Capshaw. She screened *High Art* for the Spielbergs and Peter Chan, the director, and they loved it and that's how I got my first studio movie."

Reiker suddenly found herself in Hollywood. "I had an amazing experience on *The Love Letter*. Everyone at Dreamworks was very excited to have a woman shooting this movie. You're up there and you have every last makeup woman, every script supervisor, saying, 'You go girl, I'm so proud of you.' I shoot a lot of commercials all over the world, and that's where you really get, when you're in Cambodia or Africa or Mexico and everyone's like, 'I've never seen a woman behind the camera before!'

The next generation of cinematographers may find that it's more difficult to get started. "It's much harder now," says Reiker. "In the eighties and the beginning of the nineties, MTV was exploding. I shot a lot of MTV promos—they were like little commercials, all 35mm. I don't know if there are as many outlets now for little things. All of that stuff is getting shot on tape. It just makes it harder to make that film reel." Indeed, Reiker's most recent film, *Pieces of April*, which played at Sundance this year, was shot digitally at a cost of \$150,000.

However, one thing has changed for the better: Female AC's are becoming as common on the set as female script supervisors. Forsyte's current camera assistant is a man, but previously she only hired women (including Tami Reiker). "A woman is more likely to tell me what she can and can't do. In fact, women usually underrate themselves, whereas a lot of guys will inflate what they can do."

Schreiber notes that many men are hiring female AC's. "Male DP's seem to love having women AC's because they're being supported, just like with their wives." But how many of those AC's are becoming DP's? "It's been very sad for me," says Schreiber. "I have worked with many wonderful woman camera assistants, and many of them have not gone on to shoot. It's a very rough life because we have to travel on the spur of the moment. What do you do if you have kids? You have to stay in town, work on commercials, or have a partner that shares child-rearing so you're able to do the three-month shoots."

Alberti turned down *Boys Don't Cry* to spend more time with her son, now nine years old. "This business is really not conducive to having a family first. We've made a lot of progress, but I think that women are not only expected to hunt and gather, but also take care of the food and the kids in the cave. So I try to balance both. I'm really going to try very hard to make the right choices to keep on having an interesting career. In order to be a good mother, I need to be a cinematographer—that's part of me; that gives me life and passion. But my son will always come first."

A desire for a family is one reason these DP's suspect that many young women are not pursuing cinematography careers, but another may be that women are too tough on themselves, a liability in such a technically intimidating field. "When we were kids, we never played baseball," explains Forsyte, "and if we had played baseball, we would have realized that striking out two out of three times makes you the best

baseball player on the planet. You can make some mistakes and it's okay.”

Or perhaps it's just that today's young women are unaccustomed to the kind of struggle that previous generations took for granted. “There are a lot of good woman DP's coming out of schools, but on the whole their numbers are dropping,” says Schiesari. “When I first started teaching about nine years ago here at Austin, it was about fifty-fifty. My last sync sound class had twelve men and one woman.”

These things go in waves, and nine years from now Schiesari's classes may be filled with women who grew up watching Claire Danes in *The Mod Squad* and saw Kuras' name on the screen. And they'll walk through doors opened by two generations of women who just kept shooting, no matter what. “I think the most destructive thing about the lack of opportunities for myself and other women is that it hasn't made a lot of successful women visible to women that are younger than us,” says Forsyte. “They don't see a lot of women up there winning Academy Awards. I'm discouraged that they're so discouraged, because I feel like I'm a success. My name's not on a lot of big movies, but I'm really loving what I do. I think shooting is one of the best jobs in the world.”

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