

# Sexism From Page to Screen: How Hollywood Screenplays Inscribe Gender

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyses how characters are described in recent Hollywood screenplays, and notes that female characters are routinely described very differently than male characters. Male characters are commonly named and described expansively, whereas female characters are often unnamed, described meagrely, highly sexualised and infantilised. How characters are described in screenplays matters, because it impacts on production practices, the nature of workplaces, the films produced, and the gender representations we see daily on our screens. Conceptualizing this as a problem of screenwriting rather than an abstract problem of representation helps us imagine and enact change for people both imagined and real.

## KEYWORDS

screenplays, sexism, gender, feminism, Hollywood, screenwriting, representation

## Introduction: Hollywood is Sexist...In Ways We Haven't Even Explored Yet

In this article, I argue that sexist representations of women on screen are already well formed before a woman steps in front of a camera, before a single frame is shot. By analysing Hollywood screenplays, we can see how women are imagined by the writers of the world's biggest screen industry. And it is not pretty.

The representation of women in screenplays recently came to popular attention with the Twitter feed [@FemScriptIntros](#), where American film producer Ross Putnam tweets descriptions of female characters from unproduced scripts he reads, anonymized with the character name JANE. It [received](#) a [great deal](#) of [media attention](#) (Wagner 2016, Hunt 2016, Brown 2016, Dockterman 2016). The quotations published in the @FemScriptIntros twitter feed effectively demonstrate a pattern of women valued for their youth, beauty and sexuality.

'A gorgeous woman, JANE, 23, is a little tipsy, dancing naked on her big bed, as adorable as she is sexy. \*BONUS PTS FOR BEING THE 1ST LINE' (9 Feb 2016).

'JANE leads a yoga class on the quad. Her stomach is flawless as she does a bridge' (28 Feb 2016).

'JANE is beaten, bruised yet resilient and beautiful' (16 Mar 2016).

The examples tweeted by Putnam have shone a spotlight on gender stereotyping in Hollywood, and specifically on the role of screenplays in contributing to this. From the perspective of screen performers, the Tumblrs [Casting Call Woe](#) and [Terrible Casting](#), and YouTube series [Lady Parts](#) have similarly drawn attention to the hackneyed casting calls for performers to fill poorly written female roles. But Putnam has also been criticized for circulating quotes from unproduced screenplays; it is implied that produced screenplays will be less likely to use reductive introductions to their female characters, as will be explored further below.

Like Putnam's Twitter feed, this article applies a familiar feminist lens to artefacts of screen practice not previously examined in this way. Screenplays and films are understood here as key sites where contemporary society negotiates and produces meanings about gender and sexuality, masculinity and

femininity, women and men. As Karen Hollinger and Anneke Smelik confirm, this approach to film as a vital creator of cultural meaning has been significant for feminist scholars since at least the 1970s (Hollinger 2012, 8-9; Smelik 1998, 9). In this study, cinema is understood as an important and active participant in the cultural construction of gender difference, a dynamic process that influences social conventions, behaviour and personal conceptions of identity. In this context, women's exclusion from and distorted representation within screen stories indicate women's disempowerment in society and the cultural imagination.

Hollinger and Patricia White both note that feminist scholars have actively interrogated and engaged with both the theory and practice of filmmaking, intertwining production, politics, and philosophy (Hollinger 2012, 7-8; White 2015 8). In this tradition, I work here to reveal the biased industrial norms of mainstream filmmaking. Analysis of screenplays provides evidence for how gender difference is manifest, how women are excluded from screens in droves, and when represented on screen women are moulded through fantasies of male dominance and female stereotypes. In the wake of Laura Mulvey's pioneering work, much feminist cinema scholarship on gender representation has concentrated on the 'male gaze', and how film's perspective routinely positions women on screen as an erotic object and the film audience as a heterosexual male (1975). Many scholars, including Mulvey herself, have complicated this framework since the mid-1970s (Mulvey 2009). This study likewise complicates the notion of the gaze by examining how women are constructed through language on the page rather than images on screen, suggesting that the notion and construction of the film's gaze prefigures its visual manifestation. Screenplay analysis reveals how women's otherness is inscribed at multiple stages of the production process, and opens room for rewriting and reworking. In order to challenge dominant, biased representations of gender on screen, it is necessary to understand their practices of production, so that these practices might be challenged and transformed.

Of the scholars addressing gender in screenwriting and screenplays, Kevin Boon's work stands out as particularly relevant for its analysis of the representation of gender in screenplays as texts. Boon focuses heavily on screenplay dialogue, and identifies masculine and feminine character types commonly found in Hollywood screenplays, noting that a wider range of types seem to be available to male characters and that female characters are primarily defined in terms of their sexuality (2008, 115-48). I take a closer look at how gender is represented in screenplays, by comparing how female and male characters are described in produced screenplays, and by exploring some of the implications this has for screen production. It is already well known that [male characters dominate dialogue on screen](#) (McIntyre 2012). A [recent study](#) of over 2000 American films found that, in the vast majority of them, male characters had 60-90% of the dialogue (Anderson and Daniels 2016). Although not without its complexities, dialogue is relatively easy to measure and something the viewing public readily understands. In addition, substantially more male characters appear in Hollywood films than female characters. Male characters outnumber females by a ratio of approximately three to one in most films; only 10% of films have a roughly equal proportion of male and female characters (Smith, et al. 2013). Hollywood screenplays thus marginalise women in a number of ways.

In this article, I concentrate on the *scene text* (also known as *big print*) in screenplays. Screenplays comprise two main components: *dialogue* and *scene text*. Claudia Sternberg explicates the chief functions of scene text: to describe characters and setting, and to report action (1997). As prose description of a scene's action, separated from a scene heading and dialogue, scene text has been a key feature of Hollywood screenplays since before the sound era (Norman 2007). Recent screenplay manuals generally encourage direct, pithy expression (Corley and Megel 2014, 24-26; McBride 2011, 31) in third person, present tense (Millard 2011, 145; Price 2013, 117). In a tradition that Adam Ganz identifies as 'lens-based' writing, with lineage through scientific and travel writing (2012), most manuals urge the writer to describe only what the film viewer will see on screen, discouraging explicit camera direction (Field 2005, 220-221), but promoting language that 'direct[s] the reader's visualisation of the potential film' (Ingelstrom 2014, 31). This sounds tightly

prescriptive, but Price notes that there is 'widespread variation' in practice (2013, 10), chiefly due to the differing styles of writers. Analysing scene text in screenplays allows us to see how the film and its characters are imagined, at a stage when the practical vicissitudes of production are somewhat limited.

For this article, I read screenplays for 36 feature films nominated for Academy Awards for Best Original Screenplay, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Picture, Best Actress in a Leading Role and Best Actor in a Leading Role in the years 2014 to 2016. (For a small number of nominated films, a screenplay was not available in English). This sample was chosen because the films are recent, commercially successful, and critically acclaimed; they are emblematic of current trends and presumably demonstrate best practice. A few television screenplays are also mentioned here, from series that have won Emmy Awards for Outstanding Writing for a Drama Series and Writers Guild of America Awards, however reading of television screenplays for this study was not wide or systematic. As a collection, this sample crosses a range of genres and target audiences; the films are largely, but not exclusively, from the USA. I read each entire screenplay and treated them as independent texts (I have not seen some of the films made from them). I concentrated discourse analysis on descriptions when characters are first introduced, as this creates a dominant impression. I paid particular attention to the patterns of naming characters and descriptions that mark status, agency or role. I compared how male and female characters are described in the scene text within each screenplay; there is enough variation between writing styles in different screenplays that scene text would not be directly comparable.

The key finding of this analysis is that male characters are described in screenplay scene text in very different ways from female characters. The following analysis will show how descriptions of female characters in Hollywood screenplays differ from descriptions of male characters, focusing on common tendencies across a number of screenplays. Firstly, I examine how a lack of description of female characters renders them invisible, compared to well-described male characters. Secondly, I analyse how female characters are commonly described in terms that position them as accessories owned by male characters. Thirdly, I examine how scene text sexualises and objectifies female characters. Fourthly, I analyse how the language used to describe adult females often infantilises them. Fifthly, I examine how the names given to female characters in screenplays downgrade their social status. These five patterns amount to a consistent, multifaceted marginalisation of female characters in Hollywood screenplays. Finally, I explore some of the implications of this marginalisation, in production, industry and wider society. This problem of representation is broader than any single screenplay; the problems outlined here are pervasive. Women are systematically marginalized on screen and this article analyses just one aspect of a broader problem (Smith, Choueiti and Pieper 2014). I hope this analysis will raise consciousness about how to write more and better female characters, which is an important step towards more equitable representation on screen. Most significantly, I hope that it will enliven an understanding of screen representation as the product of malleable practices.

### **Describing Women: The Invisible**

In this section, I compare how much description is afforded to male and female characters in screenplays. Male characters are routinely afforded more detailed description than female characters. This means that male characters commonly have more personality and depth than female characters, who thus readily become superficial and secondary.

Female characters are frequently introduced without any character description whatsoever, whereas it is uncommon for male characters to be introduced without any description. For example, *Foxcatcher* is a 2014 American sports/crime drama that is populated predominantly by male characters, who are described in detail. The screenplay by E. Max Frye and Dan Futterman concentrates on three male wrestlers, Mark

Schultz, Dave Schultz and John Du Pont. On the first page alone, Mark's body, clothes and possessions are described in several sentences:

MARK SCHULTZ (27, 180 lbs., cauliflower ears) lifts a human-sized, leather WRESTLING DUMMY from the mat to stand in front of him [...] Mark pulls his beat-up car into a space in the parking lot of this nondescript, 1960s-era suburban brick-facade school. He's freshly showered, wears a short-sleeve dress shirt, clip-on tie, slacks [...] Mark waits alone in a chair he's much too big for...(2014, 1)

Dave is introduced a little later with a paragraph:

DAVE SCHULTZ (31, bearded, intelligent, 163 lbs., strong, fierce, but calm), Head Coach of U of W wrestling, stands on the wrestling mat speaking VERY QUIETLY with 3 or 4 select WRESTLERS from the team. We can't quite hear what Dave is saying to them, but we can sense immediately the reverence and deep respect they have for Dave - one of the country's top wrestlers and great coaches (2014, 4).

Before we first meet John Du Pont, he is introduced in the script through dialogue about him and photographs that show him as '50, thin, beak-nosed, blond-grey hair' and meeting with US Presidents (2014, 15). When we meet him, his personality is described in a paragraph:

You quickly realize that du Pont can be voluble and charming, but the more time you spend with him, the more you see what an effort this is for him - how essentially uncomfortable he is in his own skin.... Also, he just might have snorted a tiny bit of coke before he came in (2014, 15).

There are only two female characters in the film with names and speaking roles: Nancy Schultz and Jean Du Pont. Through dialogue among the men, we are given to understand that Nancy is Dave's wife and Jean is John's mother. The screenplay reader is given no description of their personality, their looks, their professional position or social role when they are introduced. There is simply no description of Nancy; she features in the big print only in action, despite being mentioned on 18 pages of the script: 'Nancy turns to walk away' (2014, 22), 'Nancy looks over' (2014, 23). On her introduction, Jean Du Pont is described only as 'in her wheelchair' (2014, 53). To be sure, Mark, David and John are given much more description in the screenplay because they are major characters, while Nancy and Jean are only supporting characters. But Nancy's description is scant even compared to male supporting characters. Stan Beck works for John Du Pont and features on 16 pages of the script (two fewer than Nancy); he is described briefly on his first appearance with age, personality and dress: 'mid-forties, no-nonsense, suit and tie' (2014, p. 25). It is notable that that similar traits could not be afforded to Nancy Schultz.

Similarly, in the biography of a criminal stockbroker, *The Wolf of Wall Street* by Terence Winter, Jordan Belfort's first wife Teresa features on 9 pages of the script, but is never described (2013). Likewise, over fifteen male characters in political drama *Argo* by Chris Terrio (2011) are introduced with their age and job title ('TOM AHERN, 48, the CIA station chief' p2; 'FRED KUPKE, 34, communications officer' p6), but two of the three female characters who work in the consulate in similar roles are given no description at all. The introduction of 'MARK LIJEK, 29, a consular officer' is routine (2); when his wife appears and speaks she is not even mentioned in the scene text (6), despite the fact that she features in just as many scenes throughout the script as he does.

It is rare to find male characters lacking description in the same script as female characters described in detail. Even when female characters outnumber male characters and take central roles, in a script such as *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts, the male characters are usually afforded description. This demonstrates how pervasive the bias is. It is not simply a matter of major characters being described in more detail, but minor characters being further marginalized.

When male characters are introduced without description, this tends to be a matter of style in scripts where no characters are afforded description. Scripts including *Carol* by Phyllis Nagy (2015), *The Martian* by Drew Goddard (2014), and *Nebraska* by Bob Nelson (2013) provide little description of both male and female characters, as their sparse big print concentrates on action. One exception is kidnapping drama *Room* by Emma Donoghue (2013), where the young boy Jack is given no description, but his mother and father are given brief descriptions. The lack of description seems appropriate in this case, given that much of the film is mediated through Jack's point of view: he describes those he observes, but not himself.

Nevertheless, it is striking that many successful scripts have a complete absence of description for female characters. It causes concern that all women might be generic or interchangeable, entirely defined by their gender. She is a woman: detail is superfluous. Lengthy descriptions often translate to a lingering camera and longer screen time, so a lack of description in screenplays contributes to the absence of women on our screens. Characters without their own description recede into the background, rather than become the subject of the camera's focus. The gross preponderance of men on our screens is created by these screenwriting practices. Just the simple practice of writing similar *amounts* of description for male and female characters in screenplays would help to ameliorate the marginalization of women on screen.

### **Describing Women: The Possession**

This section compares the language used to introduce male and female characters in screenplays, which casts them in very different positions, both linguistically and socially. Male characters are usually the subjects of sentences; female characters are often objects, possessed by a male character.

For many female characters, they are introduced only as an appurtenance to a male character. In Donald Margulies' *The End of the Tour* (2014), male lead David Lipsky is described thus:

A boyishly handsome forty-three, quick-witted, tightly-wound, smokes and types speedily from scraps of handwritten notes, surrounded by books on his current journalistic subject, climate change. A stack of copies of his recent publishing success - *Absolutely American* - looms nearby (1).

By contrast, Sarah is the largest female role in the script, and she is described simply as 'his pretty girlfriend' (4).

In *Legend*, the story of London mobster brothers written by Brian Helgeland, Reggie and Ronnie Kray are introduced expansively on the first page. They are described briefly in the scene text, 'the Krays: REGGIE tough and fit, RON off kilter in style ... heavier, thicker, bespectacled' (1), but also described expansively in the voice over by Frances,

They were brothers. But bound by more than blood, they were twins as well. Counterparts. Gangster princes of the city they meant to conquer. [...] Ron Kray was a one man London mob. Bloodthirsty, illogical, but funny [as with Reggie was different. Once in a lifetime do you find a street fighting man like Reg. Believe me when I say it took a lot of love for me to hate him the way I do (1).

Frances herself is the narrator and the principal female character in the script, but her introduction is meagre. She is described only as 'the future Mrs Kray' (3). Apparently there is nothing to her, but who she will later marry. If she has age, appearance and personality, it is not worth the ink.

There are only a few named speaking roles for female characters in *American Sniper*, a war drama written by Jason Hall, and all these women are described using possessive terms to explain their relation to protagonist Chris Kyle. Chris is the sniper of the title, introduced in action and description:

CHRIS KYLE lays prone, dick in the dirt, eye to the glass of a .300 Win-Mag sniper rifle. He's Texas stock with a boyish grin, blondish goatee and vital blue eyes (1).

The phrase ‘Texas stock’ effectively highlights the importance of his family and cultural background, without diminishing his independence and agency. The women in this script are not afforded such dignity: ‘SARAH steps out, his high school sweetheart all grown up’ (8). The fact that Sarah and Chris were once high school sweethearts becomes her defining characteristic, but further than that she is also ‘his’. In addition, the script insists that the spaces inhabited by female characters should be identified as possessions of the male protagonist. The house shared by Chris, Taya and their children is repeatedly referred to as ‘Chris’s house’ in scene headers, despite the fact that he is rarely seen there due to his military deployment (57, 61); the home does not belong to the family, but to him.

This relegation of female characters to appurtenances of men is more widespread than these glaring examples might suggest. It is often crucial in scene text to spell out relationships between characters – this is far from inappropriate. But the phrasing used in screenplays routinely renders women as possessions of men. On the first page of *Boys n the Hood*, written by Richard Linklater, Olivia is described as ‘Mason’s MOM’, and her character name throughout most of the script is MOM. Mason Sr is likewise named DAD throughout most of the script, but is introduced in this way: ‘Dad gets out of the car and hurries to the door’ (16). He is not Mason’s Dad, or Samantha’s Dad. He is not possessed by another character. But Mom is. She belongs to Mason.

*The Theory of Everything*, by Anthony McCarten, provides a neat example of how to write male and female characters with dignity, even when depicting a story world that does not. *The Theory of Everything* is a biographical story of Stephen Hawking. We see a blossoming romance between young scientist Stephen and young Christian Jane in the UK in the 1960s. In this era, Stephen Hawking is described as:

STEPHEN HAWKING (in his early 20s) [...] his face almost entirely covered with spectacles and floppy hair, slight of frame, a velvet jacket and velvet bow tie, eccentric-looking. STEPHEN is a fun-loving, playful, active, young student (2).

Jane is introduced as:

A YOUNG WOMAN, JANE WILDE, (18) arrives at the door with her friend DIANA. [...] JANE, shy, has her hair up in a fashionable bouffant roll (3).

Both Stephen and Jane have ages, personal styles, and personalities. When Stephen asks another character about Jane, Brian says she’s ‘Basil’s sister’ (4) – a description that might aptly reflect the speaking character, the characters’ relationships, and the broader view of women in society in mid twentieth century Britain. The cleft between the scene text’s character description and the description in dialogue suggests that Jane is much more than just ‘Basil’s sister’. This kind of nuance seems to feature rarely in screenplays. By routinely positioning female characters as possessions of male characters, screenplays use language to subordinate women, effectively concealing their personality and agency.

### **Describing Women: The Sex Object**

In Kevin Boon’s chapter, ‘Scripting Gender, Representing Race’ (2008, 115-148), he argues that female characters in Hollywood screenplays are consistently drawn within tight patriarchal boundaries and defined primarily as objects of a sexualised male gaze. This analysis of scene text in recent Hollywood screenplays supports Boon’s argument, finding that female characters are often described in terms that sexualise and objectify them. The sexualisation and objectification of female characters in scene text often comes at the expense of describing all other characteristics: women are exclusively sexual objects. By examining how this is written in screenplays, we can deconstruct the processes that compose biased spectatorship.

It is typical for female characters in screenplays to be described only or primarily in terms of their looks, but rare for male characters. Film and television are visual media, to be sure, but male characters are usually

described visually *and* in terms of their character, attitude, and personal qualities. As Laura Mulvey articulated, the female body functions in the cinema chiefly as an eroticised object of the male gaze (1975). In the wake of Laura Mulvey's influential work on the gaze, much of the feminist scholarship on cinema has been concerned with spectatorship, a concept that might seem tangential to the textual analysis of screenplays. However, screenplays contribute to the construction of spectatorship, and therefore offer strategies for changing those practices of construction.

For example, in the pilot episode of television political drama, *The West Wing* by Aaron Sorkin, Leo Jacobi is introduced as '55 and professorial' (1999, 2) and on the following page C.J. Gregg is described as '38, compact and athletic'(3). In the ensuing pages, Donatella Moss is introduced as '25 and sexy without trying too hard, DONNA is devoted to Josh' (6) whereas her boss Josh is introduced as, 'A youthful 38, JOSH is Deputy Chief of Staff and a highly regarded brain' (7). It is clear that women in *The West Wing* are valued for their physicality and service to men, but men are respected for their intellect.

In the *Birdman* script, a comedy/drama about a faded actor by Alejandro Inarritu and friends, major female characters are described primarily in terms of their attractiveness. Sam, 'has simple and striking good looks' (2014, 1); Laura is, 'dark, exotic, the kind of woman who makes every person she meets feel like she's seducing them' (3), Sylvia is, 'elegant and simply beautiful' (36). By contrast, only one of the many male characters has his attractiveness mentioned, but it is not his only attribute; Ralph is, 'slightly handsome, slightly balding, slightly invisible' (3).

The most prevalent of descriptions for female characters seems to be that she is unknowingly attractive. In Nick Hornby's historical tale of a young woman's immigration to the USA, *Brooklyn*, protagonist Eilis is described as 'open-faced pretty without knowing it' (2015, 1). Musical drama *Whiplash* by Damien Chazelle features only one female character: Nicole is 'pretty, but doesn't really know it. More to the point, she doesn't seem to care' (2014, 3). The pilot episode of fantasy drama television series *Game of Thrones*, 'Winter is Coming' written by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, introduces lead character Daenerys Targaryen in a similar way: 'Daenerys is a beautiful girl but nobody has bothered to tell her' (2011, 11). This common cliché seems to indicate a character, who embodies the Madonna/whore complex, offering the reader innocence, purity and potential sexual degradation all in one neat persona. The contradiction here hinges on a construction centered on the conjunction 'but' or 'without'. I have yet to read a similar construction applied to a male character.

Screenplays often use sexual language as metaphor when describing female characters. So even when she is not directly sexualized, there is no mistaking the sexual connotations readers should associate with her. For example, *Nightcrawler* (2012) is a crime thriller by Dan Gilroy, set in the world of news media, which introduces its main female character in this way:

NINA ROMINA is a veteran of three decades in the blood-sport that is local TV news [...] she's a 50-ish, over-made, hard-bitten beauty who began in front of the camera and has now, through sheer survival, become the madam of the whore house [...] (2012, 18).

Although ostensibly focused on Nina's professional experience in the television industry, this introduction tinges her professionalism with an image of sexual degradation. Exploitation is a key theme throughout *Nightcrawler*; for the female character, exploitation is expressed in explicitly sexual terms.

More often, the sexualisation of female characters is much less subtle. *Wolf of Wall Street*, the biography of stockbroker Jordan Belfort, introduces the protagonist as 'handsome' (2013, 1). But it is his second wife, Naomi, who is repeatedly described in sexual terms throughout the script. Jordan performs his rampant sexuality through active sentences: 'Jordan fucks an HISPANIC HOOKER from behind' (3); 'Jordan cums

loudly, convulsively' (47). By contrast, Naomi's descriptions are passive. The first time we see Naomi, she is introduced as 'a living wet dream' and if that were not crystal clear, she is also, 'incredibly, painfully hot' (3). Whose dream? Whose pain? These descriptions are not really about Naomi, but the effect she has on men.

Such descriptions render this female character as little more than an object of sexual fantasy, offered for consumption by male characters, the implied reader and the presumed screen audience. Almost astoundingly, *American Sniper* (2014) literally introduces its most prominent female character as a sexual object: 'A brunette steps to the bar. A sharp object with heavy eye-shadow and tight leather pants' (15). There is no mistaking the fact that this character is simply a sexualized tool for men, both within the script and beyond it. More pervasively, the heavy emphasis on looks, attractiveness and sexuality in descriptions of female characters effectively reduces them to objects for consumption. To describe female characters primarily in terms that sexualize and objectify them means that their characters routinely lack depth and agency.

### **Describing Women: The (Sexy) Child**

The terminology used to describe adult female characters in screenplays often infantilises them, suggesting connotations of weak, foolish dependents. This is frequently combined with language of sexualisation and objectification to further disempower women characters.

Adult female characters are often idiomatically referred to as 'girls' in scene text. When applied to an adult female, the term 'girl' infantilises and disempowers her: she lacks independence, experience, her own perspective on the world, maturity and seriousness. Nicole's introduction in *Whiplash* is compact: 'The GIRL at the counter is about his age [20]' (3). Nevertheless, this short sentence brims with contradiction: it insists that Nicole is a female child rather than an adult woman, but clarifies that she is of adult age.

Similarly, in *Dallas Buyers Club* by Craig Borton and Melissa Wallack, 'Ron and T.J. party with two hot girls, KELLY and CRYSTAL, 20s' (2012, 11), who the middle-aged men proceed to have sex and snort cocaine with. *Inherent Vice* by Paul Thomas Anderson describes the narrator, Sortilège, as a, 'lovely young girl' and clarifies that she is in her '20s' (6); it similarly introduces, 'A sexy young Asian girl in a bikini: JADE (20s)' (2013, 15). Sexykitten is the screen-name of a character whose voice features in *Her* by Spike Jonze (2011); she is described as a, 'cute girl voice' (7) before protagonist Theodore has cybersex with her (8-9). The script does not seem to suggest that Sexykitten is, in fact, a child. Theodore is not portrayed here as a paedophile. She just seems childlike. Indeed, women in screenplays seem to be most often described as girls when they are about to have sex.

The adult male characters in screenplays tend to be referred to most often as men; young adult males are sometimes referred to as 'guys'. Scene text very seldom describes adult male characters as boys; notably, I did not find a single example. In Hollywood screenplays, 'Boy' is a word reserved for children. 'Girl' is a word equally applicable to children and sexy women. The terminology consistently chosen to describe female characters in screenplays constrains their independence, agency and autonomy.

### **Naming Women: The Anonymous**

The names given to characters in screenplays are also revealing of attitudes to women. Character names used within scripts may not even be known to film audiences, though they often feature in the final credits. Nevertheless, names are significant for the way they signal character status within scripts. Readers are more regularly reminded of male characters' higher status.

In biographical health drama *Dallas Buyers Club* (2012), two doctors are introduced in similar terms: 'DR. NATHAN SEVARD, 50's, arrogant, DR. EVE SAKS, early 30s, sophisticated' (7). But throughout the script, his dialogue is headed 'DR. SEVARD' and her dialogue is headed 'EVE'. We are constantly reminded of his

title. Hers seems to vanish. Description of their actions reinforces this: ‘Dr. Sevard walks down the hallway with Eve’ (8). Similarly, in Wes Anderson’s European comedy *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2013), over a dozen male characters are referred to with titles throughout (M. Jean, M. Gustave, Deputy Kovacs) and only one female character has a title (Madame D.), whereas most of the female characters have only first names (Clotilde, Agatha). The constant reminder of the male characters’ titles calls forth their social prestige; the use of a first name alone gives the women an undistinguished familiarity.

More male characters are named in these screenplays than female characters. Naming a character gives them an individuated identity, something elusive for many women mentioned in screenplays. Scripts like *Argo*, *The Imitation Game* (2015) and *Nightcrawler* concentrate heavily on male characters, but are littered with unnamed women in minor roles. It is worth noting that minor male characters are more often given names and therefore the status of character, when females are not (Lauzen 2011). In *Birdman*, unnamed male characters are given titles like ‘STAGE HAND’ (3), ‘TOURIST’ (83), and ‘USHER’ (99), but the TV host is described as ‘busty’ and named ‘BLOND WOMAN’ (9). There is no reason why the screenwriter should not remain consistent, naming this character the TV HOST, yet her gender and hair colour eclipsed the job. There is no equivalency with Inarritu et al’s male characters, for instance the stage hand, tourist and usher could just as easily be give titles like ‘brunette man’ and descriptions like ‘beefcake’.

Marginalisation of characters by name regularly coincides with other disempowering descriptions outlined above. Despite lacking a name, minor female characters are nonetheless often sexualized. In the opening pages of Peter Landesman’s thriller *Kill the Messenger*, a pair of minor characters is introduced: he is named and described, ‘RONNY QUAIL, 40, nose collapsed from a lifetime of blow,’ and her description becomes nominalized, ‘LITTLE HOTTIE, 19, topless and G-string’ (2013, 2). He is a person with an affliction. She simply *is* her sexualized body.

The way characters are named (or not) and accorded titles (or not) reinforces throughout a script which characters matter. The common practice of skipping titles or names for female characters reminds the reader that she is less important than the male characters, whose titles and names are repeated regularly. This practice of naming characters differently by their genders seems to dovetail with and compound the effect of studies that show female characters are commonly given lower status professions in films than male characters (Crockett 2016).

### **Why Words Matter**

How characters are described in screenplays matters, because it impacts production practices, the nature of workplaces, the films produced, and the gender representations we see daily on our screens. A screenplay is usually the basis for screen production, and film and television both reflect and shape our society in important ways. Ultimately, how women and men are described in screenplays matters, because screen representations contribute to the normalization of sexist gender roles in our society.

It is important to remember that meagre and hackneyed descriptions of women in screenplays are pervasive. I have cited many sexist examples here, and from scripts that are well regarded and widely considered successful. This is not the problem of any one screenplay, but indicative of a troubling norm. Before being published online, all of these scripts were read by dozens of industry professionals: writers, script assessors, script editors, producers, performers, crew, marketers and publicists. These scripts were deemed suitable for productions costing millions of dollars, and acceptable for distribution as scripts to be read by the general public. The level of industrial confidence in these scripts cannot be overestimated. Nevertheless, the way they describe female characters is glaringly deficient. This study hopes to suggest that changing the ways we write, read and produce screenplays will work to improve this.

Major characters in a screenplay are more than just a pithy introduction: they are created through an

accumulation of description, action and dialogue over dozens of pages. However, male characters also dominate screen time and many female characters often [sit on the narrative sidelines](#) watching the action driven by male characters (Hickey 2014), so their introductory description may take on greater significance. Character descriptions are sometimes simply lifted from scripts and posted as casting calls. Accordingly, female performers may be cast simply because they fit a certain physical description, rather than for their capacity to play a certain kind of character. Paradoxically, puny and cliché character descriptions mean that female performers usually work harder to create characters. They put in considerable work to build a character without direction from the page. For many male performers, the screenwriter has already done substantial work establishing their character. This contributes to the difficulty actresses regularly report in finding good roles (Casting Call Woe, Lady Parts, Terrible Casting).

The impact of poorly written female characters in screenplays rarely seem to be recognized within Hollywood. Indeed, it runs contrary to the claims of some industry insiders, who seem to think that the cliché roles available to female performers make their jobs easier. For example, screenwriter Aaron Sorkin [reportedly](#) claimed in an email to The New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd, that actors must do more work to win awards than actresses: ‘That’s why year in and year out, the guy who wins the Oscar for Best Actor has a much higher bar to clear than the woman who wins Best Actress’ (Boot 2016). Recognising that female performers work hard to compensate for deficient scripts is a small, but necessary step. It is also worth noting that for actors, playing the role of a named character usually commands a higher level of pay than playing an unnamed day player. So the many unnamed female characters in screenplays also represent many low-paid female performers.

Although sexist descriptions of female characters are prevalent in Hollywood scripts, there are some good examples of scripts that describe male and female characters in similar amounts and terms. Recent examples include *Philomena* by Steve Coogan and Jeff Pope (2013), *Gravity* by Alfonso Cuarón and Jonas Cuarón (2013), *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts (2013) and *Wild* by Nick Hornby (2014). These films are more likely to be nominated in the Academy Award category for Best Actress than for Best Original Screenplay or Best Adapted Screenplay. In this way, Hollywood institutionally prizes screenplays that depict men with greater depth and dignity than they depict women. This echoes Cate Blanchett’s 2013 Oscar speech in which she lamented the number of her peers ‘who are still foolishly clinging to the idea that female films with women at the centre are niche experiences’. That women’s cinema has long been marginalised, devalued, and trivialised has been explored by scholars including White, Hollinger and Butler (2002) and is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it should come as no surprise that the screenplays most lauded by the Academy would be dominated by ‘men’s cinema’.

Women make up a small fraction of Hollywood screenwriters, and Kevin Boon argues that this contributes to the sexist representation of female characters in screenplays. Women were credited as writers of just 15% of Hollywood’s 500 top-grossing films of 2015 (Lauzen 2016, 4). Of the 36 screenplays analysed in this article, there was a total of 60 writers: 52 male and 8 female. Liddy (2016) and Coles (2016) suggest that these figures are fairly steady across other Anglophone screen industries. Additionally, gatekeepers, such as producers and studio executives, are predominantly male. Scholarly efforts such as Jill Nelmes and Jule Selbo’s encyclopaedic *Women Screenwriters: An International Guide*, Linda Seger’s *When Women Call the Shots*, and Bridget Conor’s ‘The Gendered Screenwriter as Creative Worker’ situate themselves explicitly within a context of longstanding industrial gender inequity, and feminist theorists such as Catherine Grant have interrogated what feminist film authorship might mean (2001). Wider awareness of this workforce marginalisation has grown recently, with news media reporting on the topic (Dowd 2015; Thompson 2015). It is beyond the scope of this study to determine a causation or even correlation between how gender is inscribed in scene text and the gender of the screenwriter/s, but I hope that further study can test this.

Similarly, this article has not addressed the representation of intersex and transsexual people in screenplays, or the intersections of gender and other kinds of social and cultural marginalisation, but I hope future research will address these important issues of representation. I suspect that there are a number of causal factors contributing to the problem of gender representation in screenplays, and I hope that future research will explore and examine them. The very publication of a book on how to write female characters, Helen Jacey's *The Woman in the Story: How to Write Memorable Female Characters*, suggests an acknowledgement of the problem outlined here, and it might be a useful tool for those writers working towards a solution.

## Conclusion: Imagining a New Hollywood

Screenwriting is always a practice of imagination, alive to a world of possibilities. Examining screenplays allows us to analyse some of the steps in the byzantine process of creating mass media entertainment. Most significantly, it helps us to understand each of these steps as a practice that is continually enacted, and might be enacted differently. It helps us to shift the focus away from deficient representations committed to celluloid or compressed into files – storage that connotes permanence. It helps us shift the focus towards malleable, everyday practices. In this way, we can create change, for workers, investors, and audiences - for people fictional and real.

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