

Women in and on Film

Sarah Pillsbury

Producer, Sanford Pillsbury Productions

It is an incredible honor to be invited to this conference in the company of so many accomplished and thoughtful women. When I was first invited I admit to being somewhat daunted although not quite as worried as my daughter who is here with me on her college tour. “Mom,” she implored me, “whatever you do, please sound smart.” And the women who came before me have set the bar very high.

I’ve been asked to speak about my career in the movies and the impact of women in and on film. But after last week when we heard so often that the unimaginable had happened, I found myself drawn to the topic of this particular seminar—“Imagination: Center of the Arts.” I thought about my own relationship to my imagination and what comes to us from the imaginations of others in the worlds of film and television.

Before I came to Yale I don’t think I made much use of my imagination—except to daydream in school or to envision favorable outcomes in my own social dramas or conjure up some

future glory. But I did rely heavily on the imagination of others. I found refuge in other people's stories and images, in paintings and sculpture, poetry and fiction, plays and television, but most of all at the movies. What with my blond hair and all, I thought I might be a movie star, but I don't remember if I ever thought about the people who made these movies until my parents introduced me to another Yalie, George Roy Hill. I was in awe of him and I certainly never thought that I would have any part of making movies myself.

Then I got to Yale in the fall of 1969 and the women's movement was in full bloom. Being in the first class of women, there was a special urgency to our feminism. The ratio among undergraduates of eight men to every woman was amusing only in the abstract, and soon after I arrived I was involved in passing around a petition calling for open admissions. Kingman Brewster meanwhile took pains to assure the alumni that Yale was still committed to producing one thousand male leaders every year, thus prompting my classmate, Julia Preston (now a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist) to quip that Yale was now committed to producing one thousand male leaders and 250 bitchy wives.

There was plenty to rail against but the paramount issue for me was that suddenly I was supposed to have some sort of ambition. Here I was fortunate enough to be at Yale and I didn't know what the hell I wanted to do. Returning early for my sophomore year because I had work left undone (this was after May Day 1970 and we were cut a lot of slack), I sequestered myself in the JE library to finish a few papers and plot out my year. I emptied my mind of any preconceived notions and started on page one of the Course Catalogue and didn't stop reading until H—history—African history. Eureka. I would study African history, then take a year off and go live there—in a third world country, a popular notion at the time.

In Kenya everyone becomes a photographer. You can point and shoot and it's so stunning, it's not hard to imagine you have talent. But more important for me was realizing that the only thing I really missed about the States was the movies. Since I was a kid

I'd gone almost every week and even more after I got to Yale. There were the Yale Film Society, the American Film Society, the Berkeley Film Society and the Yale Law School Film Society and every Tuesday at eleven, there was a series, Things That Go Bump in the Night.

I was also struck by the misconceptions Africans had about the States and Americans—many of which came from the movies and television they had seen. And I wanted to go back and tell Americans what Africa was like. I would bear witness and deliver the truth and, of course, I knew what that was because I was all of 21.

When I returned to Yale I wanted to study film, but there weren't a lot of options. I took some film courses—none of which were taught by women—in fact, I never had a woman professor at Yale. But I was encouraged by some wonderful men: Michael Rohmer, Nick Dubb and my history advisor, Leonard Thompson.

I moved to L.A. and due to the times and my political interests, I initially set out to make documentary films, but after a couple years, I realized that dramatic film was my first love. Plus, I'd had the opportunity to work on some dramatic, student films and I had fallen in love with the process.

I didn't think too much about whether becoming a filmmaker would be a hard thing for a woman to do, but in hindsight I see that my decision to be a producer was absolutely based on gender. A veteran, male literary agent once made the ridiculous comment that women could never be directors because they had never been captains of ships. But the truth is I didn't have the nerve to try to become a director. The obstacle was internal as much as external. I was afraid to call the shots.

On the other hand, being experienced as an organizer and activist and having the role model of den mothers, camp counselors and party hostesses, producing came more naturally. Still, only six months after I hung out my shingle as a producer, I realized that I couldn't go it alone and had the great fortune to hook up with Midge Sanford who has been my producing partner for twenty years. Both of us marvel at those younger and bolder

women directors who have overcome those internal obstacles as well as the more real and prevalent external obstacles that exist to this day. Just as I had some questions about my ability to lead, I also questioned if I had real vision. Instead I chose to serve the visions of others: writers and directors.

I'm conscious of being up here today with two women who are creators when the creative process for us is more reactive, responsive, and collaborative. But producers must be imaginative as we try to get a sense of how a script will play on the screen. Then we have to imagine whether enough people can be persuaded to see it to make it viable commercially. Essentially, Midge and I try to make movies that we want to see: human stories on a human scale. But when my daughter is asked what kinds of movies we make, she likes to say that we make movies about women trying to find themselves and it's not a bad description of a number of our films: *How to Make an American Quilt* and *The Love Letter*. But the search for identity is most pronounced in *Desperately Seeking Susan* and *Lovefield*.

Six years ago Midge and I were choosing film clips from our movies for a conference celebrating 100 years of Psychoanalysis and Filmmaking—who knew they shared a birthday?—*Psychic Reality: Projections of Gender and Power*, I believe it was called. We were surprised and amused to realize that we had told the same story twice. Roberta played by Rosanna Arquette in *Desperately Seeking Susan* and Lurene played by Michele Pfeiffer in *Lovefield* have the same character arc.

Both are unsatisfied in their lives and their marriages, but don't realize it because they live vicariously through other women. Roberta follows Susan (played by Madonna) and her travels through the personals and Lurene idolizes Jackie Kennedy—"I have the same suit! We have the same taste," she cries out as Jackie and Jack get off the plane at Lovefield in Dallas. Their obsessions propel them on an adventure that reveals their real values and strengths to them, allows them to leave their marriages and find romance, but not until they find themselves first.

We then joked that we had to make the two, because there were two of us struggling with our own identities. And while we work with different writers and directors what we've produced reflects important themes in our own lives. My long partnership with Midge is based on shared values and tastes, although our interests diverge at times—she's more spiritually and psychologically oriented. I love politics, history, and sociology. But the first thing we look for in a story are characters so lively and so relatable that we can't believe that one day we won't be able to make them come alive on the screen. We're attracted to characters who must face some emotional crisis, moral dilemma or historical circumstances often beyond their control and are transformed in the process. Sometimes they're men, as in *Eight Men Out*, *And the Band Played On*, and *River's Edge*.

Though we're attracted to women's stories, like most women producers and directors, we're afraid of being pigeonholed. And Midge and I haven't been specifically interested in message movies or in women's films. We just hate movies that appeal to the lowest common denominator and we try to speak to what's best in people: the search for self-knowledge and awareness, the commitment to live a moral and just life and, as in *How to Make an American Quilt*, how we learn to forgive the people in our lives—most of all ourselves—for all the bad choices, the missteps and the lost opportunities, and put the pieces of our lives together.

Midge and I feel enormously blessed to have made so many movies, but the best part of all was being able to create for other people those magical, transformative moments that had inspired us.

I wish I could say it has gotten easier, but it hasn't. When we were shopping *Desperately Seeking Susan*, a script that most women fell in love with, we realized there wasn't a woman in town who could say yes and green light it. However, it was a woman executive at Orion, Barbara Boyle, who was one of the founders of Women in Film who got it made by threatening to quit. "They don't want Goldie Hawn, they don't want Barbra Streisand. They want to work with up and coming actresses. They need \$5 million and if you don't give it to me, I don't know why you hired me."

In 1980, Sherry Lansing became the first studio president and others have followed, but only a couple have that kind of power.

I was jealous during the conversation yesterday about universities where there is some hope of an institutional response to sexist practices. As Martha Lauzen at San Diego State remarked after compiling dismal statistics of women in the entertainment business, “It is my understanding that Hollywood cannot be embarrassed about its treatment of women in the same way it can be for its underrepresentation of minorities. They just don’t care.”

Sexism has always been endemic to the film business. Before the studio system was born, women enjoyed a surprising degree of success—from 1911–1925, half of all the movies made were written by women. But men ran the studios and men hired men. And despite some success stories—it’s still true today. Women wrote only 17% of the screenplays that were produced during the past decade. Women get little over one third of the acting roles, and for women over 40, it’s 9%. In 1998, women directors worked only 10% of the total days worked by DGA directors. In the year 2000, only 17% of the producers, executive producers, directors, writers, directors of photography, and editors were women. But 90% of all executives are male. With the pressure on them to make money, they want to make safe choices regarding what films they make and whom they hire to make them. As Jodie Foster remarked, “When faced with giving someone \$5 million and an enormous amount of faith and good will, you’re going to give it to someone who looks like you. You’re not going to give it to the black guy and you’re not going to give it to the woman.” Women still suffer from the old prejudices: we don’t understand all the technical information, we can’t handle the money and the pressure, and we’re too emotional.

Never mind that it’s male directors who have the reputation of blowing up on the set and harassing their crews. Hollywood rewards bad behavior. They love their boy wonders, their *enfants terribles*, says director Julie Taymor. But women still get labeled as difficult. When women directors and producers don’t work it hurts women all the way down the line. Women are more likely

to hire women. Martha Lauzen’s study showed that when women direct, the number of women on the cast and crew increases by 150%.

There is prejudice against women’s movies, and what are typically categorized as women’s themes are often viewed as unimportant. I was talking to a husband and wife the other day and the man asked me if I’d seen *Apocalypse Now: Redux*. I said that I hadn’t heard enough good things about it to make me want to see it again, but what I really had liked recently was *The Deep End*. The depiction of the mother’s relationship with her teenage son really resonated with me. “But,” said the husband, “Coppola tackles the big issues like war and our country.” “As opposed to motherhood?” said the wife. Intimate stories about women that deal with relationships, friendship, family, love and romance, personal growth and empowerment—which are dubbed disparagingly women’s films—are considered soft and difficult to market.

Every two years or so after the “surprising success” of a *First Wives Club* or *Erin Brockovich*, we get a call from a journalist wondering if this doesn’t herald a new wave of women’s films. But it never has. Partly because—wouldn’t you know it—we’re too damn unpredictable. The marketing geniuses try to track our interests and our awareness of specific films to determine how many of us will show up to buy tickets, but they just can’t get a finger on it. Young males, on the other hand, are very predictable. They show up that ever-important first weekend seemingly regardless of reviews. Women wait and see, but when they like something they can show up in droves and remain loyal. Hollywood hasn’t figured out how to market to that huge audience. I don’t think they’ve really tried.

The consolidation of media ownership has made it even tougher. We made five feature films in the 1980s—four of them were for companies that don’t exist anymore. In 1982, there were over fifty media conglomerates dominating U.S. media; in 1997 there were ten. Some people say we’re coming to the day when there will be only three. Former AOL Time Warner CEO Gerald Levin foresees a world where the media business is “more

important than government . . . more important than educational institutions and non-profits.” So we have these people controlling the movie business and they aren’t in it because they saw *Citizen Kane* (or *Desperately Seeking Susan*) in college. They’re in it to make money and to maximize profits, and they want filmmaking to conform to the rules that govern the creation, production, marketing, and distribution of other products.

This isn’t good for film and it’s even harder on women filmmakers. In the 1980s, when we first approached a studio to try to get a movie going, the first thought in an executive’s mind was not how to sell it. There were executives out there who if they loved the script would energetically join with you in the creative process of finding the right director or actor. Now you have to go in knowing who’s directing and who’s going to be in it. They want to have a package with elements they can run the numbers on. Is the director known in foreign markets? How well did the actor’s last movie do? They want to know how to sell it before it’s been made. They’re looking to get at least 60% of the budget in presales from overseas and what they’re sure sells overseas are sex and violence—things that don’t need subtitles.

We don’t have time to go into the issues regarding sex and violence in film and television. I just want to say that when, for example, I hear people ask whether violence in the media creates more violence in the world (and actually most studies show that it does), I think we should flip the question and ask filmmakers: “What are you trying to say? What are you exhorting or inspiring people to do? Is your movie inspiring someone to dream or to help a child, to call their sister or forgive their father, or to fight against injustice in this world?”

On September 11, some people said that the unimaginable had happened and I thought, no, I live in a town where people dream this stuff up all the time and think about how they can make money off of it. And then they have the audacity to defend their right to do so as free speech without a thought to social responsibility. Even now as networks and studios pull shows and delay release dates of some movies, I think their first concern is

not to alienate their audiences. I would hope that the public has lost its taste for this kind of violence and mayhem, but Americans have always had an historical amnesia.

Last week I found myself looking over and over again at the image of the plane going into the second tower. I wanted to see it from all angles. I wondered why I was so compelled to do this. An article in *Daily Variety* quoted a grief counselor who described this as part of the grieving process. We need to get over our denial. Because these images are so mediated by the images we’ve seen in the movies, because these movies require us to detach from any thought of human suffering, the images of 9/11 seem unreal. The creators of violent fare keep trying to top themselves by imagining bigger explosions and new disasters, but their imaginations fail them when it comes to thinking about the aftermath: the horror, the suffering, the loss, and the grief. This stuff doesn’t sell tickets. I realized that I wanted to see those images to make it real to me, to imagine what really happened, to think about it in human terms.

After Pearl Harbor, Hollywood responded quickly. Movie stars enlisted. Directors went into war to make documentaries. And when they returned, they did meaningful work about their experiences, like *The Best Years of Our Lives*. The Vietnam era gave birth to a new wave of thoughtful, provocative films (films that inspired me to come into the business). Who knows what will happen now?

There are movies to be made. All of us know of the power of loss and grief to transform our lives. Women are particularly good at observing and valuing daily life, of seeing the miraculous in the mundane. I think they can help us comprehend the devastation in people’s lives and help us cope with our loss. I want to hear their voices. I want to have access to the fruits of their imagination. I wonder if I will.