Lesson Plan
Seeing Is Believing: Women Direct

Overview: In this one-off lesson, students examine the history of women filmmakers' successes and barriers, challenge the idea of a "woman's perspective," and consider the role of gender identity in storytelling. The lesson offers ideas for taking the conversation further through extended activities.

Materials: Index cards, chart paper, markers, "Know Your History" text

Warm up:

Pass out blank index cards and task the class with writing about their morning in three minutes on the card. When time is up, collect the cards and shuffle. Invite a student to choose three at random to read aloud. Ask the class to guess the gender after each card is read. In some cases, the class may guess based on clues in the text. At other times, it may be impossible to tell.

Pose the question and engage a brief discussion:

- Can we tell which stories were written by someone identifying as a woman?
- If so, how did you know?
- If not, what clues might have been included to help determine the gender of the writer?

Lesson: What is the "Female Perspective"?

In the film *Seeing Is Believing: Women Direct*, many of the people interviewed refer to women having a "different perspective" that they bring to their directing. Pose the question, "*What is the female perspective?*" to students. Allow them to offer answers, but do not challenge their responses. Create a list of their answers on the board to refer back to. Conflicting answers are both welcomed and encouraged.

Briefly discuss if and how that which is considered the "female perspective" can provoke ridicule, mocking, or minimizing of experience across gender lines. Invite participants into a brief conversation about where they have seen — or even engaged — this response.

Break students into eight small groups— though you may decide to populate the 1970s and 2000s-Present groups with more participants, as there is more information to work with. Hand

each group a "Directed By Women" era overview from the appendix. Each of these overviews offers contextual information about the film industry and points to a number of female directors who serve as anchor figures. Invite each group to read the brief history described, and if possible, spend 10-15 minutes researching each woman on the Internet. Invite students to grapple with the series of questions presented. Each overview offers a series of shared core questions, as well as one-two questions unique to the era they are exploring.

The core questions:

- What was happening historically at this time period in America and abroad?
- What was an "ideal woman" supposed to be in this era?
- How did other identities, such as race and class, interact with the female identity?
- How did female director's challenge ideas of "the ideal woman"?
- What conditions made it possible for these women to thrive in a time when many women did not work outside the home?
- What makes a "woman's perspective" as we typically think about it? Is there such thing?
- Why is it important for people to see themselves and their experiences on screen, as well as to see someone like them being the leader of the team who is telling the story (the director)?

Bring the groups back together. Invite each to present out the history on their card and to share what came up in their discussions. Return to the question posed at the beginning of the class.

Discuss:

- Have ideas changed about women filmmakers over time?
- What has not changed or continues to be a challenge today?
- What makes up a human's perspective? Can it be relegated solely to gender? If so, what is a man's perspective? A non-binary perspective? A trans perspective?
- Why is it important to have a variety of identities with access to storytelling?
- What will it take for more women to get into the film industry?

Extensions:

- **Map your identity** — We often recognize famous filmmakers by their style of creation, which is influenced by their life journey, various lived identities, and their artistic influences. If you were to make a film, what makes up "your name's" perspective/creative style? Examine the various experiences, identities, and threads that create a person's unique perspective.

- **Research and create a timeline of film equipment history.** Where did women contribute to the development of this technology?

- **Research and create a timeline of the styles and trends in directing,** and how directors who identify as women tapped into these styles to get their viewpoint across.

- **What *is* a director?** Research and define what a director's role is in a production — what does that look like in action?

- **Strategizing for increased presence of directors who identify as women —** Who can make a difference? What will it take for more women to get into the film industry? (Visibility campaigns, diversity programs, film school recruitment, men supporting women's films as producers, etc.)

Know Your History: 1896 to 1920

In the very early days of film, many women were central to the development of the moving picture industry — and brought both creativity in storytelling and technical advancement to the burgeoning medium. In fact, the first person to create a narrative film (or a "story-film" as she called it originally) was a French woman, **Alice Guy-Blaché**, who laid the foundation for moving pictures — movies and television — as we know it today. Blaché started her own studio, where she made hundreds of silent films, and eventually "talkies" spanning many genres, ranging from from popular Westerns to a Biblical epic.

Lois Weber was an American woman who followed after Alice, beginning to write and produce work in 1908. She also owned her own studio, as well as acted in her own films. These films were morality tales, offering value-sharing through storytelling, and often considered "feminine" in the way they cracked open the inner-lives of characters. Webber also invented the split screen, among other filmic technology. Though there were few women creating in this era, the filmmaking that did occur was no holds barred — women were making whatever they wanted to and committed to telling the stories they wanted to tell. These films were popular, but their potential for making money was not yet widely realized.

Research the names in bold and discuss the following questions:

- What was happening historically at this time period in America and abroad?
- What was an "ideal woman" supposed to be in this era, in various cultures?
- How did other identities, such as race and class, interact with the female identity?
- How did female director's challenge ideas of "the ideal woman"?
- In 1910, only 18% of women worked outside of the home. What conditions made it possible for these women to thrive in a time atypical of the majority of women's experiences?

- What makes a "woman's perspective" as we typically think about it? Is there such thing?
- Why is it important for people to see themselves and their experiences on screen, as well as to see someone like them being the leader of the team who is telling the story (the director)?

For further research, visit *What Happened to the Women Directors in Hollywood? Part 1: The Founding Mothers of Film* by Carrie Rickey

Know Your History 1920s-40s:

When films moved from silent to sound, the value of how much money could be made skyrocketed and film became an international, big-budget market. Because most women were not working outside the home, women at large were also not considered to be smart with money and were considered a risk to the production — despite their track record of invention in the field. The development of unions to protect exploited employees at Warner Brothers led to a labor strike that provoked open expressions of violence, and sets were considered unsafe for women. When movie star Fatty Arbuckle was accused of raping fellow actor Virginia Rappe, who subsequently died due to injury, hundreds of women appeared in solidarity with Rappe at his preliminary hearings — an extraordinary moment of activism during this era. This public scandal led to **The Hays Code,** instituted between 1930-1968. These codes developed a set of morals for the film industry that were profoundly restrictive to creativity — especially for women.

Despite this, **Dorothy Arzner,** an openly lesbian-identified director who wore suits and styled her hair in a fashion considered typical of men, made incredibly successful films and was responsible for launching the careers of many young actresses. Though Arzner did not take out a patent on a recording device she created, and Edmund H. Hansen filed for a similar sound device one year later, Arzner is still historically considered to be the inventor of the boom mic — still used on every film and television set today. Meanwhile internationally, Japan's first female director and one of the world's first documentary filmmakers, **Tazuko Sakane**, was so harassed by her male colleagues that she cut off her hair and wore male clothing to fit in. After World War II, it was decreed that all Japanese filmmakers must posses a university degree, and she was forced to relinquish her work as director, stepping back into roles of editor and writer.

Research the names and ideas in bold and discuss the following questions:

- What was happening historically at this time period in America and abroad?
- What was an "ideal woman" supposed to be in this era?
- How did other identities, such as race and class, interact with the female identity?
- How did female director's challenge ideas of "the ideal woman"?
- What conditions made it possible for these women to thrive in a time when many women did not work outside the home?
- What makes a "woman's perspective" as we typically think about it? Is there such thing?
- Why did the orientation to women on set suddenly change when films went from silent to sound?
- Consider Arzner and Sakane's reasons for gender-bending in appearance. What made their choices, though similar in expression, different? What were their motivations?
- Discuss the clearing of women from sets due to safety reasons— was this necessary? Why were women being seen as in need of "protecting?"
- Why is it important for people to see themselves and their experiences on screen, as well as to see someone like them being the leader of the team who is telling the story (the director)?

For further research, visit *What Happened to the Women Directors in Hollywood? Part 2: The First Females to Crack the Directors Guild* by Carrie Rickey

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Know Your History 1950s:

Actress-turned-director **Ida Lupino** was the only American woman in the 1950s to direct and produce films in the Hollywood system. Her work was considered edgy in addressing social issues including rape, bigamy, and unwed motherhood, and her stories were sympathetic to women characters. However, Lupino also took a leap away from "women's stories" when she directed a film about two men, *The Hitchhiker,* which featured no women at all. The majority of Lupino's later career was in television, where she flaunted a diverse range, directing more than 100 episodes of productions that encompassed Westerns, supernatural tales, situation comedies, murder mysteries, and gangster stories.

In Britain, women were flourishing in the 1950s film industry. **Muriel Box**, for example, created films that were primarily stage adaptations influenced by her background in theater, with controversial, topical themes that featured Irish politics, societal hypocrisy, the courage and capabilities of women police officers, teenage sex, abortion, and STDs — edgy enough to be banned by several local authorities. Women characters were often at the forefront of her films.

On the other end of the creative spectrum, French director **Maya Deren** bridged the 40s and 50s as an experimental, avant-garde filmmaker, and promoted the idea of the filmmaker as artist. Her works were not in the typical narrative or documentary format. Deren was also a choreographer, dancer, film theorist, poet, lecturer, writer, and photographer. Her work was important as a representation of developing a personal voice in directing, and bringing the film media out of entertainment arenas and into the fine art category.

Research the names and ideas in bold and discuss the following questions:

- What was happening historically at this time period in America and abroad?
- What was an "ideal woman" supposed to be in this era?
- How did other identities, such as race and class, interact with the female identity?
- How did female director's challenge ideas of "the ideal woman"?
- What conditions made it possible for these women to thrive in a time when many women did not work outside the home?
- What makes a "woman's perspective" as we typically think about it? Is there such thing?

- If Lupino was not telling a "woman's story" in *The Hitchhiker,* how does that challenge "the woman's perspective" conversation?
- Why do you think it is significant that Maya Deren was creating "art" from the film medium?
- Why is it important for people to see themselves and their experiences on screen, as well as to see someone like them being the leader of the team who is telling the story (the director)?

For further research, visit: *What Happened to the Women Directors in Hollywood? Part 2: The First Females to Crack the Directors Guild* by Carrie Rickey — beginning at paragraph about Ida Lupino.

Know Your History 1960s:

In the 1960s, women — part of the Feminist movement or not — began to openly question why the women on screen often appeared as sexualized objects. In response to this, they pushed for more diverse representation on camera and to get more women behind the camera. In 1965, **Stephanie Rothman** became the first woman to win a Directors Guild of America fellowship, which led famous directors such as Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese to bring her on their sets as assistant. She went on to make six successful female-driven genre films that used satire to challenge male audience's expectations of submissive women on screen. **Barbara Hammer** took a less traditional route. As an avante-garde filmmaker and pioneer of queer cinema, she began pushing the envelope with controversial films that focused on what was considered taboo subjects around the female experience such as menstruation, orgasm from the female perspective, and lesbianism.

Agnès Varda, who was awarded an Oscar for her life's work in 2018, began the New Wave movement in French film. Her distinctive experimental style has been called a mix of documentary realism, Feminist issues, and social commentary. While Varda does address the female experience in her work, she also created films on other topics, for example, the Black American revolutionary group, the Black Panthers. Her interest in subject primarily lived in the common experience and stories of everyday people, rather than people in power. Varda's approach is instinctive rather than following tradition, bringing her own intuition to the filmmaking process.

Research the names and ideas in bold and discuss the following questions:

- What was happening historically at this time period in America and abroad?
- What was an "ideal woman" supposed to be in this era?

- How did other identities, such as race and class, interact with the female identity?
- How did female director's challenge ideas of "the ideal woman"?
- What makes a "woman's perspective" as we typically think about it? Is there such thing?
- Often in society, intuition is assigned as a feminine attribute— intuitive — if we assign that to the female gender, what does that mean for men filmmakers — can they not be intuitive? What about people who identify between gender poles?
- Agnes Varda is considered "The MOTHER of the New Wave." Is this a compliment or another way to genderize her work?
- Why is it important for people to see themselves and their experiences on screen, as well as to see someone like them being the leader of the team who is telling the story (the director)?

For further research, visit: _What Happened to the Women Directors in Hollywood? Part 3: A New Generation of Women Behind the Camera, 1966–1983_ by Carrie Rickey

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Know Your History: The 1970s:

In the 1970s, the Feminist do-it-yourself spirit became increasingly common, and women embraced creating films on their own terms. When a film lacked funding, it opened a positive perspective: Freedom. If no one was paying for the film, the directors didn't have anyone to answer to but their own vision. Embodying this spirit, **Chantal Akerman** made films completely by herself because she struggled with enlisting collaborators in her poetic vision. Polish filmmaker **Agnieszka Holland** could not release a film under her own name because of the harsh censorship laws under Communist authorities. Though the male director Andrzej Wajda offered to "adopt" her films under his name, Holland refused, pushing to eventually release films under own name. These women's decisions paid off in the end. Though in the 1970s, Akerman's work lived on the fringes, considered avant garde, she is now Akerman is considered a genius. Holland's first major film won the International Critics Prize at the 1980 Cannes Film Festival.

Other women were directing experiences that ran the gamut. **Joan Micklin Silver**'s first film was produced by her husband and was about the disenchantment of 1960's counterculture newspaper writers. Later, she would direct films about the immigrant experience. **Barbara Loden**'s film _Wanda_ was the only film she ever made and challenged the women's expected experience of motherhood and wifedom. Like many women who were ahead of their time, Loden's film was not well received when it was released, though now is considered a classic. **Elaine May** created dark comedies that became critical successes. Italian director **Lina Wertmüller**'s films showcase role-reversal stories of dominant women and subversive men, positioning her as the first women director to be nominated for a best director Oscar — and for her film _Seven Beauties_, she received four nominations in total.

At the end of the decade in 1979, six women directors met at the Directors Guild of America (DGA) and formed the Women's Steering Committee of the DGA to address the disparity in representation of women in the film industry. The **"Original Six,"** these activists — Susan Bay Nimoy, Nell Cox, Joelle Dobrow, Dolores Ferraro, Victoria Hochberg, and Lynne Littman — partnered with DGA president Michael Franklin to gather statistics. They discovered that only 0.5 percent of directors in movies and television were women.

In the late 1970s, Chinese filmmaker **Anna Hui** began directing films, and continues to today. Though her work began decades earlier, it took until 2011 for "the West" to recognize her work.

Research the names and ideas in bold and discuss the following questions:

- What was happening historically at this time period in America and abroad?
- What was an "ideal woman" supposed to be in this era?
- How did other identities, such as race and class, interact with the female identity?
- How did female director's challenge ideas of "the ideal woman"?
- What conditions made it possible for these women to thrive in a time when many women did not work outside the home?
- What makes a "woman's perspective" as we typically think about it? Is there such thing?
- Thinking about Loden's film, which broke from traditional ideas of a woman's experience, if all the film critics are male, how does this affect the reviews?
- How does Anna Hui's story play into the continued idea of "the other" for those who come from different racial identities in the West, especially if they are additionally identifying as female?
- Why is it important for people to see themselves and their experiences on screen, as well as to see someone like them being the leader of the team who is telling the story (the director)?

For further research, visit: *What Happened to the Women Directors in Hollywood? Part 3: A New Generation of Women Behind the Camera, 1966–1983* by Carrie Rickey

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Know Your History: 1980s:

In the 1980s, women directors begin to take up space in new and different ways, sharing resources and equipment in order to support one another's creations. By this time, many women were making their second feature films, and the story of what being a woman meant and how it was represented on screen continued to expand. Women of color finally began to be recognized for and welcomed into opportunities to create their work. In 1980, **Kathleen Collins** became the first African-American woman to write, produce, and direct a feature film, *The Cruz Brothers and*

Miss Malloy, and went on to make her second, the more successful *Losing Ground,* in 1982. **Mira Nair**, an Indian-American director who brought her cultural background to her storytelling is considered one of greatest filmmakers of all time.

Though it was still considered impolite, unfeminine behavior to stand up for what they desired, women filmmakers continued to push the boundaries. In 1968 singer and actress **Barbara Streisand**, already famous on the Broadway circuit, was told her story about a Jewish girl who disguises herself as a boy to engage religious study was too "ethnic," that she was too old to play the role, and that a new director would not be trusted with a multimillion dollar budget. Despite that, she made a deal with United Artists to star and direct, and the film, *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy,* went on to earn four Oscar nominations and opened her to direct future films.

Others were not as well-received and still struggled against the pervasive social culture of undervaluing women's work. **Lizzie Borden** made a Feminist epic, *Born in Flames* that was considered exceptionally radical and featured disenfranchised women in New York City fighting for their rights. Though it did not make a splash in the mainstream, it is now shown in museums like the Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Academy of Music as well as around the world. Her follow up, *Working Girls,* features a realistic depiction of a woman who chooses to work as a prostitute. The piece won at the Sundance Film Festival.

Research the names and ideas in bold and discuss the following questions:

- What was happening historically at this time period in America and abroad?
- What was an "ideal woman" supposed to be in this era?
- How did other identities, such as race and class, interact with the female identity?
- How did female directors challenge ideas about the "ideal woman"?
- What do you think created such a range of successes and challenges for women filmmakers in the 1980s?
- Why do you think it was necessary for women to share equipment and resources?
- What makes a "woman's perspective" as we typically think about it? Is there such thing?
- Why is it important for people to see themselves and their experiences on screen, as well as to see someone like them being the leader of the team who is telling the story (the director)?

For further research, visit: *What Happened to the Women Directors in Hollywood? Part 3: A New Generation of Women Behind the Camera, 1966–1983* and *Part 4*, by Carrie Rickey

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Know Your History: The 1990s

In the 1990s, women continued to blaze trails in storytelling, expanding public ideas about what was considered the female experience. **Kimberly Peirce** told the story of Brendan Tina, a transgender boy who was murdered for his gender expression, in *Boys Don't Cry*. **Jane Campion** explored the story of a speech-impaired mother who struggled with her sexuality in *The Piano* through an interracial/cultural relationship. **Sofia Coppola**, who debuted her directing career with *Lost in Translation* (daughter of famous director Francis Ford Coppola) to huge critical success. Through the Coppolas' example, the importance of men's allyship in supporting women's voices is highlighted.

Julie Dash, director of *Daughters of the Dust,* was the first African-American woman to have a wide release of her film. Despite her film's success, which included winning Best Cinematography at Sundance and being one of the few films placed in the National Film Registry, Dash struggled to get further films financed. Only recently is she being publicly recognized for her groundbreaking film. At the 1996 Oscar ceremony, with *Antonia's Line,* Dutch filmmaker **Marleen Gorris**, also an active feminist and a supporter of gay and lesbian issues, became the first female filmmaker to direct an award-winning foreign film. Though her film won best picture, Gorris did not take home the award for best director, begging the question of why American media has never recognized the film's win as significant.

Research the names and ideas in bold and discuss the following questions:

- What was happening historically at this time period in America and abroad?
- What was an "ideal woman" supposed to be in this era?
- How did other identities, such as race and class, interact with the female identity?
- How did female directors challenge ideas about the "ideal woman"?
- What do you think created such a range of successes and challenges for women filmmakers in the 1990's?
- What makes a "woman's perspective" as we typically think about it? Is there such thing?
- Why is it important for people to see themselves and their experiences on screen, as well as to see someone like them being the leader of the team who is telling the story (the director)?
- Is it important for women in film to have male allies? Why or why not?
- How can men support the development of women's voices in films?

For further research, visit: *What Happened to the Women Directors in Hollywood? Part 3: A New Generation of Women Behind the Camera, 1984–1999* by Carrie Rickey

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Know Your History: The 2000s-Present

Women's work in the 2000's-2010 further pushed boundaries, making bold work that was un-afraid. **Lynne Ramsay**, who doesn't like being labeled a "female director," tells stories laden with violence — similar to her contemporary **Kathryn Bigelow. Andrea Arnold** proved that the community that finds you may not be the community around you. Her films about working class English people and members of society who aren't necessarily valued were unpopular within her community. But they made her a star at Cannes Film Festival.

But while women directors are crossing incredible boundaries, there remain roadblocks to navigate, barriers to knock down, and hurdles to clear. From 2010-present, women continue to carve out their own space, and their fearless choices are underscored, but not always richly rewarded. **Ana Lily Amirpour** created two disturbing films, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, a female vampire story, and *The Bad Batch,* about a girl who is captured by a savage group of cannibals. While successful in their own right, these films did not skyrocket her to the status of male filmmaker Quentin Tarantino — a director whom her work rivals in its commitment to risk taking and expression of violence.

Dee Rees brought the young Black lesbian experience to film in the beautifully shot *Pariah*, and went on to direct the Oscar nominated film *Mudbound,* which garnered the first Oscar nomination for a female cinematographer. Despite that, Rees did not get an Oscar nomination herself. **Ava DuVernay**'s films exploring the African-American experience made her a household name, and yet, she couldn't find distribution for her blockbuster film *Selma*. Taking a cue from the 1970s women, she founded her own distribution company.

Research the names and ideas in bold and discuss the following questions:

- What was happening historically at this time period in America and abroad?
- What was an "ideal woman" supposed to be in this era?
- How did other identities, such as race and class, interact with the female identity?
- How did female director's challenge these ideas?
- What makes a "woman's perspective" as we typically think about it? Is there such thing?
- Why is is important that women are making films that feature violence and horror?
- In what ways are women still creating space for themselves to flourish on their own terms? Why do you think this remains necessary?
- Why are women still finding it hard to gain the level of success their male contemporaries achieve?
- Why is it important for people to see themselves and their experiences on screen, as well as to see someone like them being the leader of the team who is telling the story (the director)?