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the eye



A Female Tarantino

why women are still underrepresented in film & why you should care

by Anneliese Cooper



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Editorial: (212) 854-9547
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A FEMALE TARANTINO

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by Anneliese Cooper

cover and lead visuals by Suze Myers

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

As central as they are to our daily lives, arts and culture are all too easily dismissed as trivial distractions or wastes of our time. TV is the “boob tube”; movie reviews are “fluff pieces.” But as any number of clichés tell us, words—and theater, and music, and everything else lumped into the all-inclusive label of “culture”—have power.

Our third lead story, penned by *The Eye*’s former managing editor for features Anneliese Cooper, highlights the arts’ all-too-often underestimated impact. Tackling the subject of the so-called celluloid ceiling, Anneliese points out that representation, or lack thereof, has a direct impact on perception. The pervasive absence of female directors, female writers, and even female characters in American film turns the idea that, as Anneliese puts it, “BOYS, GUNS; GIRLS, FEELINGS” into a self-fulfilling prophecy; the presence of women is treated as an anomaly in a world that’s supposed to mirror our own, and women’s absence comes to be the norm both on-screen and off.

The relationship between the action on-screen and the viewers who consume it also preoccupies “Are We What We Watch?”, Beth

Tolmach’s feature investigating the possible real-life consequences of violence in popular culture. Like Anneliese’s lead, Beth’s feature examines the symbiotic relationship between popular culture and just plain culture: do violent movies, TV shows, and video games cause violence, or does our violence cause them?

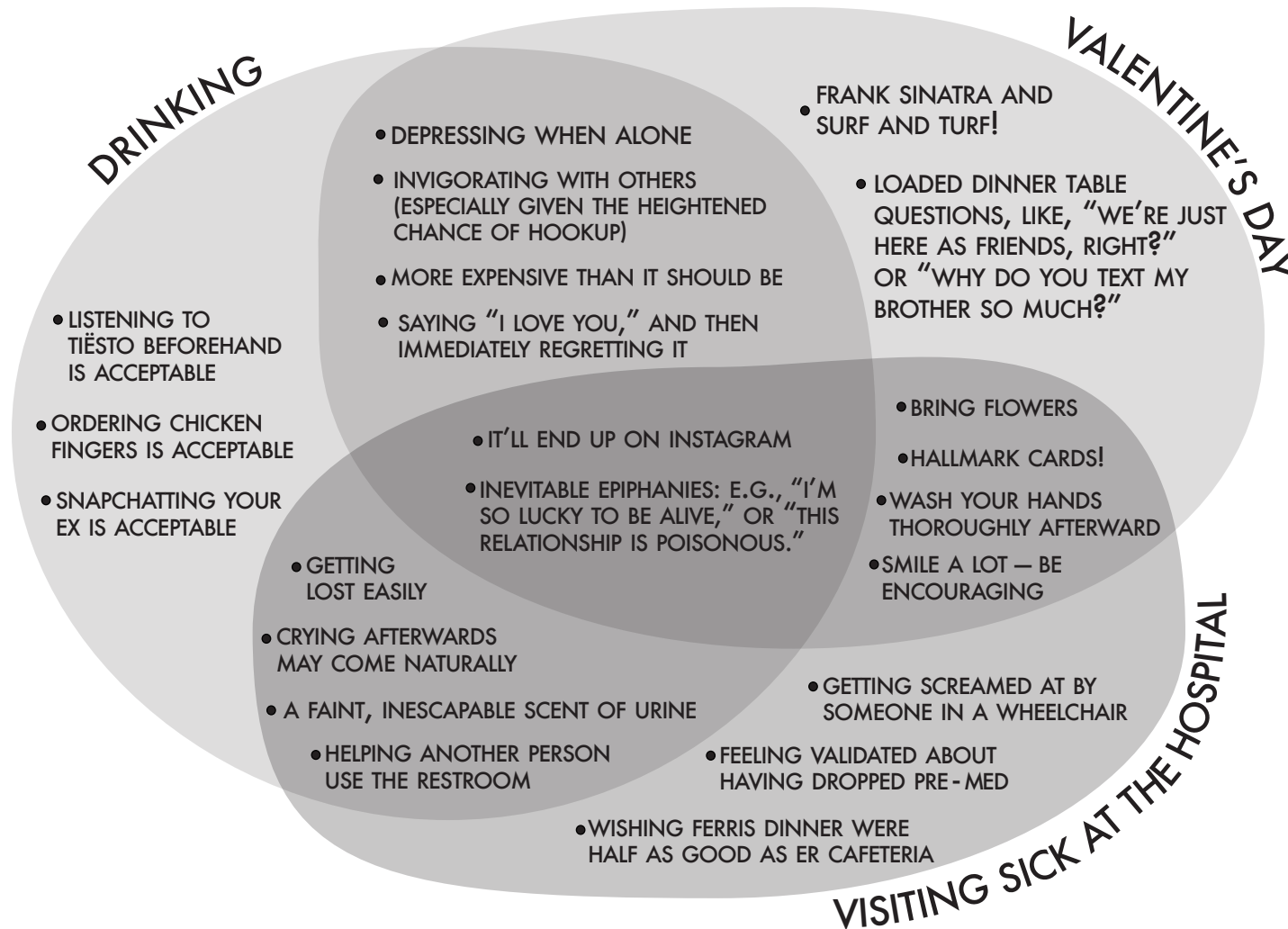
Though Anneliese and Beth’s articles are especially straightforward in highlighting the impact the arts have on our everyday lives, the belief that arts and culture matter underlies every word *The Eye* has ever published, and the pieces in our third issue are no exception. From an examination of Restaurant Week from the eyes of a college student to a survey of the rock musical and its target audience, this issue does anything but trivialize the importance of the arts. Read on, and if writing decidedly un-fluffy pieces sounds like your cup of tea, email eye@columbiaspectator.com—we’re always looking for contributors.

Alison Herman

VALENTINE'S DAY, DRINKING, AND HOSPITAL VISITS

BY PJ SAUERTEIG

Have you ever sat down to \$14 appetizers on Valentine's Day and thought, "Wow, this is a lot like visiting Uncle Theo in the hospital?" or even, "Wow, this reminds me of that EC rager last weekend?" If you haven't, you're clearly not embracing our humanities-based education. To truly understand anything, we've learned, you must view it in relation to other things. Thus, *The Eye* has done a little (unorthodox) comparing and contrasting to help broaden your understanding of Singles Awareness Day.



MUSIC QUIZ

FALL OUT BOY OR SYLVIA PLATH

BY AMELIA PITCHERELLA

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN THORN

American pop punk band Fall Out Boy recently ended their three-year hiatus with the announcement of a new album, *Save Rock and Roll*. Whether their morose emo music will single-handedly save rock and roll remains to be seen, but one thing's for sure: their poetic sensibilities could usher in a revival for confessional poetry. With lyrics as cheerless as these, we think Sylvia Plath could be ghostwriting for the boys.

Four of the following quotes are Fall Out Boy lyrics; four are lines from Plath poems. Can you tell the difference?



a. I am God's gift, but why would He bless me with / such wit without a conscience equipped?

b. Rueful, most vexed, that tender skin / should accept so fell a wound, / he stamped and cracked stalks to the ground / which had caused his dear girl pain

c. Already he can feel daylight, his white disease, / creeping up with her hatful of trivial repetitions

d. I just never want to know what meant the world imploded, / inflated, then demoted all my oxygen to product gas

e. From the comic accident of birth / to the final grotesque joke of death, / your malady of sacrilegious mirth / spread gay contagion with each clever breath

f. Every line is plotted and designed to leave you / standing on your bedroom window's ledge / and everyone else that it hits, that it gets to, / is nothing more than collateral damage

g. I am a wing, I am a prayer, a thimble, and an acorn: / a promise from a poor apothecary to an understudy in love forlorn

h. A scowl of sun struck down my mother, / tolling her grave with golden gongs



a. Fall Out Boy; b. Plath; c. Plath; d. Fall Out Boy; e. Plath; f. Fall Out Boy; g. Plath; h. Plath

A JUSTICE LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

TRACING THE FEMALE SUPERHERO WITH DIRECTOR KRISTY GUEVARA-FLANAGAN

BY GABRIELLE NOONE
ILLUSTRATION BY KADY PU

You're not the only one who thinks of Wonder Woman as more than a novelty Halloween costume. In fact, she was featured in last week's Athena Film Festival at Barnard. Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroines, directed by Kristy Guevara-Flanagan, follows Wonder Woman's path from comic book superheroine to sex icon of the small screen. The film also examines how media representations of women reveal concerns over their power and liberation. The Eye sat down with Guevara-Flanagan to talk about the lack of female superheroes today, the decline of comic books in the digital age, and her dream movie franchise.

What drove you to become so fascinated by the history of a comic book character?

It was kind of a gradual thing that happened. I read one article about [comic book writer] Gail Simone. I wasn't even up, really, on the comic history of Wonder Woman at that time, but the article mentioned that [2007] was the first time the comic book would be written by a woman. I just thought that was really odd and such a contradiction: that Wonder Woman, such a great figure of female empowerment, was actually being created by a guy and [had] never even been written by a woman until recently. I started having her on my radar a bit more and went back one day, looked at her origins, and found a really fascinating character who I thought was exciting for being created in the '40s. She still felt unique as a female hero in terms of the kind[s] of heroes we see today. I feel like the more I research about Wonder Woman, [the more] I find more interesting of a history. I had no idea she had been on the cover of Ms. Magazine when it was just starting out. I had no idea Gloria Steinem wrote about her. It kind of became something interesting to me that you could trace the history of women as heroes and women's history through her. She pulled all of these ideas into her own history and chronology.

Your film doesn't just focus on Wonder Woman, right?

It branches out and shows her as this original female hero, who allowed for these other women to emerge in popular culture. If we hadn't had her, I don't think we'd have people like Buffy the Vampire Slayer or even science fiction heroes like Ripley from *Alien*. The film, at a certain point, shows the Wonder Woman TV

show and looks at these different examples of female heroism on-screen. I think of her as one of our predecessors.

I feel that it's a good time for real-life role models, such as female comedians and directors, yet there's a lack of strong fictional female figures. Do you agree?

Yeah, I sort of do agree. There's especially a lack of larger-than-life characters like Buffy the Vampire Slayer. There hasn't been a Buffy in years—decades. We have someone like Bella from *Twilight*. She's really popular, but she's not really heroic. We have young women who

heroes like a Buffy or a Wonder Woman, with the exception of Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games*. Maybe with the next version of that we'll see some more examples of that kind of female heroism.

Do you feel as though comic books themselves are becoming obsolete?

The amount of people who actually read comic books has gone lower and lower since the '40s and '50s. It's a pretty small group, but we're creating Hollywood blockbusters from these comic books. Those are how most people recognize the characters. So, it's kind of a travesty that Wonder Woman hasn't had a big Hollywood blockbuster because that's how people recognize superheroes today.

There's so much money devoted to male-superhero-centered blockbuster films. What would be your dream scenario if there were to be a movie franchise made about a superheroine?

There's a really interesting comic book called *Birds of Prey* about a group of women heroes. One of them is actually disabled. They work together and I think it'd be great as a film. They are just very complete characters and have great backstories. One of the things you still see today is, regardless of being a fantasy superhero film or just a drama, you rarely see women on-screen having relationships with one another.

It's easier than ever to make videos, since so many people have access to webcams and smartphones. Do you think that technology can change the way women are depicted?

It's easier to make media, but it's even easier to find an audience through YouTube and other kinds of social media. You can connect with people you could never connect with before. There is some power in that, but anonymity can bring out the worst in people. Harassment online is a really big issue and can really be a deterrent to people feeling safe enough to put their own work out there.

What would you like people to take away from your film?

I'd like people to really think about ... where our heroes come from and what kind of effect they have on us, culturally. I'd like to see women and girls that read comic books going to comic book conventions and complaining when female characters they like are killed off. I'd like people to push themselves to support female directors and, if there is a film they want to make, they shouldn't feel intimidated by technology. They should think about media critically and if you don't like what you see, tell people making the media that you want better representation. ●



"I'D LIKE TO SEE WOMEN AND GIRLS THAT READ COMIC BOOKS GOING TO COMIC BOOK CONVENTIONS AND COMPLAINING WHEN FEMALE CHARACTERS THEY LIKE ARE KILLED OFF."

are strong like Hermione in *Harry Potter*, but ultimately the story's centered around Harry, not her. We have women in ensembles, but not

BROADWAY GONE BADASS

MUSICALS GET A HARD-ROCK EDGE

BY KATHERINE FREEDMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY LAURA DIEZ DE BALDEON CERV

Was that a Broadway show or a rock concert? With electric guitars and amplifiers onstage and actors shouting (or screaming) lyrics, there's an increasingly fine line between musicals and high-caliber jam sessions.

Of course, high-octane musicals aren't an entirely new phenomenon. Rock became part of the musical theater scene back in the '60s, with the premiere of *Hair*. Ever since, rock musicals have been on and off the Broadway listings; notable examples of the form include *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Grease*, and *Little Shop of Horrors*.

When *Rent* became a hit in 1996, producers started putting on rock musicals more frequently. *Spring Awakening*, *Next to Normal*, *American Idiot*, and most recently *Bare* have all emerged within the past decade, which raises a few questions: Are rock musicals the future of mainstream theater? Is the target demographic of theatergoers shifting from middle-aged women to young people in their teens and 20s? And most importantly, what is the future of Broadway, and will it lose touch with its golden age past?

Steven Chaikelson, a member of the theater faculty in the School of the Arts and co-founder of Snug Harbor Productions, points out that there is no grand plan to tap into younger theatergoers. "In fact, there's no grand plan for anything on Broadway," Chaikelson explains. "There's no organization on Broadway. Broadway is a sort of weird animal in that every season is made up of individual producers or individual theater companies. There may be an individual producer or certain producers who are really interested in family fare, or reaching out to young audiences because they believe that they're the audiences of the future, but there's no concerted effort."

The rock musical trend, according to Chaikelson, is largely a result of producers following the money. "Producers produce shows because they want to produce something memorable and artistic, but also

because they want to sell tickets. So having individual successful shows with rock music on Broadway leads to more shows with rock music on Broadway."

Some industry members have concerns about the genre: Songs written for rock musicals are often behind current pop trends, characters tend to be hollow, and shows can't match the impact and spontaneity of a rock concert.

Wendy Waterman, a professor at the Juilliard School and a member of the Barnard theater department, worries that rock musicals have a tendency to not tell a compelling story. "Often the music is just wandering rather than using craft to build the story. I like rock musicals as long as they really tell the character's story and they're not just about howling," Waterman believes that theatergoers might mistake musicals like these for real storytelling: "The audience misses the experience of an actor really living through something that's more than just affect." According to Waterman, there's often a kind of superstar showmanship in rock musicals. "There is nothing wrong with showmanship. It is a component of performance, but it is meaningless without character and story. Something has to back that showmanship."

Some shows in the rock genre involve a lot of screaming and little substance, but others have something to add to the world of mainstream theater in New York City. Stafford Arima is the director of *Bare*, an off-Broadway rock musical about teens dealing with identity, sexuality, and religion at a coed Catholic boarding school. He notes that recent rock-anthology musicals, such as *Bare*, *Next to Normal*, and *Rent*, often deal with the subject of healing.

"I think it's important that writers, directors, and producers realize the element of healing is an important aspect of what theater is able to do," Arima explains. "If we can shed some light on the situations younger people are experiencing, then works like *Bare* really have a wonderful place. They can start connecting with people, characters, and situations that are perhaps happening in their lives or peripheral lives."

None of these three theater insiders believe that Broadway will be taken over by

rock. "I think we're going to continue to have all different kinds of music coexisting," Chaikelson states. "And I think we're going to see an expansion in all different types and styles of music that wind up being on Broadway."

ARE ROCK MUSICALS THE FUTURE OF MAINSTREAM THEATER? IS THE TARGET DEMOGRAPHIC OF THEATERGOERS SHIFTING FROM MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN TO YOUNG PEOPLE IN THEIR TEENS AND TWENTIES?

Arima agrees that there is room for all. He points out that it's even possible to blend the old with the new, citing *The Book of Mormon*, a contemporary work with a traditional form. "All of these elements are coming together and bringing new life to theater in ways that are exciting for the ears, because diversity is important in any art form," Arima says. "I'm thrilled that if people come to NYC and see a Broadway show it's not just a musical comedy: Sometimes it's a rock musical, sometimes it's a dance musical. It's all part of the exciting evolution of the musical genre."

The world of theater is evolving, not dying; trends may come and go, but great theater will endure. "When there's good theater, in any genre, people sit on the edge of their seats and are so much more focused and attentive," Waterman says. "They might not know what's different, but they do appreciate it. That gives me hope that good theater will always be done, and that there will always be people attracted to it." ■



WRITING SOLO

THE BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF SELF-PUBLISHING

BY KATHERINE FREEDMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN PAYNE

Priscilla Becker would self-publish her work if she had the choice.

"Your work may be more accessible if you're published by a major publishing house," says Becker, a creative writing professor at Columbia and published poet. "But you don't get paid anything."

Becker isn't the only one to throw off the age-old taboo against self-publishing. Since 2006, the number of self-published books produced each year has grown by almost 300 percent. The unprecedented ease of sending a book into the world may have even begun to threaten long-established, profitable publishing houses. In July, Penguin bought Author Solutions, a company founded in the '90s to help authors self-publish. In November, Simon & Schuster worked with Author Solutions to create Archway, Simon & Schuster's imprint for self-publishers.

Author Solutions is one of a growing host of largely online companies—such as Lulu, Blurb, and Amazon—that specialize in allowing writers to self-publish manuscripts. Gone are the days when a pile of rejection letters meant a book would never make it into readers' hands. These companies design, format, and copy-edit books, then put together marketing packages to help authors advertise—for a price, of course. Depending on the number of

services required, an author can pay between \$2 and \$20,000 to get a book onto the virtual shelves of the web, although the journey onto real-world shelves is significantly more difficult.

The 21st-century turn to self-publishing isn't surprising. The rejection rate for manuscripts received by traditional publishing houses is 98 percent. But e-books and Internet have made self-publishing a newly viable option. While producing a book and selling it to bookstores on one's own was once nearly impossible, services like those offered by Author Solutions have made it easy for writers to reach small markets with a relatively small investment.

"The new technology has thrown traditional publishing models into disarray," says Victor Navasky, chair of the Columbia Journalism Review and former editor of *The Nation*. "Self-publishing used to be called 'vanity press' because one couldn't get a traditional publishing imprint to do it. There's a whole new set of enterprises, and the whole thing is redefining itself."

Many people still think of self-publishing as the "vanity press." But self-publishing has unexpected advantages for more than just those who are rejected by large publishing imprints.

With the rise of e-books, author royalty structures are changing in favor of authors. Traditional publishing houses pay the initial expenses to produce a book and put it on the market, but they also keep anywhere from 70 to 90 percent of the profits.

This isn't true of e-book publishers, who can keep royalty rates as high as 50 to 70 percent. And self-publishing authors who advertise successfully can often keep a majority of the profits from their book sales.

"It's inevitable that famous authors, if they have the choice, will push to self-publish because of the royalty difference," says Navasky.

And it's not just the royalty dif-

ference that's so attractive; there's also the independence that comes with rejecting the traditional publishing route.

Although they're able to capitalize on Simon & Schuster's brand name, authors who work with the company's imprint Archway don't actually receive editorial input from the publishing house. That's part of the beauty and the gamble of self-publishing. Authors no longer need someone to put a seal of approval on their book. Does that mean misunderstood, frequently rejected authors will finally gain their much-deserved audiences? Or does it mean the book market will be flooded with inferior material?

Probably both.

"There is an inherent quality control problem," says Navasky. It has to do, he explains, with the largely online nature of self-publishing. With the Internet, "traditional standards don't apply," he says. "In the magazine business, I did a survey with the Columbia Journalism Review. Even prestigious publications like the *New Yorker* don't fact-check and copy edit as rigorously online as in print because they want to be fast and attract maximum traffic."

Navasky believes this lack of quality control extends naturally to self-published books. After all, authors who self-publish have the same attitude as *The New Yorker*: They want to get their books out as fast as possible and attract maximum traffic. Authors have to be relentless about advertising, and the vast majority of self-published authors meet a very small, or even nonexistent, audience. In a *New York Times* article, Alan Finder reported that most self-published books sell fewer than 100 or 150 copies.


Becker agrees that there are disadvantages to forgoing the traditional route. "Self-publishing may help monetarily, but I don't think it's good for your bio or your curriculum vitae," she admits.

But in the end, Becker says that there are advantages and disadvantages to any approach to publishing, and that the main problem is simply getting your foot in the door, whether through a well-established publishing house or on your own.

"It's really difficult to get going," she says, "but once you've published it's not so difficult to publish again." ■

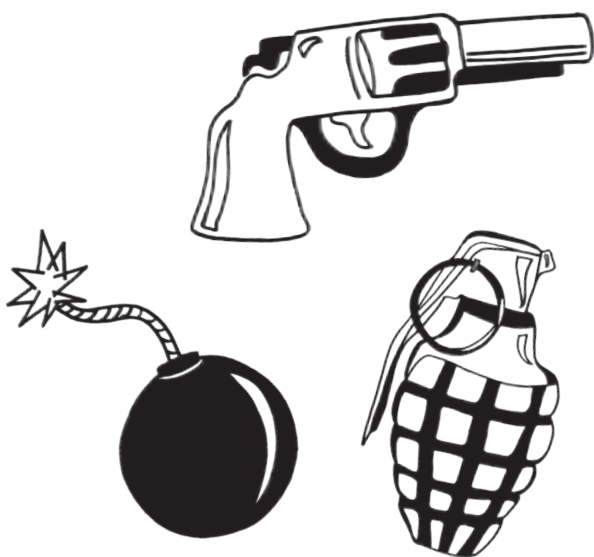


AUTHORS NO LONGER NEED SOMEONE TO PUT A SEAL OF APPROVAL ON THEIR BOOK. DOES THAT MEAN MISUNDERSTOOD, FREQUENTLY REJECTED AUTHORS WILL FINALLY GET THEIR MUCH-DESERVED AUDIENCES?



A Female Tarantino

by Anneliese Cooper



why women are still underrepresented in film & why you should care

As a recently decided film major midway through the fall of my sophomore year, I was sitting in the back of 511 Dodge Hall, idly doodling in the minutes before my Script Analysis class, when our professor cut through the ambient murmur with an announcement. He wanted to apologize, he said, for an unfairness he now perceived in his choice of films to screen. To us women specifically, he wanted to explain that, “as a heterosexual male,” he was naturally drawn toward Westerns and action films—what he called “Boys With Toys”—leaving out romantic comedies and, with them, he seemed to think, his female students. And he wanted to apologize for that. To me—the girl who was writing her final project on Quentin Tarantino.

A few weeks later, I was sitting in the same auditorium, this time for an elective on American Independent Cinema. That day, we were to ex-

amine the “Cinema of Women”—specifically, how female filmmakers had turned to independent modes of production as an alternative to male-dominated Hollywood. And, as an example of this phenomenon, our professor had chosen to screen Allison Anders’ *Gas, Food, Lodging*. For those who haven’t had the pleasure, the film begins with its young female protagonist proclaiming, in jubilant voiceover, “I knew what was missing from my life: a man!”—a sentiment that proceeds to echo throughout. When the lights came up and a few of us mumbled that the film didn’t seem particularly feminist, our professor countered by insisting that he had never meant to call Anders’ movie “feminist,” just “feminine”—that is, replete with a “feminine sensibility.” We had just watched a woman’s work unfold before us, a film that clearly had a concrete set of qualities

illustrations by Suze Myers

different from a male-directed picture, and could we list them, please?

My intention in recounting these stories is not to smear these professors—not in the least. Looking back, I can see how, on some level, it was responsible for the first professor to acknowledge the ways in which his personal taste may have biased his screening choices, and the second was ultimately doing some real good by pointing out women as a minority group in Hollywood. Still, these anecdotes have stuck with me, if only because, in all my study of film, I've been unable to shake their common misconception—that is: “BOYS, GUNS; GIRLS, FEELINGS.” By applying gender stereotypes to cinema, my professors essentially put forth that “women’s film”—whether “made for,” “made about,” or “made by,” and especially if all three—was a fundamentally frilly affair, fit for emotional dramas and sappy scoring and arguments over who used the last tampon. (Note: This is an actual scene in *Gas, Food, Lodging*.)

Something in my gut tells me, as a female filmmaker and aspiring filmmaker, that this isn't right. It's the same something that twinges when I read studies like Martha M. Lauzen's recently released “The Celuloid Ceiling,” which examines “behind the scenes employment of women on the top 250 films of 2012,” only to find that their participation in major creative positions comprised a measly 18 percent—directors, 5 percent. It's the same something that gets piqued at news of the third annual Athena Film Festival, which took place at Barnard this past weekend—a four-day series of “feature films, documentaries and shorts that highlight women's leadership in real life

and the fictional world,” according to its website. And it's the same something that ultimately leaves me asking: Just what constitutes a “woman's film,” anyhow? And why is it that, even today, it's still so hard to get them made?

On-Screen and In Real Life

If you'd like a snapshot of women's on-screen presence in narrative film, I suggest you click over to BechdelTest.com. There, you'll find the now infamous tripartite standard put forward by Alison Bechdel's 1985 comic strip, “Dykes to Watch Out For”: Are there 1) more than two named women who 2) talk to each other about 3) something other than a man? This test is applied in detail to a list of almost 3,500 films, spanning from 1900 to today. Even a quick glimpse at the site's stats page is sobering: Though it's true that a majority of the films profiled pass all three tests, that majority is impressively slim. A whopping 46.08 percent fail to present female characters who meet these simple, humanizing criteria—including an alarming number of my favorites. Forget Tarantino, I'm talking *The Princess Bride*, *Clerks*, *Trainspotting*, *Newsies*, *Groundhog Day*, *The Dark Knight*, *Citizen Kane*.

If you're interested in a more concentrated, current data set, you could also check out the research conducted by Stacy L. Smith of USC Annenberg. For example, in 2011, along with Marc Choueiti and Stephanie Gall, Smith found that, in the highest-grossing films of 2007, 2008, and 2009, “women represented only one-third of speaking characters”—29.9 percent, 32.8 percent, and 32.8 percent, respectively—and moreover, “only about one in six (16.8%) films depicted ‘gender balance’ (women in 45 to 54.9% of speaking roles).”

According to Melissa Silverstein, founder of the blog Women and Hollywood and co-founder of the Athena Film Festival, this dearth of fully realized females on-screen was part of what inspired her and co-founder Kathryn Kolbert to create the festival in the first place. While at an event to celebrate director Jane Campion, “she [Kathryn] and I had this conversation, based on the fact that a lot of the women at the event felt that they couldn't get movies made that had strong female protagonists. After that, we just put our heads together and this is what we came up with.” Of course, Silverstein's explanation of Athena's origin also indicates the other side of its mission: to foster a strong female presence behind the camera, as well as in front of it. These two separate but parallel goals dovetail in the festival's overall commitment to showcasing “women's leadership.”

Despite Nemo's inclement backdrop, the third annual installment of Silverstein and Kolbert's brainchild went ahead as planned this past weekend. From Thursday, Feb. 7, to Sunday, Feb. 10, Barnard's campus was host to a total of 21 feature-length films, 15 shorts, and six works in progress, in a mix of documentaries and narrative films—as well as director Q&As, panels, workshops for young filmmakers, and an award ceremony honoring, among others, accomplished producer Gale Anne Hurd. This

year's program featured an array of subjects, styles, and even languages—including *Granny's Got Game*, a documentary about a North Carolina women's basketball team for senior citizens; *Hannah Arendt*, a German biopic about the woman who introduced us to the “banality of evil”; *Brave Miss World*, a documentary about a former Miss World who, after experiencing sexual assault, took it upon herself to empower survivors across the globe; and *Brave*, last year's Disney-Pixar release about a canny Scottish princess-cum-master archer.

Though Athena certainly foregrounds women's accomplishments, that doesn't mean it's an all-woman affair; the diversity of its content extends behind the camera as well, implicitly busting the myth that it takes a woman to craft an empowering female

IN THE HIGHEST-GROSSING FILMS OF 2007, 2008, AND 2009, “WOMEN REPRESENTED ONLY ONE-THIRD OF SPEAKING CHARACTERS.”

narrative. For example, writer-director David Riker describes his film, *The Girl*, which focuses on the plight of a young mother helping illegal immigrants across the Texas border, as “the story of a woman's journey towards a new sense of self-awareness and strength.” He adds, “I can't think of a better place to have this preview screening before it opens. I love that it's playing at a festival that is highlighting the lives and the struggles of women.”

For some, inclusion in Athena constitutes an even bigger ideological coup. “The LGBT film festivals always pick us up, but we love that this is a woman's film festival that is about women and empowering women,” says Andrea Meyerson, director of *I Stand Corrected*, a documentary about acclaimed jazz bassist Jennifer Leitham. “I made a film about an extraordinary musician who happens to be transgender, not a film about a transgender person who happens to be a musician. And there's a really big difference there.”

Festivals like Athena offer the opportunity for this kind of discourse away from the competitive Hollywood grind. “It's not so much about opening weekend at the box office; it's not about getting the next gig,” says Silverstein. “It's really about trying to have a larger cultural conversation.” This mission resonates with the ever-expanding International Women's Film Festival Network—including, for example, “You Cannot Be Serious: A Discussion of the Status of Women Directors,” a panel that will take place in Berlin on Feb. 15 as part of the Berlin Film Festival. “Our objective for this meeting is to really plant the flag and let them know this is something we're going to be paying attention to from now on,” says Silverstein. “This is a battle for gender equity. It is a feminist conversation.”



Carving out the space for dialogue is key—if only because so often, and especially in the film business, it's money that does the talking.

One Quadrant

"If you, for instance, have a vagina," remarked Mark Harris in his Feb. 2011 GQ article, then in the eyes of film studios and their marketing departments, you "are considered a niche audience that ... generally isn't worth taking the time to figure out." And evidently, gender aside, once you turn 30, you become "such an exhausting proposition in terms of selling a movie that, well, you might as well have a vagina." Indeed, according to Harris, this hasty demographic shucking "leaves one quadrant—men under 25—at whom the majority of studio movies are aimed, the thinking being that they'll eat just about anything that's put in front of them as long as it's spiked with the proper set of stimulants." (Think "Boys With Toys.")

Harris's assertion seems not only to confirm every movie buff's worst fears—that *Transformers 12: Even More Explosions* is, in fact, the future of cinema—but also to explain why directors who want to tell stories about women may have a hard time getting their feet in Hollywood's door. "When we first started developing the script and taking it out and pitching, where we actually had access to people in Hollywood, we would constantly get this comment of, 'Oh, it sounds really great, but you know how hard it is to get a drama with women made,'" says writer-director Jenny Deller, whose debut feature, *Future Weather*, chronicles a young environmental science enthusiast's strained relationship with her grandmother after her mother skips town.

Deller isn't alone. In fact, her experience fits with Smith's most recent study, "Exploring Barriers and Opportunities for Independent Women Filmmakers." Commissioned by the Sundance Institute, the report combines data from 2002 to 2012 with qualitative testimonials from 51 female filmmakers and executives about their experiences in the world of independent cinema. (The Athena Film Festival featured a panel discussion on the study with Smith and Sundance Institute Executive Director Keri Putnam, a full recording of which is available on the Athena website.) According to Smith's findings, 43.1 percent of the interviewees "spontaneously mentioned" bumping up against "gendered financial barriers"—including, specifically, the fact that "female-helmed projects are perceived to lack commercial viability."

Of course, this exclusion of women from marketing considerations seems fundamentally misguided, even in a purely pragmatic context: According to the Nielsen National Research Group's 2012 American Moviegoing report, women have constituted almost exactly half of the American film audience for the past three years—51 percent, in fact, in 2012.

Meanwhile, there's a way in which the "one quadrant" marketing model is equally bleak for the young men it supposedly prizes. Considered little more than an "ADD-addled, short-term-memory-lacking, easily excitable testosterone junkie," according to Harris, the average teenage boy's taste for drivel essentially becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. "There are an enormous number of men who do not feel that the kind of role models of the patriarchy are of any value to them—who feel as oppressed by it as anyone else, and their voices also, I think, are underrepresented," Riker says. "It is limiting, and it's destructive."

Riker goes on to describe an experience he had at a special preview screening of *The Girl* on the Tuesday before it went up at Athena: "At the end, a man, who was probably 60 years old, came up to me. And he said, 'These women dragged me here, because, you probably know—I mean, you read about this film, as a man, you're not really going to want to go. But I'm so happy I came to see it, because, you know, I'm a wannabe.' I think what he meant is, 'I want to be sensitive. I want to be someone who is interested in the emotional journey of life.' He asked me to think about how I can speak about the film so men might be interested in going to see it."

Riker's story seems to exemplify the ways in which demographic branding can ultimately become predictive—how terms like "chick flick" and the marketing strategies behind them close off not only the production but also the reception of women's stories, as the feedback loop of gendered film analysis spins us ever further away from the basic truth that one's taste isn't encoded in one's chromosomes.

For one of the more graceful phrasings of this argument I've heard, I'll turn to the Sept. 17, 2009, episode of *The Onion's* "Hater Podcast" with Amelie Gillette. In response to Michelle Orange's Sept. 3, 2009, *New York Times* piece, "Taking Back the Knife: Girls Gone Gory," which notes an apparent surge in popularity of scarier fare among the fairer sex, Gillette and her guest, Kelly Shea, wrack their brains as to why women could possibly enjoy horror movies. Do they sympathize with the traditional last-girl-standing? Are they just masochists? Or do they just want to snuggle closer to their dates when scared? Finally Gillette shows her hand: "I think I have this solved for them. Maybe women go see horror movies because they're people. And people like horror movies."

Equal Opportunity

Of the myriad data points presented by Smith's recent Sundance study, there's one I keep coming back to: that 15.7 percent of the female filmmakers reported "stereotyping on set" as a barrier to their success. As such stereotypes seem to be at the heart of my inquiry, I ask Silverstein what exactly she thinks these 15.7 percent are referring to: "I think they mean 'sexism,'" she says, matter-of-factly. "People need to think a woman can direct a big budget movie, that she can control a crew. I mean, there's all this crazy stuff about, like, [how] guys on the set won't listen to her."

Indeed, perhaps some of the perceived "lack of commercial viability" Smith reported may stem from this fear that women can't keep their crew disciplined enough to deliver on time and on budget. "To make a movie, you have to deal with other people's money and a lot of it," says comedian and filmmaker Bonnie McFarlane, director of *Women Aren't Funny*, a documentary that examines that age-old entertainment stereotype. "People have to be aggressive—like, 'I'm going to do this, I'm confi-



IN FOCUS

"I THINK I HAVE THIS SOLVED FOR THEM. MAYBE WOMEN GO SEE HORROR MOVIES BECAUSE THEY'RE PEOPLE. AND PEOPLE LIKE HORROR MOVIES."

dent.' And I think for women, once you are that person, people are a little scared of you. You can't win either way. If you're as confident and ballsy as a guy, you're crazy, but if you're not as confident and ballsy as a guy, they can't trust you with doing the job." It's a classic female catch-22, of course: damned if you do, resigned to a Victorian fainting couch if you don't.

"I definitely experienced what I thought was discrimination based on being a woman—but nothing that ever stopped me," Deller says. "The film set is a culture that has been predominantly male for so long, guys can get used to that. Then, when a woman comes along, I think it can be a little—not so much threatening as different."

“We’re still fighting for equal pay and equal opportunity,” Meyerson points out, speaking of women in every industry. “It’s certainly better than it’s ever been, but I think we have to prove ourselves maybe a little bit more.”

McFarlane picks up on another subtle indicator that we may not be able to tack a “post-” onto our feminism just yet. “I find it interesting that people are allowed to say ‘women aren’t funny,’” she reflects on the title of her film. “People have no problem saying it to my face. People are allowed to say, ‘Oh, here’s a woman trying to do a guy’s thing.’ But they wouldn’t say that about race. Shit would hit the fan.”

She’s right, I think, and I tell her so. I add that I think this is because—at least when it comes to what people will say out loud—essentialist, biological definitions of race have, mostly, gone the way of phrenology. Today, if you publicly claim that certain behaviors are hard-wired according to race, you’ll get called out on it—and rightly so. However, essentialist definitions of gender seem to persist, at least subtly, even in the most liberal of minds, without being tagged as fundamentally sexist. Notions of a “maternal instinct,” a “woman’s intuition”—the lurking, latent sense that, though it’s all well and good that modern convenience has allowed women to develop careers outside the home, were we to strip life down to base animal necessity, the female’s place is, fundamentally, to nurture. It’s encoded in her DNA. Prescribed to her by evolution. Sugar and spice, stretching back to the dawn of time.

A Female Quentin Tarantino

On the Oct. 3, 2011, episode of “How Did This Get Made,” a podcast hosted by actor Paul Scheer (aka Donnie, the head page from *30 Rock*), director Lexi Alexander described exactly why she agreed to take on *Punisher: War Zone*, the third sequel to Marvel’s notoriously gore-steeped “Punisher” franchise. She recalled her agents goading her, saying, “‘Look, Lexi. No woman has ever directed an R-rated comic book film. This could really break through the glass ceiling, and there’s a lot of little girls who will thank you for it.’”

Apparently, that was the ticket: in her words, “I want girls to grow up and think that they can be film directors, and it doesn’t have to be Lifetime movies. I want girls to grow up and know they can do anything. And to be honest, it’s not like that in the film industry yet. We don’t have enough examples. There needs to be a female Quentin Tarantino, in my opinion.”

It’s an inspiring message, to be sure—and it would be a logical next step for women’s equality in the film industry. Indeed, one might imagine that the entrance of a prominent female gun-and-gore-slinger onto the cultural main stage would dissolve, once and for all, the myth of the “feminine essence,” at least when it comes to filmmaking.

“I WANT GIRLS TO GROW UP AND THINK THAT THEY CAN BE FILM DIRECTORS, AND IT DOESN’T HAVE TO BE LIFETIME MOVIES.”

Of course, there are already some examples working in Hollywood today—chief among them, perhaps, Kathryn Bigelow, whose résumé includes such “man’s man” fare as *K-11: The Widowmaker* and 2008’s Oscar-winner *The Hurt Locker*. In fact, Alexander was quick to name Bigelow as an example—even though that podcast predated the recent groundswell of controversy over *Zero Dark Thirty* that put Bigelow’s name on the front of nearly every entertainment section. Though most of the discourse surrounding Bigelow’s latest film revolves around its depictions of torture, her status as a female filmmaker has also come under fire. Even author Bret Easton Ellis jumped into the fray, calling Bigelow “overrated,” asserting via Twitter that the industry gives her special treatment because she’s “a hot woman.” It seems that, no matter how dude-friendly their product, women directors are still subject to gendered criticism.

Meanwhile, it’s hard not to interpret the fact that so few women are trusted with non-Lifetime fare as a reflection on studios’ overall lack of confidence in women’s stories to be anything but flower-scented—as if women directors are assigned to projects primarily as female sensibility consultants. “When they do give a woman a movie to make, they want it to be a ‘woman’s movie,’” McFarlane says. “I really think that they think, ‘Well, we want a woman to come in here and give it a woman’s touch.’ Because they know guys who can take care of the other stuff.” (At this point, I find myself tempted to remind Mr. Ellis and his ilk that his most famous novel, *American Psycho*, was brought blood-splatteringly to the screen by director Mary Harron.)



Indeed, though Bigelow’s career is doubtlessly inspiring, there’s always a danger of letting tokenism take the place of real progress. “‘Kathryn Bigelow’ is like what the dumb people say to show, ‘Oh, I know about female directors!’” complained comedian Patton Oswalt, a guest on Scheer’s podcast and an avid *Punisher* fan. “She’s great, but there’s other people.” The problem, it seems, is getting those other people heard.

If You Can See It, You Can Be It

Silverstein clocks our snap judgment of the word “director”: “young, male, baseball cap backwards.” Immediately, images jump to mind: Jason Reitman, Bryan Singer, Zack Snyder, on and on. “And white, of course,” she adds. “These stereotypes have been perpetuated over the years because all we see is pictures of guys looking like this.” Silverstein recently published her e-book, *In Her Voice: Women Directors Talk Directing*, which seeks to combat this trend by presenting a series of interviews with female filmmakers, supplementing them with links to external resources. “I just wanted to put women’s voices out there, so they become a normal part of the conversation,” she says.

So long as women’s voices represent an exception, our fuss over them risks becoming patronizing, even alienating—as if we’re congratulating monkeys for typing Shakespeare. “I feel like at some point we can stop being surprised by women in entertainment,” McFarlane says. “I mean, you can still write about us, but maybe stop being surprised.”

“It all comes down to trusting women,” says Silverstein. “If you are a behind-the-scenes person, you have to be able to trust women’s vision to create a world—whether it’s about men or women—that you want to see. If it’s in front of the scenes, you are putting out a vision of women on-screen that people have to buy into. So, people have to be welcome to seeing women—strong women.”

“In our digital age, ideas and culture are increasingly shaped by the stories told with moving images,” begins the case statement of Smith’s Sundance report. “This context elevates film artists to an enormously influential role in determining how we see ourselves, one another, and the world around us.” Silverstein sums up this idea with reference to the aphorism, “If you can see it, you can be it.” Because if young girls can see *Future Weather* protagonist Lauduree pursuing her passion for science, they might be inspired to speak up in chemistry class—just as, if they can see Deller’s name roll on-screen at the end credits, they might feel empowered to take up a camera.

The reason those gendered remarks from my sophomore year film classes have bothered me for so long—why they merit more than an eye roll—is that, ultimately, there is an important distinction to be made between the irksome notion of “a woman’s touch” and the vital promise of “women’s stories.” Because, as it turns out, we want to hear from women—we need to hear from them, in fact, to have a cultural dialogue that even pretends to reflect the diverse makeup of those asked to engage in it. Because, as festivals like Athena help remind us, women can tell all kinds of stories—about scientists and terrorism and bass-playing and basketball and, indeed, fighting over tampons. We just have to let them.

With any luck, we may even find a female Tarantino in the process. ●

DINING DEMOCRACY

NEW YORK RESTAURANT WEEK & THE AVERAGE COLLEGE STUDENT

BY COURTLAND THOMAS
PHOTO BY AMELIA PITCHERELLA

As a college student in New York, it's easy to feel like you're surrounded by thousands of beautiful forks when all you can use is a spoon.

Those forks are the 24,000 registered restaurants in NYC. We know they exist, but we're not even going to think about trying them; they are simply not for us. Their prices, their dress codes, their air of sophistication—it's all too much.

Yet, for the past couple of weeks, we've felt much less left out. Thank you, Restaurant Week.

Of course, "week" is a misnomer. This year, Restaurant Week lasted from Jan. 14 to Feb. 8, and there will be a two-week counterpart to the event in July. But we're not mad. Where prices would have ordinarily exceeded our professors' salaries, we only need drop \$38 on a three-course meal at one of the city's high-tier establishments. Combining the cavatappi pasta with spicy lamb sausage of Chelsea's The Red Cat with Butter Restaurant's grilled brook trout and the cookie-dough egg roll from Brooklyn-based Benchmark Restaurant, Restaurant Week opens

the kitchen doors of fine dining to all types of New Yorkers, even us.

Nonetheless, only 317 restaurants participate in New York Restaurant Week. Do the math and you'll realize that's a little over 1 percent of the city's restaurants. For all the hype it gets, participation is surprisingly low. Could it be that participating is a risky move for restaurants?

The return rate of customers, after all, will not be high. In addition, there is an extraordinary cost of production once the restaurant reaches a high demand. Ingredients, additional staff, and longer hours roll into a larger bill for the restaurant. The customers may not even appreciate the craftsmanship of a red onion-sugarplum sauce drizzled over a grilled chicken breast. They might ask for ketchup. Worse, they might be from California and ask for a substitute.

However, Restaurant Week creator Tim Zagat argues that restaurants reap huge rewards from the twice-annual event. "Restaurant weeks have become a tradition in city after city because they appeal to both customers and restaurants. In short, they are a win-win," Zagat wrote in a 2010 article published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Upon reflection, the effects do seem highly symbiotic; customers chance upon a restaurant that

otherwise wouldn't get past their \$-\$\$ Yelp filter. Sure, they might pay less than what the restaurant asks for their regular menu items, but business won't stall. The restaurant is drawing in hundreds or thousands more diners than it usually would; publicity skyrockets.

Plus, Zagat argued, many just need the push to go out to eat, and will often decide to forgo the prix fixe menu once they arrive. Restaurant Week "patrons very often go à la carte, add an extra dessert, or celebrate by buying wine," he wrote. In this way, diners end up paying far more than the fixed price, "especially since drinks, coffee, and tip are all extra."

So maybe Restaurant Week isn't that great of a deal for the customer. Still, there's something special about it. We students feel able to go out, dress up, and find a fancy place. Participants in the yearly event, such as the

aforementioned The Red Cat, Butter, and Benchmark, know their new clientele. It is comprised of college students, residents of the greater New York area, and tourists giggling with glee over the fact that New York really does have that smell. Consequently, the atmosphere of each and every restaurant changes for a month. Instead of a couple's

**LIKE NEW YORK ITSELF,
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THEN ENJOY ON NIGHT IN A
BOUGIE, DOWNTOWN LOUNGE**

quiet consumption of crème brûlée at the end of the night, there may be a flash as the college sophomore uploads photos of her entrée onto Instagram.

Potential everyman diners reference the database of participating businesses for a chance to secure a table at triple-dollar-sign restaurants: they are "the masses," the remaining consumers who fall into categories outside the elite. New York's ability to temporarily allow everyone access to elite establishments extends beyond Restaurant Week. Think of the Tribeca Film Festival, New York Fashion Week, and Fashion's Night Out.

NYRW has also inspired Restaurant Week spin-offs across the globe: Boston Restaurant Week, Shanghai Restaurant Week, and Grand Rapids Restaurant Week have similar logistics and pricing, and the same PR benefit envisioned by Zagat in 1992. If the success of one trial-run in New York 20 years ago catalyzed the production of entire restaurant months across the globe, the drawbacks for restaurants must ultimately be negligible.

Like New York itself, Restaurant Week embodies the idea that anything can happen. You can be an ordinarily starving college student pleading outside of Westside Market, but then enjoy one night in a bougie, downtown lounge. You can be too cheap to buy the clothes modeled at Fashion's Night Out, yet cross paths with Karlie Kloss off Prince Street. You can finish your Plato's *Republic*, descend onto a subway platform, and disappear anywhere. Restaurant Week fits right in; it remains one of the crazy, kooky, completely necessary experiences of being in New York City. ●



ARE WE WHAT WE WATCH?

DEBATING THE IMPACT OF ON-SCREEN VIOLENCE

BY BETH TOLMACH

If there is one way to make Quentin Tarantino defensive, it's to question the violence in his films. The director's latest movie, *Django Unchained*, hit theaters this past December, and in the trademark style of *Pulp Fiction*, *Kill Bill*, and *Reservoir Dogs*, it contains a fair amount of bloodshed.

In an interview with a reporter, Tarantino explained why it's ok to enjoy violence in films: "It's a movie. It's a fantasy ... You go and you watch a kung-fu movie and one guy takes on a hundred people in a restaurant. That's fun." The interviewer pressed Tarantino further, asking him whether there was a link between violence on-screen and off. Instantly enraged, he replied, "Don't ask me a question like that. I'm not biting. I refuse your question."

Tarantino's reaction was immature, and his attempt to dodge blame irresponsible. But more importantly, the interview was representative of a larger national reluctance to consider the relationship between violence on-screen and in the real world.

This conversation between art and society has unfolded over several decades. In the 1980s, Tipper Gore campaigned to mark albums with explicit stickers in order to protect children from lyrical vulgarity. After the killings at Columbine in 1999, Marilyn Manson's music was blamed for inspiring the shooters' violence. And now, after the devastating mass shootings in Newtown, Conn., our popular entertainment is once again being subjected to attack.

The National Rifle Association suggested a connection between violent art and violent action in the statement it released one week after the tragedy in Newtown. At a press conference Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president of the NRA said, "There exists in this country a callous, corrupt, and corrupting shadow industry that sells, and sows violence against its own people, through vicious, violent video games." He added, "Then there's the blood-soaked slasher films like *American Psycho* and *Natural Born Killers* that are aired like propaganda loops on 'Splatterdays,' and every day a thousand music videos that portray life as a joke and murder as a way of life. And then they have the nerve to call it entertainment."

These comments incited a renewed discussion of the ramifications of violent films. Arnold Schwarzenegger, former California governor and star of a slew of popular, gore-filled movies such as *The Terminator*, has taken a different position on the issue. "I personally feel that

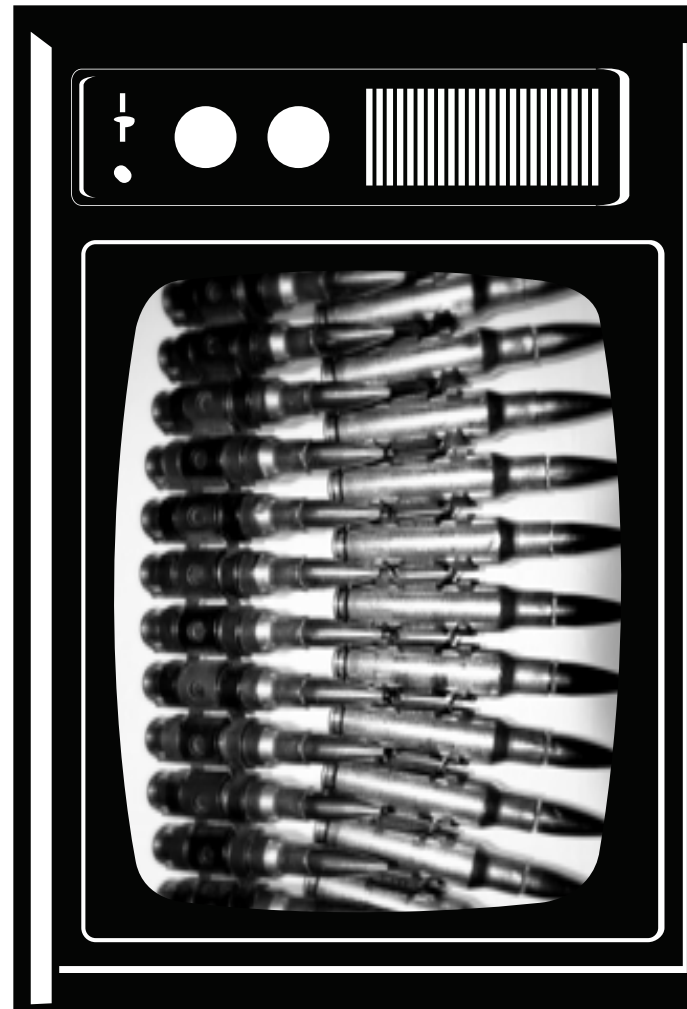
GUNS CAN BE TAKEN AWAY, BUT THE UNDERLYING PATHOS REMAINS. WHEN WE REALIZE THAT WE, AS A NATION, HAVE VIOLENT IMPULSES, WE MUST BEGIN TO SCRUTINIZE OUR CULTURE.

this is entertainment. The other thing is a serious real-life tragedy," said Schwarzenegger.

Schwarzenegger occupies an interesting position. One might expect the Governor, involved in both politics and entertainment, to bring a unique perspective to the issue of the real-life ramifications of on-screen violence. But his response—that Hollywood is merely a business, existing in a vacuum—resembles LaPierre's statement in its simplicity. When we read responses like these from people who wield extraordinary influence, we are left feeling duped. Both provide arguments that are, on some level, logical. LaPierre's descriptions of the grisly violence packaged in entertainment and marketed to youth make us cringe. No one feels comfortable with the idea of children seeing depictions of murder or of "killing" people with the click of a video game controller. Schwarzenegger's words are equally as persuasive. Everyone enjoys entertainment, and no one wants to be told what to watch. Censorship is un-American. But both these sides of the debate ignore more important issues about violence in our society.

The random act of violence in Sandy Hook, committed against innocent children and adults, came as a huge shock to the nation. What was the shooter's motivation? How can this be prevented in the future? Understandably, we wanted answers. The ability to identify a specific cause and look to political processes to cure our societal evils would be comforting in the face of such uncertainty. During the vigil for the Sandy Hook tragedy,

Photos courtesy of urbanartcore.eu, kappuru, and Israel Defense Forces via Flickr Creative Commons.



President Barack Obama argued that immediate political action was necessary, even in response to a complex issue. “No single law—no set of laws can eliminate evil from the world, or prevent every senseless act of violence in our society. But that can’t

CLEARLY, AN AUDIENCE FOR VIOLENT MOVIES AND TV SHOWS EXISTS. IF IT’S TRUE THAT HUMANS NATURALLY HAVE A FONDNESS FOR THIS SORT OF CONTENT, IS IT WRONG THAT OUR ART DEPICTS THAT REALITY? IF WE’RE A CULTURE IN DECLINE, SHOULD THAT NOT BE REFLECTED IN OUR MEDIA?

be an excuse for inaction. Surely, we can do better than this,” the president said.

A majority of Americans (52 percent) now support stricter regulations on gun ownership, but we continue to wonder whether legislation alone can guarantee a reduction in future violence. Jeffrey Bland, the founder and president of Seattle’s Personalized Lifestyle Medicine Institute, believes that access to guns is not what drives regular acts of violence in the United States. In an article in the Huffington Post, Bland wrote, “There have been 29 mass shootings in the United States between the events of April 20, 1999 at Columbine High School and the Dec. 14, 2012 tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School. I propose these shootings were, in part, a health-care issue.” Bland’s piece speculates that the recurrent shootings stem from inadequate mental health services. This view renders the fight for gun control as an initiative that is temporarily advantageous, but ultimately ineffective—a mere Band-Aid placed over a gushing wound. Guns can be taken away, but the underlying pathos remains. When we realize that we, as a nation, have violent impulses, we must begin to scrutinize our culture.

It could be argued that our obsession with violence is the result of a society that has been desensitized through an overabundance of images. We need gore to satisfy our ever-waning attention spans. In this era of instant gratification—of Google searches, texting, and study drugs—the media fully exploits our fascination

with the grim. Some of our most beloved TV shows include Showtime’s *Dexter*, a crime drama about a blood-spatter analyst who moonlights as a serial killer, and CBS’s *CSI*, where murders are analyzed in all their gruesome detail. Even apart from crime dramas, many of today’s most widely-watched programs fixate on death and revel in regular bloodshed. There is always someone being offed on *Breaking Bad*. The perished outnumber the living in zombie thriller *The Walking Dead*.

Not all of these depictions of violence can be grouped together: Some examples of violence in movies and television are more gratuitous than others. Some violence is shown for the purpose of telling a story, of reflecting real scenarios. Other images of violence are not as sophisticated; it is simply violence for the sake of violence, used to pull in a voyeuristic audience. But this trivialized, glamorized brand of violence is fun to watch. Under normal circumstances, it would be easy to side with Schwarzenegger’s viewpoint that these programs are purely entertaining, and nothing more. However, when murder happens in movie theaters and elementary schools, the on-screen violence becomes more sinister. The shootings of recent years have forced us to look at our culture more critically, to consider how what we see impacts who we are.

Vice President Joe Biden sat down with entertainment industry representatives in January to discuss this connection between what we see and what we do. Chris Dodd, the president of the Motion Picture Association of America, also attended. Dodd rejected the idea of forced regulations on content and instead proposed that there should be better information about films so that parents can individually decide what their children watch.

It appears that any changes in content will have to be made voluntarily rather than by force. It will be up to Hollywood to tone down the violence. Filmmakers, like Tarantino, possess the power of cultural production. They will either have to stifle their creative impulses and produce less violent content, or ignore popular concern and risk disapproval from those who believe that our images inspire our behavior.

But the idea that psychotic behavior can be induced from a single external influence—from a movie, a book, a song on the radio—is reductive. Blaming a single artist is taking the easy way out; it ignores, and thus excuses, society’s role in creating criminals. It would be refreshing to turn the question around, and to contemplate why we, as a culture, have such a taste for violence. Clearly, an audience for violent movies and TV shows exists. If it’s true that humans naturally have a fondness for this sort of content, is it wrong that our art depicts that reality? If we’re a culture in decline, should that not be reflected in our media? It’s a tricky question. Even if movies are simply reflecting a pre-existent penchant for cruelty, we have to consider whether it’s responsible for filmmakers to provoke these darker human emotions for the sake of commercial success. It remains to be seen whether artistic integrity can survive in a world where violence is used to titillate and exploit the public. ●



CRAZY IN LOVE?

BY SARAH CHOI

My relationship with Beyoncé began when I was five and first heard those three delicious guitar licks at the beginning of “Say My Name.” Since then it developed into pathetic attempts at singing “1+1” to karaoke instrumentals on YouTube, following the Beyoncé tag religiously on Tumblr, and watching her 90-minute Glastonbury performance at one in the morning. Over these past 13 years, our courtship—OK, my one-way obsession—has only grown fiercer. That’s not to say I don’t question my devotion. Sometimes I wonder: am I the only one who cares about us, Bey? Sure, the 16-Grammy-winning pop star is busy with Jay and Blue, but I was a fan years before either of them entered her life. I was there when she sported ramen noodle-like cornrows and wore outfits that had more rhinestones than fabric. If that isn’t unconditional love, then I don’t know what is.

Needless to say, I’m sometimes frustrated with how little Beyoncé gives in return. I’m an open book, and she’s as closed-off as the Barnard side gates after 10. Then again, this is what makes Beyoncé’s relationship with her fans so unique. Although she doesn’t expose every

detail of her personal life, she reveals what she owes to her fans as an entertainer. The distance isn’t because we don’t deserve her vulnerability, but because vulnerability would lessen the diva image she’s worked tirelessly to achieve.

But recently, my devotion has been put to the test. Excited as I was to hear Beyoncé sing “The Star-Spangled Banner” at Barack Obama’s inauguration, I was equally devastated that the diva herself used a prerecorded track. Performers like Ashlee Simpson and Britney Spears have been known to lip sync, but I would never have expected it from Beyoncé. The superstar we’re used to is confident in her capabilities, not self-doubting enough to commit a singer’s ultimate sin. Even with my die-hard fandom, I understood the enraged reactions. Lip-syncing shows a lack of effort and a sense of complacency. If I thought I was getting a live performance and got a CD, I’d feel cheated too! But after a great deal of thought, and even reconsidering my steadfast dedication to Bey, I’ve concluded that her lip-synced performance was fundamentally different from a Spears or Simpson cop-out.

At a press conference held before the Super Bowl, Beyoncé tackled the criticisms head-on. She began the conference by belting the entire

national anthem with unwavering confidence and flawless vocals. When she was done, she thanked the press, asking, “Any questions?” with a giggle. Standing by her choice, the star explained that she “is a perfectionist,” and that “due to no proper sound check, [she] did not feel comfortable taking a risk.” She recognized that the day was all about the president and the inauguration, and told the press that she “wanted to make him and [her] country proud.”

From Beyoncé’s response, I think that for the first time in Beyoncé history, the diva’s body armor of complete confidence proved it wasn’t entirely indestructible. She understood the expectations, and considered that she might not be able to meet them. But instead of being disappointed by Beyoncé’s moment of weakness, I admire her even more. Who else could have handled the press like that and reaffirmed her talent simultaneously? I am humbled and inspired by the star’s ability to discern between performances that glorify her (hello, Superbowl!) and ones that celebrate others. Clearly, Beyoncé is still as fierce as ever. Plus, with Mrs. Carter’s documentary, *Life Is But a Dream*, premiering on HBO this Saturday, maybe I’ll finally get the chance to know the superstar more personally too. ●

TV’S (TWIN) PEAK

BY ALISON HERMAN

Like most college students, I spent my winter break recuperating from months of productivity by spending four weeks doing, well, nothing. I hung out with a few friends. I ate a few burritos. And for an embarrassingly large portion of my day, I lay in bed, working my way through my Netflix instant queue.

Once I’d torn through the obvious college-student shows—*30 Rock* lasted me less than a week—I was at the mercy of Netflix’s notoriously arbitrary recommendations. Flipping past *Happily Divorced* and *Ultimate Fighting: Fistful of Dollars*, I hit on *Twin Peaks*, a show that ran on ABC for two seasons in the early ’90s. I’d seen screenshots floating around the Tumblrverse and decided to give the series a shot.

Twin Peaks doesn’t sound like much on paper. The series begins with the murder of Laura Palmer, the generic prom queen-type of Twin Peaks, Wash. Squeaky-clean FBI agent Dale Cooper arrives to investigate, and the murder mystery plays out alongside scores of soap opera-esque subplots of small-town drama.

But what makes *Twin Peaks* so memorable isn’t the basic who-what-where, but the fascinating disconnect between the everyday subject matter and its eerie, suspenseful tone. The haunting soundtrack transformed doctor’s office scenes into a demented parody of *General Hospital*. The idiosyncratic script turned Laura’s behaved attorney father into a lap-dancing, scene-stealing wreck; bizarre characters just as likely to carry around a sentient log as carry on an affair. The contrast with today’s formulaic, uncomplicated major network shows was jarring. Series like *Gossip Girl* and *Grey’s Anatomy*, with their limited repertoire of plot twists (cheating, pregnancy, and the occasional fake death) and bland, un compelling dialogue, now felt like a serious step down.

The more I thought about *Twin Peaks*, the more impressed I was with ABC circa 1989. David Lynch, the show’s co-creator and driving force, was a television rookie when he wrote the pilot. Before *Twin Peaks*, he was best known for directing *Eraserhead* (Wikipedia describes it as “a cult classic on the midnight movie circuit”) and *Blue Velvet* (“a neo-noir

crime film”). Shonda Rhimes he was not. The choice to give a notoriously obtuse art house director control over his own show was a risky decision—and unfortunately, today’s network executives are not big fans of risk.

With *30 Rock* off the air and *Community* in seemingly permanent danger of cancellation, intelligent and inventive shows are increasingly harder to find on major networks. Of course, premium networks like HBO and Showtime have big budgets, no commercial breaks, and brilliant shows like *Game of Thrones*. But the vast majority of viewers don’t have ready access to an HBO subscription. It’s not enough to create a channel or two with a monopoly on provocative or high-budget programming; in fact, it risks creating separate spaces for “good TV” and “profitable TV.”

At its best, television allows viewers to share in a common experience; that’s why it’s called “popular culture.” And what pop culture needs right now isn’t a ninth season of *Grey’s Anatomy* or one more brilliant HBO miniseries. It’s another *Twin Peaks*. ●



PLEASE MR. POSTMAN

A LOVE LETTER TO SNAIL MAIL

BY CAROLINE LANGE
ILLUSTRATION BY HANNAH SOTNICK

On the morning of Wednesday, Feb. 6, the United States Postal Service announced that, this coming August, it would stop delivering mail on Saturdays. I was sitting at the help desk in the Diana Center, where I work, when I heard the news. I felt close to tears—I love the USPS. I was so worked up about the end of Saturday mail that I had to put up the DESK STAFF WILL RETURN IN 15 MINUTES sign and take a lap around the building to calm myself down.

The United States Post Office has been around in one form or another since before our country was officially founded. Since its very first iteration in the late 1600s, the USPS system has been one thing that all Americans share: Every town in America has a ZIP code and everyone can receive mail. And we do—according to its website, our postal service still processes 554 million pieces of mail every day. Nevertheless, the USPS is going broke, and fast: Last year alone, it lost \$16 billion. To compensate, it has had to lay off hundreds of employees and close numerous small post offices, and this breaks my heart.

I have always loved sending and getting things in the mail—postcards, magazines, letters, packages—I don't care what. Even the filler mail, the promotional cards sent out by seemingly every nonprofit, are kind of exciting; it's thrilling to see my name on an envelope, regardless of whether it was stamped there by a machine devoid of the warmth I generally associate with receiving a letter.

I love snail mail because it can serve as a record of a relationship, romantic or otherwise—it is an elegant back-and-forth exchange, a history in call and response. For the past three years, I have squirreled away every letter I've received, and those letters are stories indi-

vidually and collectively told: Good luck notes from my mother, a postcard from a friend's hometown, envelopes with stickers on them. One letter, from an old boyfriend, contains pieces of crumbled plaster and a brochure from a cathedral he visited. He was the first person I ever said "I love you" to, though I didn't actually say it out loud—I wrote it, put a stamp on it, stuck it in the mail, and anxiously checked my Altschul mailbox every single day until I received a letter in reply.

Just think about how many secrets, like a first "I love you," are working their way through our postal system. We place so much faith in this system, hardly questioning whether whatever it is we're sending will arrive, having been carried by any number of trusty postal workers. Even in college, our mail service plays an important role in our day-to-day lives. How many of us order our books in the mail or wait for care packages from our parents and friends? How many of us called another ZIP code home before 10027, and sent absentee ballots through the mail when we voted in November? I find almost nothing as exciting as receiving a WITS automated email from Barnard's Mail Services letting me know that there's a package waiting for me; anticipating what's in the box on the way to the mailroom is almost as good as actually opening it. And finding a letter from a friend has the force to make my day, because it's not just letters we're sending—it's recipes and perspectives and good news and bad news and, yeah, love. It takes real thoughtfulness to sit down, write out a letter, lick and seal the envelope, and walk it to the USPS blue iron mailbox on the street corner, wishing it a good trip as you slide it through the opening.

It's no wonder, then, that thank-you emails don't have quite the same impact as handwritten ones. "No one sends thank-you notes in the mail anymore," a man told me as I was sitting at the Diana desk and he was waiting for his daughter to return with coffee. I had just told him about the USPS's announcement.

"I do," I told him.

"I do, too," he said, nodding wistfully.

And what about holiday cards and letters to Santa? What about pen pals—can you still call them "pen pals" if you exchange notes online? And what about love letters, and the intimacy that comes from seeing your name written in someone else's handwriting? These sentiments cannot be re-created in emails.

It's true that we live in the electronic age: I first read about the USPS's decision to stop Saturday letter delivery online, and then I posted the link on my Facebook. I know that our reliance on technology and social media is progress; we're changing the way we live, and that's a not a bad thing. Our use of technology has helped us to establish a society that is more efficient, more connected, than it has ever been before. It used to take weeks and weeks for a message to get from one place to another; now it takes fractions of a second for my email to get from my dorm room here in New York to my best friend, who is studying abroad in Italy. This isn't about renouncing technology. It's about choosing the right medium and sticking to it, even if it's a little more expensive and takes a little longer.

As I read the article announcing the USPS's decision, I couldn't help but feel a little guilty. If this—the end of Saturday mail—was really something I could be upset about, then I was lucky. But the thing is, it's not just Saturday mail—this is the beginning of the end. First they'll cut Saturday mail; that happens this August. We'll be down to five days of letter delivery. Sooner or later, they'll cut another day, and then another, and before we know it, the USPS and snail mail will be practically obsolete. I don't want, 50 years down the road, to have to explain the joy of great stationery or special-edition stamps. I want everyone to know the magic of getting a letter in the mail—in rain, in snow, and on Saturdays, too. ■



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