



By

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WHY AND HOW MALE-DRIVEN FILMS CAN (AND SHOULD) BE FEMINIST FRIENDLY

Last time, I took to task the male-driven film, *Manchester By the Sea*, for aggrandizing bad male behavior while resigning its female characters to the limited patriarchal roles of crying, nurturing and providing sex. Lamentably, this profile fits far too many male-driven films, and this malpractice needs to stop.



For starters, it's bad storytelling. Constantin Stanislavski said, "There are no small parts, only small actors." I'm sure he simply forgot to add, "Oh, yeah, and a bunch of lazy writers." One should never waste an opportunity for an interesting character on some boring and thoughtless stereotype. We've seen more than enough of those by now.

But the even greater problem lies in the fact that these "throwaway" characters normalize and perpetuate negative stereotypes. And why should we accept that? With a little creativity and craft, a writer, director and/or thespian can truly shine by moving beyond this egregiously low common denominator and creating more compelling, well-rounded characters across the board, including those that happen to be female and enjoy less screen time.

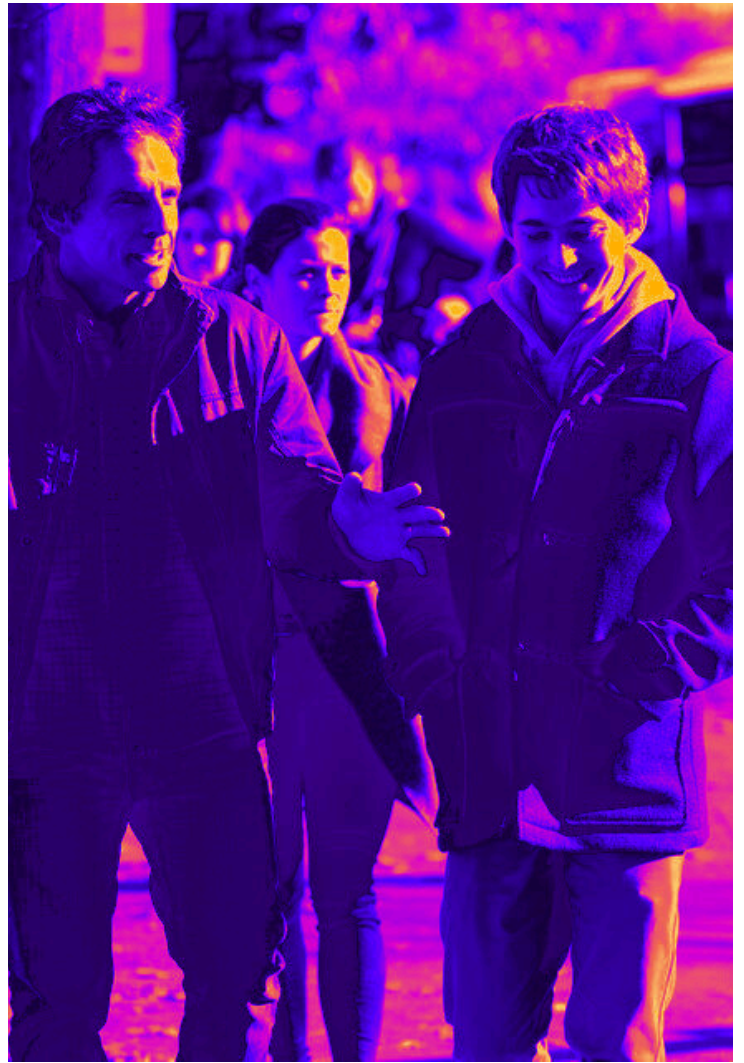


Let's explore a few films that achieve this with aplomb:

BRAD'S STATUS

Despite the surplus of films centering around whiny, straight, white privileged guys these days (cough, *The Disaster Artist*, cough), you'd be hard pressed to find one that does it more so than Mike White's *Brad's Status*. And yet, what sets this film apart from so many of the others is that, for a delightfully refreshing change, it's essential to the plot. It also features strong supporting female characters.

At the height of protagonist Brad's (Ben Stiller) self-pity binge-a-thon, he accepts an invitation by his teenage son's attractive female peer, Ananya (Shazi Raja) to go out drinking with her friends. And when he voices his whiny plight, she calls him out, "You're fifty years-old and you still think that the world was made for you."



Without getting much screen time, she steals the show by saying what so many of us have been dying to say to every whiny men's rights troll who insists the evolving world is leaving his entitled ass behind.

It's also via her example, along with that of her friends and Brad's wife Melani (Jenna Fischer) that we see the alternative to Brad's sense of entitlement and shallow concern about his image. Each woman has earned fulfillment through her own choices and accomplishments sans any need for ego stroking and entitlement.



**Good on you,
Mike White!**



THE LAND



I'll examine this film at greater length in regards to a future topic but wanted to mention it here as well because it does such a brilliant job with its supporting female characters. The story centers around four teenage boys who, in their quest to escape their harsh lives in inner city Cleveland, get caught up in a harrowing drug ring.

Despite what may sound like a less than original premise, *The Land* offers a very fresh and impressive take on its subject matter due in no small part to the wide array of diverse female supporting roles, including mothers both laudable and severely flawed, various love interests and a chilling antagonist in the form of a drug ring queenpin (yes!).

In this film, no role is wasted and no two women are alike. Despite their roles as supporting characters, each has a fully realized backstory and voice. Mothers are not relegated merely to childcare. Murderous drug queenpins are neither masculine nor cartoonish evil shrews.

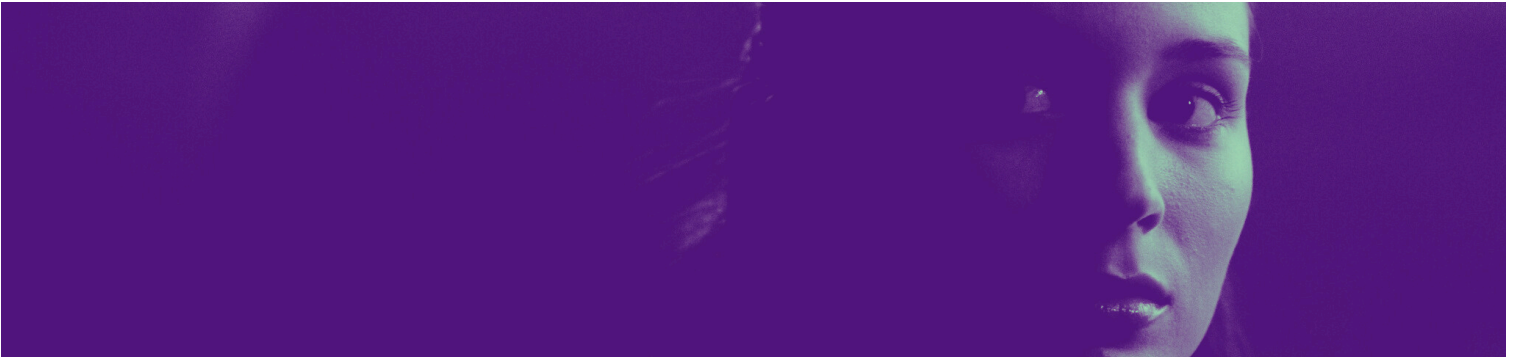
Thank you, Steven Caple, Jr.!

THE SOCIAL NETWORK



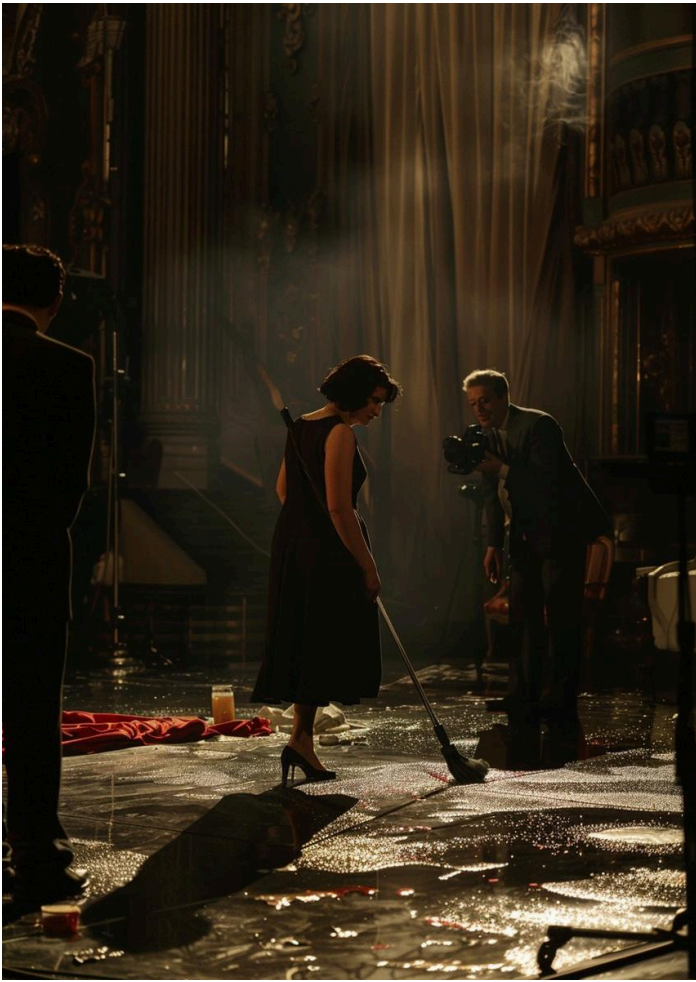
Labeled “sexist” by many critics, and not entirely without reason, this David Fincher/Aaron Sorkin collaboration, inspired by Facebook’s origin story, centers around an ensemble of male characters who, among other sexist acts, create a website to objectify and humiliate women on the basis of physical appearance.

Meanwhile, these jerkwads relentlessly backstab one another in the pursuit of ever more money and power. So, it stands to reason that the supporting romantic roles, i.e., women who would actually flock to such men, are not presented as especially intelligent, independent-thinking or well fleshed out. If they were, we’d question what in the hell is wrong with them for keeping such bad company.



And to counter these two-dimensional, minor female characters, the movie begins with a very feminist-friendly heroine indeed. Rooney Mara’s Erica Albright enjoys minimal screen time yet, in her few brief scenes, proves herself a fully developed character with a strong, independent voice. In fact, in the opening, she accomplishes what the other poor saps in the film fail to: she recognizes the Mark Zuckerberg character for the type of person the movie paints him to be: a ruthless, self-serving, narcissistic pig. She promptly dumps him with words that will haunt him until the end of the film:

“You are probably going to be a very successful computer person. But you're going to go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a nerd. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole.”



So, this male-driven film makes a couple of apt choices regarding its portrayal of minor female roles. Lamentably, it also makes two very disappointing choices. The majority of the gold-digging, sexually exploitative women (one who is downright psychotic offering no nuance or insight as to how she got that way) are portrayed almost exclusively by Asian thespians.

From what I've read, these characters are not inspired by real women, so it seems a deliberate choice in a film that features an otherwise primarily white cast. In our racially charged society, it's hard not to question the motives behind this choice.

Also, on reading more about the true events that inspired this fictionalized film, it would seem there were more females involved in the development of the Facebook enterprise—that is, beyond the roles of mere sexual playthings. It's a shame there was no representation of these women in the film.

So, Stanislavski is partially right. There should be no small roles. To make this happen, we must challenge writers, directors, and thespians to better hone their craft and their characters. Let's make every part in a movie count. Because the fact of the matter is they already do.



Next up from me: What happens when films don't pass the Reverse-Bechdel Test...

