

“An Impermeable Structure”: Minority and Female Employment

An Unserviceable Binary: “Good” Work and Minority Employment

Kristen Warner, University of Alabama

One of the more recent trends on Twitter is the emergence of Mystery Hollywood. The “Mysterys,” as they label themselves, are anonymous industry workers/insiders with enough clout that to reveal their identities would cause havoc in their real lives. Mysterys such as Mystery Cre8tive, Mystery Grip, Mystery Exec, Mystery Actor Guy, and Mystery Director are only identifiable by gender if they include it in their Twitter handle and avatar as in the cases of Mystery Directrix and Mystery Brit Exec. In addition, the Mysterys are all assumed to be white unless, similar to the gender distinctions, they mark their racialized difference in their names like Mystery Brown Director. The intersection of race and gender in relationship to how the Mysterys self-fashion their personas as successful laborers in the film and television industry complicate the honest and, oftentimes, brutal truths they espouse under the cloak of anonymity. Put simply, anonymity provides a cover by which they can unabashedly silo themselves in colorblind, genderless myopic worldviews without fear of reprimand.

Consider the Twitter screed by a Mystery account called “DevelopmentHell Exec”:

Weeks like this, I don't know what part of the industry I'm in--the one that thinks everyone's out to hate on women, or the real part. If anything, MEN are discriminated against in film and TV. Everyone wants to hire a woman, everyone wants a great female writer...#truth. Am I the only one sick of hearing about the plight of women in the film and TV industry? It's 2014. Just do something awesome, you're in. Or how bout just making GOOD FILMS? Women-centric, men-centric, alien-centric, muppet-centric, Wall-E-centric. Whatever. Quality > politics. You know what men do hate? Bitchy feminists. Feel free to be offended, women. But it's true. Like men, some of you are just intolerable. I've met tons of female writer/directors w/tons of potential. But you ALL can't be Lena Dunham You're not ALL fucking brilliant. Sorry. Untalented women (and men) w/a sense of entitlement are the WORST. You know the honest to Christ truth? You know what the Holy Grail for managers is? A black or Hispanic female writer who is INSANELY good. So let's summarize:

- No one cares about gender, they want shit to be good
- Black women are the Holy Grail for managers
- Men are icky

The cover of anonymity allows DevelopmentHell Exec to speak his truth about the manner by which diverse employment is discussed in Hollywood. It also allows him to free himself up from the focus on employing different kinds of gendered and racial bodies to instead focus on the abstract and apolitical notion of “good work” that cares not about the body it is produced from. For DevelopmentHell Exec, the data suggesting how far behind white women, and men and women of color lag behind white men in all facets of industry is not representative of a racist structure but of the weeding out of

those who create “quality” work and those who are unqualified for the business. Here’s my point: DevelopmentHell Exec is likely representative of many influential laborers in the media industries. And, if, as in most things stereotypes and anecdotal evidence trump data, then regardless of how many think pieces, pie charts and graphs emerge demonstrating that marginalized bodies are not allowed opportunities to prove they can produce quality work, the few that are allowed through will always function as evidence that “good” work rises to the top.

This is the position that I want to take in this paper: the racially myopic world of film and television depends upon the supposition that when work is “good,” the body that produced it will always find his or her way to the path of success. Of course what this discursive strategy around “good” work obscures is that Hollywood is an industry built around relationships, networking, internships, and apprenticeships—a classed set of practices that people of color are often excluded. How does one, in an industry where spec scripts aren’t “allowed” to be read without third party mediators out of justifiable concern for copyright infringement, receive feedback on their work? How does a woman of color become a casting assistant in an industry dominated by white women who primarily hire within their own relationship networks?

Returning to the Mysteries, DevelopmentHell Exec’s rant is by and large not one most would subscribe to in full. As racially myopic as they are, they do generally hope for a more diverse industry. However, their approach to how that becomes a reality is not that much different from DevelopmentHell’s; that is, they believe diversity largely occurs organically when individuals “do the work.” Thus, my response to the question informing this panel is that until the media industries interrogate their own practices, “the work” will always trump employing difference.