Funny Business: Women Comedians and the Political Economy of Hollywood Sexism

Abstract
In the last five years there has been great public interest in Hollywood's “gender problem,” namely its unequal representation of women in key creative roles such as director, producer, and studio head. Yet, in the long history of women in film and television, comedians have had the greatest success and degree of agency over their work. From silent film comediennes like Mabel Normand to Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, and more recently Tina Fey and Amy Schumer, women comedians have resoundingly had success behind-the-screen as well as in front of it. In order to comprehend the disjuncture between the data and the women comedians’ success, we must account for the women at the center of contemporary popular culture who seem to have successfully navigated highly gendered structures of media. This dissertation offers an extension of the existing scholarship on the industrial practices of women mediamakers. This dissertation offers a historical production study of gender. This dissertation opens up ways of exploring the range and complexity of gendered practices in Hollywood. It shows how these actions operate within discursive frames and institutional frameworks that generally serve to perpetuate the exclusion of women. I suggest that cultural industries like film and television, when examined simultaneously as creative spaces and business enterprises using a political economy approach blended with cultural studies, offer revelatory sites for the study of gendered labor practices in Hollywood.

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The BBC News website takes a look at some of the political words and phrases that made the headlines in 2011. But which one? Prime Minister’s Questions is meant to be a stand-off between David Cameron and the leader of Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition, Ed Miliband. So why does he frequently direct his ire at the shadow chancellor, Ed Balls? He once called him “the most annoying person in modern politics.”