Adapt or Die: The Dangers of Women’s Authorship

To date, Jane Campion is the only woman to have won the Palme d’Or at Cannes, and Kathryn Bigelow is the only woman to have won the Best Director Oscar at the Academy Awards. They are two of the best known female directors in English-language cinema, and both have careers that span more than 30 years, a testament to their survival in an industry that, as I noted in the introduction, makes little room for women’s authorship. What they have to say about the status of women in filmmaking is worth taking into account. In a short piece in the *Guardian*, Campion declares,

My advice to young female filmmakers is: please do not play the lady card. Don’t feel sorry for yourself. Just do your work and let someone else deal with the politics ... But we should mandate that 50% of films produced are made by women. That would be possible with public money. Instantly the culture would change. It can be done. (Wiseman, 2013)

And in an interview from 1990 Bigelow shares her view:

If there’s specific resistance to women making movies, I just choose to ignore that as an obstacle for two reasons: I can’t change my gender, and I refuse to stop making movies. It’s irrelevant who or what directed a movie, the important thing is that you either respond to it or you don’t. There should be more women directing; I think there’s just not the awareness that it’s really possible. It is. (Perry, 1990)
Campion’s and Bigelow’s comments are characteristic of their answers to interview questions about gender inequality in the film industry: on the one hand, they refuse the politicization of gender for women filmmakers (‘don’t play the lady card’ and ‘I just choose to ignore that as an obstacle’), and on the other, they recognize the incessant gender inequality of the film industry (‘mandate 50% films by women’ and ‘There should be more women directing’). Their mixed advice on how to deal with the gender inequality of the film industry necessarily negotiates contemporary postfeminist culture that continues to claim that women can do whatever they want even as there has been growing acknowledgement in the media of the entrenchment of inequality (such as the persistent lack of equal pay between men and women). In the introduction to this book, I noted that our current postfeminist era is particularly fraught for the woman filmmaker whose exceptional status marks her out as exemplary of feminist success for individual women and the exception that proves the rule of women’s ‘normal’ choices made in general (for example, the idea that ‘normal’ women would choose motherhood over a high-powered career). As such, Campion and Bigelow are key protagonists in this postfeminist drama: their longevity as directors with multiple films to their names and their international recognizability make them ‘exceptionally exceptional’, highlighting the possibilities of women’s vision and visibility in filmmaking, while also shining a light on the fact that few women filmmakers become as successful as they are.

In Chapter 3, I consider two popular adaptations by Jocelyn Moorhouse and Callie Khouri that at the time seemed to herald new(ish) careers in directing for two women who had been previously successful in bringing women’s stories to cinema audiences, particularly women’s audiences. Both women have directed (to date) only one follow-up feature film and neither did well at the box office. They can be compared to male filmmakers who have had similar early career trajectories, which saw initial success for debut features and follow-up films, before surviving box-office bombs to achieve relatively stable and consistent careers. One example is Bryan Singer: after The Usual Suspects (1993) his third feature film Apt Pupil (1998) grossed just over half its budget. He directed X-Men (2000) next, which grossed more than twice its budget. Apt Pupil is based on a Stephen King novel, making the parallels with Moorhouse’s