

Telefilm Canada neglects female filmmakers

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I took encouragement from my failure last month to score tickets to my top two picks at the Toronto International Film Festival. Even though I stumbled out of bed to line up hours before sunrise, and was still turned away empty-handed, my fruitless quest to gain entry to the coveted screenings of both *Stories We Tell* and *Midnight's Children* gave me heart.

Because I keep fantasizing that the critical and commercial success of Sarah Polley and Deepa Mehta will ultimately help other female filmmakers attract the kind of opportunities and funding that are currently much more available to their male colleagues.

But it turns out that what I see as a regrettable absence in movie theatres may actually be a serious threat to Canada's future competitiveness in the global digital economy. Last week, Rina Fraticelli, a former National Film Board executive who now heads up a new initiative called *Women in View*, released a report suggesting as much.

In an effort to provide the kind of annual assessment that's available in the U.S. through the "Celluloid Ceiling" reports issued by Martha Lauzen of San Diego State University, Fraticelli has compiled data, examined trends, and drawn some compelling conclusions.

The funding records of Telefilm Canada, which provided financial assistance for 130 feature films released in 2010-2011, show a 5-to-1 ratio of male to female directors, with women writers doing only slightly better, at 23 per cent of the total. These numbers are too familiar to be newsworthy on their own. But in a recent interview, Fraticelli argued that what makes them relevant is the missed opportunities they represent.

"We're living in a Gutenberg moment," she says. "Digital technology is both a big economic driver and the dominant cultural determinant. It's dramatically reshaping the

way we communicate, propelling creative production from local and national audiences to global ones.” This represents an opening door for Canada.

And yet at a time when we could be leveraging the rich potential of our diverse pool of talented storytellers to capitalize on this vast new market, the Telefilm data demonstrate that Canada’s film industry remains hidebound and homogeneous.

In the context of this transformational moment, our failure to produce diverse stories for digital screens isn’t merely unreflective of our cultural reality, it’s spectacularly bad business. And not only because of the international audiences now more accessible than ever before.

Lots of evidence in recent years has made it clear that calling on the usual suspects (and those who know, look and think like them) is not a path to innovation — in any industry.

Companies in the high-tech, pharmaceutical and financial sectors have been actively investing in programs designed to attract and nurture more women and members of minority groups, having learned that doing so increases both productivity and profitability. More than a third of Fortune 500 companies, including Cisco and Hewlett Packard, cite their active engagement of diverse employees as a key innovation strategy.

It only makes sense that extending this to the creative industries would yield similar advantages.

Women In View is doing more than counting the numbers and calling for change. Earlier this spring, the organization launched its Creative Leaders program, aimed at advancing accomplished women from diverse backgrounds into top decision-making and content creation tiers in TV, film and gaming, and helping them access global networks.

As for me, I have nothing against Atom Egoyan, David Cronenberg or his equally macabre-minded son. But as a frequent moviegoer, I have often yearned for more stories that reflect my reality and interests. And reading Fraticelli’s report made me wish that

my Telefilm-distributed tax dollars would be more equitably allocated to give female writers and directors in this country the opportunity to tell stories and create characters that reflect their preoccupations and perspectives.

Like many of my friends, I'm not so interested in films that cast car chases and gunplay in starring roles; I actively avoid movies that devote screen time to imagery likely to give me nightmares. But I'm willing to line up for screen works by the as-yet unfunded Canadian versions of Kristen Wiig and Tina Fey — and box office records suggest I'm not alone.

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