

Media Pandering: The Good, the Bad, and the... Inclusive?"

Ryan Collins, *University of North Texas*

I have been fortunate growing up. Not just in my own personal experiences as a white, middle class male, but also in the images I see in the media including film and television. I have been privileged to see people like myself represented on and off screen countless times in various degrees, rather than just viewed as a narrowly defined stereotype that many less privileged people have had to endure. The television industry has made great strides to improve diversity with television programs such as *Master of None*, *Orange is the New Black* and *Blackish*. However, Hollywood has fallen behind in their promotion of diversity on and off screen as noted by academic studies like the “2016 Hollywood Diversity Report” published by UCLA. Hollywood should take it upon itself as a cultural imperative to have more diversity both on and off the screen to reflect the multiple subjectivities that exist rather than just to appeal to white, middle class audiences.

Incorporating more diversity on-screen not only lies within the media industries, but it also relies on the audience of the intended media text. Hollywood films, as opposed to television shows, do not have the luxury of sticking to a tight demographic due to their high budgets. Hollywood hopes to reach as many targeted demographics as possible to recuperate costs. One of the largest demographics that studios have targeted is the white middle class audience. Attempts at providing diversity in Hollywood that branches out from this major demographic has led to much debate from privileged fans and audiences questioning the politics of inclusivity and diversity.

One of the biggest debates this summer has been about the new reboot, *Ghostbusters* (2016). When the announcement was made that the *Ghostbusters* reboot would include a female cast, there was an angry response from fans leading to a grossly disliked trailer. Much of the anger, including the sexist attacks, was a result of the failed *Ghostbusters 3* film including the original male cast. Having followed movies quite extensively, I have never seen a movie receive such hatred without the movie being released in theaters. Some of the more die-hard fans were upset that the producers “pandered” to women. Although the term “pandering” is used quite commonly, pandering is a loaded-term. The rhetoric behind the term lies behind who is being pandered to and if it is pandering in the first case. I would have to agree with Joseph his essay, “Nerd Guys, Pandering, and “Forced” Diversity “that some audiences see “pandering” anytime a piece of media features anything that deviates from the standard gruff white antihero-centric formula”. Contrary to the knee-jerk reaction of die-hard fans of the *Ghostbusters* series, pandering is not solely restricted to decisions they do not agree or accept.

While I completely agree with Joseph that the backlash against the *Ghostbusters* reboot was unwarranted, Hollywood is in the business to make money and there is only so little time to present characters with much depth as compared to television. Therefore, a large number of films produced by Hollywood appear to be very surface level when it comes down to representations of various subjectivities. In addition, the majority of white, male screenwriters in Hollywood outnumber people of color and women according to the diversity reports from UCLA, therefore, attempts at including diversity can result in accusations of pandering. This is why we need more authentic representations of less privileged people including people of color, LGBTQ, and

women in Hollywood. It's not about forcing diversity, it's about including those who are unfairly left out.

Much of the debates regarding pandering and forced diversity have been discussed about what happens in front of the camera, I would suggest examining the issue of diversity from behind the camera as well. In order for Hollywood to properly represent America's diverse subjectivities without pandering or appearing to pander, it requires Hollywood to hire more individuals that have an authentic background and point of view that allows an opportunity for disenfranchised and disempowered voices to speak. Instead of just including disenfranchised people on-screen in minimal ways, Hollywood needs more opportunities for the disempowered to be empowered and to have voice and agency on and off the screen. If we are truly going to answer the question of pandering, we need to address the concept of agency for those who do not possess the power to be represented in an authentic way.