

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

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I'm a forty-one year-old, white, female. When I heard about the 2016 *Ghostbusters* reboot, my first thought was "Oh my God. Yes! I loved that movie. I love these woman. This will be so much fun." Then, the critiques started pouring in. First, critics accused the director (Paul Feig) of ruining their childhoods and destroying the franchise. Then the "pandering to the female audience" accusations poured over the internet covering it, and the project, in a sticky coat of misogynistic, nerd boy nostalgia. However, this didn't dampen my enthusiasm for the project. It actually increased it, because I thought "If this is what it means to be pandered to, then I say: Bring. It. On." The more it pissed the Internet trolls off, the happier it made me because it indicated that the film would be more "for" me than it was for them, and that often isn't the case.

Throughout my life, I've sat through more all-male comedies (written by all male writers) and have listened to more jokes unique to the male experience (like penis and testicle jokes) than I can count. They're ubiquitous. But all-female comedies? Written by female writers? That include jokes unique to the female experience? Not so much. I'm not saying they don't exist, but they're not *nearly* as common. So to reboot and reinvent a film from my childhood like *Ghostbusters* for a (presumably white) female audience *and* include a queef joke early in the film was—and is—rewarding and satisfying. The joke, which initially masquerades as a fart joke, is absurd but not insignificant.



[after playing a "farting" noise on a recording to a colleague]

Jillian Holtzmann: "Is it more or less disgusting if I tell you it came out the front?"

It's not that queefs and queef jokes aren't funny; they are. The human body is ludicrous and capable of ridiculous sounds. Anyone who thinks fart jokes are funny should think queefs jokes are funny too, because it's the same noise; it just comes from a slightly different location. Historically, however, the topic has been overlooked as jokes for women in films written by men and written for the male audience. In contrast, Katie Dippold, one of the head screenwriters on *Ghostbusters*, had to fight to keep the joke in the script. According to Dippold, "It's not like I thought that one day I would be fighting

for a queef joke, but it was a big debate... Fart jokes have been in movies for years. If the only thing offensive about this is that it comes from the vagina, I'm like, 'That's on you!'" (Diehl) And, as Leigh Cuen points out, "In the few instances of films openly referencing queefing, the jokes are usually made at women's expense. Take, for instance, a queef joke in the Ben Stiller movie *The Heartbreak Kid*, in which the vaginal puff is meant to show how unromantic married life can be."¹ The distinction between these two types of jokes, as Cuen points out, lies between laughing with women rather than laughing at them. And so, if this is what it means to be pandered to, I say again: Bring. It. On.

However, as much as I like to think that *Ghostbusters* (and everyone associated with creating and making it) pandered to me, it's overreaching to say that they pandered to the female audience, in general. This is obvious in the casting and its subsequent criticism. Three out of the four lead actresses are white scientists and the one African American actress (Leslie Jones) is a New York subway worker. So the film (and its casting) simultaneously destabilizes gender stereotypes and ideologies as it reinforces racial stereotypes and ideologies. As a result, my fandom is self-conscious and conflicted, and raises the question: what responsibility do audiences have (who are being pandered to) to make room for audiences and fans that aren't—but want to be pandered to? Because whenever new audiences are pandered to, it means that other audiences are subsequently being neglected. For those of us who are committed to diversity and inclusion (both behind and in front of the camera) what responsibility do we have to support media that is made for non-straight-white-male (or female) audiences?

References

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¹ Here, it may be important to consider that *The Heartbreak Kid* was directed by the Farrelly Brothers (of the female fat-shaming *Shallow Hal* fame) and the screenwriters were predominantly male while *Ghostbusters* was directed by Paul Feig (of *Bridesmaids*, *The Heat*, and *Spy* fame) and he co-wrote it with Dippold.