Women Take on the Summer Box Office

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In July, the Scarlett Johansson vehicle Lucy became the fourth film with a female protagonist to premiere at number one on this summer’s domestic box office, following similar achievements from The Fault in Our Stars, Maleficent, and The Other Woman. Significantly, records showed that women made up most of these films’ audiences. These successes, particularly salient in light of the overall decline in box office revenues, have challenged long-standing assumptions about the box office potential of female-centric films and thus have reignited calls for more leading roles for women.

Hollywood’s long-standing credo against female protagonists rests on three assumptions: that men watch more films in theaters; that women watch male-centric films but the opposite is not true; and that female-driven films are unsuccessful in crucial overseas markets. Yet, these assumptions are increasingly unfounded. In the last couple of years, the percentage of female filmgoers in the domestic market has continually surpassed that of men. The latest surge in interest
for female-centered projects seems to stem not only from the significant attention garnered by changing audience demographics, but also from the fact that female audiences have taken to genres previously considered male-centric.

Nowhere is this shift more noticeable than in the case of superhero franchises. Notably, Marvel’s Guardians of the Galaxy opening weekend audience was 44% women, the highest percentage of female audience for any release from the studio. As well, the success of Lucy is said to have intensified the call for a stand-alone film featuring the Black Widow, Scarlett Johansson’s character from The Avengers franchise.

Furthermore, Sony plans to release a film centered on a female superhero from the Spider-Man universe in 2017; Warner Bros. said it has plans for a Wonder Woman spin-off if its Batman vs. Superman and Justice League films are successful; CBS committed to a Supergirl television series if they approve of the
pilot; ABC will air *Agent Carter*, based on the Marvel character Peggy Carter, in January; and Marvel Comics is introducing a new comicbook series with a female character as Thor.

While these recent announcements are encouraging, they are far from an overhaul of the status quo. Last month, for instance, Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige attributed the lack of female superhero movies to an issue of timing but sidestepped any explicit commitments. And the potential Wonder Woman spin-off from Warner Bros. remains contingent on the success of their upcoming films. Moreover, demands from critics and audiences for more female-centric films are not entirely new. Similar calls were made after the success of franchises such as *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, whose sequels grossed twice as much as their predecessors, and after standalone hits such as *Sex and the City*, *Bridesmaids* and Disney’s *Frozen*. Whereas these cases were once considered outliers, the continued success of female-driven films may be changing the perception of their broader value.
commentators argue that simply calling for films with female protagonists is only part of the solution. Less visible but no less important is the fact that women comprise barely 16% of all behind-the-camera talent. For instance, out of the top 600 grossing films of 2013, less than eight percent of writers and only two percent of directors were women. The exclusion of female talent should be an urgent concern for anyone invested in diverse onscreen representations. The recent superhero project announcements are no exception. Guardians of the Galaxy marked the first time a Marvel film had a female screenwriter, and Sony has now hired a woman to work on the script for its Spider-Man spin-off. Thus, if any new project is to signal substantial change, it will have to contend with diversity on both sides of the camera.