

Insignificant topic: women's stories

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Panel 20 – INTERVIEW-BASED RESEARCH

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Abstract

“A commissioner said to me: 'Who cares what a 15-year-old girl thinks? Nobody.' And then I was told to change my main character to a man.” This is a quote from one of the interviews of project Insignificant Topic. The project started as a discussion in social media, and quickly developed into a fact gathering expedition and a research project by eight female filmmakers in Finland. The aim is to create a documentary theatre performance based on oral histories of women filmmakers. My paper discusses our findings. Why are there so few films about and by women? Not only are women's bodies harassed in the industry but also their stories and ideas. Data from across Europe shows that men and women graduate from film schools in equal numbers. However, a majority of the films that get produced are by men. In Finland, half of the members of the Screenwriters' Guild are women. Yet, year by year only 25 % of feature films are written by women. Even in short films the numbers are similar. When and how are women's ideas and proposals stopped? What happens behind closed doors with producers, commissioners and funders?

Through a questionnaire and interviews we gathered the stories of almost 30 screenwriters, directors and documentarists. Their careers span over four decades. There appears to be a pattern. The female character in fiction has to be nice. A coming-of-age story of a girl is “small” and insignificant while that of a boy is universal and bears a social message. Women's stories and themes are constantly mansplained to them in negotiations. “Why not upgrade your minor male character and make him the protagonist?”

In my presentation I discuss the patterns of the discourses around women's ideas and scripts and the consequences of conscious and unconscious bias.

Keywords – women screenwriters, funding, discourse, bias, limits of screenwriting

Raija Talvio, Doctor of Arts (Aalto University, Helsinki, Finland) is the current Professor of Screenwriting at Aalto University ELO Film School in Finland. The topic of her doctoral thesis (2015) was the emergence of screenwriting as a profession in 1930s Finland. Talvio has published articles in the *Journal of Screenwriting* and in other publications. She is also an awarded screenwriter whose credits include the feature films *Little Sister* (1999) and *August Fools* (2013), several hours of television drama and a stage play for the Finnish National Theatre. In her early career she worked as a film editor and was the editor of the early films of Aki Kaurismäki. Talvio is the former president of the Screenwriters' Guild of Finland and was a co-leader of In Focus, an incubator for female screenwriters created by Women in Film and Television WIFT Finland.

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