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An Open Letter to Netflix

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An Open Letter to Netflix

Abstract

If there is one thing that I will be absolutely ashamed in admitting to you, it's that I love television. Love it. Not in a turn-it-on-watch-whatever-all-TV-rocks kind of way, but in an I'm-overly-obsessed-with-15-shows-at-a-time kind of way, to the point where I could say that being able to watch the latest episode of *Suits* or *Community* could easily be the highlight of my day (week, year...). [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, television, female lead roles, acting, strong female

Disciplines

Film and Media Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Sociology | Women's Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](http://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

AN OPEN LETTER TO NETFLIX

April 8, 2013

If there is one thing that I will be absolutely ashamed in admitting to you, it's that I love television. Love it. Not in a turn-it-on-watch-whatever-all-TV-rocks kind of way, but in an I'm-overly-obsessed-with-15-shows-at-a-time kind of way, to the point where I could say that being able to watch the latest episode of *Suits* or *Community* could easily be the highlight of my day (week, year...).



In my ever-progressing relationship with the medium of television, I have come to recognize the recent tendency for “shows with a strong female lead” to be its own genre – *what do you want to watch? A drama? A comedy? A strong female lead?* You see it on Netflix, you see articles about it all over the internet. It’s trendy to watch television shows with “strong female leads.” Or perhaps, if you identify as male, it is emasculating to admit to someone else that your favorite show is classified by Netflix to be in this category... *dude, you like a show where a girl gets to do something awesome every episode? Give me your man card.* I, too, get excited about this category, joking to my man-friend the other day that “when I get a Netflix account, it’ll probably only suggest shows to me in one genre.”

So what does this category mean? What is the difference between a “female lead” and a “strong female lead”? It seems to me that according to Netflix, the difference is precisely – nothing. Any show that has 1) a person identifying as a woman in it, and 2) that woman talking or doing something, is a show with a “strong female”. Now, I don’t want to speak for Netflix or assume that I understand their motivations behind this...but maybe this is a hugely progressive and pro-woman decision on behalf of Netflix executives to make the statement “ALL WOMEN ARE STRONG, SO ALL TV SHOWS WITH FEMALE LEADS ARE TV SHOWS WITH STRONG FEMALE LEADS.”

Or maybe not.

Let’s take a quick moment to point out the obvious – Netflix does not have a category for “strong male leads,” let alone a category for “male leads.” The assumption is that TV shows probably have male leads, and that if they do, obviously they are “strong” male leads because that is *natural, expected, unchangeable*. So if the underlying assumption is that all television shows revolve around awesome, cool, powerful, respectable men, of course it’s

important to point out how remarkable it is when a show doesn't follow this mold. Hence, the introduction of "strong female lead." *Hmm.. strong, female...almost an oxymoron, isn't it?*

Imagine if we had the category "TV Shows With A Weak Male Lead"? What would that mean? I guess we have to think about what a "weak male" is in our society. Perhaps a show in this category would have a male who cared more about romance than about his career. This male character could spend a significant amount of time worrying about his appearance, with a heavy emphasis on whether or not he was "thin enough" or "pretty enough" for someone else. Or perhaps we could get more dramatic, and he could consistently be rescued from dangerous situations by a female counterpart, instead of the other way around. He could be emotional or care more about photography or fashion than football. Emotions, caring about appearance, romance — none of this is what we consider "manly," but all of this is what we consider feminine, and therefore weak. And you know what? I'm a woman, and I'm emotional, and I care about my appearance, and I'm in love with love, but I don't think that makes me weak. I think that makes me, you know, **a person**.

But even as I want to recognize that there is *nothing* wrong with wearing your emotions on your sleeve or getting TOTALLY PUMPED when your shoes perfectly match your outfit (best day ever), I also want to remind everyone that there is more to women than just that. Women also have jobs, and you know, a lot of times we're pretty good at them. Many of us go to school and care about school and do well in school. We have friends of all genders who we talk to about stuff that is *not* romance, but also sometimes stuff that is romance. It just depends. Sometimes we're awesome at listening and other times we're good at getting things done. And also there are probably lots of individuals who identify as women who *totally-one-hundred-percent* disagree with me. And that's totally cool and also expected because we're allowed to have opinions and get angry and talk about it and yell about it and learn from each other. And we can do all of that while also maybe being in love or maybe not being even a little bit in love.

So, Netflix, how about designing a rubric that determines when a woman is "strong" and when she's not? It might sound like I'm being facetious (and okay, maybe I am), but let's take this seriously. Netflix executives (Netflixexecutives, if you will), it's time we make a [Bechdel Test](#) for television, so that we can determine whether or not these shows are doing a [good enough job](#) of representing the women you see in the real world, out here where we are.

Admittedly, the Bechdel Test began as a [joke](#), and the fact that so many films fail the test despite the embarrassingly low criteria proves that there is a problem. But the solution will require a rubric that has much higher standards for female characters. Here's how it could look:

"TV Shows With Strong Female Leads"

Shows with women at the forefront who do more than just fall in love – they have jobs, opinions, and a purpose. They are heterosexual, homosexual, black, Asian, indigenous. They are interesting. They matter.

These women would represent the women I see every day – my friends, my peers, my professors, my bosses, my mother. I believe that women are strong, but I do not believe that women have been represented this way in television. Maybe Netflixexecutives aren't the right group of people to task with the job to challenge the norms of television, but if not them, who?

Q. WHY DO YOU WRITE
STRONG FEMALE
CHARACTERS?
A. BECAUSE YOU'RE STILL
ASKING ME THAT
QUESTION

— JOSS WHEDON

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<http://surgegettyburg.wordpress.com/2013/04/08/an-open-letter-to-netflix/>