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# Why ‘Gatekeepers’ Matter to Future of Filmmaking and Reaching Diverse Audiences

By Peter Debruge ▼



Photo by Charlie Weinmann

From the importance of diversity in storytelling to the impact of Netflix and other streamers on the distribution marketplace, a panel of top content industry creatives and executives weighed pressing issues for the future of filmmaking.

The panel, held March 31, was presented by the World Film Industry Conference and organized by the nonprofit org NewFilmmakers L.A, featured a master filmmakers’ dialogue moderated by *Variety* chief film critic Peter Debruge.

The panelists were drawn from different disciplines: Oscar-winning documentary director [Morgan Neville](#), filmmaker/showrunner [Aline Brosh McKenna](#), producer Paul Perez (Perez Pictures), Walt Disney Animation Studios vfx supervisor Marlon West and previsualization expert Chris Edwards (The Third Floor).

McKenna claimed to know the same feeling: “I want to start a company called Big Surprise because the movies for women or movies for people that are not white,” in her experience, leave the industry saying, “‘Oh my God, I can’t believe this worked!’ It’s always a big surprise.”



Peter Debruge, Aline Brosh McKenna, Marlon West, Chris Edwards, Haige Wang, Paul Perez, Morgan Neville  
Photo by Charlie Weinmann

But if the people with the power to greenlight weren’t so uniform, the movies would be better, she argued. “You spend a lot of time working with wonderful people with diverse names. You get to a certain level of VP, and it’s like you’re still working with a lot of women and maybe a few people of color. And then above that, it is literally all guys named Bob ... or Brad or Jeff or Steve. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been in a situation where I’m working with someone where I feel totally seen, they totally get it [and then they say] ... ‘But we gotta talk to David. And you’re like, ‘Oh no. I hope David doesn’t hate women.’”

To fix it, McKenna tried to imagine a world where the top offices were occupied by a mix of different genders and backgrounds. “Until we start having the Heathers and the Hectors...” she began.

“And the Tyrones!” West added.

After years of designing visual effects for animated features, West is now working on an Afrofuturist series for Disney+ called “Iwájú” with modern cities and flying cars. “It’s with some cats who were three years ago just doing comic books in Nigeria and Uganda,” West explained. “They were interviewed by the BBC and one of them made some cheeky comment about, ‘We want to kick Disney’s ass in Africa.’ My boss, Jennifer Lee ... thought to call them and said, ‘How can I help?’”

According to Perez, “For me it’s telling my former colleagues in the industry, ‘Look, it’s not an ethical issue, it’s a business issue, if you guys want to grow with this audience that is evolving,’” he explained. Still, “it’s tricky when you are trying to sell something because the best trick question that I ever get asked when I’m pitching a Latin project is, ‘Who’s the star?’ You’re never getting an answer you want because we don’t have a Brad Pitt, we don’t have a Tom Cruise, yet.”

Perez credited Netflix with betting on Jenna Ortega for the title role of hit series “Wednesday,” suggesting that such decisions help create bankable Latin stars.

“One of the reasons they’re much more interested in diversity is because people click on stuff,” McKenna said. “I think ‘Your Place or Mine’ played extraordinarily well in Europe and extraordinarily well in Latin America. They love love stories.”

Streamers have unprecedented worldwide reach, but aren’t always the right answer for filmmakers. It all depends on the project.

“If you make a film that isn’t what you expect it to be, you’re going to have a really hard time in the streaming environment because you need to build a discussion,” explained Neville, who produced the Taylor Swift documentary “Miss Americana” for Netflix. “When you do things like that, streamers are great for that. What concerns me is how do you build discussion around things that just aren’t purely down the middle?”

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