

MINORITIES BEHIND THE SCREEN: A CONVERSATION WITH YAS HAGHIGHAT

*Written in collaboration with AUB's
Equality in Film Society*

The push for diverse representation is more prominent than ever before, with audiences and creatives demanding stories that reflect their lived experiences. Despite the scale of the film industry, many women and minorities still struggle to find opportunities to showcase their skills and talent. Even for those who do succeed in taking a step, it's often to fill a diversity quota and subsequently leaves them with no real support, mentorship or creative authority to truly succeed. They end up left in the shadow of a white, male-dominated community that undermines them as individual creatives.

Although there are schemes in the creative industry that are starting to tackle these barriers, there is still a long way to go. Ella from the Equality in Film Society sat down with Yas Haghighat, a half-Thai, half-Iranian writer, director and producer, regarding diversity, inclusivity and her journey into the film industry.

Yas writes and directs at a Bristol-based production agency, Fable Studios. Notable examples of her work include writing and directing a national campaign on 'Consent' for Cheshire Constabulary, a TV advert for the immersive attraction Wake The Tiger, an animation on Women in Data Science and AI for The Alan Turing Institute, and two cinema releases in collaboration with the Oscar-nominated and BAFTA-winning production company, Magic Light Pictures.

The following interview has been edited and condensed.

PLEASE TELL ME ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY INTO THE FILM INDUSTRY.

So, I've had a varied journey! I've worked in both the UK and abroad, in retail, in tech, in marketing, and in schools. All of these experiences have really helped me as a writer and producer because one, it helps me get into the headspace of who I'm writing for and the problems I'm trying to solve and two, it's also given me a lot of general workplace experience in knowing how to manage pressure, workload, and all the admin that comes with producing.



Behind the Scenes of the TV advert for
Wake the Tiger

THERE IS AN ARGUMENT THAT TO BE A MINORITY IS AN ADVANTAGE, AS THE INDUSTRY IS LOOKING TO DIVERSIFY ITS STORIES AND WORKFORCE. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT THIS IS TRUE?

I'm not sure 'advantage' is the right word for it. Yes, a lot of employers make diversity hires and make space for creative stories from minorities. On the surface, this is a great thing. When I was little, I never thought someone like me could work in the creative industry, because I'd only ever see white male writers and directors in the spotlight; I'm not taking that away because it's amazing of course.

I'm so glad that there are creatives whose perspectives are welcomed and supported, but I think it's a real blanket generalisation to talk about 'the industry'. Because the creative part only makes up a small portion of this industry and there's a lot of it that runs like other workforces; it's office jobs, it's accounting, it's admin.

I watched this comedy show, *Mythic Quest*, and there's a storyline where the black HR manager is promoted to a diversity lead and goes from helping all the employees to suddenly doing nothing all day; I think that's very true of a lot of workplaces. The reason it isn't sustainable is because companies in any industry hire a minority workforce and then give them no support, expecting them to code-switch into a white, heteronormative corporate culture.

HOW DO YOU APPROACH SITUATIONS WHERE YOU'RE FACED WITH PREJUDICE OR DISCRIMINATION?

Any time that I have encountered any kind of misogyny or racism (accidental or not), I always keep my cool in the moment and think about the bigger picture; why has this person behaved in this particular way and where has their anger or annoyance come from? I find that thinking about things in a formulaic way helps with managing my own feelings or emotions and working towards helping people make proactive change.

Growing up in a predominantly white suburban area, I learned that sometimes people don't mean to be the way that they are. That isn't an excuse for people's behaviour of course, but I watched how my dad especially (being from Iran) would deal with things. He was always kind and gentle, and it really took a lot of people aback. One person even said to my dad, "you aren't like the other foreigners," and that really stuck with me. They had this idea in their head, but actually when it comes to it, it's all untrue.

A lot of it stems from education, media, and societal trends. Getting angry in the moment just perpetuates the 'emotional female' or 'angry foreigner' stereotypes to these kinds of people. Instead, I try to understand why they're reacting this way, and follow that thread all the

way back to the source. That's how you make change, it's changing the source. Shouting at Joe and Jane Bloggs isn't going to help, especially when they've had certain ideas in their head all their lives.

I am not going to lie though, I am a millennial woman, so I do still have constant imposter syndrome that I'm not good enough to be where I am. Ask any woman my age and they'll probably say the same thing! That's something I'm slowly but surely trying to unlearn. I grew up in the 90s where 'girl power' was all the rage because of the Spice Girls. You might think that this was a great movement in feminism, but it actually kind of wasn't.

I'm paraphrasing from one of my favourite video essayists, Broey Deschanel, in her video 'TikTok Feminism Is Not Your Friend' where she touches on how the Spice Girls version of feminism actually didn't challenge the status quo of society. It emphasised individualism and 'being yourself' rather than systemic change. Whilst this obviously inherently isn't a bad thing and I endorse celebrating all of our beautiful selves, if you dive into it a bit deeper, Girl Power wasn't a political movement, it was about packaging up feminism into something you could buy. It was about encouraging young girls to purchase stuff that advertised Girl Power to everyone else. Girl Power became a slogan on a T-shirt made by children in a Chinese factory, or a glittery plastic ring that ended up going into a landfill.

Sorry if that was a bit of a tangent, but it brings me back to my point about genuine systemic change and how important it is to change the source. Start from the ground up, if you will.

WHAT ARE THINGS THAT WE CAN ALL DO TO WORK TOWARDS CREATING A SAFER, MORE WELCOMING SPACE FOR DIVERSE CREATIVES IN THE FILM INDUSTRY?

I think it's about making sure that diversity checklists aren't just a 'tick boxing exercise'. Support minorities when they want to tell stories that have nothing to do with their race, identity, or trauma; essentially, don't commodify them. That takes the pressure off for people to keep 'performing' for what are predominantly white people in high positions and they can just be themselves.

But having said that, it's also 'Inclusion By Design'; put everyone's pronouns on a call sheet, mark out spaces on-set in a production office for quiet spaces, have gender-neutral bathrooms, ask everyone about their access requirements. Make it the standard for everyone and create that new normal.

As I've said, change the source.

*Find Yas on her website: yasatch.com
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