

# Episode Six: The Bechdel Test and Bad Film Opinions

It's been a big week for people saying profoundly idiotic things on social media and because I hate myself, I'm obviously on Twitter reading as many of them as I can cram into my stupid little eyeballs. In order to call this doom-scrolling productive, I'm going to base this episode around a particularly stupid hot take I saw.

Don't worry, we're not going to be diving into the quagmire of American politics. We're all tired and nobody wants to hear me try and cobble together a take that isn't "Can a meteor just hit us please?" (Side note: If there are any large rocks listening, hurtling through space, looking for a diversion, hit me up.) Instead, we're going to the movies! Specifically, we're going to be taking a look at the recent release, *Fire Island*, a good movie which has somehow managed to generate some supremely stupid tweets about feminism and the Bechdel test. And we're going to dig into that.

I'm Alex, this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about the Bechdel Test.

On the 3rd June 2022, queer rom com *Fire Island* was released on streaming platform, Hulu. A short summary would be to say that the film is a queer re-telling of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, set in the gay village on Fire Island. A slightly

longer summary would be to say that it's a gay rom-com which casts the film's writer, comedian Joel Kim Booster, as Noah, and SNL cast member Bowen Yang, as Howie, the film's Elizabeth and Jane Bennett. Noah is happy to be hot and available, while Howie is yearning for romance. Their annual summer on Fire Island is disrupted by the appearance of Charlie, (the Mr. Bingley archetype, played by James Scully) and Will (a very hot Mr. Darcy, in the tradition of all hot Mr. Darcs, played by Conrad Ricamora). It manages to bitingly dissect the racist politics of the queer party scene, while also keeping the charming fun you'd expect from an Austen re-telling in the rom-com genre. It's a skilful adaptation that's notable for both the sharp writing and the unique snapshot of queer men's culture it provides. If you're in Australia, it's streaming on Disney+ and I'd recommend checking it out.

So that nice thing happened. And then on 6th June 2022, Hanna Rosin, the editorial director for New York Magazine's podcasts, tweeted, "So, @hulu #FireIslandMovie gets an F- on the Bechdel test in a whole new way. Do we just ignore the drab lesbian stereotypes bc cute gay Asian boys? Is this revenge for all those years of the gay boy best friend?" Which is... such a spectacularly stupid take, I don't even really know where to start with it? For

the uninitiated, the Bechdel test has three basic principles. The first is that a film should feature two women, the second is that those women have at least one conversation, and the third is that that conversation must be about something other than a man. And sure, *Fire Island* does not meet those standards. We'll circle back on that later, but like... *Fire Island* is a *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation featuring Asian American leads talking about the overlapping complexities of gay fucking and racism? I don't think anyone watching could reasonably look at what was happening on screen and go, "My god, this genre is so played out – I'm so sick of seeing multi-faceted takes on the lived experience of racism in the queer community in my rom coms!" Like, wow. What a uniquely dogshit opinion – impressive for both its ingenuity and the confidence with which it was tweeted at 40K followers.

Rosin, of course, was resoundingly slammed by anyone with two brain cells to rub together. It was such a chaotically bad take that even Alison Bechdel, the creator of the Bechdel test being referenced by Rosin, had to weigh in with a response. She tweeted, "Okay, I just added a corollary to the Bechdel test: Two men talking to each other about the female protagonist of an Alice Munro story in a screenplay structured on a Jane Austen novel = pass. #FireIsland #BechdelTest". Which, bless her, is an objectively funny response. But it did make me want to dig into the Bechdel test more – it's obviously not designed to deal with the nuance of something like *Fire Island*, so what does it do, how did it come about, and why are people so fixated on using it as a gotcha moment at

the most inappropriate times? Let's get into it.

From 1983-2008, Alison Bechdel penned a strip comic called *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which serialised the goings on of a group of characters (mostly lesbians) living in a medium-sized city in the United States. In-and-of-itself, the strip was famous as a long-running queer publication, but circa 1985 an instalment called *The Rule* was published. In it, two women appear to be on a date, and one suggests catching a movie. The other says that they have this rule where they'll only watch movies that meet three basic requirements – "One, it has to have at least two women in it who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man." She then says the last movie that she was able to watch was *Alien* because the two women in it talk about the monster. The two women decide to give up and eat popcorn at home, while posters of muscle-bound machine-gun-holding men advertising movie titles like *The Mercenary*, *The Vigilante*, and *The Barbarian* scroll past them in the background. The comic marquee gives thanks to Liz Wallace, Bechdel's karate training partner, who had devised the test and was inspired by Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay, *A Room of One's Own*. And that's it. That's the Bechdel Test... or the Bechdel Wallace Test, as Bechdel herself has stated she prefers.

In its context, Bechdel has described it as "a little lesbian joke in an alternative feminist newspaper" – the punchline in a queer setting being that the only possible way to imagine a queer woman on screen was with something that met the rules outlined in the strip, but then you've only got *Alien*, which came out a full six



years before the comic was published. It's a quick zinger – after all there's only so much you can achieve in a short strip, and read visually as intended, you can see how the popularity of the blockbuster action genre in the mid-1980s provides the groundwork for this type of thought experiment. Action movies were having something of a golden age, and Arnold Schwarzenegger was busy creating a whole new standard of buff for those leading men. Those films don't leave a lot of space for women. But if all it is, is a quick funny page in a feminist paper from the 80s, how did we end up with dogshit takes on race and queerness in popular cinema in 2022?

Great question. The cursory digging I did while trying to write this can't seem to give me a clear answer about exactly when and how the term 'Bechdel Test' started to gain popularity, aside from the fact that Google trends indicates it really kicked up a notch in the mid-to-late-2000s. Bechdel seems to believe that it was adopted by young feminist filmmakers and academics as a quick litmus test for whether there were women present in a film. Not even like... good or well written women. Just women. From what I can tell, it made the jump from film circles into the mainstream lexicon in the late 2000s, which coincided with the release of Bechdel's hugely influential (and wonderful) 2006 graphic novel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomedy*, and with the rise of social blogging platforms, which allowed normal people to circulate their film opinions to an audience in an unprecedented way. More people were introduced to Bechdel's work, and they were able to apply it and share it more easily. People built websites

like [bechdeltest.com](http://bechdeltest.com), a database that indicates whether a film passes the test. According to the database, of 9,329 movies, 56.7% meet all three criteria. Swedish cinemas introduced the Bechdel Test to their ratings. The test was incorporated into grant criteria for film makers, discussed endlessly in the media, and used as a blunt instrument by tweens on Tumblr to prove the moral superiority of their media consumption.

Which is... problematic. Taken in its simplest form, the test only covers three specificities: presence of women, dialogue between women, and the fact that they don't talk about a man. Lots of movies don't pass the test, including things that would be considered classics. If you're someone who maybe hasn't spent a lot of time thinking about the media they consume, or how they consume it, then it might name an absence you felt while watching but weren't able to articulate. Which is what Virginia Woolf is naming in *A Room of One's Own*. She says, "It's strange to think that all the great women of fiction were... not only seen by the other sex but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that..." That's not nothing – being able to identify that absence that might otherwise pass you by, is the first step toward asking for more and better. But it's really only a first step. The problem with Hollywood, and with modern cinema, is not just "No women".

I'll give an example. Let's all think for a moment about the film *Moonlight*. Now, *Moonlight* is an exceptional piece of media for a lot of reasons. It is shot beautifully, it tells a complicated and heartbreaking

story about queerness, poverty and race in America, the performances are incredible and, perhaps most importantly, it was responsible for having all the actors and directors of Lala Land sheepishly walk offstage with their tail between their legs while it claimed its rightful place as best picture. Frankly, anything that is a catalyst for such joy in me in the way seeing Lala Land get wrecked was, is already a masterpiece and deserves all the accolades we can give it, but also... Moonlight is a significant film, culturally. It's hard to think of another mainstream film that shows black men and queerness with such tenderness, let alone one that won an Oscar. It does not pass the Bechdel Test.

Godzilla vs. Kong is a movie about Godzilla, a giant lizard, fighting King Kong, a giant ape. Eventually, the large ape and the large lizard realise that they are not enemies, and that the true enemy is actually the large, mechanical Godzilla, built by an evil mega-corporation. The mechanical Godzilla is named Mechagodzilla, because is mechanical and a Godzilla. It made \$468 million at the box office, mostly from idiots like me, who want to see the lizard begin to fight the ape before reaching a place of begrudging respect as two creatures who are bigger than they're supposed to be. This film passes the Bechdel Test.

Now, these examples are funny to contrast because one film is so obviously wonderful, and the other is so obviously a Godzilla movie, but the distinction here is not even particularly related to the quality of the films. Specifically, it's about the content. Women might be talking to each other in Godzilla vs.

Kong, but I don't think anyone would reasonably argue that Godzilla vs. Kong is representing a more marginalised perspective than Moonlight. I don't think anyone could reasonably argue that Godzilla vs. Kong is a more socially significant film than Moonlight. Anyone attempting to do so would be arguing in such bad faith that I would encourage them to reconsider seeing the thought through to the end and tweeting it out to 40K people. Because the problem with Hollywood is not just "No women" – it's white supremacy, it's cultural imperialism, it's heteronormativity. It's all the factors that mean that while Godzilla vs. Kong already has a television spin off series in the works, you'll likely not see something that even gently grazes the space that Moonlight occupies for another decade. Meaningful contributions to a diverse cinematic canon that discusses the intersection of race, gender and sexuality are not being captured by the Bechdel Test.

Hell, if you walk it out a little further, it doesn't even really measure the meaningful contributions of women playing a central role in a film. Writing about the gaps highlighted by applying more rigorous academic scrutiny to the Bechdel Test, Jennifer O'Meara points out that it the test doesn't measure the type of women who are granted dialogue or how it's presented. Now look – I don't want to get into an argument about what does or does not constitute a Film In The Conventional Sense, but O'Meara uses the example of Beyonce's Lemonade, which features extended pieces of poetic dialogue from Beyonce, in between musical performances. As you hopefully all remember, that dialogue was directed



at her husband, Jay-Z, appearing to address his infidelity. It was equal parts angry and hurt, and it allowed her to very publicly take control of a tabloid rumour that had been circulating off and on for years. Jay-Z doesn't get the right of reply in *Lemonade*. While much of what O'Meara touches on is about exploring the metaphor of the voice and the dexterity of female vocal performance, I think *Lemonade* is a useful illustration of what can be lost by only looking at film through the lens of a simple rule. You have a solo performance by a black woman that, in her discussion of a man and her relationship to him, also discusses the relationship between black women and American society. It chronicles the achievements of black women in the face of adversity, and it does that even though it isn't in dialogue with anyone else. It's acknowledging a rich inner life, even some of the turmoil is connected to men, and even if the women that are so thoroughly present and acknowledged in the work do not actually appear in conversation. It's a Bechdel Test failure, but it's absolutely a feminist film that centres black women.


So, the shortcomings of the Bechdel Test as applied at a broad scale are pretty obvious. It's testing one thing, it doesn't leave room for nuance, but it does leave a lot of room for people who should know better to have shit takes on films that are doing pretty innovative things otherwise. Obviously, these shortcomings are not actually about the test itself. Alison Bechdel is not going around crowing about the test's successes and telling everyone that they should start using it as the basis for all critique. The tweet about *Fire Island* should be evidence enough

of that, but if not, here's another quote. She says, "You can have a feminist movie that doesn't meet the criteria, and you can have a movie that meets the criteria and isn't feminist... it's not scientific or anything... It's a bit surprising what does and doesn't pass."

I think what's most fascinating to me about the Bechdel Test, is its explosion in popularity. Again, once you get over the initial "oh that's what that is" feeling of noticing that there are less women on your screen generally, there's still so much more work needed before you start to pull together a thought that's more complicated than "wait! I'm not on the screen!" But people seem determined to shoe-horn it in to conversations that absolutely do not require it. Thinking about *Fire Island* again, what is gained from asking "why is there only one women?" in a film that is ostensibly applying Jane Austen principles to gay circuit parties? What would writing some more girls in there do for anyone, beyond convoluting a pretty tight script? Sweet fuck all, is the answer.

I think the appeal of the Bechdel Test is this: people want their consumption of goods and services to be somehow more "ethical" to avoid having to deal with the complexities of actually solving a problem, so they will choose the easiest possible measure of success in order to feel superior and as though they are doing the correct thing. The problem with Hollywood is complex and multifaceted – it involves having to deal with issues like white supremacy or heteronormativity, that take a lot of work, or heaven forbid, might mean having to sit through a solid 90-minute film that does not feature a





single person that looks like, talks like or thinks like you or anyone you know. And if you're a white woman, that might involve having to sit with the personal discomfort of knowing that you're still higher in the social pecking order than almost any other human being. Ooft. Sounds a lot like having to acknowledge my own privileges and shortcomings. You know what's easier? Applying a three-step test to determine whether or not women are in the film. God, I can feel the superiority coursing through my veins already. I'm fucking invincible!

Look, the test in and of itself is not a bad joke. It's not even a bad start to a thought experiment. It just can't be the only thought, or you sound like a real asshole.

Well, those are my thoughts on the Bechdel Test. Can we all stop dragging Allison Bechdel back to Twitter and forcing her to defend her almost-40-year-old comic strip now? Go and watch Fire Island or something. It's very funny. You'll have a great time. Anyway, if you have recently noticed that not all films are about you and want work through that with someone, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!

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Theme tune by Wes Fahey. ([Soundcloud: lee snipes](#))

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