

Center for the
Study of Women
in Television and Film

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Thumbs Down

The Representation of Women Film Critics in the Top 100 U.S. Newspapers

Introduction

Contrary to the myriad prognostications of media observers and writers, film criticism is not dead. It is, however, hurtling into a new era in which professional critics share space with amateurs, and credentialed journalists find multiple platforms for their reviews. Through web sites such as *Rotten Tomatoes* and *Metacritic*, formerly print-only film critics and writers now supplement their traditional audience with a whole new generation of on-line readers.

A number of these critics have noted the incredibly low numbers of women filmmakers and female protagonists in major studio films. Commenting on the dearth of women directors and lead characters in films released during the summer of 2008, *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis opined, “Welcome to the new, post-female American cinema” (“Is There a Real Woman in this Multiplex?”, May 4, 2008, p. 3). The fact that males dominate the business and art of filmmaking is well documented. According to the latest *Celluloid Ceiling* report, women comprised a scant 15% of all directors, writers, producers, editors, and cinematographers working on the top 250 films of 2007 (“The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Representation of Women on the Top 250 Films of 2007,” Martha M. Lauzen). In addition, female characters comprised only 28% of all characters in the top 100 films of 2002. However, little is known about the sex of those writing reviews and whether this influences the nature of their reviews. This report seeks to fill this void by asking some basic questions about women’s representation in the ranks of those individuals who write about film in the United States.

This study examined film reviews for theatrical releases written in the top 100 U.S. daily newspapers (by circulation) from October 22, 2007 through December 25, 2007. A list of these newspapers can be found in the Appendix.

The sample included reviews written by film critics; other types of critics including those for television, music, and popular culture; staff reporters; and freelancers. In addition to tracking the overall numbers of reviews written by these individuals for the top 100 newspapers, one randomly selected review by each individual who wrote during the study period was chosen for additional analysis. These reviews were analyzed for length (number of sentences) and nature of the review (number of positive, negative, or mixed/neutral sentences).

Findings

During the fall of 2007, 186 individuals wrote 2,365 film reviews for theatrical releases appearing in the top 100 daily newspapers in the United States with a combined circulation of approximately 28,215,000 readers. However, because the majority of these reviews also appear on the Internet, the reach and influence of the writers included in this study are far greater than the circulation numbers indicate. According to the *Rotten Tomatoes* website, over 7 million readers visit the site each month.

Approximately one-quarter (26%) of the newspapers in the study had no women **or** men writing film reviews during the study period. It is not known whether the absence of film reviews in these newspapers is the result of recent budget cuts or long-standing policies regarding news content. Numerous media reports have documented the recent cutbacks at newspapers nationwide. Writing for *Variety*, Anne Thompson noted, “Over the past two years, newspapers have forced out or pushed into early retirement some 28 critics” (“Crix’ Cachet Losing Critical Mass,” April 7-13, 2008, p. 12). *Los Angeles Times* columnist Patrick Goldstein observed, “Seeing their business model crumble, many newspapers simply have decided they can’t afford a full range of critics

anymore" ("Are They Still Relevant? Everyone's a Critic," April 8, 2008, pp. E1, E4).

Of the newspapers featuring film reviews in the fall of 2007, 47% had no reviews written by women critics, writers or freelancers. In contrast, only 12% had no reviews written by men critics, writers or freelancers. Overall, 70% of the individuals reviewing theatrical film releases in Fall 2007 were male and 30% were female. In addition, men wrote significantly more film reviews than women. Men wrote an average of 14 film reviews. Women wrote an average of 9 film reviews.

These imbalances may be slightly tempered by the fact that women critics, writers, and freelancers wrote for newspapers with marginally higher circulations. The average circulation size of newspapers with women writing reviews was 348,530. The average circulation size of newspapers with men writing reviews was 294,760.

In addition, women and men wrote reviews of equal length. Reviews written by both women and men averaged 23 sentences.

In sum, more men than women write film reviews in the nation's top circulation newspapers, and men write more reviews than women on average. Women work for newspapers with slightly larger circulations and their reviews are the same length as men's.

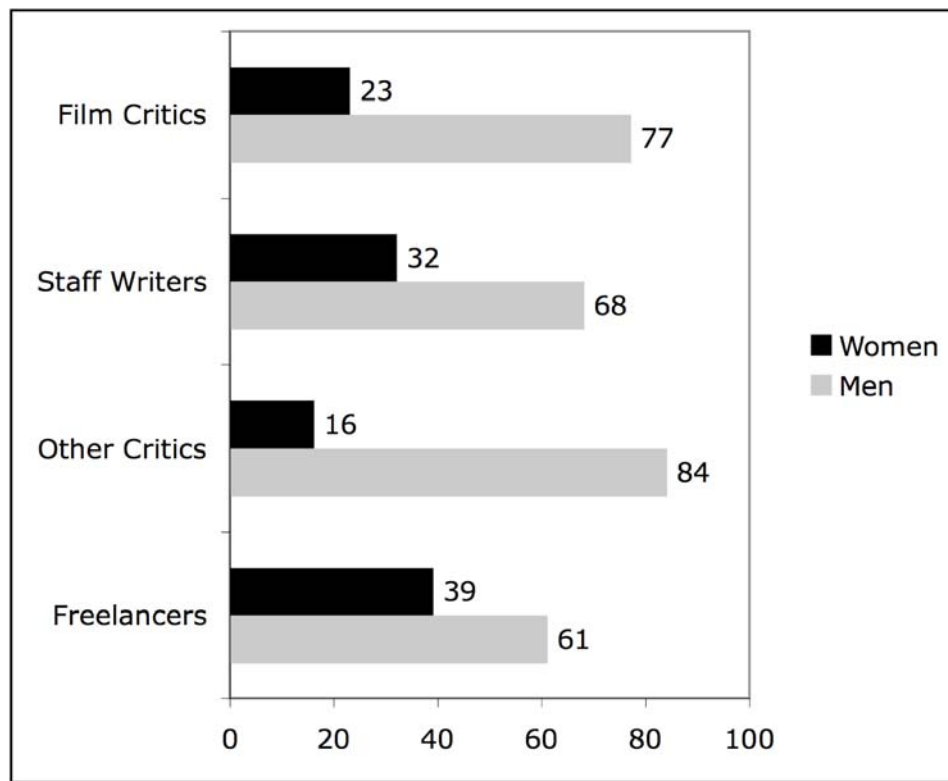
Overall, these findings suggest that film criticism in this country's newspapers is largely a male enterprise, echoing the heavy male dominance behind the scenes and on-screen in the film industry.

Sex of Reviewers and Job Titles

Men outnumbered women in every job title category considered in this study. Seventy seven percent (77%) of film critics were male and 23% were

female. Sixty eight percent (68%) of staff writers were male and 32% were female. Eighty four percent (84%) of other types of critics (e.g., television, theatre) writing film reviews were male and 16% were female. Sixty one percent (61%) of freelancers were male and 39% were female (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Job Title by Sex of Reviewer



Women were most likely to hold the job title of staff writer, whereas men were most likely to hold the job title of film critic. Women writing reviews were most likely to hold the job title of staff writer (35%), followed by film critic (29%), freelancer (29%), or some other type of critic (8%). Men writing reviews were most likely to hold the job title of film critic (37%), followed by staff writer (29%), freelancer (18%), or some other type of critic (16%). These findings

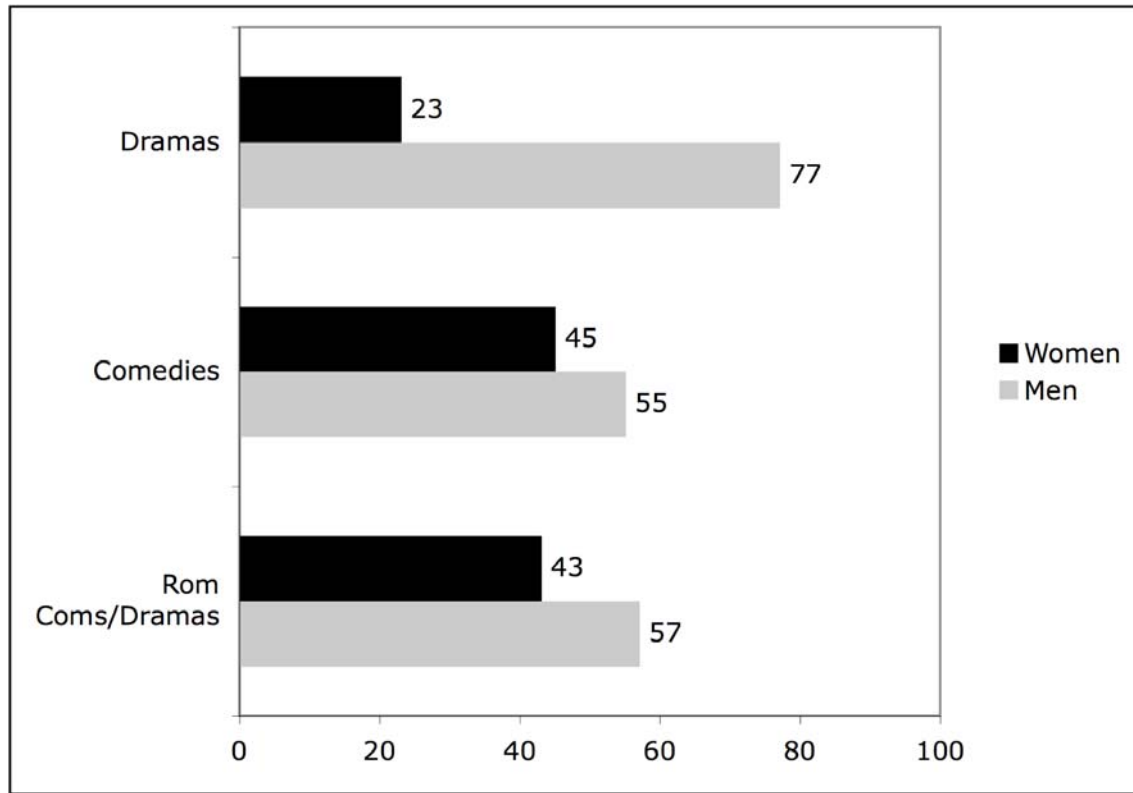
indicate that men hold the higher status titles of film critic or critic in categories other than film including television critic, music critic, theatre critic, pop culture critic, and media critic. Individuals with these titles are assumed to have expertise in their given area. In contrast, the women in this study were more concentrated in the staff writer and freelancer categories. These job titles imply a jack-of-all-trades or part-time status.

In every job title category, men wrote more film reviews than women. Men film critics wrote an average of 25 reviews whereas women film critics wrote an average of 19 reviews. Men staff writers wrote an average of 10 reviews and women staff writers wrote an average of 6 reviews. Men critics in areas other than film wrote an average of 6 film reviews whereas women with this job title wrote an average of 3 film reviews. Men freelancers wrote an average of 7 reviews and women freelancers wrote an average of 4 reviews.

Sex of Reviewers and Film Genre

Men wrote more reviews of films in all genres than women. Men wrote 77% and women 23% of reviews about dramas. Men penned 55% and women 45% of reviews about comedies. Men wrote 57% and women 43% of reviews about romantic comedies and dramas (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Genre of Films Reviewed by Sex of Reviewer



Romantic comedies and dramas constituted a larger proportion of the reviews written by women than by men. Sixteen percent (16%) of the reviews written by women but only 9% of the reviews written by men were about romantic comedies and romantic dramas. Twenty seven percent (27%) of the reviews written by women and 14% of the reviews written by men were for non-romantic comedies. Fifty six percent (56%) of the reviews written by women and 77% of the reviews written by men were for non-romantic dramas.

It is unclear whether women chose to review romantic comedies and dramas or if editors were more likely to assign films with romantic themes to women writers. Informal interviews with a number of the critics included in

this study suggest that the ratios are a likely result of reviewer choices and editorial assignments. The individuals interviewed described the assignment of film reviews as a highly collaborative process, involving input from both reviewers and editors.

Sex of Filmmaker and Sex of Reviewer

This study considered whether women were more likely than men to review films featuring a female director. However, the number of films with female directors during the study period was so low that it prohibited statistical analysis. Thus, we combined women directors and women writers to create a women behind-the-scenes variable.

Of the reviews written by women, 22% were for films with at least one woman director or writer and 78% were for films with only men as directors and writers. Of the reviews written by men, 14% were for films with at least one woman director or writer and 86% were for films with only men as directors and writers. In other words, films with women filmmakers constituted a larger portion of the films reviewed by women than by men.

It is not clear whether women chose to write reviews of films with women directors and writers or if editors assigned these films to women writers. Informal interviews with film critics included in this study indicate that reviewer choices and editorial assignments produce the reported percentages.

Sex of Protagonist and Sex of Reviewer

This study also considered whether women were more likely than men to review films featuring a female protagonist. However, the number of films featuring a clearly identifiable female protagonist was so low that films falling in this category were combined with films featuring ensemble casts in order to conduct the statistical analysis.

Of the reviews written by women, 33% were for films featuring a female protagonist or ensemble cast and 67% were for films featuring a male protagonist. Of the reviews written by men, 18% were for films featuring a female protagonist or ensemble cast and 82% were for films featuring a male protagonist. In other words, a significantly higher percentage of films reviewed by women than men were for films featuring female protagonists or ensemble casts.

Once again, it is likely that these findings are due to a combination of reviewer preferences and editorial assignments.

Editors of Film Critics, Writers, and Freelancers

This study identified the sex of the editor of the section containing film reviews. Forty nine percent (49%) of these editors were female and 41% were male. Ten percent (10%) had no section editor or the gender of the section editor was unknown.

Nature of Reviews and Sex of Reviewer

Whereas the numbers of women versus men who write reviews and the number of reviews that they write are decidedly unequal, the nature of the reviews written does not appear to differ by sex of the reviewer.

This study analyzed one randomly selected review by each of the 186 individuals writing reviews during the study period. We counted the number of positive, negative, and neutral/mixed sentences in these reviews. Positive sentences praised some aspect of the film including performances, cinematography, pacing, and storylines. Negative sentences noted poor performances, disjointed plots, and overly pedantic or frenzied pacing. Mixed or neutral sentences included both positive and negative comments or offered plot descriptions.

On average, women and men wrote equally negative reviews. Both women and men wrote reviews with an average of 4 negative sentences. On average, women and men wrote equally positive reviews. Both women and men wrote reviews with an average of 5 positive sentences. The remaining sentences in the average 23-sentence review offered either mixed or neutral observations. In addition, women were not more likely than men to write significantly more positive reviews about films with at least one woman director and/or writer or featuring a female protagonist or ensemble cast. Similarly, men were not more likely than women to write significantly more positive reviews about films with only men filmmakers or featuring a male protagonist.

Conclusion

In summary, women are under-employed as reviewers of film in the nation's 100 largest circulation newspapers. Not only are women outnumbered as film critics, staff writers, other types of critics, and freelancers, women also review fewer films on average than men. In addition, larger proportions of the films reviewed by women are for films with romantic themes, and those with women filmmakers and women protagonists or ensemble casts. However, the actual reviews written by men and women do not differ significantly in their length or nature. Women and men write equally positive and negative reviews and do not become significantly more positive when writing about films with same-sex protagonists or filmmakers.

Overall, these findings suggest that film criticism in this country's newspapers is largely a male enterprise, echoing the predominance of men working on screen and behind the scenes in the film industry. In short, men dominate the reviewing process of films primarily made by men featuring mostly males intended for a largely male audience. The under-employment of

women film reviewers, actors, and filmmakers perpetuates the nearly seamless dialogue among men in U.S. cinema.

Appendix
Top 100 U.S. Daily Newspapers*

<u>Newspaper</u>	<u>Circulation</u>
1. USA Today	2,269,509
2. The Wall Street Journal	2,043,235
3. The New York Times	1,066,798
4. Los Angeles Times	775,766
5. New York Post	704,011
6. Daily News	693,382
7. The Washington Post	656,297
8. Chicago Tribune	576,132
9. Houston Chronicle	508,097
10. Newsday	410,579
11. The Dallas Morning News	404,653
12. The Arizona Republic	397,294
13. The Boston Globe	386,415
14. Chicago Sun-Times	382,796
15. The Star-Ledger	378,100
16. San Francisco Chronicle	373,805
17. Star Tribune	358,887
18. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution	350,157
19. Detroit Free Press	345,861
20. The Plain Dealer	336,939
21. The Philadelphia Inquirer	330,622
22. The Oregonian	310,803
23. St. Petersburg Times	305,854
24. The San Diego Union-Tribune	304,334
25. The Orange County Register	287,204
26. Miami Herald	279,878
27. St. Louis Post-Dispatch	276,588
28. The Sacramento Bee	273,609
29. am New York	266,852
30. The Times-Picayune	261,573
31. The Washington Examiner	260,950
32. The Indianapolis Star	258,696
33. The Denver Post	255,935
34. Rocky Mountain News	255,675
35. The Kansas City Star	254,793
36. The Baltimore Sun	236,172

<u>Newspaper</u>	<u>Circulation</u>
37. South Florida Sun-Sentinel	235,154
38. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	230,781
39. San Jose Mercury News	228,880
40. Express-News	223,846
41. Orlando Sentinel	221,826
42. The Tampa Tribune	220,277
43. The Columbus Dispatch	217,291
44. The Seattle Times	212,691
45. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	212,075
46. The Courier-Journal	210,081
47. Fort Worth Star-Telegram	206,991
48. The Charlotte Observer	206,497
49. Boston Herald	203,552
50. The Oklahoman	201,947
51. The Detroit News	201,482
52. The Cincinnati Enquirer	197,962
53. St. Paul Pioneer Press	184,371
54. The Buffalo News	183,856
55. The Virginian-Pilot	183,210
56. Richmond Times-Dispatch	181,369
57. Hartford Courant	179,066
58. Omaha World-Herald	177,919
59. Arkansas Democrat-Gazette	176,172
60. Investor's Business Daily	173,169
61. The Press-Enterprise	170,965
62. Contra Costa Times	168,689
63. Las Vegas Review-Journal	168,653
64. The Austin American-Statesman	168,569
65. The Palm Beach Post	167,605
66. The Record	166,392
67. The News & Observer	165,483
68. San Francisco Examiner	165,183
69. The Tennessean	165,131
70. Rochester Democrat and Chronicle	156,129
71. Florida Times-Union	154,700
72. Commercial Appeal	154,403
73. The Providence Journal	152,736
74. Daily News	151,215
75. Daily Herald	151,200
76. The Fresno Bee	149,491

<u>Newspaper</u>	<u>Circulation</u>
77. Asbury Park Press	148,690
78. The Des Moines Register	147,701
79. The Birmingham News	143,791
80. Honolulu Advertiser	139,312
81. The Grand Rapids Press	132,214
82. The Salt Lake City Tribune	131,361
83. Seattle Post-Intelligencer	126,225
84. Dayton Daily News	123,181
85. The Blade	123,095
86. The Journal News	122,358
87. La Opinion	121,572
88. Akron Beacon Journal	118,771
89. Tulsa World	117,844
90. The News Tribune	116,150
91. Knoxville News Sentinel	115,608
92. The Post-Standard	114,179
93. Daily News	112,540
94. The News Journal	112,492
95. Lexington Herald-Leader	108,442
96. The Morning Call	108,200
97. Herald-Tribune	107,755
98. The State	104,880
99. Arizona Daily Star	104,731
100. Albuquerque Journal	103,889

*Source: 2007 Editor & Publisher International Yearbook

About the Center

The mission of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film is to celebrate the accomplishments of television and film directors, writers, producers, cinematographers, and editors – who happen to be women. The Center's programs encourage more women to pursue careers as storytellers, and its research agenda documents trends in women's employment, the impact of their employment on television and film content, and factors influencing the under-representation of women's voices in television and film.

About the Author

Dr. Martha M. Lauzen is founder and Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University. A nationally and internationally recognized expert on the employment of women on screen and behind the scenes, her research has been widely published in scholarly journals, trade publications, and the popular press. Dr. Lauzen directs research at the Center and teaches classes including *The Women of Prime Time: From "That Girl" to "Saving Grace"* and *Film Directors: When Women Call the Shots* in the School of Theatre, Television and Film. She holds a doctorate from the University of Maryland, and M.A. and B.A. degrees from the University of Iowa.

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