

## “When Women Ruled Hollywood: A Response to the AFI’s ‘Women They Talk About’”

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My first reaction to the AFI’s study, “Women They Talk About,” (“WTTA”) was one of elation—finally we have data that confirms what film historian Shelley Stamp and others have long argued, that women “absolutely” played a substantial role in defining film culture in American cinema during the silent era.<sup>1</sup> These revelations challenge the current status quo in Hollywood – that it has *always* been an industry unfavorable to women working behind the camera, especially in directing and writing roles. The AFI’s study reveals that women were indeed employed in larger numbers during 1910-1930, more than any other time in the twentieth century: 10.9% for overall feature credits attributed to female writers, directors, and/or producers, and nearly 27.5% films co-written or written by women.

As a teacher of American film history to future filmmakers in a film school, this latter statistic was particularly exciting. This research provides that evidence that I can confirm to my students that female writers flourished in the silent and early sound era in Hollywood. What’s more, the data underscores the overall importance of women to the developing American film industry in the early twentieth century. One of the most popular and profitable genres for Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s was the Woman’s Picture, which encompassed drama, melodrama, comedy, and romance (all quantified by “WTTA” as the dominant genres written by women). The Woman’s film typically referred to a “motion picture that revolves around an adult female protagonist and is designed to appeal mostly to a female audience.”<sup>2</sup> “WTTA” underscores how women were the presumed target audience for Hollywood cinema during this time, and as a result, female voices were valued onscreen and off. True, the industry was still dominated by men, but the male studio chiefs and producers adhered to a common formula: to be profitable, Hollywood films needed to appeal to women. That meant developing and marketing films to and for female audiences that in turn were headlined by powerful female stars that included Mary Pickford and Gloria Swanson (both independent producers of their own films by the 1920s). As Frances Marion, the most prolific screenwriter of this time, put it, women were “better able to determine and understand women’s likes and dislikes, and thus, be able to give them the kind of pictures they enjoy.”<sup>3</sup>

The cultural and economic importance of women in Hollywood continued into the 1930s, after the transition to sound, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> The Woman’s film continued to thrive into this decade, which accounted for more than a quarter of the movies in *Film Daily*’s exhibitor polls and *Variety*’s top-grossing films list, particularly in the 1930s. Likewise, female stars comprised more than 50% of the *Motion Picture Herald*’s “10 Top Box Office Stars—a list that included Marie Dressler, Bette Davis, Claudette Colbert, Joan Crawford, Myrna Loy, Shirley Temple, and others.<sup>5</sup> Renowned independent film producer Samuel Goldwyn remarked in 1935 that “Women rule Hollywood,” given that by his estimate, Hollywood’s movie audience was “more than seventy percent feminine.”<sup>6</sup> Screen Writer Guild (SWG) membership was 20-25% female across the 1930s, and Mary C. McCall, Jr. was elected the first female of the SWG in 1942.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, the power of women directing and writing behind the camera began decline. Case in point using the AFI catalog search tool – of the Oscar winning screenwriter Frances Marion’s 158 writing credits, only ten credits come after 1934. And between 1929-1970, there were only two female directors working in Hollywood: Dorothy Arzner, who retired in 1943; and the actress-turned-director-producer-writer, Ida Lupino, who expanded her career to behind the screen in the 1950s.

As exhilarating as the findings of “WTTA” is, the study also raises a sobering question: what accounts for the precipitous decline for women working behind the camera in Hollywood after the early 1930s? How can it be that in the next sixty years, the total number of women directing, producing, and/or writing American films dwindled to 6.9%, and that films written or co-written by women dropped to 12.2%? While “WTTA” does not reveal the answers, it provides incredible research as a starting point for film historians and scholars to document what transpired. Possible reasons include women being pushed out as Hollywood became a Wall Street backed big business enterprise in the 1930s, the postwar shift to that of a presumed male and youth dominated audience (largely engineered by George A. Gallup’s audience research polls to disprove the “myth” of the female audience in Hollywood) that in turn led to the reduction in the Woman’s film and diminished power of female stars, and the persistent gender inequality both above and below the line employment in Hollywood. “WTTA” makes clear however that nearly 100 years ago, women did contribute substantially to American cinema in front of and behind the camera. With the AFI’s impressive “WTTA” database, scholars and students of film history have the research that illuminates how the first thirty years of American filmmaking was a more inclusive film industry, and perhaps we can mine this data to anticipate and inspire an even more inclusive film industry moving forward.

<sup>1</sup> Shelley Stamp, “Women and the Silent Screen,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, eds. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon. CITY: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930-39* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 235.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Antonia Lant, ed, *The Red Velvet Seat: Women’s Writings on the First Fifty Years of Cinema* (Verso, 2007), 552.

<sup>4</sup> Emily Carman, *Independent Stardom: Freelance Women in the Hollywood Studio System* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. Other women include Greta Garbo, Janet Gaynor, Norma Shearer, and Mae West.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Goldwyn and Eric L. Ergenbright, “Women Rule Hollywood,” *New Movie Magazine* 11, no. 2 (1935): 18.

<sup>7</sup> J.E. Smyth, *Nobody’s Girl Friday* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 119.