

# Gender @ the Movies: On-line Film Critics and Criticism

by Martha M. Lauzen, Ph.D.

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Recent events indicate that gender often plays a role in popular film criticism. In February of this year, Rex Reed, film critic for the *New York Observer*, made an issue of Melissa McCarthy's weight in his review of *Identity Thief*. This incident followed closely on the heels of a (now former) male editor at the *Niagara Falls Reporter* ordering a critic to refrain from reviewing films with strong female characters. While such anecdotal stories are attention getting, they reveal little about the relationship between gender, film critics, and movie reviews.

In an effort to better understand how gender may influence popular film criticism, this study tracked over 2,000 reviews penned by 145 writers designated as "top critics" on the film review aggregator site *Rotten Tomatoes* over a two-month period in the spring of 2013. The study examined the percentages of male and female critics, the numbers of reviews they wrote during that period, and the length and nature of their reviews.

According to the *Rotten Tomatoes* website, writers considered top critics "must be published at a print publication in the top 10% of circulation, employed as a film critic at a national broadcast outlet for no less than five years, or employed as a film critic for an editorial-based

website with over 1.5 million monthly unique visitors for a minimum of three years."

The following summary discusses three perceptions about gender and film critics/criticism, followed by the reality.

*Perception #1: In recent years, the decline of newspapers and the rise of the Internet have democratized popular film criticism. More women now review films than ever before.*

Reality: Film critics appear to have become less, not more gender diverse over the last six years.

In Spring 2013, top male critics wrote 82% and top female critics 18% of the film reviews featured on the film review aggregator site. (In Fall 2007, men penned 70% and women 30% of reviews written for the top 100 U.S. daily newspapers.)

78% of the top critics writing in Spring 2013 were male, 22% were female.

Males accounted for 91% of critics writing for movie/entertainment magazines/websites such as *Entertainment Weekly*, 90% of those writing for trade publication websites such as *Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *The Wrap*, 80% of critics writing for general interest magazines and sites such as *Time* and *Salon*, 72% of those writing for newspaper websites, and 70% of critics writing for radio outlets/sites such as NPR.

In contrast, women comprised 30% of critics working for radio outlets/sites, 28% of those writing for newspaper websites, 20% of critics writing for

general interest magazine sites, 10% of those writing for trade publication sites, and 9% of critics writing for movie/entertainment magazine sites.

*Perception #2: Film critics tend to gravitate to films directed and written by individuals of their own sex. In other words, female critics gravitate toward films with female directors and writers and male critics are drawn to films with male directors and writers.*

Reality: There is some support for this perception.

A larger proportion of the total reviews written by female critics were about films directed by and/or employing at least one woman writer. 36% of the reviews written by women and 21% of reviews written by men were about films directed by and/or written by at least one woman writer.

Conversely, a higher proportion of the total reviews written by male critics were about films directed and written exclusively by men. 79% of the reviews written by men and 64% of the reviews written by women were about films with exclusively male directors and/or writers.

*Perception #3: If critics gravitate to films created by same-sex directors and writers, their reviews must be very biased, awarding those films more stars or higher ratings.*

Reality: Not necessarily.

Female critics write their lengthiest reviews about films directed and/or

written exclusively by males (average of 604 words). Reviews female critics write about films with female directors and/or written by at least one woman are considerably shorter (average of 480 words). Male critics write slightly longer reviews, on average, about films directed by and/or with at least one woman writer (average of 485 words) than about films directed and/or written by males (average of 473 words).

In addition, neither male nor female critics award substantially higher ratings to films directed and/or written by those of their same sex. Female critics award the highest average scores to films directed and written exclusively by males (67%), followed closely by films directed by a woman and/or employing at least one woman writer (64%). Male critics assign higher average ratings to films with exclusively male directors and/or writers (63%), followed closely by films directed by a woman and/or employing at least one woman writer (60%).

*The Bottom Line: Popular film criticism remains a predominantly male activity. Films with male directors and writers receive greater exposure as male critics are more likely to review these films than films with female directors and writers. However, while film critics tend to review higher proportions of films directed and/or written by individuals of their same sex, on average, critics do not privilege those films by writing longer reviews or awarding them substantially higher ratings.*

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