

WOMEN THEY TALK ABOUT: EXPLORING FEMALE FILMMAKERS IN EARLY AMERICAN CINEMA

AFI's Women They Talk About project is an educational initiative with a mission to document the impact of women's contributions to early American cinema and to evidence the work of female filmmakers throughout the first century of film history (1893-1993). Named after a lost 1928 film, Women They Talk About brings female pioneers from the silent era into the cultural vernacular by providing new and unprecedented tools that help researchers uncover the widely untold story of women's labor in cinema history. Using the renowned AFI Catalog of Feature Films as a foundation for academic research and as a platform to share information with the world, AFI has documented thousands of films released in the silent era—many of which were written, directed, and produced by women—that have little or no record in any book or online database. In the process, AFI captured information about hundreds of women who have yet to be included in the historical canon. With generous support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the David and Lura Lovell Foundation, Women They Talk About supports new conversations about female filmmakers, ensuring that they are, indeed, talked about.

INTRODUCTION

The film industry is unique in its representation of labor. When going to see a movie, audiences are not only entertained by the film's narrative—they are also exposed to the onscreen credits for individuals who brought the story to life. Although credits were either non-existent or sparse in early cinema, they have grown to become an industry standard and a critical aspect of film production and reception. No other business in the world displays the name of each and every person who worked on its product to its users the way movies do, and this provides exciting opportunities to explore employment trends and statistics in the industry.

For over fifty years, AFI has been documenting onscreen and offscreen credits in its AFI Catalog. Long before there was an IMDb, AFI was watching (when possible) and researching every American feature film and co-production to amass a comprehensive and scholarly database of names and roles for the first century of cinema. Today, there are over 500,000 people credited in the AFI Catalog, from actors and directors to stand-ins and caterers. Inspired by the work of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, the Geena Davis Institute, the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, and the British Film Institute, as well as the 2020 report about gender imbalance in the film industry from Northwestern University¹, AFI decided to capitalize on its wealth of data to test academic assumptions about women in the silent era, and to provide a research tool for future discoveries.

THEORIES

The following report uses data from the AFI Catalog to support the academic theory that women were working in greater numbers in the silent film era (1910-1930), and to test the widespread assertion that gender parity was achieved for writers during this time. As noted by Jane Gaines,

“more women held positions of power than at any other time in the U.S. motion picture industry.”² During the 1910s and 1920s, the American film industry offered unique job opportunities for women unheard of in other times and workplaces. Karen Ward Mahar writes, “female stars like Mary Pickford and Gloria Swanson earned some of the highest salaries in the world, and many more worked in creative roles behind the camera...When in 1920 the *Ladies Home Journal* predicted that within five years ‘the female influence’ will be fully ‘fifty-fifty’ in ‘Studio Land,’ it was more than wishful thinking.”³

Furthermore, various historians contend that 50% of writers working in the silent film era were women. This statistic has appeared in numerous publications, including an article by Cari Beauchamp,⁴ and has been extensively cited in academic sources, essays, and documentaries.^{5 6} Scholars often attribute the 50% statistic to Lizzie Francke’s *Script Girls*, which states in a footnote that “no data have been compiled to support this assumption,”⁷ or to Wendy Holliday’s dissertation *Hollywood’s Modern Women*, in which it is noted “the exact percentage is unknown due in part to inconsistent crediting.”^{8 9} Anthony Slide, who was one of the first historians to bring attention to silent era female filmmakers in the 1970s when he uncovered their names as a researcher at the AFI Catalog, disputed the 50% figure. Hand-counting female writers listed in the 1911-1920 and 1921-1930 printed volumes of the AFI Catalog, Slide came up with 20% and 25%, respectively.¹⁰ While lower than 50%, Slide’s estimates nearly double more contemporary statistics that report only 13.2% of popular American films released from 2007-2016 were written by women.¹¹ Jane Gaines uses this dilemma to illustrate the limitations of factual documentation in this period and the prevalence of assumption in the academic community: “those who cite this fifty percent figure do not know how many women there were...so what percentage should we now claim?”¹²

Were women indeed working more prolifically in the silent era, and was gender parity achieved? Exploring credits data in the AFI Catalog helps shine new light on these questions, as well as supports the discovery of who the female pioneers were, what kinds of films they were making, and how the opportunities for women filmmakers changed over time.

METHODOLOGY

The AFI Catalog’s half million person records were aggregated from the data entry of feature film credits, including cast and crew, literary and music sources, and copyright holders. These credits were generally derived from what appeared onscreen; however, in the case of silent films, in which onscreen credits are scant, credits also came from contemporary news items which reported on the making of the film. From 1910-1930, there were an average of 4-5 production credits per film. That number increased to an average of 40.5 credits per film in the years 1931-1993. Therefore, AFI had to take into account that labor in early American filmmaking was not as well documented as it was in later decades, and that it was likely that people (women and men) were often uncredited for their contributions. This is best illustrated in the editing department, in which women—called “cutters”—worked in great numbers but were not included in the film credits due to the dearth of information that exists on their identities. Since editors could generally not be accounted for in early silent film credits, AFI focused its study on writer, director, and producer credits for this report.

To filter its credits data through a lens of gender, AFI ran its person records through two distinct automated programming interfaces (APIs) that predicted gender by first name based on statistical evidence. The APIs returned the records with a percentage of certainty per name, allowing AFI to manually review names with 80% certainty or less. In addition, the study looked at the gender of character names in cast credits, helping to further designate gender for more ambiguous names. Production credits with inconclusive first names (which did not have character names to give additional clues as to the gender of the person) were particularly hard to identify, especially names that begin with initials or names such as Pat and Leslie. AFI listed individuals as “unresolved” if the gender could not be determined based on a 90% degree of certainty or more. These unresolved records were not included in the report since AFI’s goal was to calculate a definitive ratio of women to men.

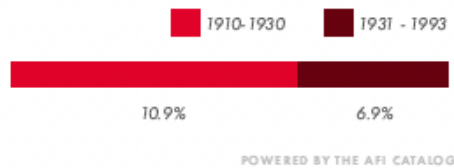
Despite a thorough analysis of the automated results, this part of the Women They Talk About project proved more challenging than was initially predicted. In the years since the project began, cultural values about gender have vastly evolved and society has come to appreciate that gender is not a polarity of male and female, but rather a multitude of significant identifications. Mining AFI Catalog data for gender is a useful tool for evaluating statistical information about women’s labor and gives researchers compelling opportunities to track gender parity. However, it also endorses a more polarized representation of gender than what is consistent with our current beliefs. The mission of the project is to support inclusion in the historical record, and yet data mining for gender makes it difficult to convey ambiguities, as individuals credited in the dataset are not able to self-identify. AFI therefore presents the following data as an imperfect means to prompt further discussion about the role of gender, with great appreciation for the fact that the results of the gender APIs provide limited information about the wide spectrum of personal identities. With utmost respect and sensitivity to our culture’s changing definitions of gender identification, AFI Catalog person records adhered to the GLAAD Media Reference Guide Glossary of Terms when documenting gender, with one field for “Sex Designated at Birth” and a second field to capture “Gender Expression,” when relevant.¹³

The credits data is based on feature film productions, which are typically defined as being greater than 40 minutes in duration.¹⁴ The number of feature films produced greatly increased in the early 1910s to become the standard in the latter part of the decade. Since AFI has not documented short films to date, they were not included in this study.

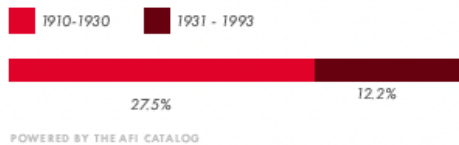
FINDINGS

AFI discovered that women were indeed working in larger numbers in the silent era than at any other time in the first century of American filmmaking. Roles for women working behind the camera substantially decreased over the next sixty years.

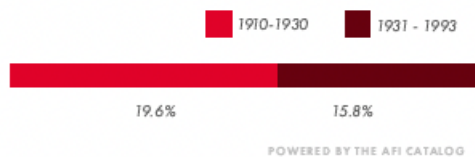
From 1910-1930, 10.9% of feature film credits for films released from 1910-1930 were attributed to women writers, directors, and producers. In the decades that followed, that number dropped to 6.9%, even though the amount of writer, director, and producer credits increased 308%. There were more credited roles, but women were not employed in them.



From 1910-1930, women were credited as writers or co-writers in 27.5% of feature film productions. This number dropped to 12.2% in the release years 1931-1993, even though the average number of writing credits per movie increased 13%. Gender parity was not achieved in the silent era, but there were over twice as many women writers at that time than in the following years.



From 1910-1930, women writers were credited as literary source authors in 19.6% of feature film productions. This number decreased to 15.8% in films released from 1931-1993.



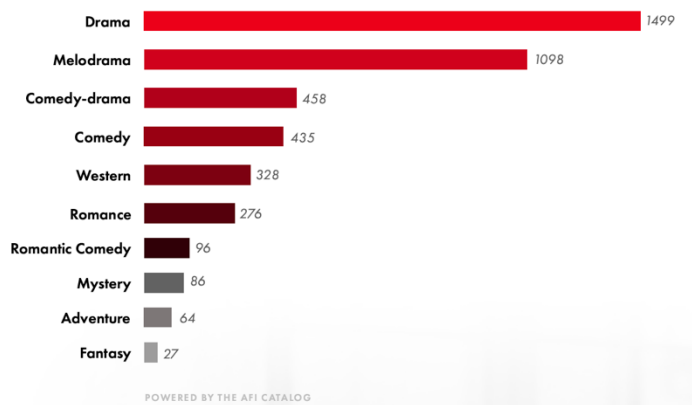
These were the top 10 women writers of feature films in the silent era



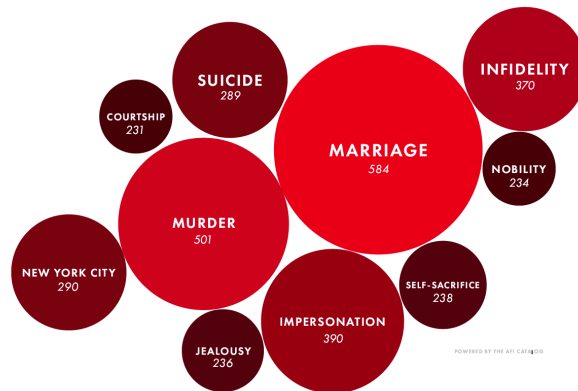
POWERED BY THE AFI CATALOG



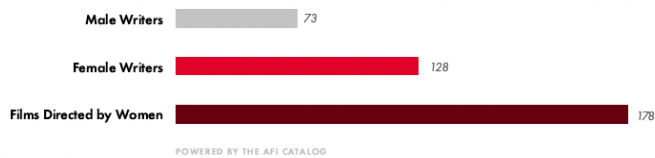
These were the most common genres of feature films written by women in the silent era



These were the most common subjects of feature films written by women in the silent era



Films directed by women were 31% more likely to have female writers*



*The number of male and female writers add up to more than the total number of films directed by women because some films have more than one writer, representing both genders.

CONCLUSION AND OUTCOMES

There are two main outcomes to the data study portion of *Women They Talk About*. The research outcome supports the theory that women's labor was more prolific in the silent era than at any other time in the first century of American filmmaking. Empirical data has been applied to test the assumption that women were half of the writers, and though this was not proven, the data still indicates that women writers were more common in the silent era than in the following decades. The data may not conclude there was gender parity, but 27.5% is considerably higher than a study done in 2019 by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative which stated that 19.4% of the top films released were written by women.¹⁵

What the data does not reveal is the cause for the decline in women filmmakers. Could it be that the advent of sound technology, along with the establishment of the studio system, pushed women out of roles they initially assumed at the dawn of feature filmmaking? Or perhaps the creation of the guilds and unions resulted in the exclusion of women? The adoption of the Motion Picture Production Code in the early 1930s also coincided with the dissipation of women working behind the camera. Could there be a correlation between these monumental shifts in American filmmaking?

As scholars ponder these questions and others, their research will be supported by the structural outcome of *Women They Talk About*, which has added new features to the AFI Catalog advanced search. Researchers can now select gender as search criteria to explore the role of women in the first century of American cinema, advancing awareness and knowledge of how female filmmakers worked during this time. With its gender filter in advanced search, AFI has changed the database infrastructure to support future studies of women storytellers and to help identify their contributions to the creation of the industry. By sharing the results of this report, and by providing new research tools that support the discovery of women in film history, AFI intends to start building the foundation for more inclusive scholarship that accurately accounts for the women pioneers.

¹ Luís A. Nunes Amaral et al., "Long-Term Patterns of Gender Imbalance in an Industry Without Ability or Level of Interest Differences." *PLoS One* 15, no. 4 (2020), accessed September 26, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0229662>

² Jane M. Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 9.

³ Karen Ward Mahar, *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 2.

⁴ Cari Beauchamp, "100 Women, One Hotel, and the Weekend Retreat That Presaged Time's Up By 18 Years," *Vanity Fair*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/01/women-directors-miramar-women>

⁵ Naomi McDougall Jones, "When Hollywood's Power Players Were Women," *The Atlantic*, February 9, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/02/naomi-mcdougall-jones-wrong-kind-of-women-excerpt/606277/>

⁶ *These Amazing Shadows: The Movies That Made America*, directed by Paul Mariano and Kurt Norton (2011; Martinez, CA: Gravitas Docufilms), DVD.

⁷ Lizzie Francke, *Script Girls: Women Screenwriters in Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 27.

⁸ Shelley Stamp, "Women and the Silent Screen," in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, First Edition, eds. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 5.

⁹ Wendy Holliday, "Hollywood's Modern Women: Screenwriting, Work Culture, and Feminism, 1910-1940" (doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1995), 100.

¹⁰ Anthony Slide, "Early Women Filmmakers: The Real Numbers." *Film History: An International Journal* 24, no. 1 (2012): 114-121.

¹¹ Stacy Smith et al. "Inequality in 900 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT, and Disability from 2007-2016," *USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism*, https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/Dr_Stacy_L_Smith-Inequality_in_900_Popular_Films.pdf

¹² Gaines, 2.

¹³ "GLAAD Media Reference Guide," GLAAD Media Institute, accessed September 26, 2022, <https://www.glaad.org/reference>

¹⁴ "Rules & Eligibility," Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, accessed September 26, 2022, <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/rules-eligibility>

¹⁵ Stacy Smith et al. "Inequality in 1,300 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT, and Disability from 2007-2019," *USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism*, https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aai-inequality_1300_popular_films_09-08-2020.pdf