

GENDER IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICAN FILM: GENDER
MESSAGES AND TYPES OF ARTISTIC SUCCESS

by

ELLEN ROJC

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Sociology
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

June 2014

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Ellen Rojc for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Sociology to be taken June 2014

Title: Gender in 21st Century American Film: Gender Messages and Artistic Success

Approved:  _____

Jocelyn Hollander

This research is a content analysis comparing the gender messages displayed in financially successful and critically acclaimed American films in the years 2008, 2010 and 2012. The analysis focused on three aspects of gender messages: the percentage of female and male characters present as lead characters in each film, gendered social character relationships, and gendered patterns involving sexuality. In financially successful films, only 25% of lead characters were female, compared to 14% in critically acclaimed films. Findings showed that there was a trade-off between realistic depictions of gender and the significance of the character role. Overall, the critically acclaimed films showcased less sexual objectification, and contained less distinctive roles for female characters, while the female characters in the financially successful films featured more prominently in the central plotline, but were portrayed less realistically, and appeared as objects of the male gaze.

Acknowledgements

I am honored to have had the privilege of working with the following professors, students and staff at the University of Oregon.

Firstly, I would like to thank my primary thesis advisor, Professor Jocelyn Hollander, for guiding me through my thesis process and working with me throughout the year to examine my topic and its sociological significance. I would also like to extend my thanks to Professor CJ Pascoe, my second reader, who helped me develop an effective research method. I would like to thank Professor Shiao and the students in the Sociology Honors Cohort 2013-14 who helped me examine my topic and methods multiple times to ensure excellence. I would also like to recognize Professor Gwartney, who recommended the Sociology Honors Program to me, and Professor Light for introducing me to the concept of cultural consecration, a keystone in my literature review.

From the Robert D. Clark Honors College, I would like to thank Professor Matthew Sandler for being my CHC representative at my thesis defense. I would also like to thank Professor Prazniak and the students in my CHC Thesis Prospectus course for providing me with invaluable feedback and advice. I would like to thank Professor Bishop and Miriam Jordan for helping me to coordinate my thesis process. Finally I would like to recognize the wonderful support of my family and friends throughout this entire thesis experience!

Table of Contents

Literature Review and Innovation	3
Cultural Consecration	3
Gender Norms and Ideals	5
Approach	8
Coding Categories	9
Coding Procedures	10
Limitations	13
Results	16
Social Patterns	20
1. Describing Men and Women	20
2. Observed Character Occupations	21
3. Character Traits	24
Character Relationship Patterns	26
1. Non-Romantic character relationships	26
2. Romantic relationships between characters	28
Sexual Patterns	32
1. Sexual relationships between characters	32
2. Images of Sexuality	33
3. Actions and Dialogue involving Sexuality	34
Discussion	36
Appendix	38
Bibliography	39

Introduction

Film is an important medium through which the cultural and social norms of American society are communicated and confirmed. As with any cultural product that is projected via the mass media (broadcast, electronic, print), films cannot be produced without some intersection between artistic and economic interests. As a result, “product performance is assessed with multiple dimensions, because cultural goods are simultaneously artistic creations and economic products.” (Delmestri 2005). This combination of creative and economic achievement defines artistic success.

As the literature review on the subject of gender and film illustrates, a number of case study driven sociological studies have been conducted about gender representations in American film throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. Although women have slowly gained access to certain opportunities historically denied to them, the majority of American films seem to continue to feature male protagonists. (Smith 1972, Thornham 1999). This discrepancy is important to be noted because of the cyclical nature of media creation and consumption in American society. The literature on media studies states that each viewer or consumer “constructs [his or her] own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow. [She or he then] transforms [the resulting mythology] into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives,” (Jenkins 2006). The messages supplied by films to movie viewers can be instrumental in creating norms for femininity and masculinity. However, the direction of cultural meaning goes both ways. While

individuals take cultural cues *from* the media they consume, feminist film theorists also hypothesize that historic and current male hegemony in American society *perpetuates* the consistent return to male main character narratives in film. (Thornham 1999).

Because “Films are produced within a capitalist system that operates on the principle of competition...producers are motivated to make movies that sell. Under this premise audience members, as consumers, constitute the driving force behind what types of films and representations are produced by the media.” (Eschholz 2002). If this is true and consumers pay to watch the types of films they desire, desired gender roles implemented in film should predict financial success.

The literature on the salience of film messages also argues that, “film’s images are not neutral objects of a pure perception [but are]... already significant by virtue of their relation to the viewer’s subjectivity, coded with a certain potential for identification,” (De Laurentis, 1984). Gender messages that prove to be salient with viewers should also predict financial success. To explore this concept, my research question asks what patterns exist in the types of gender norms and images presented in recent American films. Is there a difference in patterns of gendered ideas between financially successful films and critically acclaimed films? My findings demonstrate that both categories contained sexist gender messages. Overall, the critically acclaimed films showcased less sexual objectification, and contained less distinctive roles for female characters, while the female characters in the financially successful films featured more prominently in the central plotline, but were portrayed less realistically, and appeared as objects of the male gaze.

Literature Review and Innovation

Previous literature has focused on coding mainly financially successful American films for gender messages for very specific subtopics. Box office success has been used regularly in previous studies, which code for trends in film messages (Steinke 2005, Martin 2009, Gilpatric 2010). Katy Gilpatric distinguishes her 2010 content analysis research about women in action roles in contemporary films, explaining that substantial literature exists which offers interpretive analyses of female characters portrayed in cinema, but few studies that provide quantitative data (Gilpatric 2010). The data that I collected is a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data and expanded the types of success of films analyzed to include what I define as ‘critically acclaimed’ films.

Cultural Consecration

My definition of critical acclaim stems from the concept of cultural consecration. Cultural consecration takes place when certain distinctions are inflicted that separate individuals and accomplishments that are worthy of appreciation and respect from those that are not. (Allen 2004). It is important to study films that have earned critical acclaim via cultural consecration, because films that attain critical acclaim can gain their cultural status separately from their economic status. Literature on cultural consecration argues, “cultural producers become more concerned with the specific legitimacy conferred upon them by other producers and less concerned with

popular or...bourgeois legitimacy.” (Allen 2004). By investigating this previously unexplored category of success, I hope to be able to comment on the potential relationship between gender norms and ideals and resulting artistic success for American films.

As mentioned previously in the introduction, films represent a kind of dual nature because of their status as cultural art *and* economic products. One study has been conducted using interviews with Italian film industry employees, exploring reputation and industry connections in predicting commercial success and artistic merit of independent films. The researcher argues that the performance of films “cannot be measured using a single standard. A film can be assessed either on the basis of its box-office success, or on the basis of the quality of its cultural content as assessed by the group of social actors who are legitimized to do so.” (Delmestri 2005). In the specific case of my study, these social actors who have gained legitimacy are the film critics, hailing from prominent newspapers and arts entertainment magazines. So, there are therefore two distinct cultural groups that make up my two categories of success: judges of the cultural consecration of films who determine critical acclaim, and judges of bourgeois legitimacy, the general audience members, who determine financial success.

I will choose individual films to code as ‘critically acclaimed’ by combining Academy Award nominations with rankings from film aggregation websites. I believe critical success as a category has been previously overlooked and has salience because “awards make claims concerning a field’s legitimacy and boundaries” (Anand and Watson 2004). Additionally, the organization of cultural production is an important

factor in the institutionalization of prestige, as elevated fields tend to be only loosely coupled to the market and proximately focused on aesthetic interests of the artistic community itself (Becker 1978; Bourdieu 1993; DiMaggio 1981). If the function of a film achieving critical acclaim is to represent a more prestigious form of artistic cinematic achievement, does this correlate with progressive representations of gender and sexuality? Are there differences in the presentation of female and male characters between films that only earn financial success and films that earn critical acclaim? If such a discrepancy in gender presentation exists, why?

Gender Norms and Ideals

In order to address what defines gender norms, I must first explain the subjectivity/objectivity juxtaposition established by feminist literature of the twentieth century. According to de Beauvoir, man purports to be the universal, rational and transcendent of the physical body. In contrast, woman appears as his 'Other', tied to the body and defined in relation to the man. (Chaudhuri 2006). If one applies de Beauvoir's assertion to sociological film critique, the male perspective is not only the dominant narrative, but is associated with intellect, whereas the female is usually reduced to an object of desire, and her body is the focus of her significance. Sexual objectification is one subsection I will code for, because according to existing feminist film theory, "The role of a woman in a film almost always revolves around her physical attraction and the mating games she plays with the male characters, but in a wide variety of roles" (Smith 1972, Thornham 1999). Sexual objectification as a concept cannot be restricted to an activity where men subject women to secondary roles. Becoming an object also entails

complex forms of cultural participation (often involuntary) by women, containing psychological, social and ritualistic significance. (Barthel 1988). It is possible that the average female viewer remains largely unaware of the predominance of male subjectivity and female objectivity in film, and accepts presentations of female characters as normal.

I define normal behaviors associated with gender roles by the ideas presented in Sarah Eschholz's article analyzing gender as a predictor of violence in film. Eschholz compiles a working definition of male and female gender roles as, "Individuals who act in a masculine manner expect to and likely will be treated with respect and a degree of deference to the 'power' implicit in their behavior...Feminine behavior, on the other hand, implies caring, concern for others, and a certain vulnerability, signaling a need for protection and direction from others." (Eschholz 2001). Most of the existing case study or quantitative studies have demonstrated a reinforcement of traditional gender roles by contemporary American films. Gilpatric's study of female characters that participated in violence in contemporary American films found that characters maintained gender stereotypes with respect to feminine traits of submission and affection. (Gilpatric 2010). In their article coding for norms of hetero-sexiness in children's films, Martin and Kazyak found that "heterosexuality is constructed through depictions of interactions between gendered bodies in which the sexiness of feminine characters is subjected to the gaze of masculine characters." (Martin and Kazyak 2009).

Some research has been done on countering traditional gender roles in films but it was discovered that "Media responses to female heroes occasionally reveal[ed] a discomfort about the presence of powerful women within action cinema." (Purse 2011).

While challenges to standards of gender norms were reacted to negatively, “The superhero cycle has been one of the most commercially successful manifestations of (predominantly) male heroism in the 2000s” (Purse 2011). In terms of action characters and film, the status quo seems to be upheld for male and female characters.

Like the examples I have just mentioned, most of the quantitative studies on gender messages and film have focused on specific, narrow topics. In order to complement these existing studies on gender and film, and the existing theoretical work done on cultural consecration and critical success, my study expands to encompass gender messages in reference to general topics (sexual objectification, social roles and general demographics).

Approach

In order to explore these gender identities in American film, I utilized content analysis. I compared films that were released in theaters in the United States during a selection of three years: 2008, 2010 and 2012. My empirical case compares the gender messages in financially successful films to the gender messages in critically acclaimed films. By comparing these groups of films, I examine how messages about acceptable and/or ideal femininity and masculinity differ from films popular with the general public in the United States, to films regarded by film critics as worthy of artistic and/or social praise.

Because the literature on cultural consecration argues that films are made ‘acclaimed’ and gain their cultural status separately from their economic status, there may be a potential for these types of films to deviate from standard gender portrayals that appear in many financially successful films. I will identify and analyze patterns of gender representations in the films I code. It could be possible that female characters in these culturally consecrated films may re-articulate traditional gender roles in an alternate way to the norms presented in financially successful films.

Coding Categories

I have four categories of film in total: I compare financially successful films and critically acclaimed films to films with average financial success and films that did not attain critical acclaim. I explain my rationale for the individual films representing each of the four categories below:

1. Films that attained high financial success: I looked at a list from a top film statistics site, boxofficemojo.com, that ranked widely released films from each year by domestic box office gross. I then selected the three films that earned the most domestic gross for the given year.

2. Films that attained average financial success: Using the same list as the previous category, I calculated three random integers from the range of numbers representing the middle third of widely released films from each year. (For example, in 2008 there were 169 total movies. The middle third range consisted of movies ranked 56 through 113. I then used the Microsoft Excel formula for random integer generation to generate three random integers between 56 and 113.) I repeated these steps for 2010 and 2012. The three random integers would serve as my criteria for selecting films from each year that achieved average financial success.

3. Films that attained critical acclaim: I define a film's critical acclaim by utilizing the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Award nominations for Best

Picture. According to the literature on film critique, “Not only are [The Academy Awards] comparable in prominence and media attention (if not dignity) to the Nobel Prizes, but they are the most prominent cultural prize by a wide margin” (English 2005; Levy 2003). I began with the nominees for Best Picture (5 to 10 films for the years 2008, 2010 and 2012). I then narrowed the list to 3 films per year by utilizing the critical rankings on rottentomatoes.com, which a widely utilized film aggregation website. I chose the top three critically acclaimed films.

4. Films that did not attain critical acclaim: I looked at a list from a top film statistics site, boxofficemojo.com, that ranked all released films from each year by domestic box office gross. I then utilized the Microsoft Excel formula for random integer generation to generate three random integers between the full ranges for each year. The first three random numbers, which were associated with a film scoring between 65% and 35% on Rotten Tomatoes, were the numbers I used to determine my three films from each year in for this category.

In total I coded 35 films (12 from each year minus 1 film that appears in two categories. See appendix for list of films selected for coding.

Coding Procedures

In order to define appropriate categories with which to code for gender messages, I refer to previous studies (explained in literature review) on gender in film, one of which has examined gender stereotypes exhibited by characters, created profiles

based on demographic information, and analyzed the quantity and type of various actions taken by characters. (Gilpatric 2010). I coded my defined content categories to answer three sub-questions:

(1) Quantitative: Is there a discrepancy in the number of male and female characters in lead roles between critically acclaimed and financially successful films? I define a lead role by the character's actor or actress's name appearing in the flashing credits, which appear at the end of most American films, prior to the rolling credits (where all major and minor credited actors and actresses appear.)

(2) Qualitative: What differences (if any) can be seen between amounts of sexual objectification of men and women in critically acclaimed and financially successful films? A 2009 study of heteronormativity in children's films describes sexual objectification as, "the desiring gazes, the commentary, and the depictions of [female characters by male characters.]...[These attitudes] are constructed as competitive and conquering or frivolous," (Martin and Kazzyak, 2009). In order to examine the presence of the sexual objectification of both men and women I watched each film and identified any gendered portrayals of sexuality including but not limited to the categories such as the categories below:

Female/Male Body is displayed onscreen without character's face

Comical/Not Comical reference in dialogue to Female/Male genitalia

Character shown in undergarments or naked

Fantasy scene of sexualized character

Character lauded verbally for sexual appeal

Character is chastised for lack of sexual appeal

(3) What gender messages about the social roles of females and males are portrayed in critically acclaimed versus financially successful films? Here I am concerned with established gender role boundaries that have permeated film narratives. For example, the existing literature on the role of men and women in film found that “Men are more likely to use violence and aggression to achieve their objectives, engage in problem solving, complete their tasks, even if it means breaking the rules, and act goal oriented, [but] women tend to be passive, sometimes emotional, rule-followers who are preoccupied with pleasing men” (Eschholtz 2002). I watched each film and recorded each instance I notice of gendered behavior or words performed by the characters. I recorded any instances of the way men and women are described by characters, what careers and activities the characters are involved in, if any gendered tendencies enter into romantic partnerships and platonic partnerships. Finally I coded character traits of characters that can be attributed to gender. Some categories that I recorded of gendered social factors include:

Character participates in mainly domestic activities

Character in position of leadership and authority

Character describes and defines a stereotype for their sex such as “Women love to shop for shoes” or “Boys don’t cry”

Character is primarily a love interest

Character is encouraged or chastised by another character for adhering to or deviating from expected gender roles (see Eschholtz's definition above).

In analyzing gender messages in both critically acclaimed and financially successful films, I explore whether or not gender messages serve to distinguish kinds of success. Much exploration in the discipline of sociology has been initiated in regards to the female character's objectified role in financially successful films, and the male character's perspective in plot narratives. The existing studies conducted on the relationship between gender and film (Eschholtz 2002, Steinke 2005, Martin 2009, Gilpatric 2010) have found the presence and redundancy of sexist gender roles in American contemporary films. Because 'critically acclaimed' films are judged to appeal to certain aesthetic and narrative innovation and excellence, I expected less dichotomous and more progressive gender messages in this category. (Allen 2004, Hadida 2010).

Limitations

It is important to note the subjectivity and homogeneity of the film critics that make up the Academy of Awards committee. In his study of cultural consecration, Allen states that, "much of [critics'] cultural authority derives from their ability to frame their aesthetic judgments about films and directors within the context of an established cultural schema such as auteur theory," (Allen 2004). Though I predicted progressive gender ideals could be associated with critical artistic success, ultimately male

hegemony in American society may apply universally to all categories of film. The male-dominated nature of the American film industry also poses a potential causal reason for the limited range of female roles in the films I coded. The majority of directors, screenwriters and producers for both critically acclaimed and financially successful films in 2008, 2010 and 2012 were male (usually white males).

Because most of the previous studies on gender in film focused on financially successful films, it was difficult to make an inference about what I would find in my 'critically acclaimed' category solely from the existing literature. Regardless of my findings about gender messages, I expected the presence of many potential spurious factors that may have resulted in each film gaining critical and/or financial success. I found some patterns that described a relationship between types of success and the equity of gender messages; however this does not mean the two are causal. I will assume that there *exists* a relationship between levels of success and gender messages, but this relationship is *not* the sole cause of the film's financial performance and critical rating.

I expected to find many discrepancies in the gender messages about women and men in *all* categories of the films I coded. As the single coder for this study, to prevent coder bias, I attempted to limit my analysis of qualitative factors to facts directly presented in the films.

The major limitation in my study is the amount of films I am coding. Because I have a limited time period to complete my coding and have no additional resources to employ and train coders in addition to myself, I have limited my sample to 12 films per year (3 different years). To ensure consistency within my own coding, I

have watched and coded each of my 35 films twice. While I have utilized a mixture of random sampling and literature-recommended methods for selecting the films I will code, it is possible that the films that made it to my list may be outliers or unrepresentative of their larger categories for each year. In my results, I pay attention to outliers and attempt to understand their presence in their given category.

Results

My primary research question asks if there exists a difference between patterns of gendered ideas between financially successful films and critically acclaimed films. Because ‘critically acclaimed’ films are judged to appeal to certain aesthetic and narrative innovation and excellence, I expected less dichotomous and more progressive gender messages in this category. However, after coding 35 films from 2008, 2010 and 2012, I did not find this to be the case. Neither Financially Successful nor Critically Acclaimed films demonstrated any significant trends towards gender equity; however, I was able to identify some differences in gendered portrayals between the two categories.

Specifically for female characters, there seemed to be somewhat of a trade-off between realistic depictions of gender and the significance of the character role. Overall, the Critically Acclaimed films showcased less sexual objectification, and smaller, less distinctive roles for female characters, while the female characters in the Financially Successful films generally featured more prominently in the central plotline, but were portrayed less realistically, and appeared as objects of the male gaze. There were a couple of exceptions in all four of my coding categories that defied the patterns that I will expand on in each results sub-section below. A significant pattern that distinguished Financially Successful from Critically Acclaimed films was the patterns in genre. Out of the 9 films I coded for the High Financial Success category, 8/9 were action films. Out of the 9 films I coded for the Critically Acclaimed category, 8/9 were in the drama genre. There seems to be a pattern to the types of films that earn their rank

in either the Financial Success or Critical Acclaim categories. Gendered differences between the two genres may therefore intersect with genre more strongly than their classification as financially successful or critically acclaimed.

My first comparison category, Average Financial Success, had 5/9 films in the comedy genre and 4/9 films in the drama genre. My second comparison category, Films that did not reach Critical Acclaim, had 6/9 films in the comedy genre and 3/9 films in the drama genre. There was one action genre film in each of the former categories. The reason certain films make more money at the box office than others also likely intersects with levels of budget and the funding and reach of the production and distribution companies.

Two movies did exhibit more egalitarian gender messages: “The Hunger Games” (Financial Success, 2012) and “Zero Dark Thirty” (Critical Acclaim, 2012). An additional intersecting factor is the demographics of the creator of the narrative and characters. In the case of the formerly mentioned ‘exception’ films, “The Hunger Games” is an adaption of a novel series written by a female author about a lead female character. “Zero Dark Thirty” is inspired by the historical story of female C.I.A. analyst, and is directed by a female director.

There were more specific patterns that I found after having coded my four categories of films that I divide into general social patterns, character relationship patterns and sexual patterns.

In my coding procedures, the first sub-question I asked was “Is there a discrepancy in the number of male and female characters in lead roles between critically acclaimed and financially successful films?” Similarly to my general prediction, I

estimated that critically acclaimed films would display a more egalitarian representation of female characters. After counting the lead roles for each film, I calculated the average percentage of female characters that appeared in each of my four categories. Only 2 out of 35 (6%) films had a higher percentage of female characters than male characters, leaving 33 out of 35 (94%) films that contained more male characters. Even if the lead character was female, overall, the majority of the films I coded contained more male characters.

FILM CATEGORY	PERCENTAGE of FEMALE CHARACTERS
High Financial Success	25%
Average Financial Success	33%
Critically Acclaimed	14%
Not Critically Acclaimed	39%

The Critically Acclaimed films actually contained the lowest percentage of lead female characters. I found that the majority of the films in my critically acclaimed category were historical dramas or stories based on the significant deeds of one individual. Seven out of nine films featured male protagonists, who interacted with other male characters throughout each films' narrative. Even in the two films "True Grit" (2010) and "Zero Dark Thirty" (2012) that featured female protagonists, the other characters the leads interacted with were overwhelmingly male. These two particular films share a pattern of a female overcoming adversity in a male-dominated space. In

fact, overcoming social adversity seemed to be a narrative pattern in all of the critically acclaimed films.

There was an average percentage of 25% female characters in the Financially Successful category, which was 11% higher than the Critically Acclaimed category, but still demonstrates the large discrepancy in female character representation. The general pattern the action films in this category followed was having one or two female characters, one primary love interest for the male protagonist and an additional female (which could be a mother, associate or enemy of the male protagonist). The two exceptions in this category were “Alice in Wonderland” (2010) and “The Hunger Games” (2012) which featured female leads. However, similarly to the Critically Acclaimed category, both of these films still contained a majority of male characters.

The higher 33% female characters in the Average Financial Success category and the highest 39% female characters in the Not Critically Acclaimed category could be due to the higher diversity of film genres in each of these comparison categories. Romantic comedies, which tend to be targeted at a female audience, appear only in these two comparison categories. The only two films that featured more female leads than male leads, “Nim’s Island” (2008) and “Sex & the City” (2008), appear in the Average Financial Success and Not Critically Acclaimed categories, respectively. “Nim’s Island” is classified as a family film and “Sex & the City” a romantic comedy, neither of which genres regularly appear in the critically acclaimed film category (with the exception of “Toy Story 3” (2010)).

Social Patterns

Since I coded based on what I observed and heard in each film, rather than establishing set categories prior to coding, I note here that the patterns I explain are not representative of every single 21st century film in each category. In fact, there existed at least one exception to every pattern.

1. Describing Men and Women

In films from all four of my categories, I noticed a trend of certain characters generalizing via dialogue about gender. There was no real distinction among the categories about what types of generalizations were voiced. However, the statements tended to reinforce traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. For example “Indiana Jones: The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull” (2008, Financial Success, Action genre) included one of the main male characters making a generalizing statement about wives after he had quit his professorship because of a moral conflict. He says to his male friend, “How does any wife take such things...the look on her face was a combination of pride and panic”. This specific statement implies that the man is in the breadwinner role in his household because the wife looks to her husband to provide income, so she is subject to “panic” when he can no longer provide it, however she has “pride” in the fact that her husband adheres to high morals. In the majority of the financially successful films (with the exception of “Alice in Wonderland” and “The Hunger Games”, the female characters look to the male characters for decision making.

In “Love and Other Drugs” (2010, Average Financial Success, Romantic Comedy) at a family dinner, the father complains (somewhat jokingly) that the medical

profession was “ruined when they let women in” implying women do not have a place in certain occupations, specifically a highly paid field like the medical field. Gendered statements seem to be able to cross film genres from action to romantic comedy. While it is debatable whether or not an audience member would internalize such a generalization or if she or he would laugh it off as a joke, the presence of such a statement remains in my films.

2. Observed Character Occupations

I observed characters engaging in specific tasks, careers and/or occupations in each film and analyzed for gendered patterns. Common occupations for male characters in the Financially Successful (mostly action films) included corporate CEOs [“The Dark Knight” Series (2008, 2012), the “Iron Man” Series (2008, 2010), “The Avengers” (2010)], high ranking military officials: [“The Dark Knight” Series, The “Iron Man” Series, “Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull” (2008), “The Avengers”, “The Hunger Games” (2012)] and lead superheroes/villains: “[“The Dark Knight” Series, The “Iron Man” Series, “The Avengers”].

There were few lead female characters that even appeared in financially successful films. The few female characters that did appear mostly are seen working in fairly prestigious occupations. However, these positions are all defined by the female’s relationship to a male character. In contrast, the majority of the male characters’ occupations were self-made. The table below lists female characters in Financially Successful films and their subsequent occupations.

FILM	YEAR	FEMALE CHARACTER	OCCUPATION
Iron Man	2008	Pepper Potts	Personal Assistant to Tony Stark (Iron Man), later appointed by him as CEO of Stark Industries
Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull	2008	Irina Spalko	Soviet "golden girl" of Stalin, continuing his vision
The Avengers	2010	Natasha Romanov (Black Widow)	Agent working for male leaders at World Gov. Agency
The Dark Knight Rises	2012	Talia ah Ghul	Daughter of villain Ra's ah Ghul, continuing her father's vision of destruction by leading a terrorist group
The Hunger Games	2012	Lead Character (Katniss Everdeen)	Chooses to volunteer name to fight to the death in reality show in place of her little sister

While these rare female characters are in what could be considered positions of power, they are performing their occupations in relation to a man, whether the man is her father, mentor, boss or lover (with the exception of Katniss Everdeen in “The Hunger Games”). While Natasha Romanov’s character in “The Avengers” chooses to work for the world agency out of independent desire, she is one of the least prominently featured Avengers out of the six. Because of the action (fantasy/superhero) genre of most of these financially successful films, fewer women appear as homemakers.

Male characters in the Critically Acclaimed films appear as politicians [“Frost/Nixon” (2008)], social activists [“Milk” (2008)], entrepreneurs [“The Social Network” (2010)] and other self-directed leaders such as U.S. Marshal Reuben Cogburn, one of the lead characters in “True Grit” (2010). Of the nine films in this category, only two films feature prominent female lead characters, Mattie Ross in “True Grit” and Maya Lambert, a CIA analyst in “Zero Dark Thirty” (2012). Mattie is a young girl who demonstrates resistance to adversity. However, her motives for strength come from her wanting to avenge a male character, her father. Maya Lambert is the only female character in any of the critically acclaimed films I coded that independently pursues a career goal without any reference to a male character. These two exceptions aside, the majority of the Critically Acclaimed films contained female characters who served no purpose other than to be love interests to the lead male characters. Female characters were almost unnecessary to “Frost/Nixon” and “The Social Network”. Both films are historically inspired dramas about the accomplishments of men. In “Slumdog Millionaire”, the female love interest serves as the inspiration for the male protagonist

to persevere. In “Milk” there is one somewhat prominent female character, a lesbian activist, who must deal with adversity from within the male-dominated gay community.

It is important to note the presence of intersecting marginalized identities within the films that I have coded. While “Slumdog Millionaire” depicts a male who overcomes odds to win a woman, the protagonist is a man of color. Within all four of my coding categories, there are even fewer lead characters of color than women. Although “Milk” depicts the gay rights activism of Harvey Milk, the majority of the lead characters featured are white males. Milk has a brief romantic relationship with a Latino character, Jack Lira, who is portrayed as submissive and unintelligent. Similarly, in the few films in the Not Critically Acclaimed category which feature female leads, the females are all white and demonstrate no more cultural competence than white males to characters of color.

3. Character Traits

One of the more difficult categories to articulate patterns in, character traits describe the personalities and narrative agency of the female and male characters. I define narrative agency as the ability of a character to make their own decisions and take action independent of the direction of other characters.

The Financially Successful films generally depicted self-directed male protagonists, physically assured, confident, decision makers. While the action genre has the potential to restrict the complexity of characters, I found the general pattern among the character traits of male protagonists was layered. Bruce Wayne (Batman) in the “Dark Knight” films, and Tony Stark (Iron Man) in the “Iron Man” films maintain the reputation of being playboys, philanthropists and CEOs of wealthy industries, while

secretly bearing the moral burden of defeating terrorism and crime in their respective cities/countries. These male characters must be leaders, fighters and lovers. Female characters, in contrast are usually relegated to one role, usually lovers and sometimes assistants to the male protagonists. In either case, female characters make none of the final decisions. The male protagonists ultimately cause the narrative of each film to progress. Again, there are exceptions to this rule in the case of “Alice in Wonderland” and “The Hunger Games”, where the main female characters (Alice and Katniss) direct the narrative of the film. However, neither Alice nor Katniss have complete agency of independent organizations like Iron Man and Batman; in contrast they are swept into the situations they find themselves in and must persevere. Alice is chastised at the beginning of “Alice in Wonderland” by her mother for not adhering to feminine expectations and desiring independence from a life as a housewife. Katniss similarly has trouble with conveying emotions and feels more comfortable hunting in solitude. Both of these female lead characters, who are the exceptions to the otherwise male-dominated category, both distinguish themselves from other female characters by rejecting traditional notions of femininity in favor of masculine characteristics. A question for further study here could be whether or not masculinity can be separated from leadership and physical agency.

The Critically Acclaimed films demonstrated similar traditional masculine and feminine character traits; however, the unrealistic traits assigned to the male protagonists in the financially successful action films were tamed in the critically acclaimed films. The male protagonists were portrayed with realistic human flaws as well as inspired traits such as innovativeness, courage and leadership. There were few

female characters in these films, but those who were present as love interests or minor characters acted in accordance with the actions of the male characters around them. The two exceptions again, were Mattie of “True Grit” and Maya of “Zero Dark Thirty”, where the women demonstrated character traits usually associated with masculinity, such as emotionlessness, perseverance, and high intellect. Similarly to the two exception female characters in the financially successful category, Mattie and Maya in some ways disposed of their traditionally feminine characteristics to perform masculinity in order to fulfill their goals.

Character Relationship Patterns

1. Non-Romantic character relationships

To avoid approaching my coding from a heteronormative and binary perspective, which would only focus on heterosexual relationships between men and women, I also coded for the platonic interactions between characters of the same gender identity.

One common platonic relationship between two male characters that was prevalent throughout many of the Financially Successful films (action genre) was the mentor/mentee relationship. This type of male/male relationship appeared most strongly in “Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull” (2008) and “The Dark Knight Rises” (2012) as well as in the sole action film in the Not Critically Acclaimed category, “Street Kings” (2008). This relationship consisted of a more experienced leader/fighter character and a younger/rookie character, which would learn how to perform masculinity from his mentor. The three examples above varied from a

father/son, chief/rookie to friend/younger friend relationship. In each instance, through dialogue, action and the interactions with third-party characters, the younger male character is chastised for his failings and lauded for his adherence to the expectations of the older male. However, when in some cases the mentor fails to protect the mentee under his tutelage, the mentor does show vulnerability, to demonstrate his failure at his ability to successfully transfer his masculine traits to his mentee.

In addition to the low presence of female characters in the Financially Successful category, there is but one instance of a female/female mentorship in “Alice in Wonderland”, between Alice and the good White Queen, who provides her with the tools for her to defeat the villains. In the majority of the films there are not two female characters that even interact with one another.

In the Critically Acclaimed category the platonic male/male relationships that exist vary from brothers, president/chief of security, best friends, to business partners. Within these relationships, there is a general pattern of heterosexuality being encouraged, as well as mental cunning, leadership, and the ability to persuade. There is only one instance of a featured female/female relationship, which is in “Zero Dark Thirty” (2012), between the protagonist, Maya and another female CIA analyst, Jessica. Jessica attempts to discuss romance and men with Maya, but Maya refuses to let anything distract her from her primary goal, which is to find terrorist Osama Bin Laden. Jessica ends up being killed due to her misplaced trust in a double agent and Maya is visibly saddened, similar to the male mentor/mentee platonic relationship mentioned above.

The category that contained the most instances of two named female characters having a platonic relationship with each other was the Not Critically Acclaimed Category, which had the highest percentage of female leads at 39%. Female/female relationships appeared the most strongly in the 2012 film “Vamps”, which was a comedy (directed by a female director) about two female vampires and their mentor/mentee relationship. The 2008 film “Sex and the City” was also a comedy about four middle-aged women in New York City and their careers and romances. It would have possibly been significant if the majority of the films in the Not Critically Acclaimed category featured strong platonic female/female relationships. However, the majority of films in this category still had a majority of male protagonists and few female characters.

2. Romantic relationships between characters

Because of the serious underrepresentation of queer characters in the majority of the films I coded, here I focus on the romantic interactions between male and female characters. Since only one of my films, “Milk” (Critically Acclaimed, 2008) focused on a queer male protagonist; I will not attempt to establish any patterns about queer romantic relationships in my categories of film. More research is needed on the topic of gender messages in relation to queer characters in film.

In the Financially Successful category, the female characters that appeared were primarily the love interests of the male protagonists. The following chart lists the main female characters of each film and their love interest status (any romantic/sexual relationship to a lead male character). Blue indicates the lead female characters are

primarily present as love interests. Pink indicates the lead female characters have male characters as *their* love interests. Purple indicates a relatively equal relationship.

FILM	YEAR	ALL LEAD FEMALE CHARACTERS	LOVE INTEREST STATUS
The Dark Knight	2008	Rachel	Former girlfriend of Bruce Wayne (Batman)
Iron Man	2008	Pepper Potts	Personal Assistant of Tony Stark (Iron Man) Primary Love Interest
Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull	2008	Marion	Indiana Jones' former lover, they re-marry at end of the film
Toy Story 3	2010	Jessie, Barbie, Mrs. Potato Head	Jessie is the love interest of Buzz Lightyear, Barbie is the love interest of Ken, Mrs. Potato Head is married to Mr. Potato Head
Alice in Wonderland	2010	Alice (Protagonist), Red Queen, White Queen	Alice and White Queen have no love interests, Red Queen has a love interest, but she is dominant
Iron Man 2	2010	Pepper, Black Widow	Pepper is the primary love interest, Black Widow has some flirtatious moments with Tony Stark, is assigned to be Pepper's assistant

The Avengers	2012	Black Widow	Black Widow and Hawkeye have a vague possible romantic relationship, but are equals
The Dark Knight Rises	2012	Selina Kyle (Catwoman), Talia ah Ghul	Both characters have romantic/sexual interactions with Batman
The Hunger Games	2012	Katniss Everdeen	Katniss has two male love interests but she is most concerned with protecting her sister/mother

While the majority of romantic relationships in the Financially Successful films above tend to confine the lead female characters to love interests, there are three exceptions (as shown in purple and pink). There is a slight trend by year, where the presence of the egalitarian or female-led relationship is replacing the male-led relationship from 2008 to 2010 and to 2012, however while they *are* the three most financially successful films of each year, I cannot generalize without adding more films to my sample size. It is important to note that while the exception films in this category demonstrate more egalitarian gender messages, only two female characters exist without any love interests. On the other hand, the majority of male protagonist characters *also* have love interests. However, since 75% of lead characters in this category are male, the majority of male characters as a holistic category do not have female love interests (that are named).

In the table below I apply the same criterion for my Critically Acclaimed films.

FILM	YEAR	ALL LEAD FEMALE CHARACTERS	LOVE INTEREST STATUS
Slumdog Millionaire	2008	Latika	Male lead's love interest
Frost/Nixon	2008	Caroline	Girlfriend of Frost
Milk	2008	No Prominent Female Leads	*Male Love interests
Toy Story 3	2010	Jessie, Barbie, Mrs. Potato Head	Jessie is the love interest of Buzz Lightyear, Barbie is the love interest of Ken, Mrs. Potato Head is married to Mr. Potato Head
The Social Network	2010	No Prominent Female Leads	
True Grit	2010	Mattie	Mattie has no love interest
Argo	2012	No Prominent Female Leads	
Amour	2012	Anne, Eva	Anne is the wife of male lead character, Eva is Anne and the male lead's daughter
Zero Dark Thirty	2012	Maya, Jessica	Neither Maya nor Jessica have any named love interests, Maya is notable single

In accordance with its 14% rate of lead female characters, the Critically Acclaimed category boasts only one film that features females in roles other than love interests. Three of the nine films do not contain one lead female character, although minor love interests do exist for the male protagonists in films such as “The Social

Network”. However, the female characters have little relevance to the overall narrative of the films. The case of “Milk” is unique, because the love interests of the male protagonist are also male. The need for a romance in the Critically Acclaimed category is less defined. Perhaps because the films above do not follow the action genre narrative like the majority of the financially successful films, there is less of a demand for romance at all. However, because female characters tend to only appear in films when romance is involved, removing romance also removes female characters.

Sexual Patterns

1. Sexual relationships between characters

Here I focus on the potential gendered natures of sexual relationships between characters and seek to find patterns in character agency in sexual acts. I define a character’s agency in regard to sexual acts as the individual’s consent and/or instigation of the act.

Actual scenes of sexual acts do not feature prominently in the High Financial Success or the Critically Acclaimed categories. There are some implied, short scenes. However, in the two comparison categories (Average Financial Success and Not Critically Acclaimed, especially in the romantic comedies, sex scenes were more frequent and extensive.

In terms of character agency and sexuality in the Financially Successful films, there was only one implied scene in “The Dark Knight Rises” (2012), that was consensual and mutually motivated by the male lead and the female love interest.

However, there were some comments made by third-party male characters implying that the female character had slept with the male lead in order to acquire leverage in a board of directors meeting. The male lead experienced no negative references to his sexual activity.

The Critically Acclaimed films showcased many more instances of complete sex scenes. This could be a result of the propensity for critically acclaimed films to have more R-ratings than financially successful movies, which usually rate at PG-13 or below to capture the family audience. In the majority of the sex scenes, both partners consented and mutually agreed upon performing the act. However, in “Slumdog Millionaire” (2008), the primary female love interest, Latika, was forced to be a mistress to a crime boss, from whom she eventually escaped with the direction of a male character.

2. Images of Sexuality

I seek to establish commonalities among my categories of film in regards to the purposeful display of sexualized bodies onscreen.

The Financially Successful films, because of their action genre, mostly featured sexualized male and female bodies in suits fitted for physical action or fighting. A character such as Black Widow in “Iron Man 2” was hyper-sexualized in low cut and tight outfits (but not as much in “The Avengers”). Scenes appeared that showcased a female body part were added that did not advance the plot, for example bikini-clad Russian ballet dancers on Bruce Wayne’s yacht in “The Dark Knight” and sexually dancing flight attendants in “Iron Man”. No such scenes of random men dancing or

dressed provocatively for the audiences' pleasure appeared in the financially successful category. However, the bare chests of male superheroes were sometimes showcased.

The critically acclaimed films had less obvious sexualization, likely due to the filmmakers' goal to imitate historical events somewhat realistically. However, due to the lack of egalitarian female roles in this category of film, and the propensity for female characters to appear only as love interests, female characters still bared more skin than the male characters. The exceptions included "Zero Dark Thirty", which featured a strong female protagonist and "Milk" which included scenes that sexualized men, due to the homosexual relationships within the film.

3. Actions and Dialogue involving Sexuality

Here I look at patterns in instances of characters vocalizing their sexual interest or approval of other characters and any potential discrepancies between female and male characters.

The comedies and romances of the Average Financial Success and Not Critically Acclaimed categories featured standard woof-whistles and discussions about the sexual appeal of potential sexual partners' bodies. Because there were so many more male characters, the majority of these sexualizing comments were instigated by males about female bodies. However, in female-led films such as "Sex and the City" (2008) and "Vamps" (2012), an equal amount of sexually objectifying comments were made about both potential male love interests and the towards the female protagonists themselves.

One trend that appeared in the action genre films in the Financially Successful category was sexualization as a threat to the female love interest, which would then be resolved by the retaliation of the male protagonist. For example, in “The Dark Knight” (2008), the only female lead character, Batman’s love interest, Rachel, stands up to the villain by yelling at him “Ok, Stop!” The villain (The Joker) responds by saying, “Well, Hello beautiful. You must be Harvey’s squeeze”. After a small struggle, Batman runs out and threatens the Joker, which leads to a series of events where Batman must jump out of a window to save the falling Rachel. Alice in “Alice in Wonderland” is also propositioned sexually by the female villain’s love interest, the Knave. The female characters in “Iron Man 2”, “The Avengers”, and “The Dark Knight Rises” are all threatened verbally with predatory sexual threats. In all cases, the female characters respond with either their own violence, or are saved by a male hero. In no cases are males threatened sexually in the Financially Successful category.

Sexual threatening is not a pattern in the nine Critically Acclaimed films I coded, however some critically acclaimed films from the earlier 2000’s deal specifically with sexual violence such as “Monster” (2003). The only exception to this pattern is “Slumdog Millionaire”, where the object of desire for many of the characters is the main female love interest, Latika, who is bartered for her beauty and talent.

Discussion

The goal of this research was to explore and identify any potential patterns in gender messages between financially successful and critically acclaimed films. However, after completing my coding and my analysis, I have found a wealth of sub-topics relating to the intersection of film genres, types of artistic success and the gender messages that are displayed. My findings demonstrate that both the Financially Successful and Critically Acclaimed categories contained sexist gender messages.

The major difference between my two categories of films seemed to intersect quite strongly with genre. For female characters, there seemed to be somewhat of a trade-off between realistic depictions of gender and the significance of the character role. The critically acclaimed films showcased less sexual objectification, but provided less distinctive roles for female characters, while the female characters in the financially successful films generally featured more prominently in the central plotline, but were portrayed less realistically.

The discrepancy in percentages of male and female characters continues to reflect the extension of the United States' patriarchal social system into mainstream media. Female characters should not represent just 14-25% of the film character population, when females make up 50%+ of the United States' population. Female director Kathryn Bigelow's "Zero Dark Thirty" consistently appeared as an exception to the majority of the sub-categories I coded for, as did any film featuring a female protagonist. While more research can be conducted on the connections between masculinity, femininity and the agency of film characters, ultimately it seems female-

character driven films seem to be an effective method of promoting gender equity in any genre of film. A switch to the female gaze, in films such as the “Twilight” saga or the upcoming “Fifty Shades of Gray” novel adaption, are not necessarily the solution, as the female protagonists in these two stories do not have narrative agency.

My study would be strengthened by the growth of my sample size, which would have to be facilitated via the assistance of multiple coders and a longer completion timeline. Additionally, to examine any potential trends throughout the 21st century so far may yield further trends in gender messages. A study examining the intersection of race and gender and/or other marginalized identities such as ability, sexual orientation and socio-economic class could also be coded for in these same mainstream films. Ultimately, equitable media representations cannot be achieved without an awareness of inequity. Through the efforts of scholars, activists, teachers, authors and artists marginalized groups may have the potential of being recognized in the media they pay to consume.

Appendix

Film Coding List

*Indicates the film is in two categories

Year	High Financial Success	Average Financial Success (#) Indicates Excel-generated random number ranking	Critically Acclaimed	Not Critically Acclaimed (# Indicates Excel-generated random number ranking. % indicates Rotten Tomatoes rating)
2008	The Dark Knight	(92) Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist	Slumdog Millionaire	(11, 49%) Sex & the City
	Iron Man	(70) Nights in Rodanthe	Frost/Nixon	(147, 50%) Smart People
	Indiana Jones & the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull	(61) Nim's Island	Milk	(104, 36%) Street Kings
2010	Toy Story 3*	(65) Predators	Toy Story 3*	(194, %38) Casino Jack
	Alice in Wonderland	(53) The Wolfman	The Social Network	(491, 43%) Mercy
	Iron Man 2	(91) Love and Other Drugs	True Grit	(402, 46%) Spoken Word
2012	The Avengers	(76) The Artist	Argo	(635, 50%) Vamps
	The Dark Knight Rises	(97) House at the End of the Street	Amour	(556, 52%) Grassroots
	The Hunger Games	(88) That's My Boy	Zero Dark Thirty	(361, 33%) Butter

Bibliography

- Allen, Michael P., and Anne E. Lincoln. 2004. "Critical Discourse and the Cultural Consecration of American Films" 82(3): 871-894.
- Barthel, Diane. 1988. *Putting on Appearances: Gender and Advertising*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Benshoff, Harry M., and Sean Griffin. 2004. *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Chaudhuri, Shohini. 2006. *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Laurentis, Barbara Creed*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Delmestri, Giuseppe, Fabrizio Montanari, and Alessandro Usai. 2005. "Reputation and Strength of Ties in Predicting Commercial Success and Artistic Merit of Independents in the Italian Feature Film Industry". *Journal of Management Studies*. 42 (5): 975-1002.
- Eschholz, Sarah, and Jana Bufkin. 2001. "Crime in the Movies: Investigating the Efficacy of Measure of Both Sex and Gender for Predicting Victimization and Offending in Film." *Sociological Forum* 16(4):655-76.
- Eschholz, S., Bufkin, J., & Long, J. 2002. "Symbolic reality bites: Women and racial/ethnic minorities in modern film." *Sociological Spectrum*, 22, 299–334.
- Gilpatric, Katy. 2010. "Violent Female Action Characters in Contemporary American Cinema." *Sex Roles* 62(11-12):734-746.
- Hadida, Allégre L. 2010. "Commercial success and artistic recognition of motion picture projects". *Journal of Cultural Economics*. 34 (1): 45-80.
- Hsu, Greta, Michael T. Hannan, and László Pólos. 2011. "Typecasting, Legitimation, and Form Emergence: a Formal Theory *." *Sociological Theory*. 29(2):97-123.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York City, NY: New York University Press.
- Martin, Karin A. and Emily Kazyak. 2009. "Hetero-Romantic Love and Heterosexiness in Children's G-Rated Films" *Gender and Society* 23(3):315-336.

- Mulvey, Laura. 1975. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *Screen* 16(3):6-18.
- Pomerance, Murray, and Frances Gateward. 2005. *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.
- Purse, Lisa. 2011. *Contemporary Action Cinema*. George Square, Edinburgh, UK:Edinburgh University Press.
- Rossmann, Gabriel, Nicole Esparza, and Phillip Bonacich. 2010. "I'd Like to Thank the Academy, Team Spillovers, and Network Centrality" *American Sociological Review* 75(1):31-51.
- Rossmann, Gabriel, and Oliver Schilke. 2013. "Close, But No Cigar: The Bimodal Rewards to Prize-Seeking" *American Sociological Review*, Forthcoming.
- Schmutz, Vaughn. 2005. "Retrospective Cultural Consecration in Popular Music" *American Behavioral Scientist* 48(11):1510-1523.
- Skeggs, Bev. 2005. "The Making of Class and Gender through Visualizing MoralSubject Formation" *Sociology* 39(5):965-982.
- Steinke, Jocelyn. 2005. "Cultural Representations of Gender and Science: Portrayals of Female Scientists and Engineers in Popular Films" *Science Communication* 27(1):27-63.
- Thornham, Sue. 1999. *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Washington Square, NY: New York University Press.
- Way, Niobe, C.J. Pascoe, Mark McCormack, Amy Schalet and Freedom Oeur. 2013. "The Hearts of Boys" *Contexts* 12(1):14-23.