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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0df2c646>

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Publication Date

2011-04-01

CSWupdate
APRIL 2011

The Gendering of Film and Television Casting

RESEARCH NOTEBOOK BY ERIN HILL

Why did casting, which in its present incarnation seems to have much in common with other feminized labor sectors in terms of the logic behind its gendering, only truly become gendered after the end of the studio system?

I BECAME INTERESTED IN CASTING, a female-dominated profession in the contemporary American film and television industry, after observing the casting process carried out at production companies where I worked in the early 2000s in New York and Los Angeles. The skills and strategies used by casting directors and assistants to guide the process of matching actors with directors and roles—meting out rejection in both directions yet managing to keep the atmosphere positive—seemed to me to be creatively important. However, the work seemed equally reliant on qualities that undercut that importance, many of which had traditionally been associated with women. Not the least of these were a kind of femininely deployed self-effacement and an ability to influence decision-making while maintaining low status. When I interviewed a dozen or so casting directors, they reported that the job often required them to assume the role of, in

their words, wife, mother, hostess, or girl Friday, and that their aptitude for playing these roles had been key to their success in the field and had in many cases led to their having increased input into the creative process. Not one of them, however, knew how the work had come to be female dominated, other than believing that the job had “always been done by women.” Research into the history of casting quickly revealed that, despite the testimony of my interview subjects, as well as some recorded anecdotes and oral histories which seemed to corroborate it, the job of casting director was actually male-dominated at American film studios, until the 1960s and 1970s. Why did casting, which in its present incarnation seems to have much in common with other feminized labor sectors in terms of the logic behind its gendering, only truly become gendered after the end of the studio system? I have come to see this job as a particularly interesting member

of a subgroup of “women’s” work at film studios, which, unlike women’s craft jobs with roots in domestic arts and crafts or women’s manual labor at studios with roots in manufacturing, is most closely related to women’s clerical labor. The following overview of my research in this area will attempt to explain what brought me to this conclusion and how my historical investigation of casting has helped me to understand the logic behind casting’s current feminization.

We can begin a discussion of clerical laborers in the studio system around 1890 or 1900, not only because that is when the first films were being made but also, and more importantly, because the dramatic rise in importance of clerical labor to American business was reaching a climax at this time. As a result of the increased use of technologies such as the typewriter and filing cabinet, as well as the implementation of principles of scientific management of production across major American industries, small

businesses, and even private homes, management was becoming increasingly separated from production and larger numbers of clerical workers were hired to carry messages in an intermediate product that economists refer to as “clerical output.”¹

Population shifts from farms to cities created a increasing urban workforce of women who were attractive candidates for these clerical jobs because they were thought to be more suited to the monotonous-yet-detailed work of operating stenographs, typewriters, and filing cabinets, and because they could be paid and promoted less before, it was assumed, they left the workforce for marriage.² And so new business technologies were gendered female, clerical work was feminized, and by the 1930s, the percentage of female workers in some clerical fields had risen to as high as 95.³

While individuals in the burgeoning film business of the 1900s and early teens hired clerical workers for their sales departments and company offices, for the most part, early film production processes involved only a cameraman

1. Fine, Lisa M. *The Souls of the Skyscraper: Female Clerical Workers in Chicago, 1870-1930*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990. p. 31.

2. Strom, Sharon Hartman. *Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class and the Origins of Modern American Office Work, 1900-1930*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992. P 190.

3. Davies, Margery W. *Woman's Place is at the Typewriter: Office Work and the Office Worker, 1870-1930*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982. P 52.

or a director with a few extra hands to round up sets, costumes, actors, and whatever else was needed, guided by a vague story outline or no script at all. Clerical workers were largely absent and notes were taken, if at all, by whoever was free.⁴ In the 1910s and 20s, clerical work shifted from being an ancillary to integral part of the film production with the development of that process into what Janet Staiger calls the “central producer system of production,” under which jobs were separated and standardized and factory-like studios were designed and built according to principles of scientific management.⁵ Here, the central producer served as manager, using the script as the blueprint for each film made and distributing resources to each project, which could then be systematically carried out by production workers. In this system, central producers ran studios and their productions with paper rather than with verbal instructions from a director. And this paperwork, or clerical output, was created and distributed by a pre-

4. Lizzie Francke's *Script Girls: Women Screenwriters in Hollywood* is particularly descriptive of the different ways in which people, and women in particular, came to work on early silent films, often relying on first-hand accounts such as writer Beulah Marie Dix's description of her early experiences at Famous Players-Lasky as “all very informal, in those early days. There were no unions. Anybody on the set did anything he or she was called upon to do. I've walked on as an extra, I've tended lights (I've never shifted scenery) and anybody not doing anything else wrote down the director's notes on the script.” Francke, Lizzie. *Script Girls: Women Screenwriters in Hollywood*. London: BFI, 1994. P 6.

5. Bordwell, David, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. P 93.

dominantly female clerical labor force that, as studios were built, became an important part of studio life.

This shift is evident not only in the studio layouts published in fan magazines throughout the 1910s⁶ but also from discussions in these magazines, which were oftentimes written by filmmakers themselves. A 1913 report in *Moving Picture World* on the application of principles of scientific management to the Lubin Western Branch in Los Angeles details the creation of an editorial department where “scripts are prepared for the directors in such shape that they can be produced as written,” as well as the new practice of carefully kept cost data “segregated for each picture, so that it is possible at any time to ascertain what the certain pictures are costing”.⁷ Similarly, in 1915, E.D. Horkheimer of the Balboa Company wrote in the same publication about his methods of efficient studio management, which included keeping snapshot records of locations, stills of every set built, a card index of props and sets dressings, and detailed

6. For example, one such article about the new Lasky Studio, depicts not only the designation of various studio buildings for different kinds of film work, but also the grouping together of departments with similar functions, such as set and property rooms, as well as various executive, administration, writers' and directors' office buildings, which all sit in the same corner of the lot. “A Bird's Eye View of the Lasky Studio at Hollywood, California” *Photoplay* 13:16, May 1918. P. 30-31.

7. “Studio Efficiency. Scientific Management as Applied to the Lubin Western Branch by Wilber Melville.” *The Moving Picture World*. 17:6. August 9, 1913. P 624.

Common to these descriptions of efficient studio management is the premium that is put on organization through record keeping in scripts databases and tabulations. Clearly then, increased numbers of clerical personnel were needed to keep these records. Based on job advertisements and discourse around clerical workers who were being hired at studios in the 1910s, as well as the larger trend of the rise of the female clerical worker in American businesses in general, it can be reasonably assumed that a large number were women.

tabulations of weather reports.⁸ And the most famous early adopter, Thomas Ince—who had perfected the use of a shooting or continuity script in the early 1910s and written about it in *Moving Picture World*—had by 1916 built a half-million dollar studio complete with lit stages as well as “an administration building for the executive and scenario departments, property, carpenter, plumbing and costume rooms, a restaurant, a commissary, 300 dressing rooms, a hothouse, a natatorium—and 1000 employees and a studio structure which was essentially that associated with the big studio period of later years.”⁹ Common to these descriptions of efficient studio management is the premium that is put on organization through record keeping in scripts databases and tabulations. Clearly then, increased numbers of clerical personnel were needed to keep these records.¹⁰ Based on job advertisements and discourse around clerical workers who were being hired at studios in the 1910s, as well as the larger trend of the rise

8. Horkheimer, E.D. “Studio Management.” *The Moving Picture World*. October 30a, 1915. P 982.

9. Staiger, Janet. “Dividing the Labor for Production Control: Thomas Ince and the Rise of the Studio System.” *Cinema Journal*. Volume 18: Number 2, 1979. P16.

10. Indeed, several articles in fan magazines on shifts in personnel discuss the hiring of clerical workers. In the case of the Edison studios in New Jersey, which underwent reorganization for efficiency in 1915, clerical staff were transferred from the Edison business headquarters to the Edison studio where, “New offices are being built in where formerly stood dressing rooms, the idea being to centralize each department’s work for greater efficiency.” “Changes at Edison Studio.” *The Moving Picture World*. October 30, 1915.

of the female clerical worker in American businesses in general, it can be reasonably assumed that a large number were women.

Much like the tabulation of weather reports and the indexing of props mentioned in articles evangelizing studio efficiency, actors became a resource to be indexed and tracked. It was at this time in the mid 1910s that casting increasingly became a process of classifying actors by type or, as Mary Pickford put it, “divid[ing] humanity in sections—young men, old men, comedians, tragedians,” for ease in distributing them to various productions.¹¹ These classifications were assigned, recorded, and cross-indexed by early casting workers—essentially locking actors into a specific type. In this way, early studio talent and casting departments resembled stock companies, filling out supporting roles once leads had been selected. The contract system developed as a means to lock these assets into place so that their availability would be assured, thus eliminating some of what Horkheimer described in his studio efficiency article as the “wastage” that is inevitable “wherever the human element is important” in production.¹² Other film production jobs created through the process of standardization

11. Staiger, Janet. In Bordwell, David, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. P 140.

12. Horkheimer, E.D. “Studio Management.” *The Moving Picture World*. October 30a, 1915. P 982.

Other film production jobs created through the process of standardization and separation of tasks that took place largely on paper, as casting did, were gendered female. For example, the crew position of continuity clerk (today's script supervisor) seems to have become a woman's job when all clerical duties on set, such as keeping notes on each take for use in editing and to maintain continuity from shot to shot, were separated from the work of the assistant director, cameraman, and whoever else had been doing it in earlier systems of production.

and separation of tasks that took place largely on paper, as casting did, were gendered female. For example, the crew position of continuity clerk (today's script supervisor) seems to have become a woman's job when all clerical duties on set, such as keeping notes on each take for use in editing and to maintain continuity from shot to shot, were separated from the work of the assistant director, cameraman, and whoever else had been doing it in earlier systems of production. Since male crewmembers were less interested in position that was purely clerical, the job fell to "script girls," as they became known. But unlike script supervision, or the secretarial and stenography departments that were being created at studios in the 1910s and 20s, casting was largely male-dominated, with only the clerical aspects of the work carried out by women.

In trying to explain this difference between casting—which took place on paper but was not female-dominated—and something like script supervision, I was eventually led to studio hierarchy. While casting today is something that happens prior to a film's production, it is still closer in terms of its status and place in the process to a below-the-line production jobs such as production design and casting workers. Other than studio casting executives who supervise all studio projects, casting directors tend to identify more as production workers than as managers, whereas a development or

production executive would identify as a manager.¹³ Studio-era casting, on the other hand, was very much a management position and was treated as such in the workflow. For example, according to a 1934 hierarchy at RKO, casting was separated from production and instead grouped with contracts and the stock company, much closer to the studio's legal and executive branches.¹⁴ This makes sense in light of how much of casting at this time was about simple acquisition and management of assets. It also makes sense when considered in relation to the branches that were closest to it—publicity and advertising, as well as the above-the-line creative departments (producers, writers, directors, and story). These branches were largely devoted to management of assets and worked closely with the front office to plan which scripts would be made, who would make them, who would be in them, and how they would be sold to the public. Similarly, studio casting directors were managers who planned with directors of various films going into production, handed out assignments, negotiated contracts, and made loans of talent based on the needs of produc-

13. This was evident during my years in film/TV production and development, and later verified during a series of interviews with contemporary casting directors in 2004. For more see "Women's Work: Femininity in Film and Television Casting." Presented at Console-ing Passions Conference, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, May 25-28, 2006.

14. "RKO Studio Organization Chart from 1934," printed in Jewell, Richard B. *The Golden Age of Cinema: Hollywood 1929-1945*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

Though casting wasn't feminized at this time, there was another department nearby that was headed almost exclusively by women: the talent department. It was here that actors were signed, often after having been "discovered" by one of the department's scouts, brought in for a screen test, and, if approved by the managerial casting directors and executives, nurtured personally and professionally by drama coaches and other studio caretakers

tion and the inventory of character actor "types" and star "personalities" available, taking into account their marketing and publicity potential at the time. Thus, while paper maintenance departments (such as accounting, stenography, scripts, and reading, which were more strictly typing and record-keeping) were located elsewhere in the hierarchy and carried out almost exclusively by women, the more managerial departments were often housed in offices near to one another and were headed up by male executives supported by what seems to have been a largely female clerical staff.

Though casting wasn't feminized at this time, there was another department nearby that was headed almost exclusively by women: the talent department. It was here that actors were signed, often after having been "discovered" by one of the department's scouts, brought in for a screen test, and, if approved by the managerial casting directors and executives, nurtured personally and professionally by drama coaches and other studio caretakers.¹⁵ Workers in this department made daily use of the skills and duties that today's casting directors claim are expected of them such as using "feminine intuition" in finding stars, fostering actors in and out of audi-

15. Extremely helpful in explaining the differences between casting and talent departments is Ronald Davies's *The Glamour Factory*, which discusses not only the nurturing and caretaking roles of talent workers, but also names many of the specific female drama coaches who headed these departments over the years. Davies, Ronald M. *The Glamour Factory: Inside Hollywood's Big Studio System*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press. P 79-95.

tions, and mitigating the emotional content of messages during the casting process as actors pass or are passed on for projects. Regular duties included emotional labor such as nurturing and caretaking of actors, the "women's work" of teaching, and, sometimes, combining these two in terms of excess of emotions needed to teach acting in specific. These sorts of skills were also used in another film profession that while not dominated by women, was certainly a job where women could more easily reach positions of power—that of the talent agent, since agents during the era of the long-term contract acted with studios as co-managers of actor's lives. Based on this evidence, it is my contention that contemporary casting is not simply a descendent of studio casting, but a mixture of aspects of the work of casting directors, talent scouts and coaches, and agents.

In the film industry's post-studio downturn of the 1950s and 60s, procuring and managing assets was no longer a cost-efficient business model. Gradually, the contract system ended, many studio properties were sold off, and actors became free agents, which meant that there was no need for talent and casting departments on studio lots, at least, not on the scale they had been. There were casting directors on staff and talent departments in operation at studios throughout the 1950s and 60s but their process was clearly changing to adjust to the develop-

Using this research, I will argue that it was when casting moved off-site and transformed into a freelance position that its status changed from executive/managerial to that of below-the-line crew and when women came to the profession in greater numbers and with greater prospects as men exited.

ing free agent system. Eventually, the studio-era formulations of casting and talent departments largely disappeared from studios and networks which now have casting executives to supervise the casting of some of the films or television programs made under their banner, but which mainly hire freelance casting directors to cast their films and shows.

Using this research, I will argue that it was when casting moved off-site and transformed into a freelance position that its status changed from executive/managerial to that of below-the-line crew and when women came to the profession in greater numbers and with greater prospects than men exited. I base this contention on the fact that this later incarnation of casting is a) more clerical, involving more list making, meeting scheduling, and availability checking because actors are no longer stable, contracted, manageable assets, b) more feminized, incorporating the nurturing and caretaking duties that previously fell to agents and talent department workers, and c) less rewarding in terms of pay and creative credit because contemporary casting directors are compensated well, but not as well as many other below-the-line crew, let alone above-the-liners or executives. Women seem to have adapted quickly to the requirements of this new form of casting and, by the 1970s, it was already clear that casting was on its way to its contemporary feminized state be-

cause when studios and networks begin gender integration of their executive ranks in order to head off public pressure for equal rights, the position they commonly chose to integrate first was casting.¹⁶ These new, female casting directors subsequently carved out more creative territory for themselves, I argue, not by working around their gender, but rather, by working through it, supporting, nurturing, and catering to individual above-the-line creative entities in a way that rendered it nonthreatening while bonding them closely to the creative process.

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16. In *Women Who Run The Show*, which details the rise of women to power positions in Hollywood following the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972, Ethel Winant describes the public relations concerns that she imagines led to her promotion to vice-president at CBS, saying "I don't think [CBS] paid much attention to women before or after I was a vice president[...] at the top levels of the network the corporate people probably said, 'What are we doing about women?'" Winant's new title as vice president of casting and talent was announced at an affiliate's meeting, but an increase in salary wasn't offered until Winant brought up that she hadn't even been asked if she wanted the job. Gregory, Mollie. *Women Who Run the Show: How a Brilliant and Creative New Generation of Women Stormed Hollywood*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002. P 11.