

Seeing plenty: women on film

Sight & Sound must recognise the wealth of women making and commenting on movies, write two correspondents. Plus our response.

See also our original editorial [The Equalizers](#), and the [resulting letter](#) signed by 75 filmmakers, academics, critics, curators, programmers and editors espousing the sentiments of this article.

[Sophie Mayer](#) , [Ania Ostrowska](#) , Sight & Sound Editors
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Web exclusive



Pussy Riot – A Punk Prayer (2012)

The November 2014 editorial [The Equalizers](#) was very welcome in its forthright recognition of Sight & Sound's role in women's under-representation in the film industry and film criticism. The magazine needs to go further, however, than a modest invitation, as testified by [our open letter](#) which collected 75 international signatories from across feminist filmmaking, criticism and curation. It is time for Sight & Sound to pay attention, regularly and assiduously, to the rich, diverse, exciting and present moment of feminist cinema and moving-image media in the UK and beyond.

Sight & Sound remains the most important UK journal of filmmaking, one recognised worldwide for its continuing ability to define and advocate for independent and emerging cinemas, not least for its support of and by such definitional writers as [Amy Taubin](#) and [B. Ruby Rich](#). If it wants to remain on top of the game in documenting a rapidly-transforming cinematic landscape, it needs to take pride in this history, and to inform itself about, attend to and welcome those of us who already exist and are hard at work in the present.



Women Without Men (2009)

British film journals, and the BFI, have a powerful record of supporting feminist film criticism and counter-cinema from its inception. 2015 marks the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Laura Mulvey's essay [Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema](#) in *Screen*, which will be marked by the publication of [Feminisms: The Key Debates](#), edited by Mulvey and Anna Backman Rogers, Patricia White's [Women's Cinema](#), [World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms](#) and Sophie Mayer's [Political Animals: New Feminist Cinema](#), all of which

draw attention to the active, vibrant and interconnected cultures of feminist filmmaking and film criticism currently active globally.

Online journals such as [cléo](#), [agnès films](#) and [The F-Word](#) are fostering a new generation of astute and attuned feminist film critics, writing passionately about the rise of a global feminist cinema exemplified by films such as *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Ana Lily Amirpour) and *Dukhtar* (Afia Nathaniel). Both screened at this year's London Film Festival as part of [a record-breaking line-up of films directed by women](#): 53 out of 248. That makes 20 per cent, which reaches parity with recent international statistics for women working in independent cinema.



Girlhood (Bandes de filles, 2014)

The international success of emerging British directors such as [Andrea Arnold](#), [Amma Asante](#), [Clio Barnard](#), [Tina Gharavi](#) and [Carol Morley](#) is demonstrating that a national cinema can have a female face, and one that is also ethnically and class diverse. That there is an audience for their work is manifest in the thriving community of feminist film festivals: London alone boasts [Bird's Eye View](#), the [London Feminist Film Festival](#) and [Underwire](#), as well as queer festivals [Fringe!](#) and [Wotever DIY Film Festival](#), and curators such as [Club des Femmes](#), [I Am Dora](#), [This Woman's Work](#) and [A Nos Amours](#), screening both new films and retrospectives.

It is crucial to believe in plenty and reject the perception of scarcity reinforced by (often unconscious) curatorial, editorial, critical and pedagogical choices. The [Directed by Women](#) campaign lists nearly 6,000 active international female filmmakers on IMDb. Plenty is also a reality for film critics, with an active new generation blogging and writing online, often for free.



Wadjda (2012)

An invitation is not enough: Sight & Sound has a role to play in helping these writers establish themselves and to change film culture. Martha Lauzen's study [Gender @ The Movies](#) shows that female film critics remain poorly represented in the US (around one in five), which matters because her figures also show that a far higher percentage of reviews by male critics focus on films written and/or directed by men, disproportionate to release ratios, perpetuating inequity. This is reflected in the S&S editorial, which makes reference only to films by male directors. Geena Davis's [Two Easy Steps to Make Hollywood Less Sexist](#) also apply to magazines. This involves a) not presuming that a male filmmaker or male-helmed film or film with a male protagonist or male critic is neutral, default or representative, and b) not presuming on a 'female gaze', nor that a female filmmaker, female-helmed film or film with a female protagonist or female critic is of niche interest only.

Powerful organisations where there is systemic inequality have the responsibility to research and reach out, on the one hand, actively soliciting and commissioning new contributors; and, on the other, to create change within the structure so that it is welcoming to diverse participants. In the [November 2014 issue](#), all three Film of the Month reviews are written by men, about films by men; all five book reviews are by white men, about books by white men. Only one female filmmaker has merited a solo cover in the magazine's history. This creates a 'chilly climate' that dissuades female critics and readers from the magazine.



The Falling (2014)

By consistently privileging the dominant masculine voices, histories and modes of writing, Sight & Sound is missing out. Some of the most exciting, dynamic, diverse and forward-thinking aspects of contemporary film and moving image culture is taking place in feminist filmmaking and criticism. Those of us involved this work can help Sight & Sound celebrate and participate in its plenitude, but only if the magazine is willing to change.

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Correction (3 December 2014): This article originally asserted “No female filmmaker has merited a solo cover in the magazine’s history.” In fact Sophia Coppola starred on the cover of the January 2011 issue. The sentence has now been amended.

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Sight & Sound’s reply

S&S welcomes this rejoinder to continue to raise our representation of women’s voices in cinema, an endeavour which includes the need to investigate and improve our own editorial policies and procedures. Our [November 2014 editorial](#) was not the first expression of our awareness that we suffer from a deficit of female subjectivity in our pages, and we conduct continual internal discussions about our choice of covers, feature subjects and writers. As a public-service publisher we recognise we have a duty to represent the realities of the world and all sections of society, starting with the most populous; as a commercial vendor we also want to increase the numbers of women

who read our magazine and website from what we currently estimate to be about one in four. Clearly we have further to go and need to make our efforts more forceful, visible and fruitful – and we welcome being publicly held to account.

We are a niche publishing operation working on tight resources in a challenging market, but will not hide behind these pressures and will make time in 2015 for more research and outreach to improve our practices. We will also seek out and champion the best new movies that propound female experiences, and will seek to ensure that we do not propound an overly male-slanted canon of historical cinema. In turn we reiterate our call for more good female writers to work with us.

— *Nick James, Kieron Corless, James Bell, Isabel Stevens, Nick Bradshaw*
Sight & Sound editors