



Taking matters into her own hands, Chicago film critic Jan Lisa Huttner started WITASWAN in 2002. Jan writes about it here.

WITASWAN: Mobilizing Grassroots Support for Women Filmmakers

What is WITASWAN?



The acronym WITASWAN (“wit-uh-swan”) stands for “Women in the Audience Supporting Women Artists Now.” Drawing on knowledge I’ve gained from over three dozen previous presentations on this topic, let me begin by explaining what WITASWAN is not. WITASWAN is **not** an “organization.” No one pays dues to WITASWAN or serves on the board of WITASWAN; WITASWAN has no standing committees and no fund raising appeals.

WITASWAN is a movement, a cause, an idea, a concept; I personally define WITASWAN as a totally grassroots, internet-based “initiative.” As the creative force behind the WITASWAN initiative, my goal is to help women make more deliberate decisions when they go out to see movies in theatres, and when they rent &/or purchase movies on DVD. I want women to ask themselves what they’re selecting and why. My conviction is that once women begin to see themselves as intelligent movie consumers, then they will start selecting more films by women filmmakers and market pressure will erode current “Celluloid Ceiling” statistics that are really, really dismal.

Every time women purchase theatre tickets &/or acquire DVDs, their actions have enormous economic consequences. The revenue generated (or not generated) by films directed by women affects future options for that director as well as all the women on her team (in front of the camera as well as behind it). Members of Women in Film know this because they’re mediamakers, but most women in the audience still don’t realize the impact of their decisions. How often have I been told: “There’s nothing good in theatres anymore.” Or worse: “I wanted to go, but my husband won’t see ‘chick flicks’.” This is the lose/lose mentality that WITASWAN is determined to combat.

I can remember when cars were only marketed to men, but now that women make purchasing decisions for themselves and their families, car manufacturers design new models that target the needs and preferences of women. I can remember when the only women in Congress were the widows of powerful congressmen, but now Nancy Pelosi

is the Speaker of the House, we have over a dozen female senators, and Hillary Clinton came very close to winning her party's presidential nomination. Every time women mobilize to create change, the world becomes a better place for our daughters and their daughters' daughters. Do I really believe this? Yes, I do!

Since WITASWAN is not an organization, it does not compete with other organizations. The explicit goal is collaboration: in Chicago, I've asked existing organizations to take this on as a cause, spreading the word to their members (as TRACTiOn is doing by posting this article). I'm also working in parallel with other women moved to action by the profound importance of Martha Lauzen's "Celluloid Ceiling" research; Tara Veneruso of The First Weekenders Group and blogger Melissa Silverstein, for example, are both doing great work that will inevitably result in the destruction of the "Celluloid Ceiling."

How did WITASWAN begin?

The seed that has become WITASWAN was planted on June 2, 2002. I opened my Sunday New York Times Arts & Leisure section and what did I see: an article called The Impatient Sisterhood by Dana Kennedy. This was the Sunday before the Friday release of The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood, and the question Kennedy had set herself was this: why had it taken Callie Khouri so long to helm a film after winning the Best Original Screenplay Oscar for Thelma & Louise in 1991?

"Are these women [including Khouri] suffering from discrimination? Many of them believe they are, but as is so often the case the truth is more complicated than that. Some women in Hollywood, like female politicians and corporate executives, choose to interrupt their careers to have children."

What?!? I went ballistic!!! I immediately wrote a letter to the editor of The New York Times:

"In your June 2 article describing the career frustrations of prominent women directors, author Dana Kennedy is very quick to offer the blame-the-victim explanation that they 'choose to interrupt their careers to have children.' Why not try looking closer to home? Who reviews films for The New York Times? Stephen Holden, Elvis Mitchell, and Tony Scott. Who reviews films for The New Yorker? David Denby and Anthony Lane. How many women are named as members of the New York Film Critics Circle website? Five out of 36, or 13.9%. When the National Society of Film Critics published its recent book The A List: 100 Essential Films, how many women contributed? Four out of 41, or 9.8%. I'm willing to bet that if more major publications hired women film critics, more films by women (which, surprise, surprise, are often films about women) would get the kind of critical buzz that leads to box office clout."

In her article, Kennedy had quoted Martha Lauzen, and this was the first time I'd heard about Lauzen and her annual "Celluloid Ceiling" research. So I spent the whole day on Google, looking up everything I could about Lauzen and getting more information. Then I sent Lauzen an e-mail message: "Your research is the most important thing I've read in years." She replied: "Thank you so much for valuing my work, and, yes indeed, it's been an uphill battle. Do not to be disappointed, because The New York Times will never publish your letter." But miracle of miracles, the Times did publish my letter (on June 30, 2002) and sometime later they hired Manola Dargis.

One day, after I'd been telling people about the "Celluloid Ceiling" for over four years (in lectures and presentations, online and in print), Martha Richards of the Fund for Women Artists called me and said: "Let's collaborate," and so we did. With energy and passion as our only resources and the internet as our primary tool, Richards and I declared our intention to celebrate the first International SWAN Day [aka "Support Women Artists Now" Day] on March 29, 2008 and voila! Women celebrated SWAN Day at over 160 events in eleven countries on four continents! Michael Bloomberg declared March 29, 2008 SWAN Day in New York City! Messages filled with hope flooded in from all around the world!

In Chicago, six local women's organizations (including WIF/Chicago) joined together to celebrate the first International SWAN Day (after three successful annual WITASWAN programs in '05, '06, and '07). We brought an incredibly talented young woman filmmaker in from Israel. The theatre was packed, we all had a great time, and now we're hoping to bring another woman filmmaker in from Mexico for our next International SWAN Day program on March 28, 2009.

When I interviewed Martha Lauzen in 2003, she said something that I always quote now in my grand finale.

In the words of Martha Lauzen:

"If we change media messages, we change the world."

LINKS:

2003 chat with Martha Lauzen

http://www.films42.com/chats/chats_lauzen.asp

Women's eNews Article on the 2004 Oscars

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm?aid=1698>

WITASWAN: How we got our name

http://www.films42.com/witaswan.asp#_born



Lifelong movie buff Jan Lisa Huttner is the managing editor of FILMS FOR TWO: The Online Guide for Busy Couples (a website devoted to promoting films of interest to both male & female audience members). She writes monthly columns for Chicago's JUF News, as well as freelance articles for numerous print publications & websites. Her article on the 2004 Oscars for Women's eNews received the award for "Best News Writing – Web" from the National Federation of Press Women in September, 2005.

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