

Simonton Self-Nomination for the Distinguished Scientific Contribution to Media Psychology



Dean Keith Simonton has made significant contributions to our scientific understanding of one of the most universally popular media in modern times—the feature motion picture. Yet although he has been publishing since 1975, it was not until about a quarter century later that his research program specifically turned toward film. Even so, in retrospect this research shift was a straightforward outgrowth of his earliest work on other forms of creative and artistic expression. In the late 1970s, he began a long series of studies devoted to classical music, and then in the early 1980s he became fascinated with classic drama, with a special focus on the plays attributed to William Shakespeare. These two lines of inquiry converged in the 1990s with some investigations devoted to opera, an art form involving both music and drama (including operas based on Shakespeare’s plays). Going from opera to cinema was a very small step because both represent highly ambitious (and rather expensive) media for creative and artistic communication. Furthermore, many creative talents in cinema have immediate roots in drama, opera, or classical music. Playwrights have become screenwriters, and classical composers have written film music. Tom Stoppard first wrote for theater before doing screenplays, and Eric Korngold created operas in before composing for Hollywood movies. Hence, in the first year of the 21st century, Simonton began constructing a huge database containing extensive information regarding thousands great and not-so-great films in history.

Simonton could not have picked a more auspicious time to launch his data collection. His previous research had relied heavily on paper archival sources, such as encyclopedias and biographical dictionaries. Yet reliance of such information had become obsolete in the case of cinema. The popularity of the medium, coupled with the explosive growth of the internet, inspired the proliferation of websites created by or for film aficionados. For example, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences already had up and running a searchable database of all Oscar nominees and awardees in all of the key categories of cinematic achievement starting with the first awards in 1928. Accordingly, most of the raw data could be downloaded directly off the internet. These data became the basis for his first publication on “Collaborative Aesthetics in the Feature Film: Predicting the Differential Impact of 2,323 Oscar-nominated Movies” (Simonton, 2002a).¹ Using two criteria of cinematic success—best picture honors and movie guide ratings—and a large number of potential predictors (including recognition for best direction, male and female leads, male and female supporting roles, screenplay, art direction, costume design, makeup, cinematography, film editing, score, song, visual effects, sound effects editing, and sound), he found that cinematic impact was indeed highly predictable.

Thus encouraged, Simonton collected still more data to get a more comprehensive treatment of the phenomenon. This effort bore fruit in three papers published in 2004. The first dealt specifically with film awards, directly comparing the well-known Oscars in various achievement

¹All citations use Simonton’s curriculum vitae as the reference list. This allows the contributions to be distinguished from the many other publications appearing in the same year.

categories with the rival honors bestowed by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association (“Golden Globes”), British Academy of Film and Television Arts (“BAFTAs”), New York Film Critics Circle, National Board of Review, National Society of Film Critics, and Los Angeles Film Critics Association (all for 1,132 films released between 1975 and 2002; Simonton, 2004i). Not only did the seven organizations exhibit a high degree of consensus, but also the Oscars most often provided the single best indicator of that overall agreement. The second investigation took advantage of this finding to conduct an inquiry into whether awards and nods in the several categories tend to cluster into specific factors and, if they did so, which achievement clusters provided the best predictors of cinematic impact, again as gauged by both best picture honors and movie guide ratings (Simonton, 2004j). The 16 major honors indeed clustered into dramatic, visual, technical, and musical factors. Moreover, the dramatic cluster was by far the most influential of the four, not only explaining more variance as a predictor but also serving as a moderator variable for the other three. The third and last article in this year focused on an enigma that was brought to light in the previous investigations: The tendency for women receiving best actor recognition to have their achievements “ghettoized” in films less likely to receive best picture honors (Simonton, 2004b). This “Meryl Streep Effect” proved to be quite pervasive, applying to awards beyond the Oscars (such as the BAFTAs and Golden Globes), and to movie guide ratings as well. As far as concerns great pictures, a woman’s stellar performance in a leading role has lesser status than a man’s stellar performance in a supporting role. Worse yet, the data show no tendency for this differential treatment to diminish over time.

Although the foregoing empirical studies used large samples of films (typically more than a thousand) and applied advanced statistical methods (especially multiple regression and factor analyses), they all suffered from one liability: All inquires focused on film as art rather than film as entertainment. In this respect, Simonton was simply following in the footsteps of other psychologists, including the pioneering studies of Hugo Münsterberg in his 1916 *The Photoplay* and Rudolf Arnheim in his 1957 *Film as Art*. Nonetheless, cultural economists have amply demonstrated that filmmaking is also big (even if risky) business. In addition, as the 1997 *Titanic* shows, “blockbusters” in the box office need not be critically acclaimed as sublime works of art. Consequently, Simonton decided to introduce financial information into his growing database. The first investigations to incorporate these data were published the following year. One study was a preliminary investigation of whether big production budgets make great films (Simonton, 2005c). Although big-budget films did tend to do well in the box office, they were not necessarily likely to receive best picture awards, and they were much less likely to receive positive reviews by film critics. Nevertheless, such expenditures did seem to “buy respect” in the visual, technical, and musical categories. Obviously, the art and entertainment goals must be carefully separated. This conclusion was reinforced by a second study that concentrated on the screenplay characteristics associated with the two kinds of film (Simonton, 2005g). The two types could be clearly distinguished according to the place of sequels, adaptations (e.g., from plays), writer-directors (or “Auteurs”), genre (viz., dramas), and the ratings assigned by the Motion Picture Association of American (especially Restricted). Put briefly, artistic cinematic products tend to be non-sequel R-rated dramas directed by the screenwriters, who most likely adapted the script from an earlier play. These results were also presented in an invited address at the 2005 APA convention and later summarized in a book chapter that appeared the following year (Simonton, 2006c).

Given this enlarged database, Simonton decided to investigate more specific questions regarding cinematic success, whether gauged by critical acclaim, movie awards, or box office performance. For example, in line with his earlier interests in classical music and opera, he conducted two studies on the impact of music, including both score and song. One investigation found that great films contained great scores but not great songs (Simonton, 2007k) while the other showed that the careers of great cinema composers closely matched the trajectories that had been earlier established for classical composers (Simonton, 2007d). In a sense, cinema composers are the new classical composers. Thus, the frequent performance of film music on classical music stations is not totally out of place.

Up to this time, Simonton's research has concentrated on great films, so he felt the need to enlarge his database to encompass really bad films: the movies that are “dishonored” each year by the Golden Raspberries or “Razzies” the night before the Oscar gala. The resulting paper was titled “Is Bad Art the Opposite of Good Art? Positive versus Negative Cinematic Assessments of 877 Feature Films” (Simonton, 2007n). Terrible movies were in fact found to be largely the mirror image of films receiving Oscar recognition, with bad dramatic qualities—direction, acting, and writing—basically sinking the ship. In yet another paper, Simonton expanded his sample further to include mediocre films, that is, those that were widely distributed but received average critic ratings and box office, developing a complex recursive model that specifies how all of the various factors contribute to different criteria of cinematic success (Simonton, 2009d). Again, he showed that art and entertainment displayed contrary paths to impact. He also conducted an inquiry into the consistency and temporal stability of film critic evaluations, with special attention to “sleepers” and “faders” (Simonton, 2009f). Why do some films take time to earn acclaim while others lose luster after the end of their theatrical run?

By now, Simonton was becoming well known for his empirical research. This increasing recognition had five major consequences.

1. He became a film critic himself, writing reviews for APA's *PsycCRITIQUES* (Simonton, 2006b, 2007j, 2008h, 2008j, 2009s, in press-l), including two reviews devoted to films emerging out of the Romanian New Wave (Simonton & Damian, 2010, 2011b). Naturally, his critiques are often closely informed by his science, giving them a distinctive perspective.
2. As an expert on cinematic creativity and aesthetics, he was asked to contribute review articles to for different venues, including the *International Handbook of Giftedness* (Simonton, 2009c), the journal *Psychology and Marketing* (2009e), and the *Encyclopedia of Creativity* (Simonton, 2011i). In a similar vein, he was invited to present two talks on the “state of the art” for the 2009 European Science Days held in Steyr, Austria. The latter was also a sign that his cinematic work was becoming well known to researchers in cultural economics.
3. His film expertise was also required by various journal editors, book publishers, and funding agencies to evaluate submitted manuscripts or proposals. For example, in 2011 he joined the Editorial Board for APA's new journal concerning the *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*. He is also asked to write endorsements or “blurbs” for books on

film, most recently for the 2012 *Psychocinematics: Exploring Cognition at the Movies* edited by Arthur Shimamura and the forthcoming second edition of *Positive Psychology at the Movies* written by Ryan M. Niemiec and Danny Wedding.

4. Given the popularity of the movies, it should come as no surprise that Simonton's research has attracted considerable media attention, including radio and television, magazines and newspapers, and various internet sites. The results receiving the most media coverage concern the Meryl Streep Effect, the impact of sex and violence on box office, and the mathematical prediction of the Oscar winners.
5. Most importantly, his visibility provided opportunities to work with younger colleagues and graduate students who shared his fascination with film. The first such collaboration involved the successful prediction of the Oscar winners using equations that provided the precise odds for each nominee in the major award categories (Pardoe & Simonton, 2008). This paper was published in the prestigious *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)*. Next Simonton worked with some data on the economic and critical impact of sexual and violent content, producing the fascinating findings reported in "Sex Doesn't Sell – Nor Impress: Content, Box Office, Critics, and Awards in Mainstream Cinema" (Cerridwen & Simonton, 2009). A few years after this second study was followed up by another that concentrated on sex and violence in family films, including animations (Simonton, Skidmore, & Kaufman, 2012). The change in genre makes a big difference: PG sex has different critical and economic repercussions than R or NC-17 sex. Most recently, Simonton collaborated on a study of the consumer ratings that provide the basis for the "Top-250" films posted on the Internet Movie Database, with special focus on age, gender, and nationality effects (Simonton, Graham, & Kaufman, 2012). Among other things, the data analyses underlined the quirky fact that #1 on that list is the 1994 *The Shawshank Redemption*!

Besides the already mentioned *Psychology and Marketing* and the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Simonton's cinema research has appeared in the *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, the *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, the *Journal of Creative Behavior*, the *Creativity Research Journal*, *Sex Roles*, and the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*—a total of nine different journals! Even so, Simonton recognized that the time had come to communicate what had been learned in book form. Books are more accessible to a larger audience than technical articles. The result was his *Great Flicks: Scientific Studies of Cinematic Creativity and Aesthetics*, which was published by Oxford University Press (Simonton, 2011). Besides getting advance endorsements from James C. Kaufman (founding co-editor, *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*), Ryan M. Niemiec (Education Director, VIA Institute on Character), Jonathan Plucker (Professor of Educational Psychology, Indiana University, Bloomington), and Victor Ginsburgh (European Center for Advanced Research in Economics and Statistics, Brussels, and Center for Operations Research and Econometrics, Louvain-la-Neuve), the book received a rave review in *PsycCRITIQUES*: "By the time we conclude the final chapter of *Great Flicks* we have learned 'lots' about great movies. We have been introduced to a significant set of predictors for greatness, whether measured in terms of awards, critical acclaim, or profits. And we have had an entertaining time doing so" (Shelley Carson, Harvard University).

Simonton did not stop here. *Great Flicks* needed a companion volume, namely, an edited book containing the latest scientific research on film. Therefore, he collaborated with James C. Kaufman to co-edit *The Social Science of Cinema*, which should be published by Oxford University Press later this year (Kaufman & Simonton, in press). The book contains two chapters contributed by Simonton, one on screenwriting (Simonton, in press-m) and another on the update of the Oscar predictions (Pardoe & Simonton, in press). Given the scope of the coverage, ranging from cognitive psychology to cultural economics, this edited volume promises to shape future scientific research on cinema for years to come.

This letter should close with a general statement about the nominee's standing as a scientific psychologist. Devoting his entire career to studying genius, creativity, leadership, talent, and aesthetics, Simonton has produced more than 450 publications, including over 150 refereed journal articles, over 100 book chapters, over three dozen encyclopedia entries, and a dozen books (with another edited volume currently in preparation). In addition, this research has had considerable impact on the research literature. For example, Google Scholar records more than 11,300 citations to his work. In fact, 180 publications have received at least 10 citations each, and his overall *h* index is 51 (i.e., 51 publications are cited 51 times or more).

In line with this impact, Simonton's research has earned him widespread recognition, such as the William James Book Award, the Rudolf Arnheim Award for Outstanding Achievement in Psychology and the Arts, the Sir Francis Galton Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Study of Creativity, the George A. Miller Outstanding Article Award, the Theoretical Innovation Prize in Personality and Social Psychology, the E. Paul Torrance and President's Awards from the National Association for Gifted Children, and three Awards for Excellence in Research from the Mensa Education and Research Foundation. Moreover, he is Fellow of six scientific organizations, such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the Association for Psychological Science, and is Fellow in one short of a dozen divisions of the American Psychological Association, including Division 46, the Society for Media Psychology and Technology. Finally, he has served as President of two divisions of APA—the Society for General Psychology (Div. 1) and the Society for the Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts (Div. 10)—as well as President of the International Association of Empirical Aesthetics.

Taken as a whole, Simonton's film research should make him a worthy candidate for the Division 46 Distinguished Scientific Contribution to Media Psychology. No psychologist since Münsterberg and Arnheim has done more to enhance our scientific understanding of the impact of movies on international popular culture. The fact that the data for these inquiries came almost entirely from the World Wide Web adds just another dimension to this nomination.