

Thumbs Down 2019: Film Critics and Gender, and Why It Matters

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First conducted in 2007, *Thumbs Down* is the most comprehensive and longest-running study of women’s representation and impact as film reviewers available. This report considers individuals working for print, broadcast, and online outlets during spring 2019. The study is sponsored by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University.

Key Findings

•**The majority of print, broadcast, and online film reviewers in the U.S. are male. There are approximately 2 male reviewers for every 1 female reviewer.** Men comprise 66% and women 34% of all film reviewers (see Figure 1). This represents an increase of 2 percentage points from 32% in 2018.

•**Men wrote 68% and women 32% of reviews** (see Figure 2). For women, this represents an increase of 3 percentage points from 29% in 2018.

•**Male writers outnumber female writers in every job title category.** For example, men comprise 71% and women 29% of *film critics*. Men account for 64% and women 36% of *freelancers*.

•**In every type of media outlet, male reviewers outnumber female reviewers.** For example, men account for 72% and women 28% of individuals writing for newspapers and wire services. Men comprise 78% and women 22% of reviewers writing for general interest magazines and websites.

•**Men comprise the majority of those writing reviews about films in every genre.** For example, men write 73% and women 27% of reviews about documentaries. Men write 72% and women 28% of reviews about action features.

Figure 1.
Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers

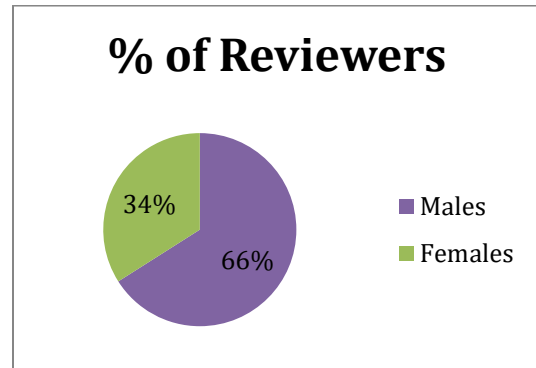
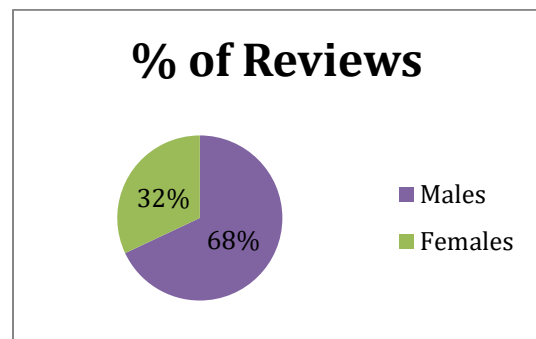


Figure 2.
Percentages of Reviews Written by Males and Females



•**A larger proportion of films reviewed by women than by men feature female protagonists.** 54% of the reviews written by women but 38% of the reviews written by men are about films featuring at least one female protagonist. Conversely, a higher proportion of the reviews written by men than by women are about films with male protagonists. 62% of the reviews written by men but 46% of those written by women are about films with male protagonists. It is not clear whether these differences are due to writer preferences or to editorial assignments.

•**On average, women reviewers award higher ratings than men to films with female protagonists.** Women writers award an average rating of 78% and males an average rating of 68% to films *with female protagonists*. Women writers award an average of 70% and men 77% to films *with male protagonists*.

•**A higher proportion of films reviewed by females than by males are directed by women.** 32% of the reviews written by women but 17% written by men have women directors. Conversely, 83% of the reviews written by men but 68% by women have male directors. It is not clear whether these differences are due to writer preferences or to editorial assignments.

•**When reviewing films directed by women, female critics are substantially more likely to mention the name of women directors in their reviews than male critics.** 31% of female reviewers but only 16% of male reviewers name female directors in their reviews. Conversely, male reviewers are more

likely than female reviewers to mention the name of male directors when reviewing films directed by men. 81% of male reviewers but only 66% of female reviewers name male directors in their reviews.

•**While female critics are almost equally likely to mention the filmographies of female and male directors in positive ways, male critics are more likely to mention the filmographies of male than female directors in positive ways.** In their reviews, 17% of female critics mention filmographies of female directors and 19% mention filmographies of male directors. However, 16% of male critics mention filmographies of female directors but 28% mention filmographies of male directors in positive ways.

This study considers more than 4,750 reviews written by over 380 individuals working for print, broadcast, and online outlets in spring 2019 and whose work is included on the Rotten Tomatoes (RT) website. Since the initial study in 2007, this study has considered over 21,000 reviews written by more than 1,300 reviewers. The reviewers were chosen using a systematic random sampling method. Only U.S.-based critics who wrote a minimum of three reviews during February, March, and April 2019 were included in the study. For a description of the criteria RT uses to select critics, go to https://www.rottentomatoes.com/help_desk/critics.

This report includes two major sections. The first section reports the findings on the *representation* of women among the population of film reviewers working for print, broadcast, and online outlets in

2019. Included in this section are the numbers of women and men writing reviews, their job titles, the type of media outlets they work for, and the film genres reviewed. This section also considers the *impact* of the gender imbalance, reporting on the relationship between the gender of film writers and the gender of protagonists; the relationship between the gender of writers and their quantitative assessment of films (i.e., assignment of stars, grades, etc.); and the relationship between the gender of writers and the mention and discussion of directors and their filmographies. The second section considers the representation of “top critics” on the Rotten Tomatoes website. This section also provides historical comparisons of the representation of women, comparing 2019 data, with figures obtained in 2018, 2016 and 2013.

Findings/All Reviewers

- The majority of print, broadcast, and online film reviewers in the U.S. are male. Male reviewers outnumber female reviewers by approximately 2 to 1. Men comprise 66% and women 34% of all film reviewers writing for print, broadcast, and online outlets (see Figure 1). This represents a slight increase in the representation of female critics from 32% in 2018 to 34% in 2019.

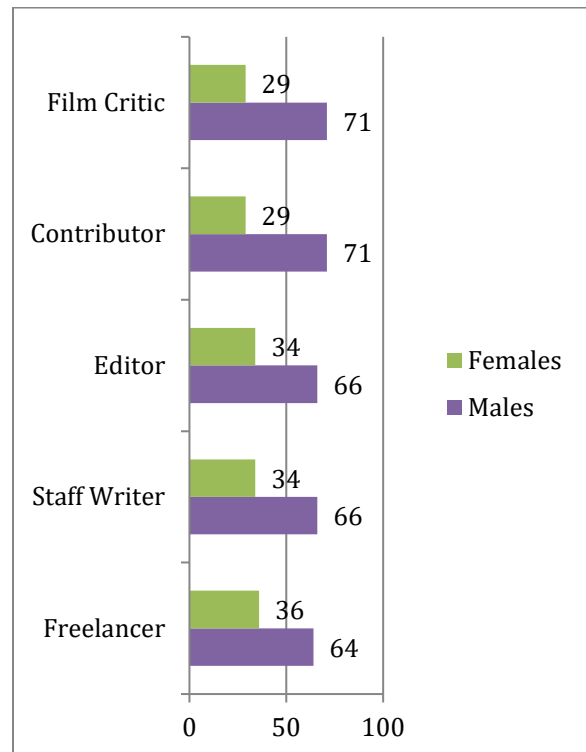
- Men wrote 68% and women 32% of all reviews (see Figure 2). This represents a slight increase of 3 percentage points from 29% in 2018.

- On average, men wrote 13 reviews and women wrote 12 reviews during the study period.

- Regarding race and ethnicity, 50% of writers are white males, 10% are minority males, and 6% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity. 23% of writers are white women, 6% are minority women, and 5% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity.

- Men outnumber women reviewers in every job category considered. Men comprise 71% of film critics, 71% of contributors, 66% of editors, 66% of staff writers, and 64% of freelancers. Women account for 36% of freelancers, 34% of staff writers, 34% of editors, 29% of contributors, and 29% of film critics (see Figure 3).

*Figure 3.
Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers by Job Title*



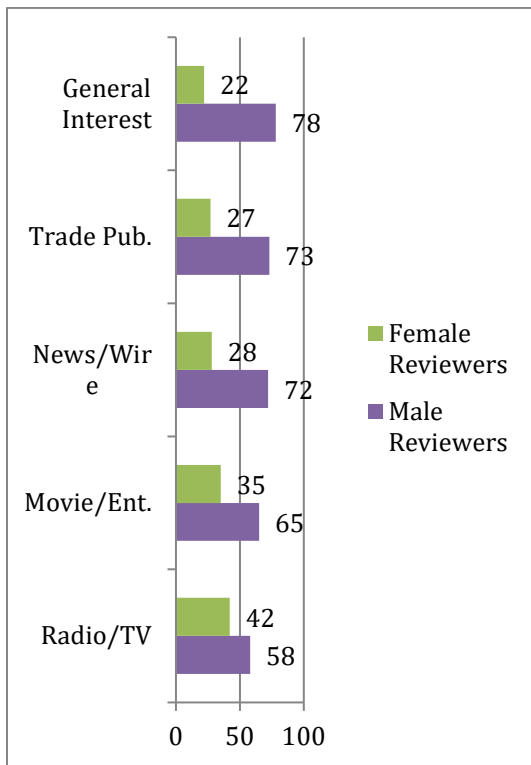
•Men outnumber women writers in every type of media outlet considered. Men account for 78% of those writing for general interest magazines and websites, 73% writing for trade publications, 72% writing for newspapers and wire services, 65% writing for movie/entertainment magazines and websites, and 58% writing for radio and television outlets.

Women comprise 42% of those writing for radio/TV, 35% writing for movie/entertainment magazines and websites, 28% writing for newspapers and wire services, 27% writing for trade publications, and 22% writing for general interest magazines and websites (see Figure 4).

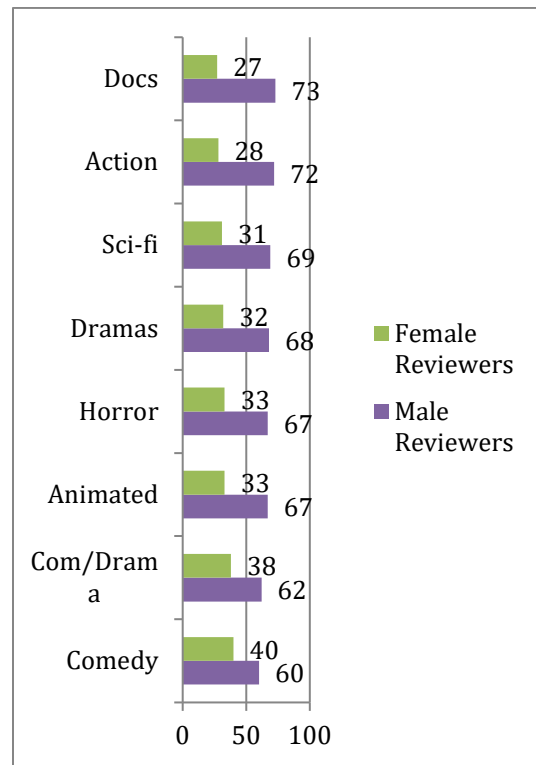
•Men wrote the majority of reviews about films in every genre. Men penned 73% of reviews about documentaries, 72% about action features, 69% about science fiction features, 68% about dramas, 67% about horror features, 67% about animated features, 62% about comedy/dramas, 60% about comedies.

In contrast, women wrote 40% of reviews about comedies, 38% about comedy/dramas, 33% about animated features, 33% about horror features, 32% about dramas, 31% about science fiction features, 28% about action features, and 27% about documentaries (see Figure 5).

*Figure 4.
Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers by Type of Media Outlet*



*Figure 5.
Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers by Genre*



- A larger proportion of films reviewed by women than by men feature female protagonists. For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told. 54% of the reviews written by women but 38% of the reviews written by men are about films featuring at least one female protagonist.

Conversely, a larger proportion of films reviewed by men than by women have male protagonists. 62% of the reviews written by men but 46% of those written by women are about films with male protagonists. It is not clear whether these differences are due to writer preferences or to editorial assignments.

- On average, women reviewers award higher quantitative ratings than men to films with female protagonists, whether they are expressed as stars, reels, grades, or some percentage score. When all of the various scoring systems used by writers are standardized into a percentage system, female writers award an average rating of 78% and males an average rating of 68% to films with at least one female protagonist. Women writers award an average of 70% and men 77% to films with male protagonists. (65% of reviewers provide quantitative scores for the films they review. Only these individuals are included in the analysis provided in this paragraph.)

- A higher proportion of films reviewed by females than by males are directed by women. 32% of the reviews written by women but 17% written by men have women directors. Conversely, 83% of the reviews written by men but 68% by women have male directors. It is not clear whether these differences are due

to writer preferences or to editorial assignments.

- When reviewing films directed by women, female critics are substantially more likely to mention the name of women directors in their reviews than male critics. 31% of female reviewers but only 16% of male reviewers name female directors in their reviews.

Conversely, male reviewers are more likely than female reviewers to mention the name of male directors when reviewing films directed by men. 81% of male reviewers but only 66% of female reviewers name male directors in their reviews.

- While female critics are almost equally likely to mention the filmographies of female and male directors in positive ways, male critics are more likely to mention the filmographies of male directors than female directors in positive ways. In their reviews, 17% of female critics mention filmographies of female directors and 19% of male critics mention filmographies of female directors but 28% of male critics mention filmographies of male directors in positive ways.

Findings/“Top Critics” Only

While the Rotten Tomatoes website no longer provides a description of the criteria necessary to elevate writers to “top critic” status, select individuals continue to retain that label. According to the criteria formerly listed on the website, a top critic “must be published at a print publication in the top 10% of circulation, employed as a film critic at a

national broadcast outlet for no less than five years, or employed as a film critic for an editorial-based website with over 1.5 million monthly unique visitors for a minimum of three years. A top critic may also be recognized as such based on their influence, reach, reputation, and/or quality of writing, as determined by Rotten Tomatoes staff.”

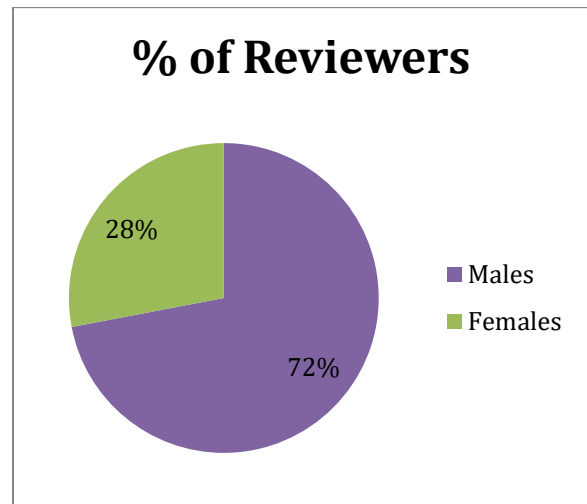
- In spring 2019, women comprised 28% and men 72% of “top critics.” The percentage of female “top critics” declined 6 percentage points from 34% in 2018 (see Figure 6).

- The percentage of female reviewers in the larger population of reviewers is higher (34%) than the percentage of female “top critics” (28%).

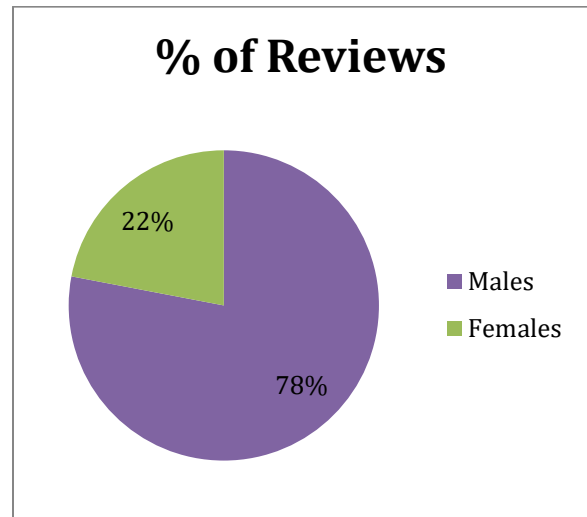
- Female “top critics” wrote an average of 13 reviews, while male “top critics” wrote an average of 18 reviews over the study period.

- Male “top critics” wrote 78% and females 22% of reviews (see Figure 7). In 2018, female “top critics” wrote 25% of reviews.

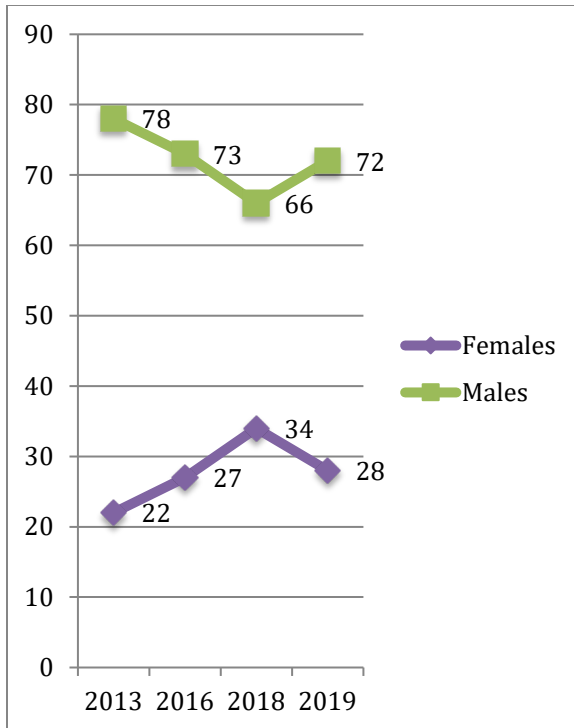
*Figure 6.
Percentages of Male and Female “Top Critics”*



*Figure 7.
Percentages of Reviews Written by Male and Female “Top Critics”*



*Figure 8.
Historical Comparison of Gender of
“Top Critics”*

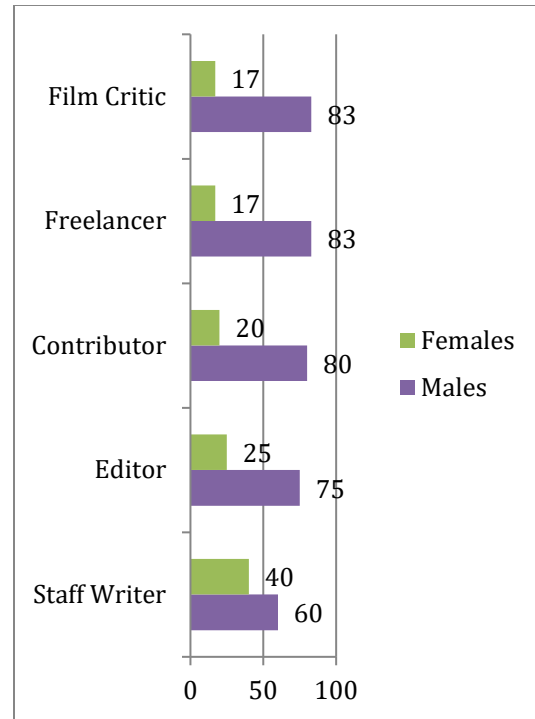


- Whereas the percentage of female “top critics” increased 12 percentage points from 2013 through 2018, they lost ground in 2019, retreating to slightly above the level achieved in 2016. Women accounted for 22% of “top critics” in 2013, 27% in 2016, 34% in 2018, and 28% in 2019 (see Figure 8).

- The vast majority of “top critics” are white. 78% of female “top critics” are white, 17% are minorities, and 5% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity. 85% of male “top critics” are white, 7% are minorities, and 8% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity.

- Men outnumber women in every job title category considered. Men comprise 83% of film critics, 83% of freelancers, 80% of contributors, 75% of editors, and 60% of staff writers.

*Figure 9.
Percentages of Male and Female “Top
Critics” by Title*



- Men outnumber women in every job title category considered. Men comprise 88% of those writing for general interest magazines and websites, 79% writing for newspapers and wire services, 73% writing for trade publications, 53% writing for movie/entertainment magazines and websites, and 50% writing for radio and television.

- In contrast, female writers account for 50% of those writing for radio and television, 47% writing for movie/entertainment magazines and

websites, 27% writing for trade publications, 21% writing for newspapers and wire services, and 12% writing for general interest magazines and websites (see Figure 10).

*Figure 10.
Percentages of Male and Female “Top Critics” by Type of Publication*

