

# ***Thumbs Down 2022: Film Critics and Gender, and Why It Matters***

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At various times in film history, pundits have proclaimed the death of cinema or the death of film criticism when industry business models morphed to accommodate changing market conditions. The last two years have been no exception. As theaters shuttered due to the pandemic, the health of the film industry, as well as the health of film criticism, were called into question. An article in the *New York Times* pondered whether we are facing “the death of cinema (again) or its glorious rebirth?”<sup>1</sup>

Film writers noted that the pandemic years may have impacted the fortunes of indie features most dramatically as they were pummeled by the one-two punch of shifting distribution models from art-house theaters to streaming services, and the disappearance of many local newspapers and their film critics that regularly sing the praises of smaller features. As film critic A.O. Scott noted last year, “The health of movies is connected to the health of journalism.”<sup>2</sup> He lamented, “the mass extinction of the local newspapers and alt-weeklies that nourished local film scenes across the country” may have prevented audiences from discovering independent features that have traditionally relied on these channels for visibility and acclaim.<sup>3</sup>

It is not unreasonable to wonder whether such changes have impacted film critics in traditionally underrepresented groups, such as women, particularly hard. This report examines how gender ratios of critics working in print, online, and radio/television outlets have shifted over the last two years, comparing data from the early months of 2022, with 2020, 2019, 2018, 2016, and 2013.

## ***Background***

First conducted in 2007, *Thumbs Down* considers women's representation and impact as film reviewers. The current report considers individuals working for print, radio/television, and online outlets during January through March, 2022.

This edition of the study examines more than 4,000 reviews written by 334 reviewers and whose work is included on the Rotten Tomatoes (RT) website. Over the years, *Thumbs Down* has considered more than 29,000 reviews written by over 1,900 reviewers. The reviewers were chosen using systematic random sampling. Only U.S.-based critics who wrote a minimum of three reviews during January, February, and March 2022 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](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/help_desk/critics).

This report includes two major sections. The first section reports the findings of the *representation* of women working as film reviewers for print, radio/television, and online outlets in 2022. Included in this section are the percentages of women and men providing reviews, the type of job positions they occupy, 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 reviewers and their quantitative assessment of films with female or male protagonists, as well as the relationship between the gender of reviewers and the gender of directors. The second section considers the representation of "top critics" on the Rotten Tomatoes website.

The report also provides historical comparisons of the representation of women, comparing 2022 data with figures obtained in 2020, 2019, 2018, 2016, and 2013.

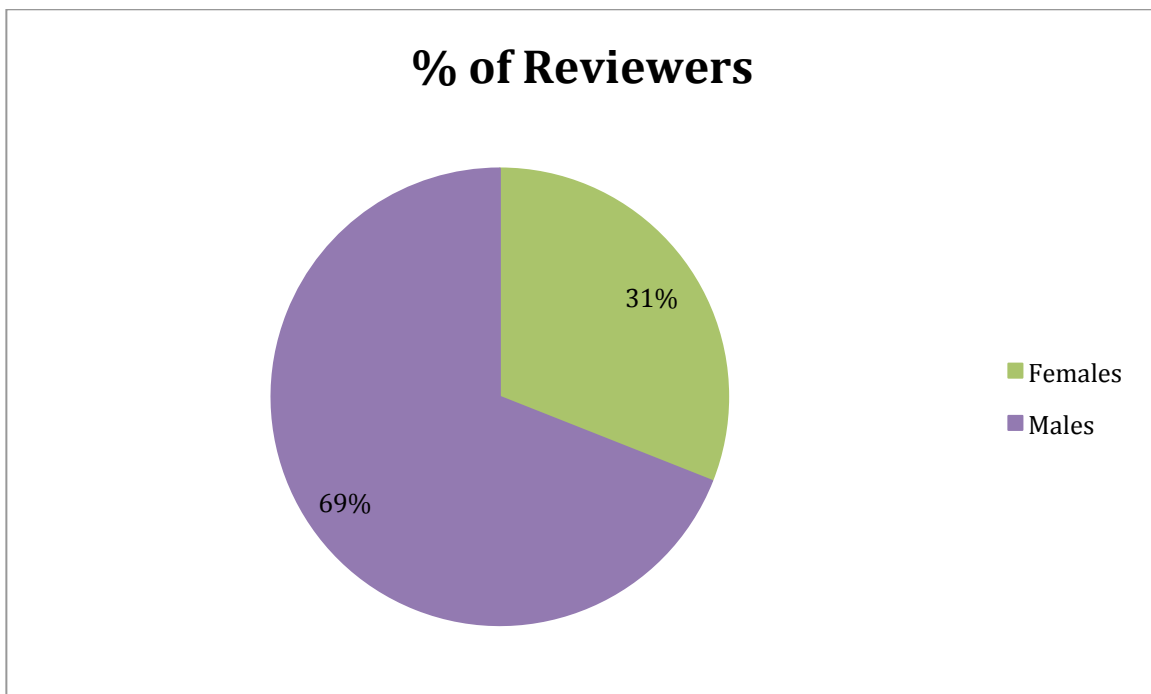
## ***Findings/All Reviewers***

### ***Representation***

The majority of print, radio/television, and online film reviewers in the U.S. are male (see Figure 1). In the early months of 2022, male reviewers outnumbered female reviewers by more than 2 to 1. Men comprised 69% (69.2%) and women 31% (30.5%) of reviewers. Nonbinary individuals accounted for 0.3% of reviewers.

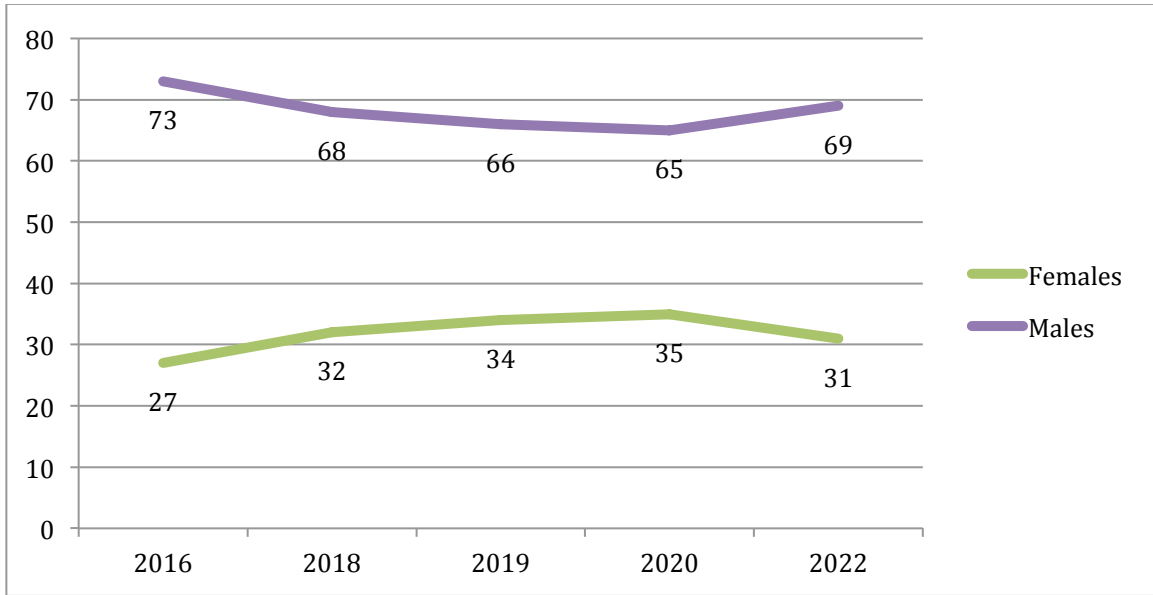
*Figure 1.*

*Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers*



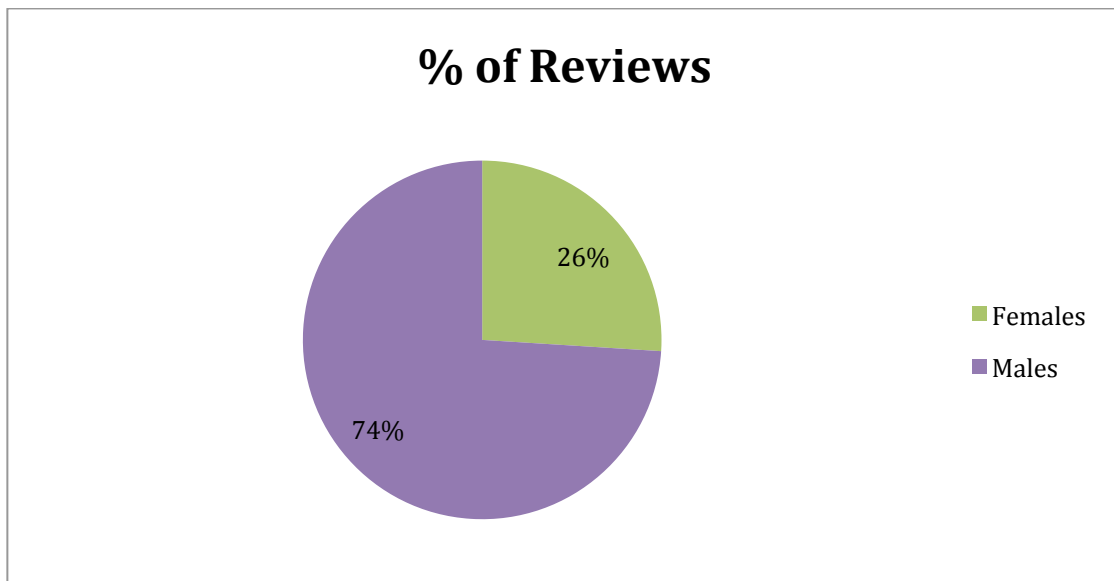
As illustrated in Figure 2, the percentage of female critics increased slightly but steadily from 2016 to 2020, but declined 4 percentage points from 35% in 2020 to 31% in 2022 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.  
 Historical Comparison of Percentages of Reviewer Gender



Men wrote 74% and women 26% of all reviews (see Figure 3). This represents a decline of 8 percentage points from 34% in 2020.

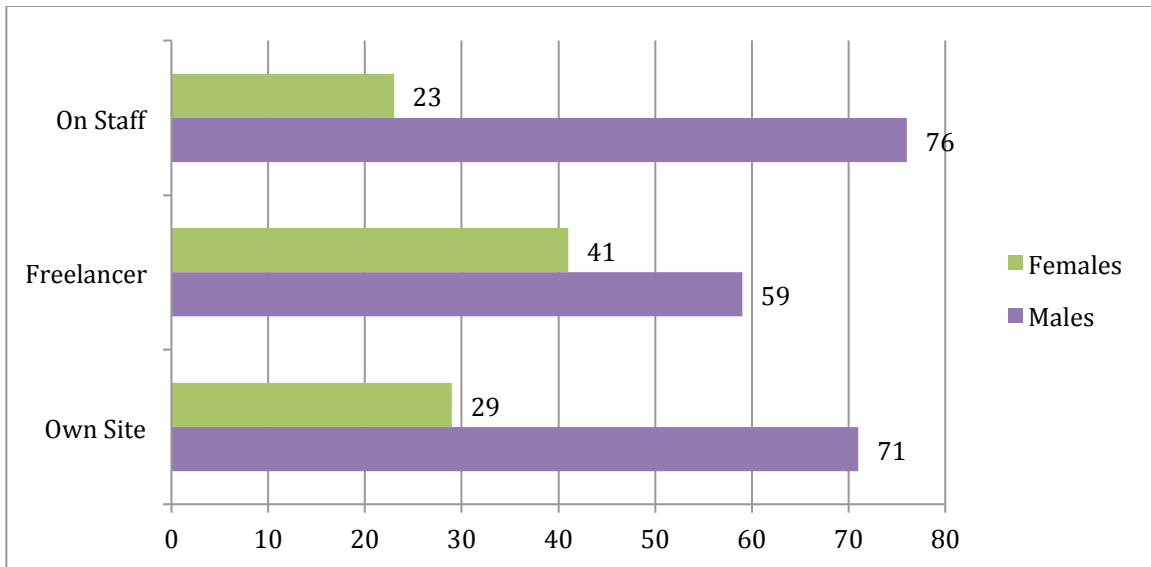
Figure 3.  
 Percentages of Reviews by Males and Females



In every job category considered, male reviewers outnumbered females (see Figure 4). 76% (76.2%) of those on staff at publications/sites/stations were male and 23% (23.1%) were female. 0.7% were nonbinary. 59% (58.6%) of freelancers were male and 41% (41.4%) were female. 71% (71.2%) of those writing for their own site were male and 29% (28.8%) were female.

*Figure 4.*

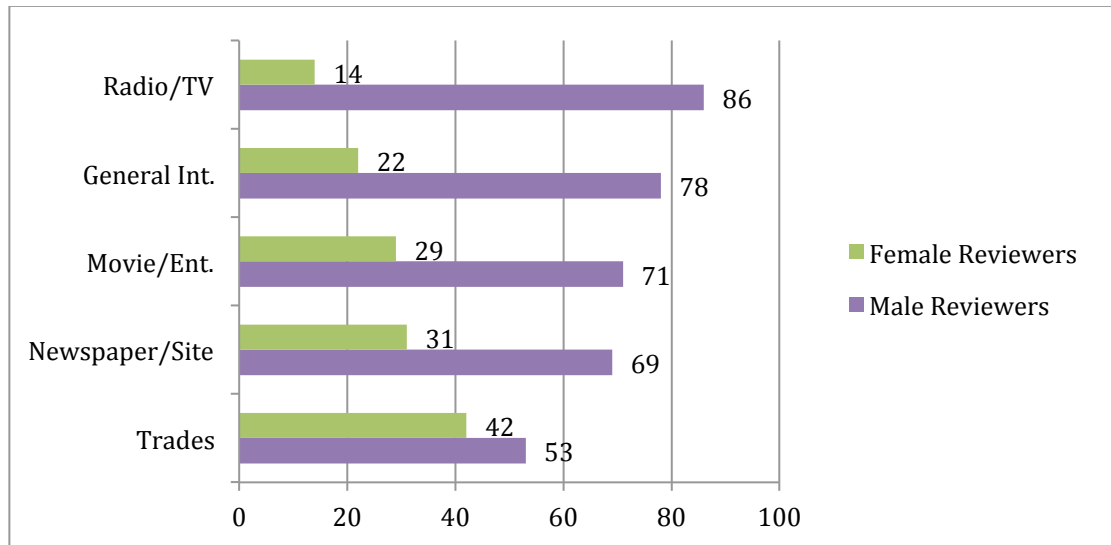
*Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers by Position Held*



Male reviewers outnumbered women in every type of media outlet considered (see Figure 5). Men comprised 86% (85.7%) and women 14% (14.3%) of those writing for radio and TV programs and sites. Men accounted for 78% (77.8%) and women 22% (22.2%) of those writing for general interest publications and sites. Men made up 71% (71.2%) and women 29% (28.8%) of those reviewing for movie and entertainment publications and sites. Men accounted for 69% (69.4%) and women 31% (30.6%) of those reviewing for newspapers and news sites. Men comprised 53% (52.6%), women 42% (42.1%), and nonbinary individuals 5% (5.3%) of those writing for trade publications.

Figure 5.

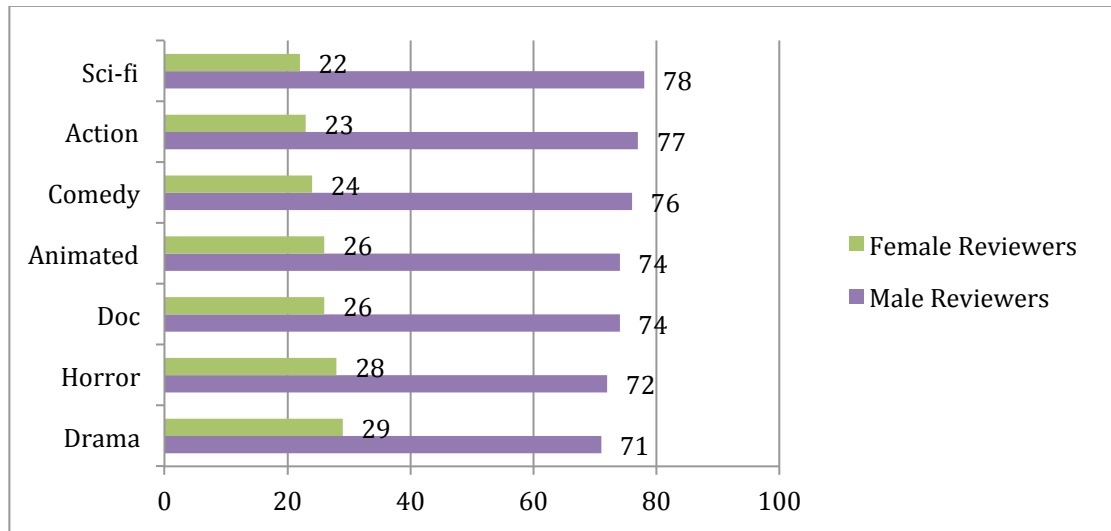
Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers by Type of Media Outlet



Men wrote the majority of reviews about films in every genre (see Figure 6). Men provided 78% and women 22% of reviews for science fiction features. Men wrote 77% and women 23% of reviews for action features. Men penned 76% and women 24% of reviews for comedies. Men wrote 74% and women 26% of reviews for animated features. Men provided 74% and women 26% of reviews for documentaries. Men penned 72% and women 28% of reviews for horror features. Men wrote 71% and women 29% of reviews for dramas.

Figure 6.

Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers by Genre



### Why Representation Matters

When all of the various scoring systems used by writers (stars, reels, grades, scores) were standardized into a percentage system, on average, women reviewers gave higher ratings to films featuring female protagonists (78%) than male reviewers (70%). In contrast, men reviewers awarded higher average ratings to films with male protagonists (73%) than female reviewers (69%). (Only those individuals providing quantitative scores for the films they review were included in this particular analysis.)

A higher proportion of the films reviewed by men than women had male directors. 78% of films reviewed by men reviewers but 70% reviewed by women reviewers had male directors. In contrast, a higher proportion of the films reviewed by females than males had women directors. 29% of films reviewed by women but 19% reviewed by men had women directors. (It is not clear whether these differences were due to writer preferences or to editorial assignments.) This finding suggests that because male critics outnumber female critics, and men are more likely to review films with male directors, these films achieve greater visibility in the marketplace.

When reviewing films directed by someone of their own gender, male and female critics were more likely to mention the name of the director in their review. 80% of reviews by male critics mentioned the name of a male director, whereas 70% of reviews by female critics mentioned the name of a male director. In contrast, 30% of reviews by female critics mentioned the name of a female director but only 20% of reviews by male critics mentioned the name of a female director. Mentioning the name of a director can be one of many descriptive items included in a review. However, the mention of a director's name also helps to increase the visibility of the director.

Moreover, female critics were more likely to make exclusively positive comments about a female director's skills, abilities, and/or vision than male critics. The study coded every review into one of four categories: included only criticisms of the director, included only compliments of the director, included both criticisms and compliments about the director, and included only neutral comments about the director. Reviews by female critics were more likely than reviews by male critics to feature only compliments about female directors. 61% of reviews by female critics but 40% of reviews by male critics featured exclusively positive comments about a female director's skills, abilities, and/or vision.

The difference for male directors was not as pronounced. 50% of reviews by male critics but 45% of reviews by female critics featured only compliments about a male director's skills, abilities, and/or vision.

A smaller percentage of reviews by female critics than by male critics featured only criticisms of female directors. 4% of reviews by female critics but 23% of reviews by male critics offered only critical comments about female directors. However, 14% of female critics and 14% of male critics made exclusively critical comments about a male director's skills, abilities, and/or vision.



## ***Findings/"Top Critics" Only***

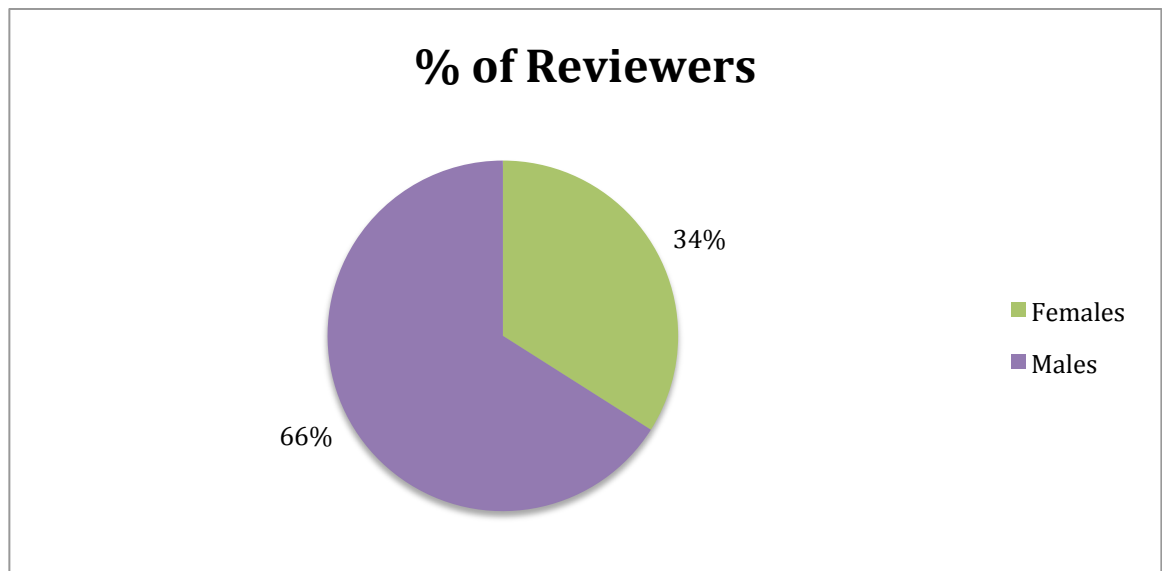
### ***Representation***

In 2022, men comprised 66% (65.8%) and women 34% (33.8%) of “top critics”<sup>4</sup> (see Figure 7). Nonbinary individuals accounted for 0.4% of “top critics.”

Women’s representation among “top critics” (34%) was higher than among all critics considered in the study (31%).

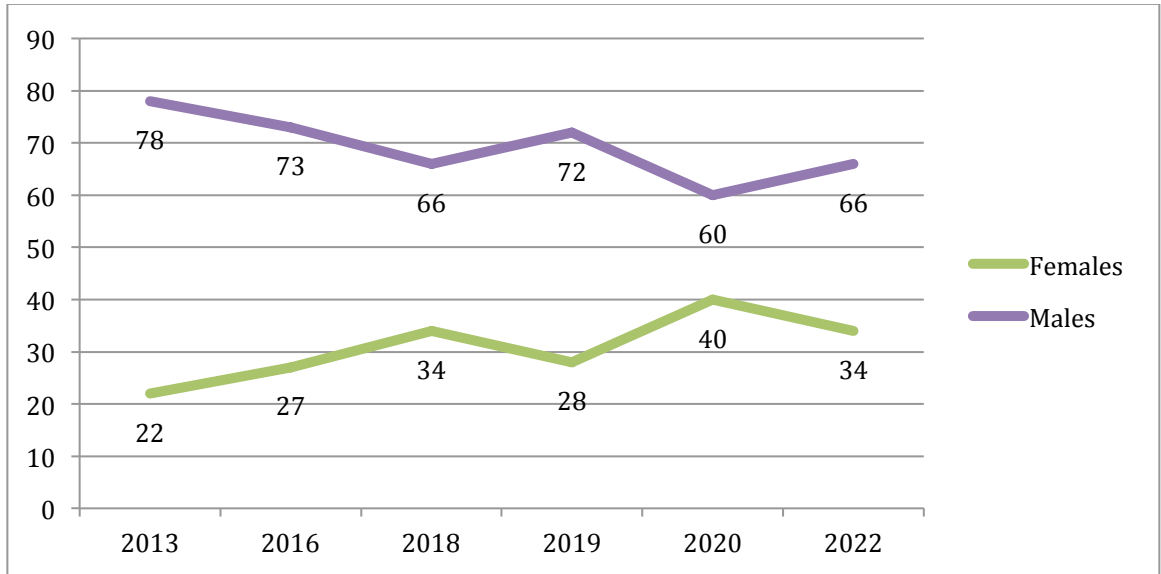
*Figure 7.*

*Percentages of Male and Female “Top Critics”*



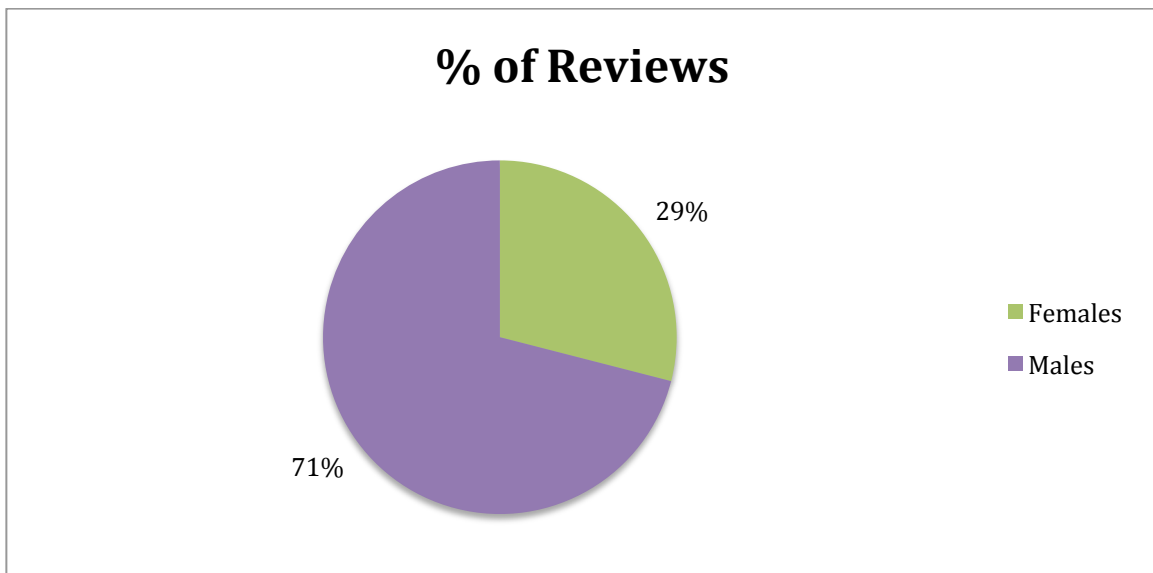
As illustrated in Figure 8, the percentage of female “top critics” declined 6 percentage points from 40% in 2020 to 34% in 2022.

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



Women wrote 29% and men 71% of reviews by “top critics” (see Figure 9). This represents a decline of 7 percentage points from 2020 when women wrote 36% of reviews.

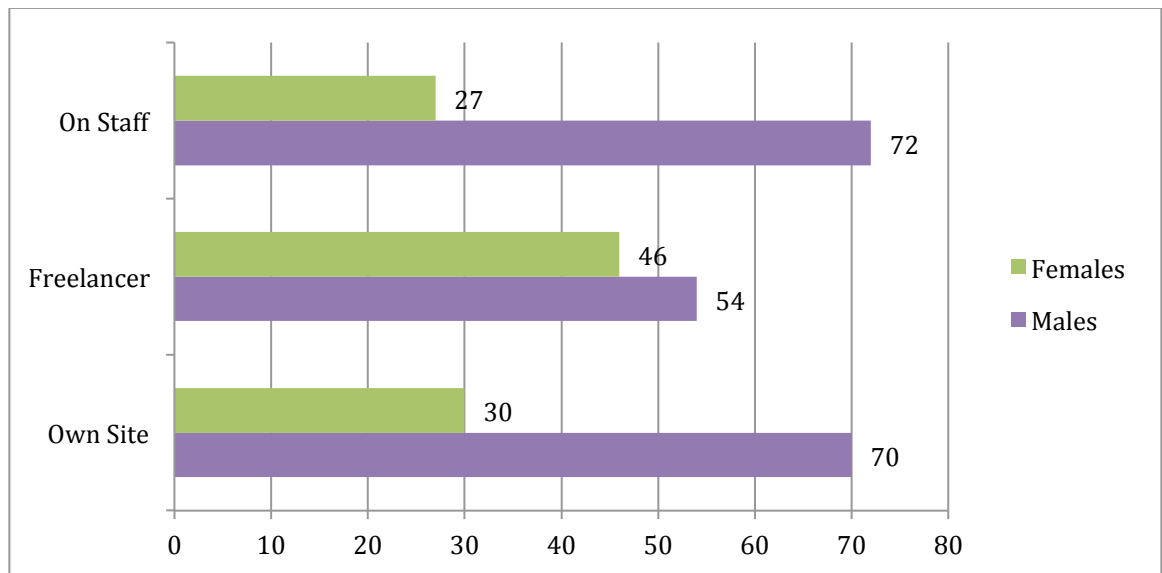
*Figure 9.*  
*Percentages of Reviews Written by Male and Female “Top Critics”*



Among “top critics,” men comprised the majority of individuals working in every job category (see Figure 10). 72% (72.3%) of males, 27% (26.7%) of females, and 1.0% of non-binary individuals were in staff positions. 54% (53.7%) of males and 46% (46.3%) of females were freelancers. 70% (70.0%) of males and 30% (30.0%) of females reviewed for their own site.

Figure 10.

Percentages of Male and Female “Top Critics” by Positions Held



Male “top critics” outnumbered females in every type of publication considered. Men accounted for 83% (83.3%) and women 17% (16.7%) of those working for radio and television outlets. Men made up 68% (68.3%) and women 32% (31.7%) of those working for movie and entertainment magazines and sites. Men comprised 68% (68.0%) and women 32% (32.0%) of those working for newspapers and news sites. Men accounted for 67% (66.7%) and women 33% (33.3%) of those working for general interest magazines and sites. Men comprised 50% (50.0%), women 44% (44.4%), and non-binary individuals 5.6% of those working for trade publications.

Men “top critics” wrote the majority of reviews in every genre considered. Men wrote 75% and women 25% of the reviews for comedies. Men penned 74%

and women 26% of reviews for science fiction features. Men wrote 74% and women 26% of reviews for animated features. Men penned 72% and women 28% of reviews for documentaries. Men wrote 69% and women 31% of reviews for horror features. Men penned 68% and women 32% of reviews for dramas.

### Why Representation Matters

Women “top critics” awarded a higher average rating to films with female protagonists than men “top critics.” Women gave these films an average rating of 79%, whereas men critics gave films with female protagonists an average rating of 67%. In contrast, men “top critics” awarded a higher average rating to films with male protagonists than women “top critics.” Men gave these films an average rating of 73%, whereas women critics gave films with male protagonists an average rating of 68%.

A higher proportion of the films reviewed by men than women “top critics” had male directors. 78% of films reviewed by men reviewers but 72% reviewed by women reviewers had male directors. In contrast, a higher proportion of the films reviewed by female than male “top critics” had women directors. 27% of films reviewed by women but 18% reviewed by men had women directors. (It is not clear whether these differences are due to writer preferences or to editorial assignments.) However, this finding suggests that because male “top critics” greatly outnumber females, and male critics are more likely to review films with male directors, these films achieve greater visibility in the critical marketplace.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Dargis, Manohla, and A.O. Scott. “Our Film Critics Discuss the Future of Movies.” *The New York Times*, 14 September 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/14/movies/future-of-movies-critics.html>.
- <sup>2</sup> Dargis and Scott.

<sup>3</sup> Dargis and Scott.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Rotten Tomatoes website, ([rottentomatoes.com/critics/top\\_critics](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/critics/top_critics)), “Top Critic is a designation created to distinguish Tomatometer-approved critics who excel at their craft. Critics selected are well-established, influential, and prolific: they are, in a sense, the cream of the crop. Top Critic status is granted by a set of criteria and a selection panel and cannot be applied for.”

In order to be designated as a “top critic,” a reviewer must “have reviewed professionally for a minimum of five years; [and] critique film/tv on a regular and frequent basis, a minimum of four to six times per month.” In addition, the individual must “publish reviews at outlets with a verifiable audience demonstrated by consistent web traffic with at least five million visits over six months; 450k followers on Twitter; 500k video subscribers; [and] for podcasts, at least 1k ratings and 4 stars on Apple Podcasts.”

“Critics who contribute to approved publications that reach underrepresented groups will be considered on a case-by-case basis. An active and dynamic social presence is also evaluated for all critics.”