

## Oscar nominees are more diverse than ever. And that raises more questions about numbers and nuance.

By **Ann Hornaday**

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This year's record-setting crop of Oscar nominees — the most diverse slate of actors in the history of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, as well as the first time two women have competed for best director — was understandably greeted as good news.

For many observers, the watershed moment indicated that Hollywood might finally be on its way to reforming the White-male-dominated culture that has held sway in mainstream American cinema for more than a century. And it seemed to cap an extraordinary period in the entertainment industry that started in 2014 and 2015, when the American Civil Liberties Union and the [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#) began investigating studios, networks and agencies for systemic (and illegal) gender discrimination.

What ensued was a cascade of events — including the #OscarsSoWhite campaign, revelations of pervasive sexual harassment and abuse by Harvey Weinstein and other industry leaders, the establishment of Time's Up and the #MeToo movement, and the academy's commitment to recruit more women, people of color and international members — that put diversity, inclusion and equity firmly on the industry's radar. The ongoing [coronavirus pandemic](#) and anti-racism protests have raised the stakes even higher: In September, the academy announced that it would institute new criteria to qualify for its best picture Oscar in 2022, designed as a carrot for filmmakers interested in making their productions more balanced and a stick for those who insist on hewing to old, discriminatory habits.

The new criteria include benchmarks for casting (at least one lead character should be played by an actor from an underrepresented racial or ethnic group; for ensemble casts, at least 30 percent should comprise at least two of the following groups: women, people of color, LGBTQ individuals and people with different cognitive or physical abilities). They also include guidelines for the composition of crews (at least two department heads should be from underrepresented groups, with at least one being a person of color); opening up employment and internship opportunities; and developing diverse audiences. When the guidelines were introduced, [I wrote a column](#) [applauding the academy](#) for making concrete the kind of checklist that has been shaped by implicit biases and old boys' clubs for decades. As I noted at the time, Oscar favorites such as "BlacKkKlansman," "Black Panther," "Roma" and "Parasite" seemed to bode well for opening up cinematic storytelling beyond its historically blinkered borders.

But, citing a study conducted by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California, I noted that women still accounted for only one-third of speaking roles in the top 1,300 films released from 2007 to 2019. "They're even scarcer behind the camera, where they constitute 4.8 percent of directors," I wrote. "A high-water mark for Black filmmakers came in 2018, but even then they were only 13 percent of directors, and their numbers reverted to

2017 levels last year.”

It was that last line that prompted an email from a reader, who observed that, if African Americans account for around 13 percent of the U.S. population, why did I put “only” in front of the 2018 statistic? Isn’t that kind of proportionality the goal?

The question stopped me in my tracks. Is exact demographic parity what we’re looking for when we talk about diversity and inclusion? How will we know when genuine, sustained representation has been achieved?

In my reply to the emailer, I said that I didn’t see demographic equivalencies as the point, especially because U.S. figures aren’t particularly helpful when you’re talking about a global medium. Even if we reach a point when 13 percent of our movies are consistently centered on Black stories made by and featuring Black artists, they’re still being exported to an international audience that includes far greater ratios of Black viewers.

Still, the question is provocative. For those who have been advocating for inclusion on screen and behind the scenes, how will success be recognized and measured? And will hitting any numerical goal be enough?

Madeline Di Nonno, president and CEO of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, believes that numbers have their place. When the institute — which focuses on on-screen representation of women and underrepresented groups — does its research, she says, “we measure against the population as a baseline,” using demographic statistics regarding the LGBTQ population and people with disabilities, for example. But “fiction should at least meet the baseline,” she notes, “and then go way beyond. People of color in the United States are 38 percent of the population. [But] we’re looking at talent. We’re looking at opportunities. And opportunities should be given to talented people and not, ‘Well, we now have 38 percent directors who are people of color, we can stop.’ Absolutely not.”

For Catherine Hardwicke (“Thirteen,” “Twilight”), who testified about sex discrimination in Hollywood during the EEOC investigation, hard numbers help avoid the tendency for people to confuse encouraging optics with authentic change.

“You can say, ‘Hey, I feel like there’s a good vibe, I saw a female directed that movie,’ but when you see the numbers, that’s when the truth hits you,” she said during a Women in Film and Video event last year. “When 50 percent of the movies are directed by women, when there are 40 percent by persons of color, then we’re going to feel like, ‘Yes, it’s really true,’ instead of just the vibe. So I believe in the numbers.”

Producer DeVon Franklin, an academy governor who helped formulate the new best-picture guidelines, says that “in a perfect world, these standards will phase themselves out, because we’ll get to a place where it’s just what we do.” Until then, he says, the numbers will serve less as concrete goals than as a barometer of progress. “This business, when it comes to representation and inclusion, is fantastic on intent. But they are terrible on execution,” Franklin says. “It’s one thing to have intent. It’s another thing to have a plan that makes good on your intent.”

The British Film Institute was the first organization to draw up inclusion and equity funding standards, which it launched in 2016. Its document has since served as a template for the academy, as well as the BAFTA awards, the BBC and Channel 4. Melanie Hoyes, industry inclusion executive at the BFI, says that in addition to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and physical and intellectual abilities, the BFI is taking steps to include socioeconomic status and regional representation in its guidelines, aimed at broadening the perspective of visual storytelling that has been generally rooted in middle- and upper-class London and its environs.

Statistical measurements can be useful for communications, Hoyes says. “On the one hand, people want to know what good looks like, so you have to give an idea.”

But, she’s quick to add, “you don’t want to make that the achievement. Like, ‘[Now] we’re done and we don’t have to think about this again.’ There’s so much nuance to that idea. If you’re looking at numbers and proportionality, it would be a good idea that our films look like and are made by the audience that we are distributing them to. But in terms of inclusion, it’s a minimum. What good looks like is if those representations on screen are really nuanced, if people are really integrated into the industry, if they feel like they belong, if they feel like it’s a good place for them to work, if it’s an industry they can come into and not feel bullied or like they can’t progress in and have to leave, or work three jobs just to keep a job in the industry. It’s so much more than how many people there are.”

Film director Maria Giese, who was a key instigator of the ACLU and federal investigations, has been a feminist activist in Hollywood since 2014, when she wrote an explosive article for Ms. magazine in which she observed that entertainment is the worst offender of Title VII employment anti-discrimination laws of any U.S. industry. She casts a somewhat jaundiced eye on enterprises like Time’s Up, which was created within the Hollywood establishment to address workplace sexual harassment and assault, observing that it’s one of several collegial, inside-industry efforts undertaken to avoid legal action and government oversight. Those threats have served as a sort of twin sword of Damocles, forcing studios, networks and agencies to do the right thing after decades of denying there was a problem.

“Put it this way,” Giese says. “If you want to create 50-50 female hires on screen and behind the scenes, you’re talking about a redistribution of jobs and money from men to women, and that is a very challenging thing to do — to take resources, jobs and sociopolitical influence around the world away from one half of the population and give it to the other half of the population. The only way to do that is by force.”

Especially when it comes to women, Giese says, the numbers are a useful and straightforward metric. “I think it’s important that women have equal employment and representation as industry filmmakers and storytellers in this

country,” she says simply. “And it’s really important that that 50 percent group of women represents U.S. demographic equivalences in terms of race, ethnicity, sexuality and abilities.”

Still, if and when our movies finally reach a proportional level of representation, it’s another question entirely as to whether they will reflect our myriad realities. Filmmaker and California Institute of the Arts film professor Nina Menkes is directing a documentary titled “Brainwashed,” in which she explores how sexism has infiltrated film grammar itself, from the way women are lit and photographed differently to how editing fragments them into so many eroticized body parts. (Giese is a co-producer of the film, which will be arriving later this year.) That approach to shot design is bound up with sexual harassment, abuse and employment discrimination within the film industry in a “devil’s knot,” Menkes says. “And the privilege of the people in power is the glue that holds that knot together.”

Reducing women to objects of glamour and sexual gratification, Menkes adds, has become “so normalized, we don’t even notice it.” And female filmmakers can be just as prone to the practice as men, whether it’s Sofia Coppola lingering over Scarlett Johansson in her underwear in the opening sequence of “Lost in Translation” or a film student reflexively panning over a female character’s body for no discernible reason.

More than mere numbers, it will be through the symbolic language of films themselves that change will be most discernible and meaningful, Menkes insists. She points to Eliza Hittman’s “Never Rarely Sometimes Always” — an intense, naturalistic drama about a young woman seeking an abortion in New York with the help of her cousin — as an example of a female director “going all the way” in rejecting the traditional cinematic perspective. “She shows the sexuality of the very pretty cousin and how she’s harassed by a guy and reluctantly uses her appeal — but Hittman always keeps us within the perspective of those two girls,” Menkes explains. “We don’t get the male gaze on those girls. And she doesn’t pretty up the story, she doesn’t make it palatable.”

And she sees signs of hope in the work of Oscar-nominated directors Emerald Fennell and Chloé Zhao. She calls the nomination of Fennell’s “Promising Young Woman” “astonishing,” adding that “in general that kind of depiction of a woman’s unadulterated rage would not be mainstream fare.”

As for Zhao’s “Nomadland,” Menkes gives the filmmaker credit for resisting the hyper-sexualization and ageism that have plagued even movies that have been applauded for their empowered women characters. “On that level, I find ‘Nomadland’ groundbreaking,” Menkes says, referring to the film’s protagonist, played by Frances McDormand. “She’s not a sexy babe, she’s a woman in her 60s, she’s not wearing tons of makeup — for that film to become a mainstream awards contender is incredible.”

Put another way: That’s what progress looks like.

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