

TOWARDS TRANSFORMATION: A CALL FOR THE REIMAGINATION OF THE FILM CANON

INTRODUCTION TO THE FILM CANON

Canonized films are those “chosen for extensive discussion and analysis... [and] chosen to be reworked, alluded to, satirized...[as] privileged points of reference” selected by canon-building bodies such as “the Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Film Institute, critics, universities, distributors, and even audiences” (“Rethinking the Film Canon,” “The Politics of the Film Canon”). Knowledge of the film canon is a form of cultural capital within the film community. The film canon is highly influenced by external structures of inequality relating to race, gender, sexuality, and other marginalizing markers of difference, as are other aspects of the film industry. In light of this, the canon is not a neutral entity built by individuals using “objective” standards of quality to determine entry. Additionally, a critical relationship exists between the film canon and the film course syllabus, in that the syllabus is frequently populated with films from the canon. Lack of diversity within the canon obscures the efforts of directors from marginalized backgrounds and influences students' ability to imagine themselves as filmmakers.

CONTENTS OF THE FILM CANON

METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to define the contents of the contemporary film canon, I searched for overlap between “Best Film” lists published by canon-building institutions. I gathered the most recent “Best Films” list of at least 50 entries from each of the following: Sight and Sound (2022), Variety (2022), American Film Institute (2007), Metacritic (no publication year available), and Screen Rant (2023).

From these five lists, I gathered 450 films in total and focused on the 81 films that appeared on two or more lists, which became the basis of my approximated film canon. These 81 films were directed 62 unique directors.

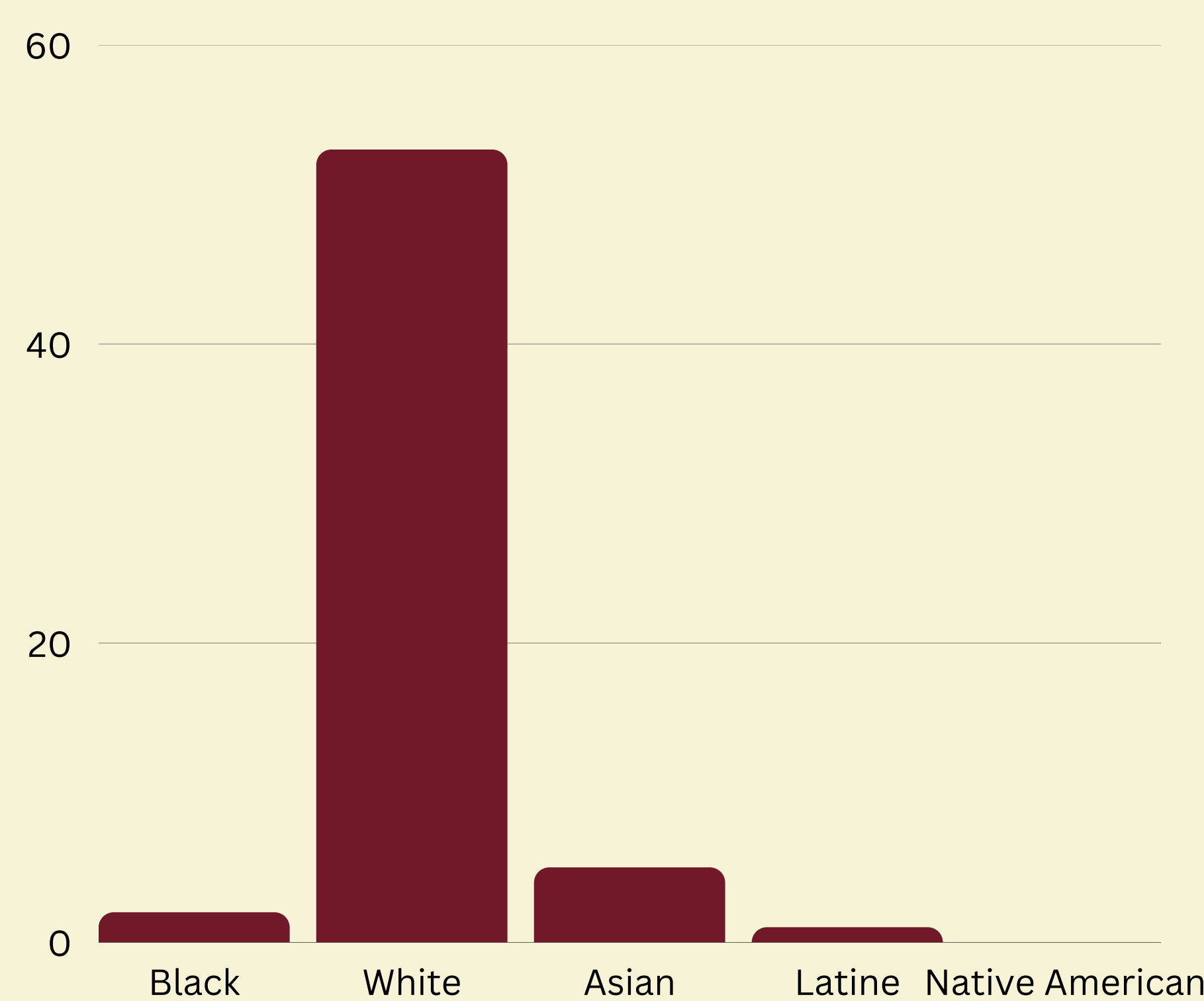
CONTENTS OF THE FILM CANON



Appendix

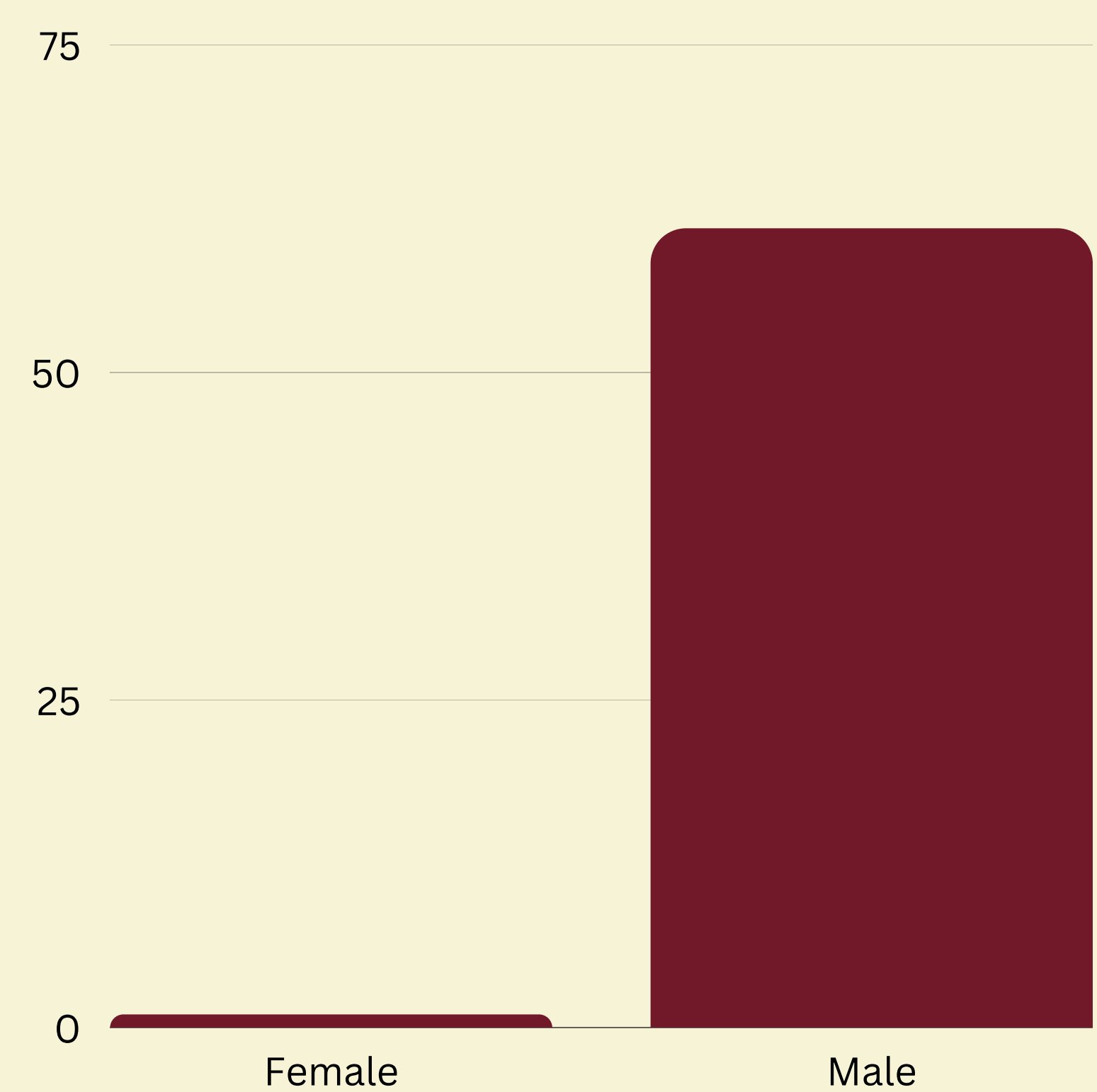


Estimated Racial/Ethnic Composition of the Canon



53 of the 62 directors in the canon are White. Only nine of them are BIPOC (all of whom are male).

Estimated Gender Composition of the Canon



There was only one female director among the 62 directors in the canon.



SOLUTIONS

Do away with the idea of a singular hallowed canon and reconceptualize canons as non-hierarchical arrays

Seek out new canon-building bodies
 Move towards a more communally-elected arena that is inclusive of diverse ages and degrees of experience

Reconsider who we think of as capable of being filmmakers

Change how we define "quality" cinema to be inclusive of more genres and styles

Educators should be more intentional and self-reflective in how they populate their course syllabi by using questions such as the following:

If the works I am teaching are notably “problematic” in their representations of a condition, group of people, or event, am I properly contextualizing the work for my students (i.e. assigning this film alongside supplementary materials to explain the impact of the work)?

Shift language from **the** canon to **canons** (thinking of it as a multiplicity in which all are valuable)



CONCLUSION

To reimagine the form and content of the film canon is to fundamentally change the way we think and learn about the medium of film. It is limiting that a mere 100 or so films should be the basis of how we interact with and discuss the medium. With this change, we create more room and support for new people, new stories, and a new community to emerge.

ANTI CANON PROJECT

An online curriculum to be implemented by educators and film students introducing them to non-canonical films to broaden their conception of what makes a “quality” film and who can be an impactful filmmaker.

