

***Indie Women:
Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women in U.S.
Independent Film, 2021-22***

by Martha M. Lauzen, Ph.D.

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Over the last couple of years, business models employed by film festivals in the U.S. evolved in response to challenges posed by the ever-changing nature of the pandemic. Many fests settled on hybrid models, offering online screenings and forums in addition to more traditional in-person events. Dubbed the future of film festivals,¹ this “high tech, high touch”² approach reinvigorates an experience that was almost universally regarded as tired and outdated. Covid accelerated the push to modernize festivals, expanding their reach and helping them serve a more diverse population.

During this time of transition, the *Indie Women* project continued to monitor the employment of behind-the-scenes women first initiated in 2008. This report focuses on the representation of women working as directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers on domestically and independently produced feature-length documentaries and narrative films selected by 20 high-profile festivals in the U.S. from July 2021 through June 2022.³ This year’s study also monitored women’s representation as composers.

Key Findings

•In 2021-22, the U.S. festivals considered in this study streamed and/or screened more *narrative* films directed exclusively by men than with at least 1 woman director. The festivals streamed and/or screened an average of 10 *narrative* films directed by men, compared to an average of 6 films directed by at least one woman (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

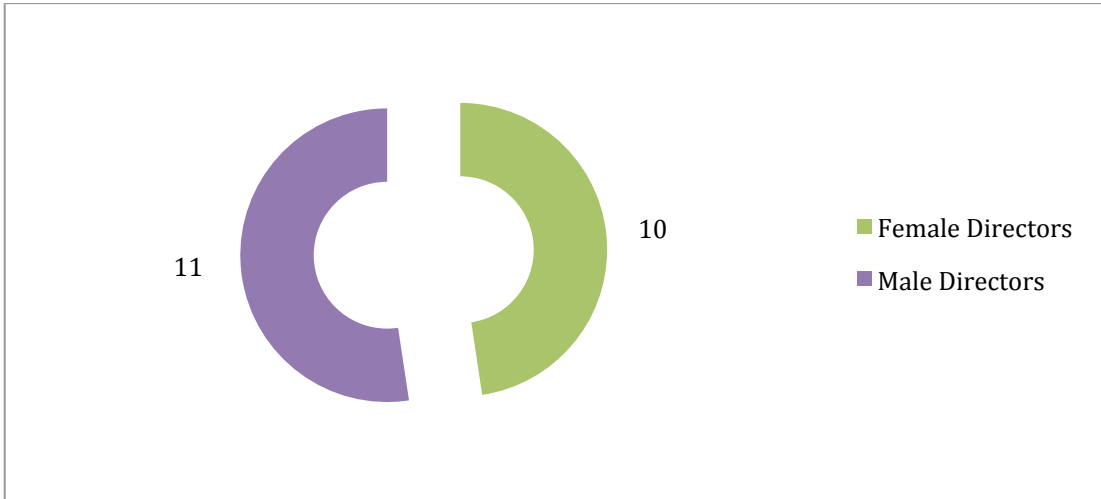
Average No. of Narrative Features Directed by At Least One Woman vs. Average No. of Films Directed Exclusively by Men Streamed/Screened at U.S. Festivals



•In 2021-22, fests streamed and/or screened almost equal numbers of documentaries directed by women as by men. Festivals streamed and/or screened an average of 11 *documentaries* directed exclusively by men versus an average of 10 documentaries directed by at least one woman (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

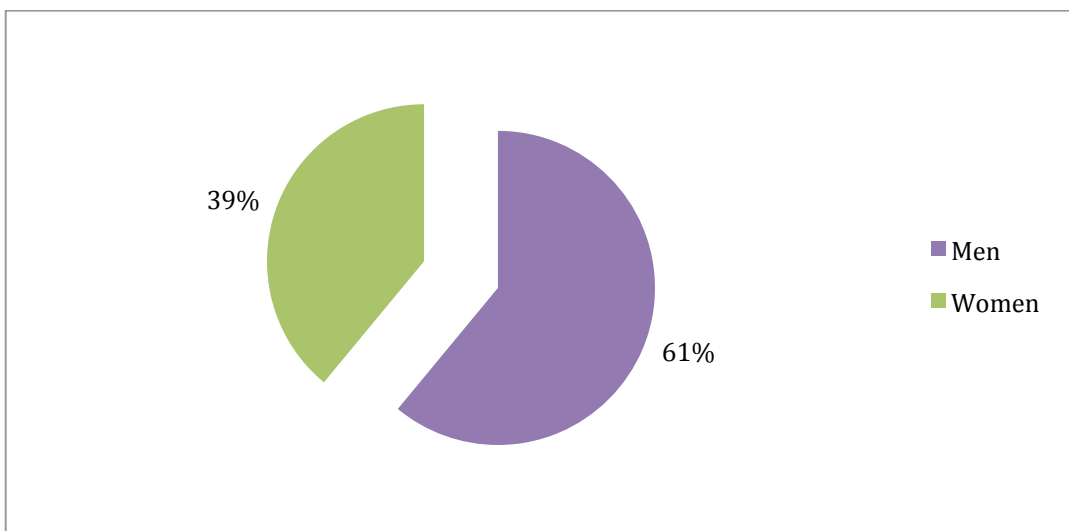
Average No. of Documentaries Directed by At Least One Woman vs. Average No. of Films Directed Exclusively by Men Streamed/Screened at U.S. Festivals



•In 2021-22, women comprised 39% of individuals working in key behind-the-scenes roles on U.S. independent features (narrative films and documentaries). This represents an increase of 1 percentage point from 2020-21. Men continued to account for the majority (61%) of individuals in these roles (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working on U.S. Independent Features Streamed/Screened at High-Profile Festivals in 2021-22



•11% of independent films employed 10 or more women, while 27% employed 10 or more men.

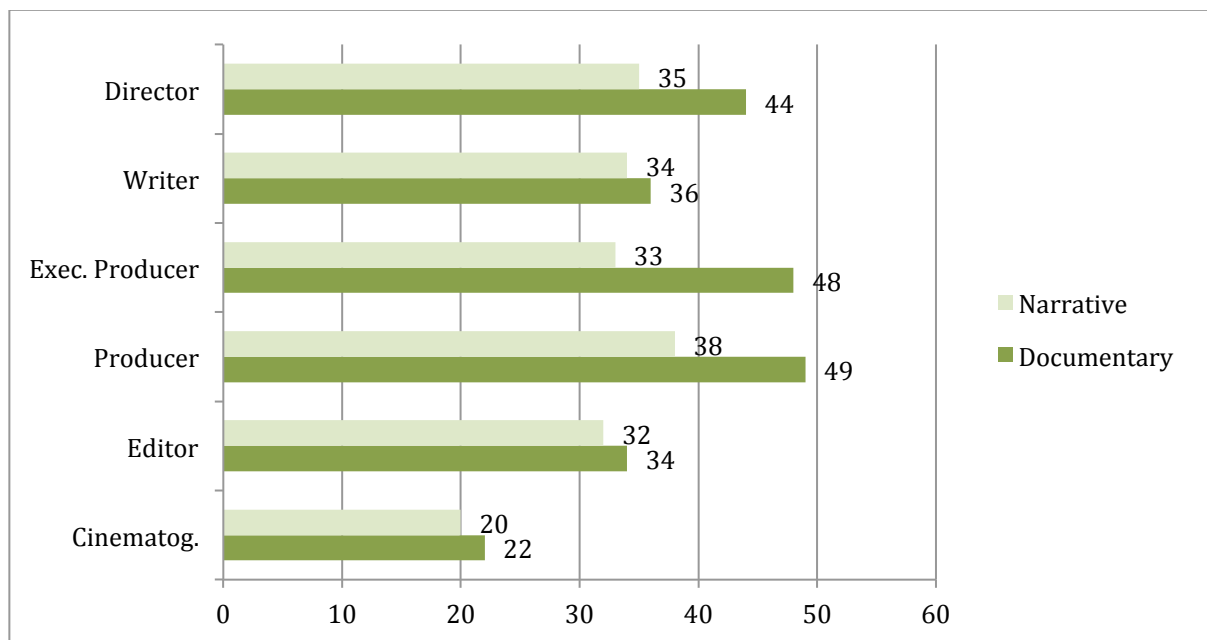
•On narrative features and documentaries, women fared best as producers (44%), followed by executive producers (42%), directors (40%), writers (35%), editors (33%), and cinematographers (21%).

•Women continued to enjoy higher employment on documentaries than on narrative features. Women accounted for 43% of those working in key behind-the-scenes roles on documentaries versus 34% of those working on narrative features.

•The percentage of women working in every role considered was higher on documentaries than on narrative features (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Comparison of Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women Working on Narrative Features vs. Documentaries



•Films with at least one woman director had substantially higher percentages of women working as writers, editors, and cinematographers. For example, on films with at least one woman director, women comprised 34% of cinematographers. On films with exclusively male directors, women accounted for 10% of cinematographers.

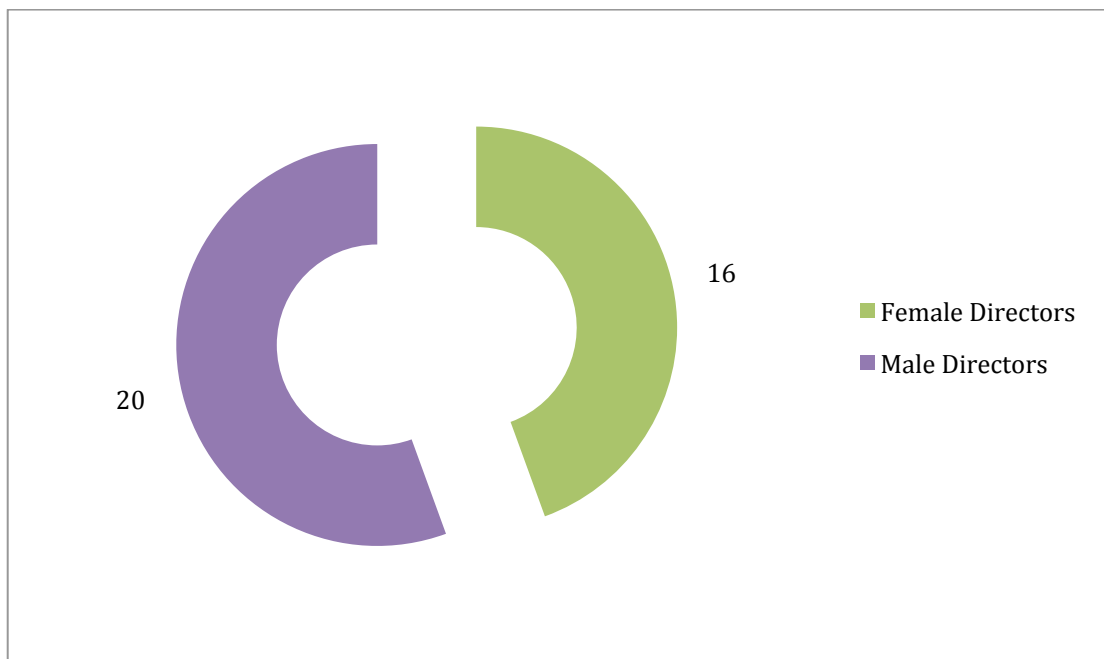
•Overall, women comprised 17% and men 83% of composers working on independent films in 2021-22. Women composers fared better on documentaries (20%) than narrative features (13%).

Findings for Documentaries and Narrative Features Streamed and/or Screened at Festivals

Overall, high-profile festivals in the U.S. streamed and/or screened an average of 16 films (narrative features and documentaries) directed by at least one woman versus an average of 20 films directed exclusively by men (see Figure 5).

Figure 5.

Average No. of Narrative and Documentary Films Directed by At Least One Woman vs. Average No. of Films Directed Exclusively by Men Streamed/Screened at U.S. Festivals



29% of the independent films considered employed 0 or 1 woman, 37% employed 2 to 5 women, 24% employed 6 to 9 women, and 11% employed 10 or more women. In contrast, 13% of the films employed 0 or 1 man, 27% employed 2 to 5 men, 32% employed 6 to 9 men, and 27% employed 10 or more men.

Women comprised 39% of directors, writers, executive producers, producers, editors, and cinematographers working on independently and domestically produced feature-length films in 2021-22 (see Figure 3 in Key Findings section). This represents an increase of 1 percentage point from 2020-21.

Women fared best as producers (44%), followed by executive producers (42%), directors (40%), writers (35%), editors (33%), and cinematographers (21%) (see Figure 6).

By role, women accounted for 40% of directors, up 1 percentage point from 39% in 2020-21. Women comprised 35% of writers, down 1 percentage point from 36% in 2020-21. Women made up 42% of executive producers, up 4 percentage points from 38% in 2020-21. Women accounted for 44% of producers, even with the percentage in 2020-21. Women comprised 33% of editors, down 4 percentage points from 37% in 2020-21. Women accounted for 21% of cinematographers, down 2 percentage points from 23% in 2020-21. Figure 7 provides a historical comparison of 2021-22 figures with those from prior years.⁴

Figure 6.

Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working on Narrative Features and Documentaries by Role

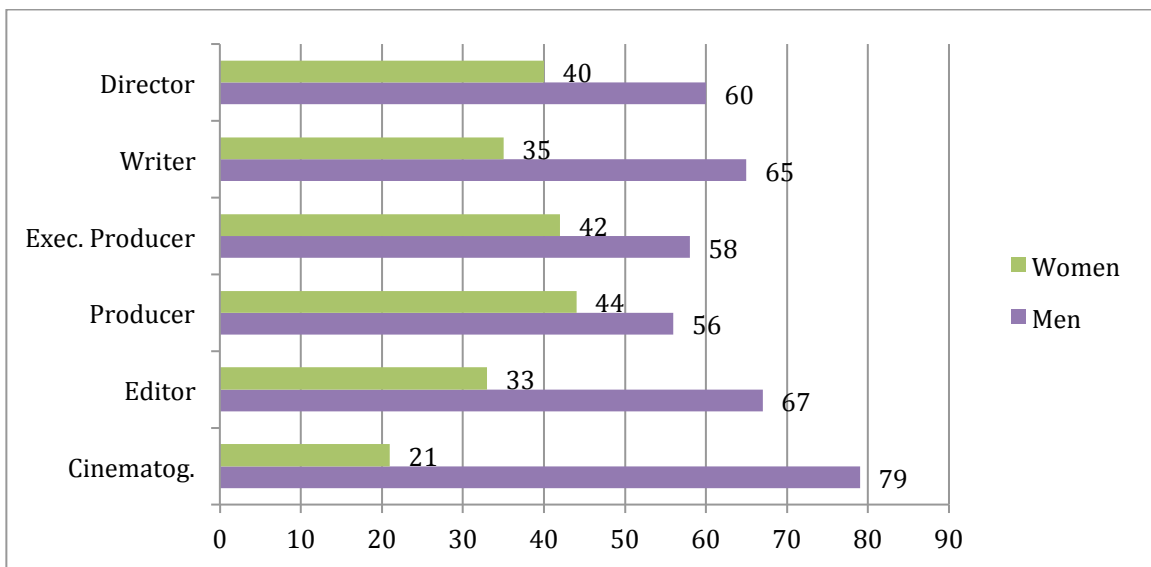
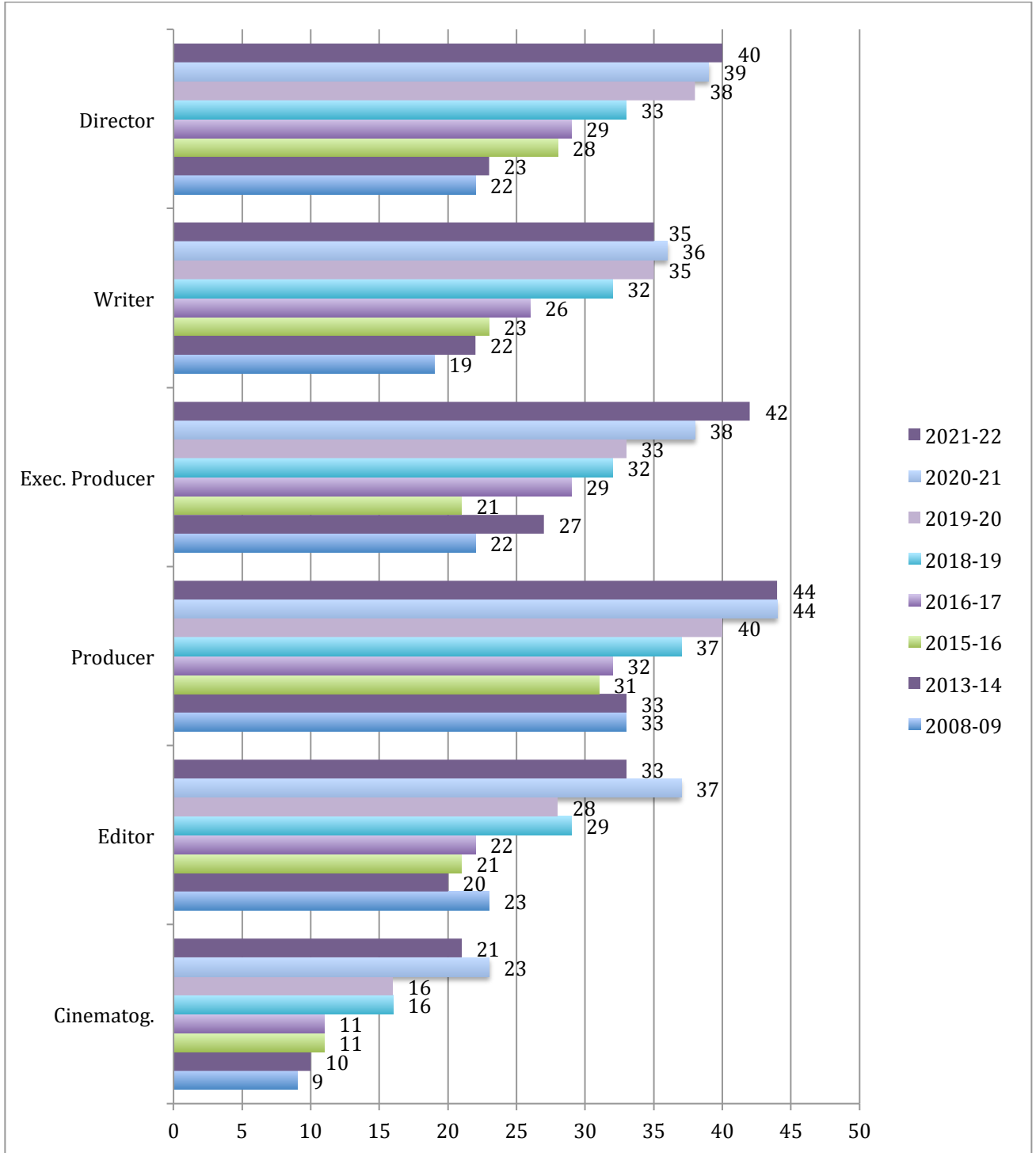


Figure 7.

*Historical Comparison of Percentages of Women Working on Independent Films
(Documentaries and Narrative Features) by Role*

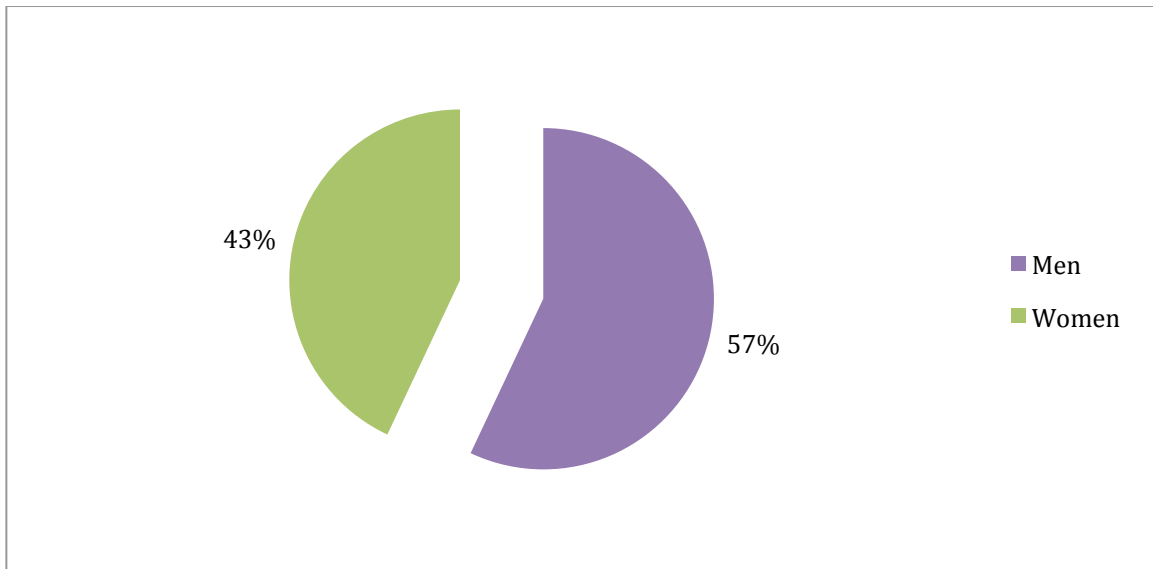


Findings for Documentaries Only

Women comprised 43% and men 57% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers working on documentaries in 2021-22 (see Figure 8). For women, this represents an increase of 1 percentage point from 42% in 2020-21.

Figure 8.

Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working on Documentaries Streaming/Screening at High-Profile Festivals in 2021-22



Women fared best as producers (49%), followed by executive producers (48%), directors (44%), writers (36%), editors (34%), and cinematographers (22%) (see Figure 9).

Figure 9.

Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working on Documentaries by Role

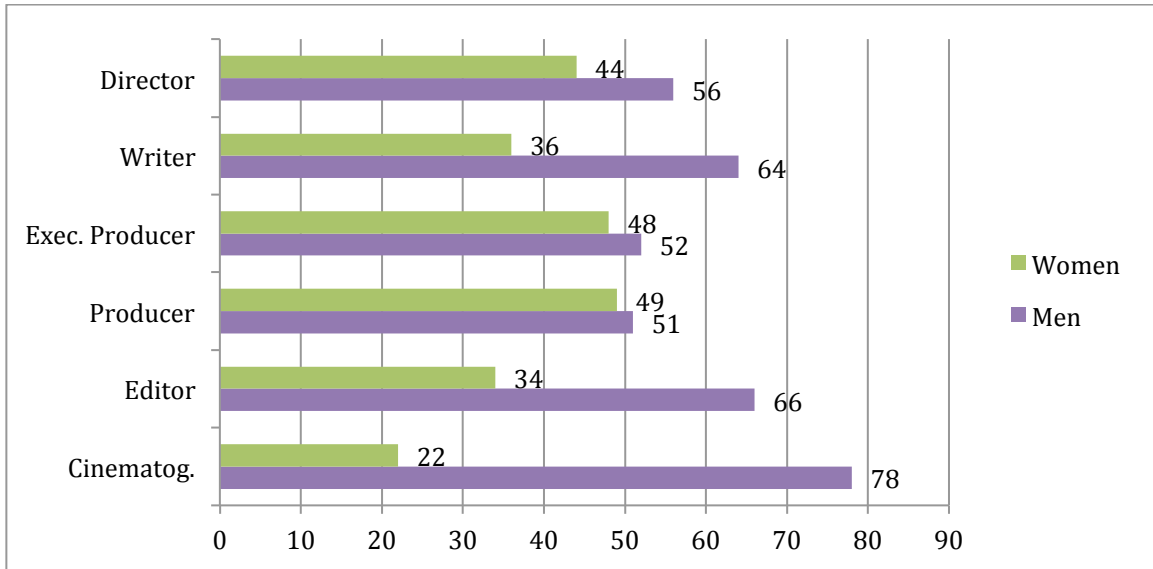
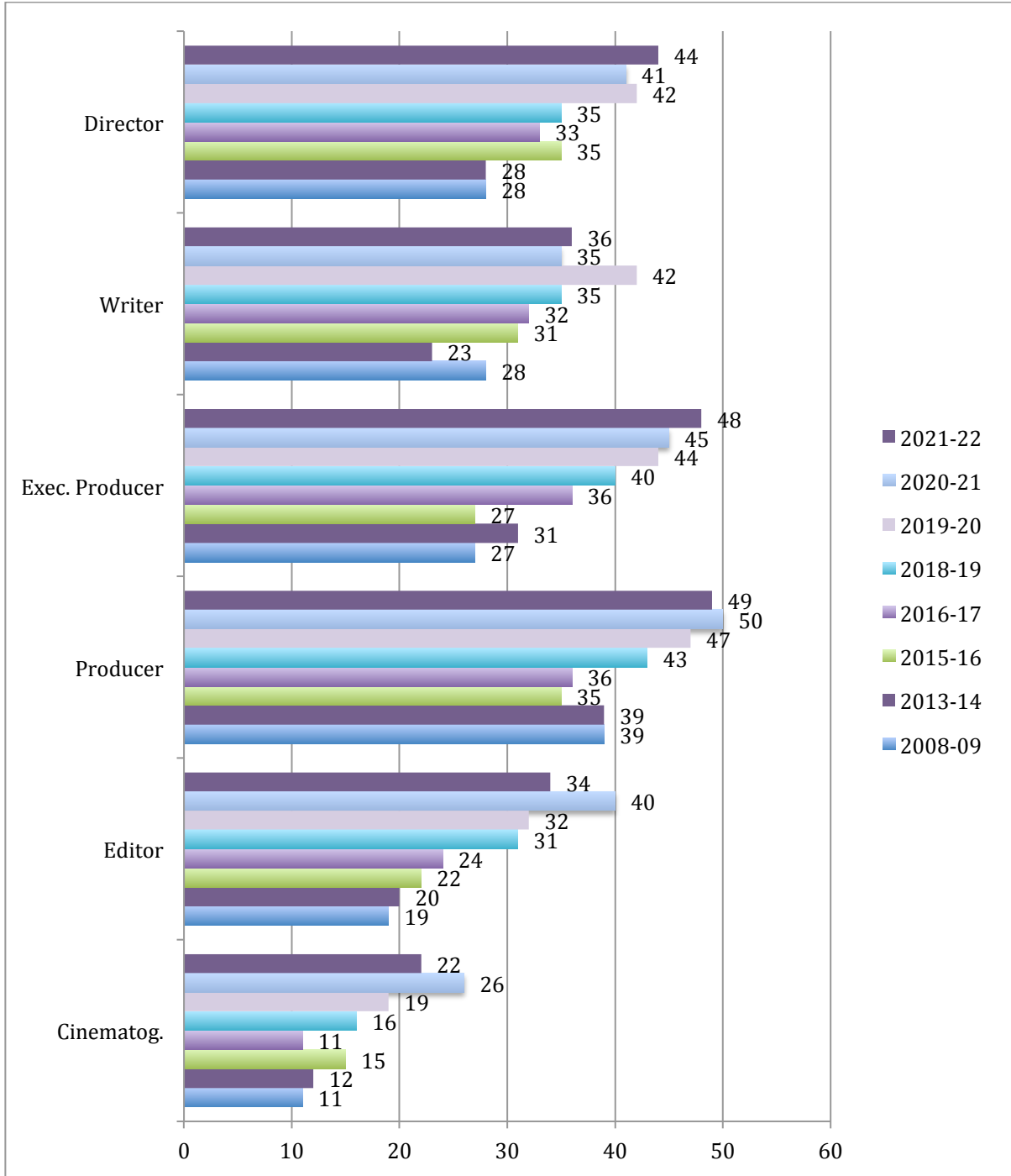


Figure 10 provides a historical comparison of 2021-22 figures with those from prior years. By role, women comprised 44% of directors, up 3 percentage points from 41% in 2020-21. Women accounted for 36% of writers, up 1 percentage point from 35% in 2020-21. Women made up 48% of executive producers, up 3 percentage points from 45% in 2020-21. Women comprised 49% of producers, down 1 percentage point from 50% in 2020-21. Women accounted for 34% of editors, down 6 percentage points from 40% in 2020-21. Women made up 22% of cinematographers, down 4 percentage points from 26% in 2020-21.

Figure 10.

Historical Comparison of Percentages of Women Working on Documentaries by Role

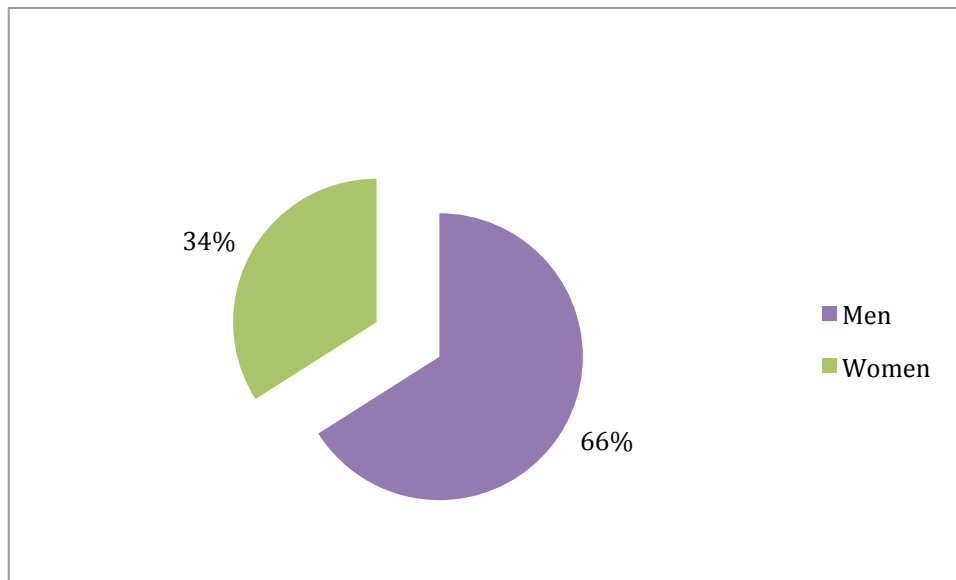


Findings for Narrative Features Only

Overall, women comprised 34% and men 66% of individuals working in the behind-the-scenes roles considered on domestically and independently produced narrative features in 2021-22 (see Figure 11). For women, this represents a decline of 1 percentage point from 35% in 2020-21.

Figure 11.

Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working on Narrative Features Streaming/Screening at High-Profile Festivals in 2021-22



Women fared best as producers (38%), followed by directors (35%), writers (34%), executive producers (33%), editors (32%), and cinematographers (20%) (see Figure 12).

Figure 12.
Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working
on Narrative Features by Role

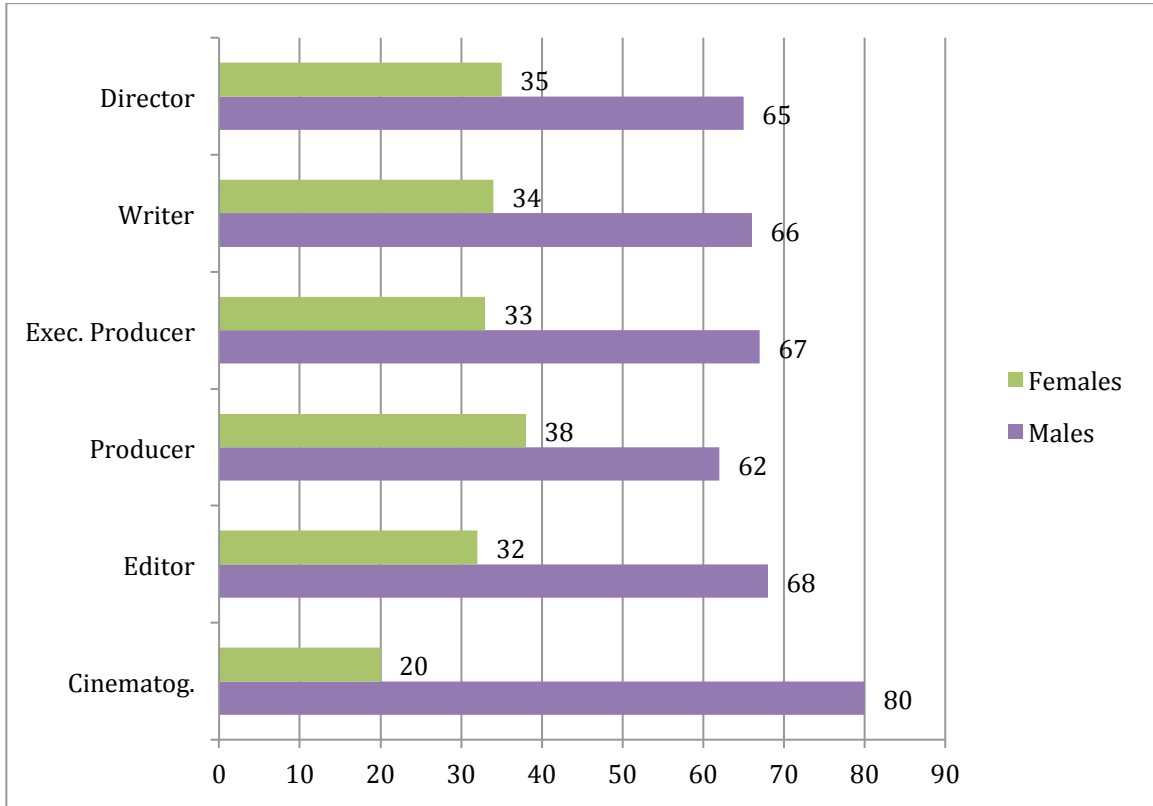
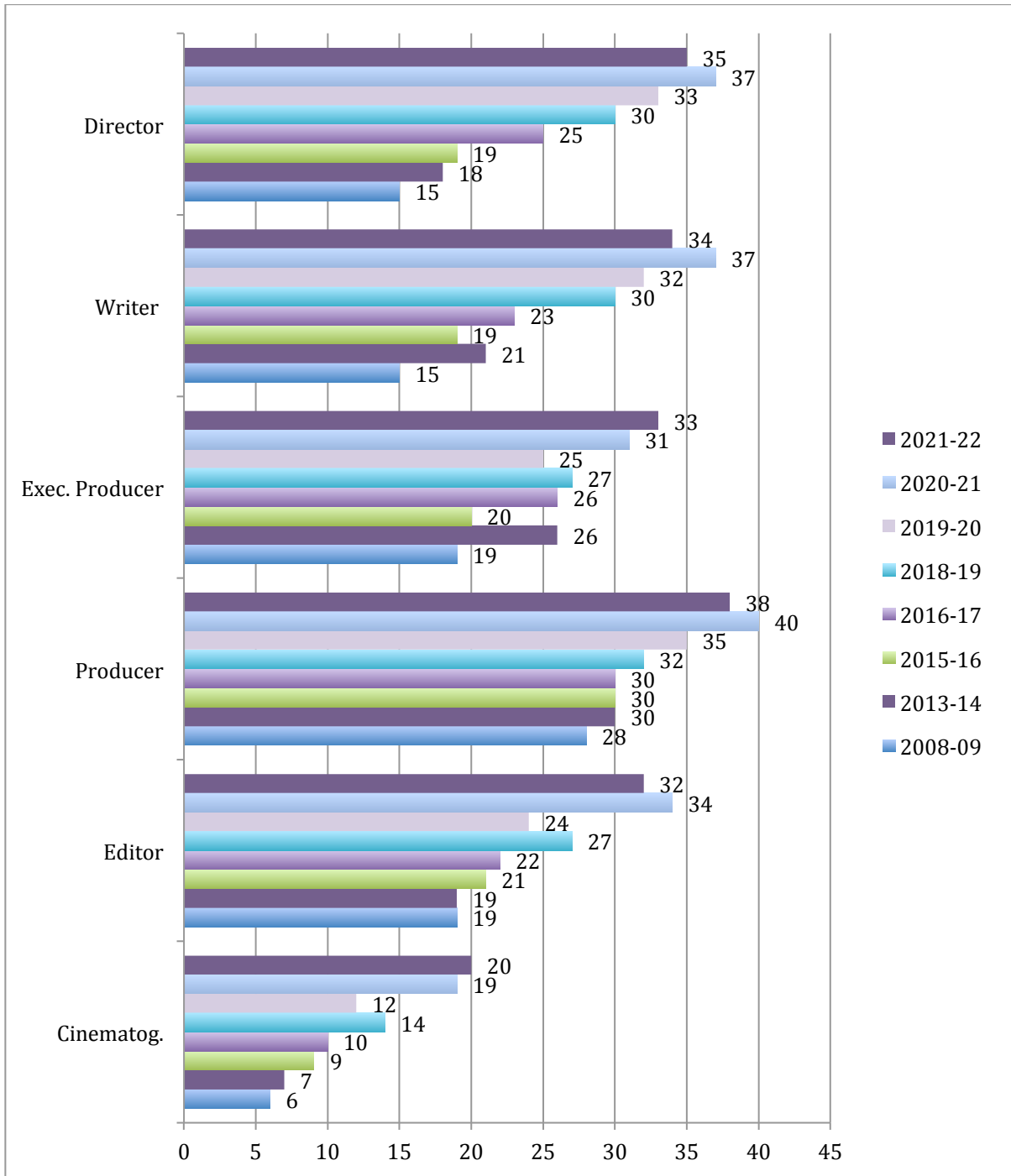


Figure 13 provides a historical comparison of 2021-22 figures with those from prior years. By role, women comprised 35% of directors, down 2 percentage points from 37% in 2020-21. Women accounted for 34% of writers, down 3 percentage points from 37% in 2020-21. Women made up 33% of executive producers, up 2 percentage points from 31% in 2020-21. Women comprised 38% of producers, down 2 percentage points from 40% in 2020-21. Women accounted for 32% of editors, down 2 percentage points from 34% in 2020-21. Women made up 20% of cinematographers, up 1 percentage point from 19% in 2020-21.

Figure 13.

Historical Comparison of Percentages of Women Working on Narrative Features by Role



Findings for Composers

Overall, women comprised 17% and men 83% of composers working on narrative and documentary films in 2021-22.

Composers, who happen to be women, fare better on documentaries than narrative features. Women accounted for 20% of composers working on documentaries and 13% of composers working on narrative features.

When a film had at least one woman director, women accounted for 23% of composers. When a film had exclusively men directors, women comprised 12% of composers.

Important Relationships

Films with at least one woman director had substantially higher percentages of women working as writers, editors, and cinematographers than films with exclusively male directors (see Figure 14).

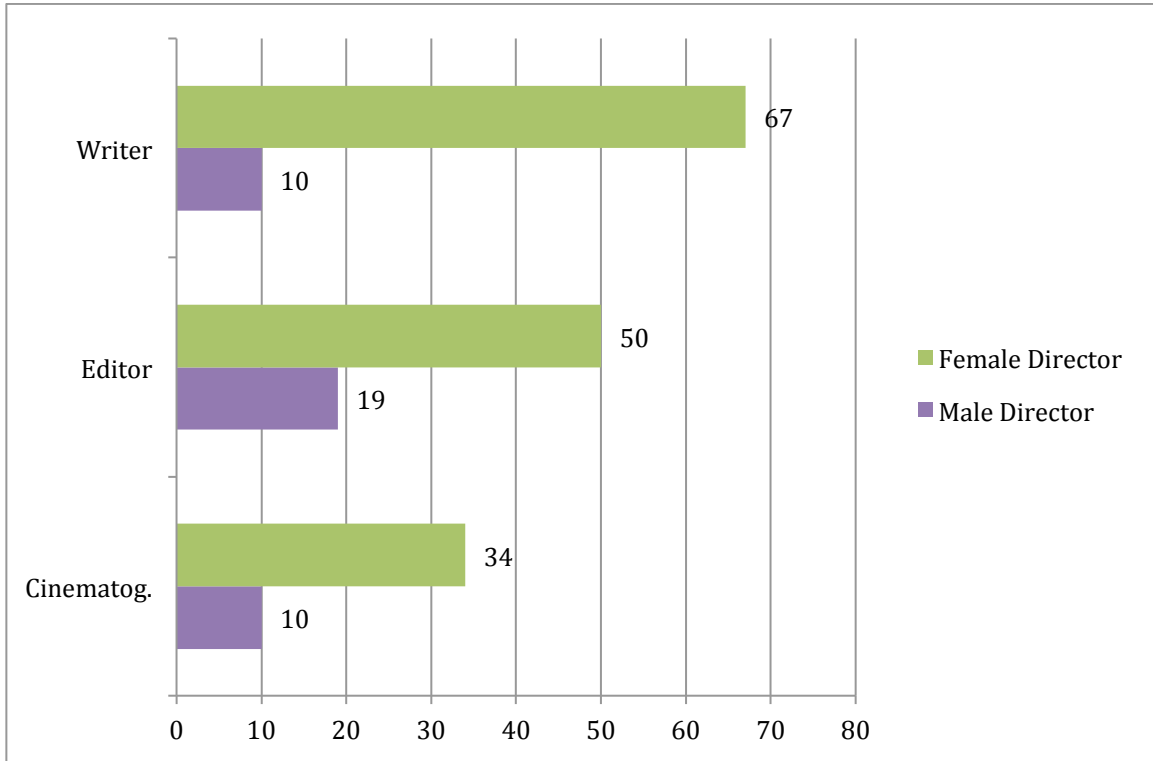
On films with at least one woman director, women comprised 67% of writers. On films with exclusively male directors, women accounted for 10% of writers.

On films with at least one woman director, women comprised 50% of editors. On films with exclusively male directors, women accounted for 19% of editors.

On films with at least one woman director, women comprised 34% of cinematographers. On films with exclusively male directors, women accounted for 10% of cinematographers.

Figure 14.

Comparison of Employment of Behind-the-Scenes Women on Films with At Least One Woman Director vs. Films with Exclusively Male Directors



Endnotes

¹Morfoot, Addie. (September 16, 2021). The Post-COVID Festival Circuit: The Future is Hybrid. *Documentary Magazine*. www.documentary.org/feature/post-covid-festival-circuit-future-hybrid.

²Naisbitt, John. (1982). *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives*. New York: Warner Books.

³The festivals include AFI Fest; Ann Arbor Film Festival; Atlanta Film Festival; Austin Film Festival; Chicago International Film Festival; Cinequest Film Festival; Cleveland International Film Festival; Florida Film Festival; Hamptons International Film Festival; Nashville Film Festival; New York Film Festival; Rhode Island International Film Festival; St. Louis International Film Festival; San Francisco International Film Festival; Santa Barbara International Film Festival; Seattle International Film Festival; Slamdance Film Festival; Sundance Film Festival; SXSW Film Festival; Tribeca Film Festival. In total, this study considers 9,960 credits on 730 films in 2021-22, and over 105,360 credits on more than 10,200 films over the period of 2008 to 2022.

All of the films included in the study were posted on the festival's website and/or in program guides. The study included U.S. feature films (narrative and documentaries) screening/streaming at the festivals, including those in and out of competition.

There are no definitive or objective lists from reputable sources designating the "top" festivals. However, festivals appearing on the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Oscar qualifying lists (short films/documentaries) tend to be well regarded. All of the festivals included in this study appear on those, as well as other, industry lists.

For the purposes of this study, independent film is broadly defined as films made outside of the studio system. However, the study does include films produced by independent companies owned by the major studios.

⁴The selection of film festivals in 2021-22 is identical to the selection in 2020-21. Note that the selection of festivals shifted slightly from 2019-20 to 2020-21 due to the pandemic. The Palm Springs International Film Festival and Telluride Film Festival canceled and did not post selections. In addition, the Ashland Independent Film Festival, Nantucket Film Festival, and New Directors/New Directions were omitted from the 2020-21 list. The following festivals were added: Ann Arbor Film Festival, Nashville Film Festival, and Seattle International Film Festival. Because the list of festivals shifted from 2019-20 to 2020-21, historical comparisons should be made with caution.