

Homme sweet homme

Despite festival prizes, critical recognition and box-office success, female directors are missing — again — from the 2023 César nominations. Where can the French industry go from here?

When the nominations for France's annual César awards were announced on January 25, they were met with both vitriol and victory. On one hand, the French industry has applauded a line-up that has found a balance between audience appeal and auteur ambition, dispelling criticism — for now — that the Césars are insular and out of touch.

Four of the films with the most nominations have done particularly well: Cédric Jimenez's *November* (2.4 million tickets sold), Cédric Klapisch's *Rise* (1.3 million), Louis Garrel's *The Innocent* (1/50,000) and Dominik Moll's *The Night Of The 12th* (with a solid if not spectacular 510,000).

On the other hand, not a single film directed by a woman has been nominated for best director and the entire nominations are dominated by films directed by white men.

"It is mind-boggling that among the five nominations for best directing, there is not one woman," says Anne-Dominique Toussaint of Les Films des Tournelles — a respected producer with 30 years' experience and a César member for at least the past two decades — whose credits include *The Innocent*. "It is disappointing because there were beautiful films made by women this year, so it's not because there were not any worthy ones to choose from."

Valeria Bruni Tedeschi is the only woman in the best film category for *Forever Young* (*Les Amandiers*). In the 48-year history of the Césars, only one woman has been named best director — Tonie Marshall for *Venus Beauty Institute* in 2000.

The films directed by women that did not receive a single nomination this year include Rebecca Zlotowski's *Other People's Children* (which had



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Anne-Dominique Toussaint,
Les Films des Tournelles

its world premiere in competition at Venice), Alice Diop's *Saint Omer* (winner of the Silver Lion and Lion of the Future at Venice), Alice Winocour's *Paris Memories* (which premiered in Directors' Fortnight at Cannes and had its North American premiere at Toronto) and Mia Hansen-Love's *One Fine Morning* (which also debuted in the Cannes sidebar and raised eyebrows at the time as to why it was not in the main competition).

Moreover, Olivier Dahan's biopic of pioneering feminist Simone Veil, *Simone: A Woman Of The Century*, the joint most successful French film of 2022 in France (along with *November*), also failed to garner a nomination.

Activists, led by gender equality group Collectif 50/50, were quick to react and César's Instagram account was flooded with cinephiles criticising the lack of female representation. This all comes after a similarly controversial 2022 awards at which Xavier Giannoli swept through every major category with wins for *Lost Illusions*, while the female

directors — who included prize winners from other major festivals such as Audrey Diwan with the Venice Golden Lion-winning *Happening* and Julia Ducournau for Cannes Palme d'Or winner *Titane* — left empty-handed.

Rock the boat, not the vote

In the short term, the Academy of Cinema Arts and Techniques, which runs the awards, has worked to change the criteria to become a voter, hoping to attract more diverse and younger members into the mix. This year there were 520 new voting members and, of the 4,705 current members, 44% are women with the organisation pushing to see that number rise to an equal 50-50 ratio in the future.

However, the parity problem may lie less in the academy's increasingly equal membership and more in an issue inherent in France's patriarchal society, which is clearly more complex to solve than a simple shift in membership.

"It happened as the result of a vote," says Toussaint. "There does not seem to be a deliberate intention to not put women in that category. We need to question ourselves as an industry because it is weird. We need to ask — how is it possible that this can happen? It is important to point it out. The fact it is shocking to people is a good sign that we're not letting it be the norm anymore. Something is wrong and now the entire profession is taking notice. It is encouraging."

Producer Laurence Lascary,



founder and head of production company De l'Autre Cote Du Periph, an academy member since 2018 and active member of Collectif 50/50, is hoping the conspicuous omission will lead to a deep dive into the voting process and membership profile.

"Nominations are always based on subjectivity, there is never unanimity," Lascary says. "But in a year when films made by women are met with success from critics and festivals and at the box office, we have to question the process. We have to look into it further."

She adds that the role of the academy moving forward should be to "ask questions and try to understand" and be more transparent in explaining to its members how this occurred. "It needs to take a deep dive and analyse ages, professions, experience, subjectivity. Its role is to try to understand why — who is voting and how did this happen?"

Fabienne Silvestre, head of independent Paris-based organisation Le Lab Femmes de Cinema, however, says: "I'm less interested in knowing why we got here than in what we can do so it does not happen again. Hopefully this scandalous omission can help us move

(Right) *Saint Omer* director Alice Diop





Left: Getty Images; Center: Instagram; Right: Getty Images

WORD OF MOUTH



Photograph by Pipp

Nikki Amuka-Bird

The Nigerian-British actress, who stars in M Night Shyamalan's *Knock At The Cabin*, turns to her 'Blacktress' WhatsApp group, fellow cast and her mother's generation for top viewing tips

When you're on set, you have a lot of time to chat to other creators and actors between set-ups, and quite often we do talk about films.

I have different friends for different genres, like when I was working on the comedy series *Avenue 5*, an actor called Zach Woods and I would talk for ages about independent films and European cinema. He got me into directors like Céline Sciamma.

An actress friend of mine, Cherelle Skeete, has started a great WhatsApp group called *Blacktress* — the clue is in the title. She lets us all know new projects coming out with actresses of colour that we can support and events that are happening. When *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* came out, a mutual friend of ours, [actor] Kobna Holdbrook-Smith, put on an event called *Peckanda Forever* in Peckham [south London]. He rented out one of the huge cinemas, Peckhamplex, and everyone was invited to come in African dress. It was really celebratory.

Outside of the industry, I tend to go to my older friends for recommendations, from my mum's generation. They raised me on the classics, and when they're looking to go to the cinema and to take themselves out of the house, they are looking to be intellectually stimulated.

Online, I'll go to YouTube and watch a lot of behind-the-scenes clips or radio interviews. I love *The Breakfast Club*, which is a radio show in New York, and I'll read the culture sections of *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*.

A couple of years ago, when Bafta was restructuring, I was invited to become a member. It's become a real gamechanger for me — as a film buff, at this time of year when all the films that are in consideration are coming into your inbox, I feel like a kid in a candy store. I thought *TAR* with Cate Blanchett was mind-blowing. I try to watch a film a day, but then you see a film like that, and you need a few days to process it.

Interview by Mona Tabbara



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Laurence Lascary, *De l'Autre Cote Du Périph*

forward so the academy can reflect on the voting process and determine if it needs to change — and if not, what we can do in parallel to make sure women aren't forgotten in the future."

Silvestre says the academy is "in a tough position because it does not pre-select films", but adds that maybe the rules need to be updated.

Michel Rebichon, former editor-in-chief of magazine *Studio*, veteran industry observer and academy member since 2006, points out that without any pre-selection or campaigning, there are simply "too many films". He says that most members do not see enough of the films before voting or opt not to vote if they have not seen enough titles.

"Members should have to see a minimum of films in order to vote. Maybe the academy should have some kind of card that has to be checked to prove they have seen at least half the films," he suggests.

Silvestre says the job of the *Femmes de Cinema* lab and other groups should be to first list the eligible women in each category and communicate ahead of the first round of nominations to help voters choose from the sea of titles.

Some voters admit to not voting in the first round because of the volume of films to watch, but say they are catching up on films for the second round. Others say too often the teams that work on certain films simply vote for their own movies, which also sways the outcome.

Lascary says that while the academy has yet to communicate with members how it plans to avoid a repeat at future ceremonies, signs of change are brewing.

"Already we can see that they are listening more, paying more attention. A few years ago, they would have said that we can't even talk about the vote. The dialogue is more open now, but it has to be followed by action." ■

Rebecca Leffler