

THE CRITICAL FIRST SHOT: ACCELERATING DIVERSITY IN THE FILM DIRECTOR'S CHAIR



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CENTER FOR
SCHOLARS &
STORYTELLERS

UCLA

In partnership with: **LIONSGATE**

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INTRODUCTION FROM CSS



At the Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS), we understand the power of research, and we strive to support executives and creators who believe that underrepresented groups should have more opportunities. The biases in the entertainment business are entrenched and systemic, but we believe that evidence-based strategies can strengthen the argument for inclusive content and fair hiring opportunities.

We conducted this study on first-time major feature directors to begin the process of using data to examine persistent biases that have thwarted progress toward the industry's stated diversity and inclusion goals¹. A commitment to diversity and inclusivity requires a wide-ranging comprehension of diverse social, cultural, historical, and individual contexts. In this investigation, we turned to collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data to offer more holistic answers to these questions. The qualitative data offers additional contextualization and nuances to make sense of the quantitative data-driven insights.

Data does not lie. Our hope is that this report will be helpful for anyone making decisions about who gets opportunities to tell stories with authentic and inclusive representation and will kickstart a much needed conversation about that critical first shot.



Lee, Jamie, Becky and Yalda



MESSAGE FROM LIONSGATE

The mission of the Lionsgate Inclusive Content team is to partner with the Motion Picture Group in the development and release of a slate of films that look like the diverse, global audiences that consume them.

We have intentionally honed in on creative team diversity (the representation of women, people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, and people with disabilities as writers, producers, and directors) because **underrepresented filmmakers are significantly more likely to deliver inclusive content, or films that represent diverse groups in authentic and empowering ways, have fewer harmful tropes and stereotypes, hire more diverse crew behind the scenes, and appeal to diverse audiences.**

The decision to greenlight a film often hinges on confidence in the director, which is often based on prior studio credits. Therefore, many female and BIPOC directors, who are deeply underrepresented in the experienced director pool, face a Catch-22.

If a director must have already directed a studio feature to be hired on a future one, scores of talented, qualified underrepresented directors will simply not be hired at all...which perpetuates the lack of director diversity in Hollywood we see today.

We partnered with CSS on this study to surface data that might inspire a change in how we evaluate first-time directors at our studio and across the industry.

We are acutely aware that the industry does not need additional DEI stats. What we need is action, and this report illuminates exactly what we need to do: hire more first-time directors from underrepresented backgrounds. We are proud of the work we have already done here, with films from first-time underrepresented feature directors including Adele Lim (JOY RIDE) and Mary Nighy (ALICE, DARLING) but there is much more work to do and we are committed to being a part of the change by sparking conversations that shift mindsets and behavior.



SVP & Head of Inclusive Content, Lionsgate Motion Picture Group
Kamala Avila-Salmon
VP, Inclusive Marketing & Business Strategy
Mana Yamaguchi



PROJECT OVERVIEW

QUANTITATIVE PROCESS

1,200 FILMS

941 LIVE ACTION FILMS

705 EXPERIENCED

232 FIRST-TIME

EXPERIENCED VS FIRST TIME X PRODUCTION BUDGET, CRITIC AND AUDIENCE REVIEWS, DOMESTIC BOX OFFICE

We compiled a list of the top 100 films per year from 2010-2021 (based on domestic box office for each year; 1200 films total).

We next collected information about each movie's domestic and international box office, critical and audience reviews, and production budget (when available). Looking only at live-action theatrical releases (n=941)², we identified the director(s) of the film and determined whether the movie on our list of 941 movies was their first major feature or not (movies that made less than \$15 million at the box office were not counted as a major film - see key terms). We next categorized all directors by race and gender.

If the individual was a first-time director (n=232), we collected publicly available data on the projects they were involved in prior to their first feature. In addition, we conducted a series of 12 interviews with two groups: 6 directors (first-hand experiences) and 6 industry executives (second-hand experiences). We then analyzed this qualitative data for relevant themes and additional nuance. For a full description of methods, see page 17.

QUALITATIVE PROCESS



THEMES & INSIGHTS

CODING & ANALYSIS

6 DIRECTORS

6 EXECUTIVES

12 INTERVIEWS

²Animation is a specific genre with additional considerations beyond what exists in the live action directing pipeline. As such, we did not feel we could combine animation and live action and deliver a cohesive, accurate analysis.



KEY TERMS



★ MAJOR FILM

In order to determine whether a director had prior movie directing experience, we categorized what they had done previously. Many had made an indie movie that did not break through in the marketplace. Thus, we defined a major film as a film that made more than \$15 million domestically. For more information on how we categorized please see methods on page 19.

★ EXPERIENCED DIRECTOR

Directors who made at least one major film prior to the movie(s) that they directed in the 941 titles we analyzed.

★ FIRST-TIME DIRECTOR

Directors who had NOT made a major film prior to the film they directed that was listed in the 941 titles we analyzed.

★ STUDIO

A major entertainment company that produces and distributes its content.

★ UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS/COMMUNITIES (URG)

In this report this term refers to women and people of color. We recognize many additional URG exist (e.g. LGBTQIA+, people with disabilities, etc.), which are beyond the scope of this study (see methods on page 20).

★ AIR

Authentically Inclusive Representation - defined by the Center for Scholars & Storytellers - involves examining two critical inclusion aspects of a film:

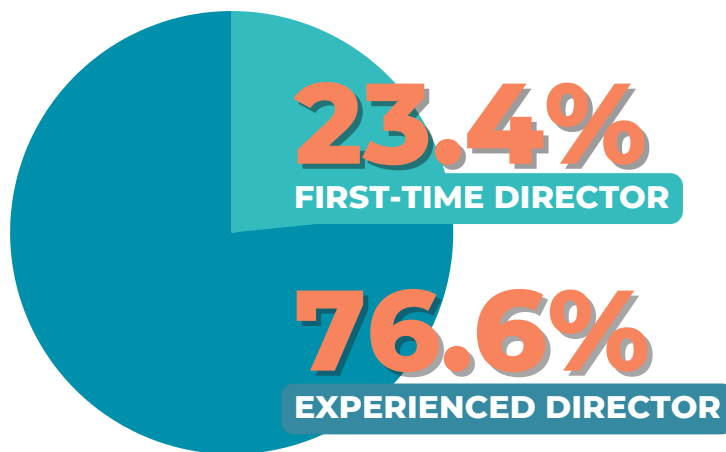
- (a) if there are individuals from diverse backgrounds (in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and their intersections) on the screen and behind the scenes.
- (b) if such diversity is present, whether the characters and story on-screen reflect genuine aspects of the culture being portrayed (i.e., instead of relying on and reinscribing stereotypes or tropes).





THE CRITICAL FIRST SHOT

Given the perception that first-time directors are risky, studios are more likely to hire experienced directors. However, in order to become a studio feature director to begin with, it is inherent that at some point there was a “risk” taken on that director. If not, the same group of experienced studio feature directors would be involved in all major studio feature films. To an extent, our data shows that this is true. When we broke down the pool of major feature film directors over the last 12 years and categorized them as either first-time directors or experienced directors, we found that experienced directors made up an overwhelming majority (approx 77%) of all major feature films.



“When those first-time films are put together, it depends on how well-connected you are. The opportunities will automatically go to a certain pool of director talent. Opportunities that others don’t have.... I think that gap exists because people hire who they know and who they’re comfortable with. And we’ve created an industry or a machine that allows for that.”

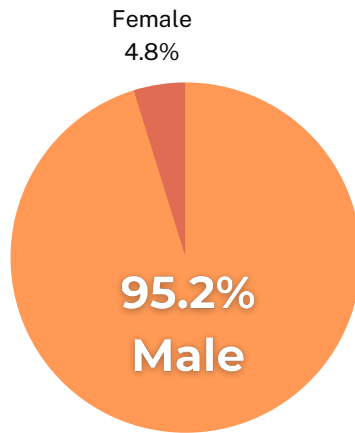
- Male executive, 24 years of experience



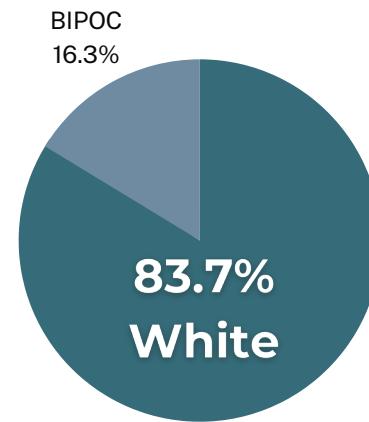
THE CRITICAL FIRST SHOT

Decades of systemic discrimination and limited access to opportunities in the entertainment industry means that most experienced directors are White and male³.

GENDER BREAKDOWN OF EXPERIENCED DIRECTORS



RACE BREAKDOWN OF EXPERIENCED DIRECTORS



“The fact that there are more male directors than female directors, obviously, men had a head start. So, even if we’re not 50/50 yet, the thing is, we’re still very behind on giving a lot of studio projects to female directors..”

- Female director, 17 years of experience

While more women and people of color have been hired as directors recently, if the rate of overall hiring in the experienced director pool continues,

it would take **175 YEARS TO REACH GENDER PARITY** and **68 YEARS TO REACH RACIAL PARITY.**

(see methods on page 24 for more information on how we determined these numbers).



THE CRITICAL FIRST SHOT



Given that studio feature films usually have the largest production and marketing budgets, both of which are highly correlated to box office success, directing a studio movie is one of the chief pathways to commercial success. And commercial success is a frequent prerequisite for ongoing future opportunities. In other words, **becoming a first-time studio feature director is a critical step to securing the next feature job. Thus we asked the question: are these currently limited opportunities (i.e. directing your first major studio film) equitably afforded to women and people of color?**

Importantly, according to our qualitative data and contrary to conventional studio narratives about what underrepresented groups do and do not want to direct, women and people of color are not underrepresented in the director's chair for top films due to an aversion for four-quadrant, big-budget, commercial genre films. They are willing, if not strongly desire, to undertake these films as a professional challenge, but they are rarely given the opportunities to do so. To be clear, four-quadrant, genre type films typically have the largest production and marketing budgets– and often, therefore, the biggest box office success.

“I’m still trying to do a big budget action. I’ve wanted to do a Marvel movie for so long.”

- Female director, 24 years of experience

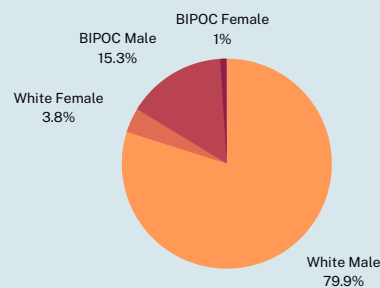
HIRING FIRST-TIME DIRECTORS FROM UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS FOR STUDIO FILMS IS A CRITICAL STEP IN THE JOURNEY TOWARDS EQUITY.



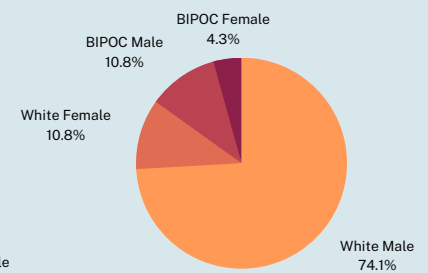
THE CRITICAL FIRST SHOT

In analyzing both the first-time director pool and the experienced director pool, we found that, strikingly, the racial and gender composition was not significantly different between the two pools.

**EXPERIENCED DIRECTORS
GENDER/RACE BREAKDOWN**



**FIRST-TIME DIRECTORS
GENDER/RACE BREAKDOWN**



Despite increased efforts and conversation in Hollywood post #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter around inclusion in the industry, we did not find a significant difference in the diversity of first-time director talent. Meaning, the vast majority of first-time directing opportunities in the industry are still being awarded to White men.

It is possible to reach gender and racial parity within the first-time director pool much more quickly than the experienced director pool. If diversity among first-time directors continues at the current rate, it would be possible to reach racial parity (of first-time directors) in 15 years, and gender parity within 20 years.

Yet, it is not sufficient to wait for this change to arrive on its own, especially in an increasingly complicated and volatile media landscape. Accelerating change in the experienced directors' pool, which is the ultimate goal, needs both intention and urgency to act. **Industry leaders have the power to hire more talented and qualified first-time directors from diverse backgrounds now.**

This study tests some of the assumptions that guide hiring decisions around first-time directors. First, we examined the underlying assumption of whether first-time directors are indeed riskier than experienced directors. Then we took a look at how many first-time directors were women and people of color (and their intersections). Finally, we examined how much directing experience is deemed “enough” to get that first major film, and if there were differences for gender or race.

“People hire people that look like them or that speak a common language. And because the industry historically has been dominated by White males, the common language that seems impressive or seems like what gets someone a job is perpetuated. I think that storytelling for the masses is driven by a male audience in some ways. Therefore, there's an idea that the person behind the camera should look like who they think is driving the audience.”

– Female Film Executive, 15+ years of experience





MAIN FINDINGS

(PLEASE SEE PAGE 13 FOR MORE DETAIL AND STATISTICS FOR EACH FINDING)

1

FIRST-TIME DIRECTORS DELIVER SIMILAR DOMESTIC BOX OFFICE, ROI, AND REVIEWS AS EXPERIENCED DIRECTORS WHEN ADJUSTED FOR PRODUCTION BUDGETS

One of the biggest barriers to first-time directors being offered their first major feature is the assumption that they are a riskier business bet than experienced directors. Our finding suggests the exact opposite.

First-time directors are no riskier than experienced directors. Since a diverse pool of first-time directors is critical to future equity in the experienced director pool, we believe this is an especially important finding.

“There’s something about new talent that often is not appreciated enough. The powers that be are so hell bent on the safety of it. I’m hearing that a lot, particularly now that I’m at a studio and not a network. Truth be told, I have said it to the CEO of our company: that diversity and talent are not exclusive. Diversity doesn’t equal risk, which a lot of people often say and it’s not true.”

- Female executive, 30+ years of experience

“There have been efforts to be inclusive of female directors or directors from diverse backgrounds. Optically, there is a change. But some people have better meetings, and might be able to speak the industry’s language or have more comfort with current standards of the industry. They still might prefer or like the pitch from a White, male perspective.”

- Female executive, 18+ years experience

2

IN THE PAST 12 YEARS, FIRST-TIME DIRECTORS FROM UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS (WOMEN AND PEOPLE OF COLOR) MADE UP ONLY 26% OF ALL FIRST-TIME DIRECTORS

Investing in first-time directors represents a major opportunity to increase diversity in the overall director pool. By awarding more first-time opportunities to underrepresented directors, the pace towards parity in the overall director pool will quicken.

Our qualitative findings revealed two key systemic factors that effectively barricade underrepresented first-time directors from making real strides: (i) the silos of industry networks and social capital that reward and prioritize insiders, and (ii) the industry’s rigid criteria for assessing potential projects largely based on a White, male perspective.

3

BEFORE THEIR FIRST MAJOR FEATURE, WOMEN HAVE TO PROVE THEMSELVES BY DIRECTING 41% MORE PROJECTS THAN MEN

While all first-time directors face systemic hurdles, women directors contend with significant additional barriers and biases. Namely, doubt in their ability to direct.

While our quantitative data puts a number to the significantly higher level of experience women have before being hired for their first major feature, our qualitative data revealed that women directors encounter this gender bias and a severe lack of support both from those who are hiring them AND on set while they are doing their jobs.

“There’s a language of masculinity. ‘You are steering the ship,’ ‘You are the captain,’ ‘You are the general.’ How films are made, especially during the earlier years, it is as if the production is an army. The idea that women can lead something like this is so foreign. Even now people still don’t believe women can lead a large group of people.”

Female director, 25 years in the industry



RECOMMENDATIONS

#1 Set specific hiring goals for underrepresented first-time directors in your slate.

Make a commitment in your slate to either a specific number or percentage of feature films that will be helmed by underrepresented first-time directors. Consider adding incentives for development executives and leaders for bringing in projects from qualified first-time directors from underrepresented backgrounds.

#2 Evaluate pitches, projects, and hires with an AIR lens and AIR tools.

a. Check your biases around which films underrepresented directors want to make.

Too often underrepresented directors (especially women) are not given opportunities in male-leaning genres with large production budgets such as action and fantasy. We found evidence in our data that underrepresented directors do, in fact, want to make these films.

b. Assess the AIR of directing opportunities your studio is sending to women and BIPOC directors.

Studios may be under-estimating the role that authentic representation plays in their directing decisions. Be wary of sending material with underdeveloped, subservient, or disempowered women and characters of color. Alternatively or in addition, communicate your desire for underrepresented directors to address potential problem areas in scripts you are offering.

The bonus will be that, **as our research shows⁴**, you are likely to achieve box office success at a higher rate.

#3 Invest in pipeline programs and initiatives that guarantee a job opportunity for underrepresented directors versus ones that simply mentor them.

These programs are a critical way that underrepresented directors create support and professional networks in an industry where such vital networks are otherwise blocked for them in many ways. While continuing to invest in network, support, and relationship building, these programs should also think practically about what a director needs to get hired for future projects - credits. Build networks AND actual guaranteed job opportunities with your programs.

“You have to look at which movies are getting made versus which movies are getting hired. I think one out of maybe every three movies that hires a director actually gets greenlit. I would suspect that the core of the greenlight is a much smaller percentage of diverse hires than the hires in general. So, that signals that the movies that are turnkey, franchise films for each studio are less diverse.”

-Female executive, 18 years of experience

“So many of the women who are applying [to prestigious diversity directing programs] and have made it to the final round have gone to film school. They have incredible resumes, have made shorts, and have support from a lot of great institutions. But they are still looking for help to make the real transition into working professionally.”

Female director, 25 years of experience



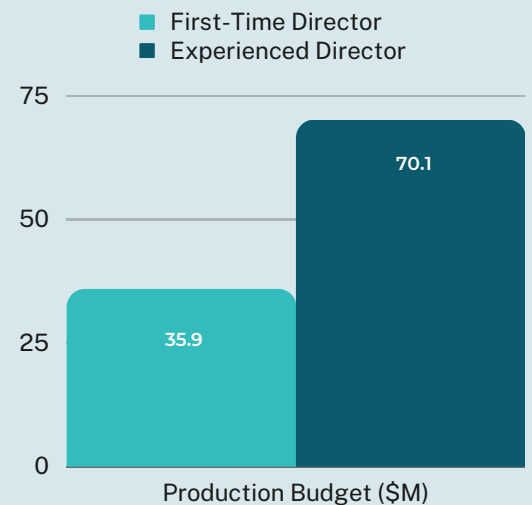
DETAILED FINDINGS

#1

FIRST-TIME DIRECTORS DELIVER SIMILAR DOMESTIC BOX OFFICE, ROI, AND REVIEWS AS EXPERIENCED DIRECTORS WHEN ADJUSTED FOR PRODUCTION BUDGETS

Regardless of gender and race, executives choosing directors often hold a strong association between inexperience and risk. They may characterize hiring first-time directors as “taking a chance” or exposing one’s self to risk (i.e. a “chance” on a new director is “risky”). Accordingly, production budgets are on average much higher for experienced directors (\$70 million on average) compared to first-time directors (\$36 million on average).

AVERAGE PRODUCTION BUDGETS AMONGST FIRST-TIME AND EXPERIENCED DIRECTORS



Thus, in order to accurately compare the success of a film directed by an experienced vs first-time director, we needed to account for this difference. By controlling for the production budget through a statistical analysis called multiple linear regression, we were able to determine that the predicted box office would not be significantly different between films directed by first-time vs experienced directors.

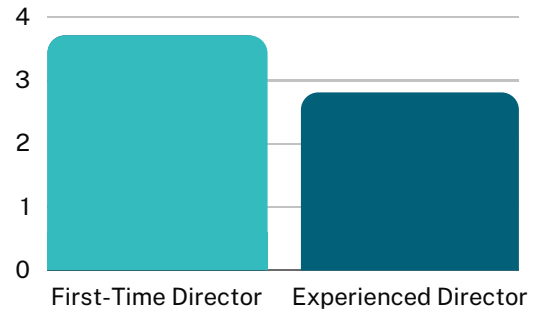
In other words, if first-time directors were given budgets at the same levels of experienced directors, the box office should be approximately the same.



DETAILED FINDINGS

We also ran an analysis of the return on investment (ROI = Domestic Box Office / Production Budget) on each of the titles and found that first-time directors actually surpass experienced directors by 42%!

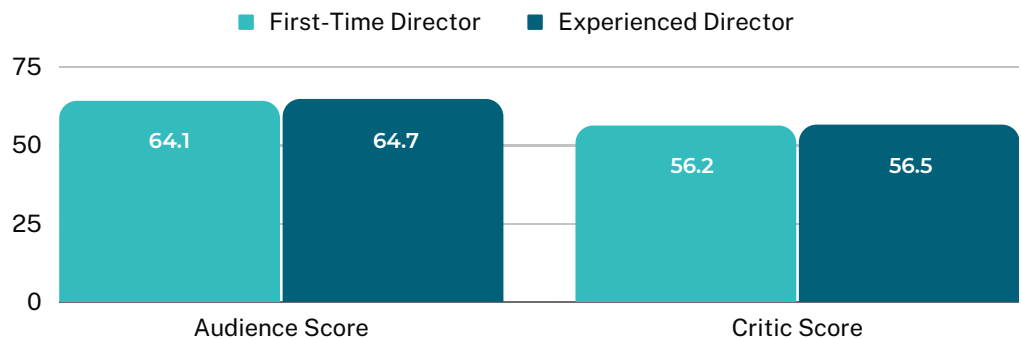
RETURN ON INVESTMENT FOR FIRST-TIME DIRECTOR AND EXPERIENCED DIRECTOR



Note: We removed two outliers in the First-Time Director group. When they were included the ROI went up to 5.75 for this group.

Beyond the financial success of the film, we also see that first-time directors are performing on par with experienced directors in both critic and audience reviews, even when they receive lower production budgets to make their films.

ROTTEN TOMATOES PERFORMANCE



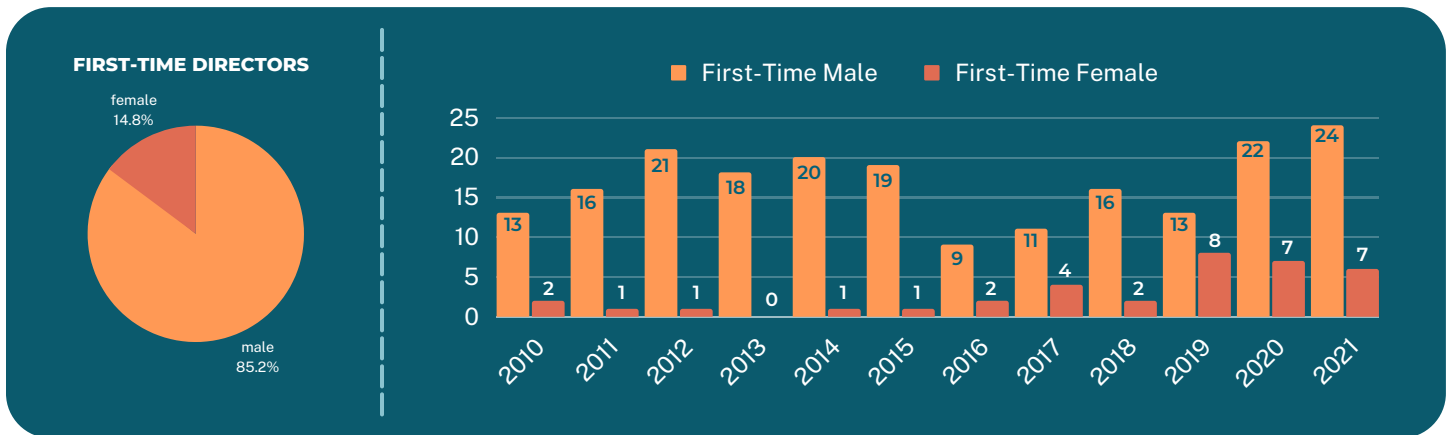


DETAILED FINDINGS

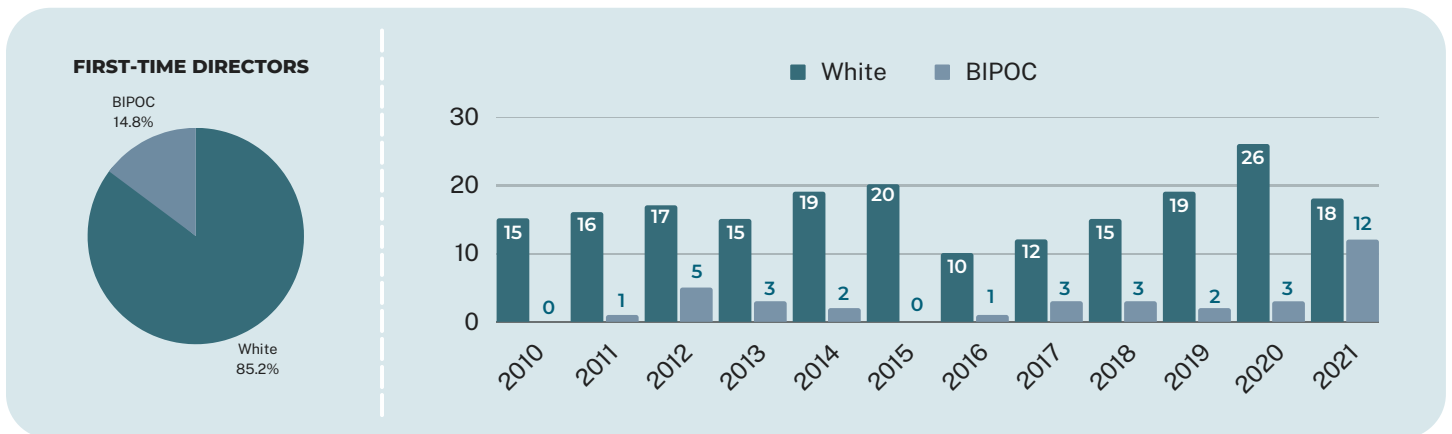


#2

IN THE PAST 12 YEARS, FIRST-TIME DIRECTORS FROM UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS (WOMEN AND PEOPLE OF COLOR) MADE UP ONLY 26% OF ALL FIRST-TIME DIRECTORS



Among all top films directed by a first-time director in the last 12 years, 85.2% of first-time directors were men while 14.8% were women. Small improvements have been made in the number of first-time women directors in recent years. However, the pace is still too slow, especially when looking at the numbers of first-time women directors as a whole, which dropped in 2021.



We see similar findings with respect to race with only 14.8% of first-time directors being people of color. While we did see a jump in 2021, we see fluctuations throughout the years.



“With studio-based projects, there still isn’t a lot of diversity among decision makers. So, they are going to hire people they feel comfortable with that they know. It’s human nature.”

- Male executive, 23 years of experience



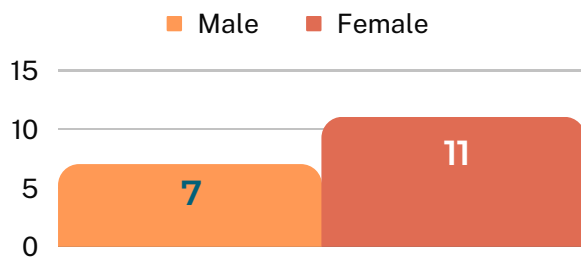


DETAILED FINDINGS

#3

BEFORE THEIR FIRST MAJOR FEATURE, WOMEN HAVE TO PROVE THEMSELVES BY DIRECTING 41% MORE PROJECTS THAN MEN

AVERAGE NUMBER OF PROJECTS BEFORE FIRST MAJOR PRODUCTION



Amongst our first-time director pool, women had worked on roughly 11 projects before directing their first major studio feature, compared to men who worked on an average of 7 projects - a 41% difference.

	Documentaries Before First Film	TV Series Before First Film	Shorts Before First Film	Total Work Before Major Production
male (195)	1	2	3	7
female (35)	1	8	2	11

“It’s not until recently, that you saw the jump from an independent film to Marvel. That’s usually reserved for White males. That big jump like that. It’s rare that a female or a person of color gets that same grace. I’m not saying it hasn’t happened, but the other route is doing a lot of episodic work, shadowing on sets and learning how to shoot television, getting those hours in between your independent films.”

- Male executive, 23 years of experience





DETAILED FINDINGS

Despite visible progress in opening up more opportunities and some mentorship for underrepresented directors, our interviewees expressed a sore lack of systemic support that has not truly met them where they are. Even when women directors have followed the same traditional path to success as their White male counterparts, they still have to build systems and networks of support on their own.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF PROJECTS BEFORE FIRST PRODUCTION



Our data showed that only 1% of experienced directors and 4% of first-time directors (17 directors in total in the study) were women of color. Therefore, we were unable to formulate conclusions with some of our analyses about women of color because the sample size was too small.

“A lot of times women aren’t given the big stories, right? They’re not given the big blockbuster stories, the big blockbuster budgets, and then they don’t get big blockbuster box office results. I think there’s an adjustment that needs to happen from the studio money side of seeing women as worthy of an investment.”

- **Female director, 18 years of experience**

“It’s a really big thing for women and any kinds of filmmakers who are underrepresented. The studio network does not only need to support them in making the art, but also in promoting them as an auteur, an artist.”

- **Female director, 18 years of experience**



METHOD



We compiled a list of the top 100 movies each year from the years 2010-2021⁵. This list is typically made up of the highest production and marketing budget films, which we know are strong predictors of box office success. A majority of releases coming from major studios end up making the top 100 each year.

For example, when looking at one of the largest studio's releases from 2017 to 2021, the number of films reaching the top 100 each year totaled, on average, 63% of their releases each year.

Additionally, when looking at the directors on these films (first-time vs experienced) we see that first-time directors are equally as underrepresented in the releases that did not make the top 100 as they are in the top 100 films (making up an average of 18% of directors each year for non-top 100 films from 2017-2021).

This list also included the production budget and box office (Domestic and International) totals for each film. We then used IMDb to access and collect information about the director(s) of each respective film, and noted whether or not it was their first major feature film (see key terms on page 5 for definitions).

If it was indeed the director's first major feature film, we considered them a **first-time director (FTD)**. For these directors, we wanted to understand what their career in film was like *prior* to this film.

For work completed prior to their first major feature film, we counted the following:

- Documentaries
- TV series
- Shorts
- Years between early work and first major studio feature film

If the director was involved in directing indie films prior to their first major feature, we collected data on the year, budget, and box office of the film.



METHOD



★ EXPERIENCED DIRECTOR

If the director of a film in our dataset had already directed a theatrically released major feature film that made over \$15M at the domestic box office, they were considered an **experienced director**. There are several directors in our dataset who directed their first major feature film that made it into the top 100 between 2010-2021⁵, and also directed several other films that were included in our dataset as well. For their first major feature film, we considered them an FTD. However, for the other films directed by the same person in our dataset, they were then considered an Experienced Director.

★ DEMOGRAPHICS OF DIRECTORS

Because we were primarily interested in how opportunities and production budgets might vary by race and gender and because race and gender information are relatively easily available (versus other underrepresented groups like LGBTQIA+, people with disabilities, etc.), we collected this data for every director in our dataset. Race and gender were judged by independent raters (research interns) based on publicly available information online. To increase statistical power and due to an overwhelmingly large sample of White directors, we ultimately categorized directors as White or People of Color. Additionally, the method for gender determination was limited to men and women in the current work. Given our reliance on publicly available information, this investigation was not well-suited to accommodate intersex, transgender and/or nonbinary identities, so to a certain extent we had to incorrectly assume that all directors could be placed in one of the categories. Future work with more resources could move beyond a gender binary, and examine biases along other lines as well, such as sexuality and disability status.



METHOD

★ ANALYSES

Descriptive statistics were provided to examine differences in outcome variables (i.e. box office, production budget, critic reviews, etc.) between different grouping variables such as first time vs experienced directors along with categorizations by race and gender. For more advanced analyses, we conducted a multiple linear regression with director status (first time vs. experienced) and production budget as predictors of domestic box office.

In order to determine years to gender and racial parity, we converted data to female-to-male and People of Color-to-White ratios per year (2010-2021), such that the equality benchmark for gender is 1, meaning an equal number of females and males. We used this information to calculate a best fitting line (slope) to represent the rate of growth in both groups over the past 12 years. Using this equation, we were able to calculate how many years it would take to reach a 50/50 split for gender (1), and 40/60 split for race (0.67), reflective of the US population. These analyses were inspired by the [*2021 Global Gender Gap Report*](#).



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would foremost like to thank Christy Wang and Arelyse Campos whose extensive work on data collection and organization made this report possible. We would also like to thank the CSS Lab and Jenny McCabe for their thoughtful feedback and insights.

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Importantly, we would like to extend our thanks to the interviewees in our study. The contributions of their time, expertise, candor, dedication, and passion are deeply appreciated and recognized.