

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood:
Analyzing Past Success to Determine Qualities and Traits of Great Directors

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Abstract:

This document proposes a research project that seeks to identify a set of standards that make a “great” film director. The film industry is less efficient and less effective than it could be because of the mystery behind success in a creative field. I propose a research project that would compare great directors to identify qualities or traits that they share in common in order to create a set of standards that indicate a “great” film director.

Introduction

Every year during awards season, the best directors of the year are honored with prestigious film industry awards—Oscars, Golden Globes, DGA Awards, and the likes. The individuals that receive these awards are most often highly respected by their industry peers and moviegoing audiences. While there seems to be a general consensus about what can be considered great direction of a film, as demonstrated by these awards that acknowledge such, there does not seem to be an agreed upon idea of what traits, styles, methods, or techniques make a great director.

This lack of standards can become an issue in two areas: hiring for directing jobs and educating the next generation of directors.

Without standards of what traits, methods, or techniques make a great director, film producers and studio executives who are in charge of hiring directors for projects are forced to rely on information about a director's past work. With large amounts of money on the line for major Hollywood studio projects, these inferences are not a great way to ensure that their investment is well-placed.

For example, the movie *Jupiter Ascending*, which was released in 2015, had a budget of around \$206,582,000.¹ The directors hired for the film were the Wachowski brothers, who directed the highly-regarded film, *The Matrix*,² which made around a \$400,000,000 profit³ and was “certified fresh” on Rotten Tomatoes with an 88% score.⁴ From the information available to the producers of *Jupiter Ascending*, it would seem that the Wachowski brothers are directors

¹ “Jupiter Ascending (2015),” *The Numbers: Where Data and the Movie Business Meet*. Nash Information Services, 2015, (accessed December 8, 2019).

² “The Matrix (1999),” *IMDb*. Amazon, 2019, (accessed December 8, 2019).

³ “The Matrix (1999),” *The Numbers: Where Data and the Movie Business Meet*. Nash Information Services, 1999, (accessed December 8, 2019).

⁴ “The Matrix (1999),” *Rotten Tomatoes*. Fandango, 2019, (accessed December 8, 2019).

who can deliver a well-received and profitable film. However, *Jupiter Ascending* was released to a 27% score on Rotten Tomatoes⁵ and grossed \$110,739,098 at the worldwide box office,⁶ meaning the movie lost nearly \$100 million. Relying on previous work to make hiring decisions can be misleading and can cause the misplacement of the large amounts of money that are spent on feature films in Hollywood. While still not being a guarantee of success at the box office, having better information when hiring a director, such as a set of standards that indicate a “great” director, would be beneficial to the film’s outcomes, eliminating some of the financial risk that comes in producing a film and also potentially increasing the audience satisfaction level of the film.

We again see another benefit of this set of standards when teaching directing in film schools. With a set of standards that are associated with a “great” director, professors would be able to better focus their curriculum on building these specific skills or traits and increasing the number of “great” directors entering the work force. This speaks to the larger issue that is encountered when trying to teach any creative field, where it seems impossible to teach the methods of a line of work that is based on subjectivity and personal taste. For this reason, finding a way to develop a set of common standards that create a great artist (in this specific case, a great director), can help break the barrier in teaching and learning a creative field.

Through the methods of my research, I will seek to answer the question: Are there any common traits shared by the greatest film directors of the past 25 years that have contributed to their success and achievement? This feeds into my broader research question: What makes a great director?

⁵ “Jupiter Ascending (2015),” *Rotten Tomatoes*. Fandango, 2019, (accessed December 8, 2019).

⁶ “Movie Budget and Financial Performance Records,” *The Numbers: Where Data and the Movie Business Meet*. Nash Information Services, 2019, (accessed December 8, 2019).

Background/Related Work

In general, there is a lack of research that attempts to draw clear conclusions about what makes a great director, or any type of creative artist for that matter. However, despite there being a lack of research that compares directors' common traits, there is no lack of work that studies directors on an individual basis, without a cross-comparison amongst them.⁷ Most of these works provide an in-depth study that analyzes a specific director's methods, techniques, and styles in order to make a conclusion about what makes them successful and what makes their work acclaimed. Drawing from these existing works, I can collect this information for a comparison across many different directors. Using these methods, I will be combining pre-existing analyses to create my own that spans a wide range of interests.

However, the desire for this type of work, that attempts to quantify and create empirical data from qualitative items, can be seen in other industries. In his book, *Good to Great*, researcher Jim Collins detailed a similar research project, in which he set out to identify qualities that allow a business to transition from "good-to-great" in market value.⁸ I will be modeling my research methods off of his approach to answering his similar research question.

Methods

Jim Collins laid out four phases of his research process leading up to his results, which I will be following.

⁷ Andrew Sarris, *Interviews with Film Directors* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1967); Gene D. Phillips, *Major Film Directors of the American and British Cinema* (Bethlehem, Pa: Lehigh University Press, 1999); Jeremy Paul Kagan, *Directors Close Up: Interviews with Directors Nominated for Best Film by the Directors Guild of America* (Scarecrow Press, 2006); Marjorie Rosen, "Martin Scorsese Interview," *Film Comment New York* 11, no. 2 (April 1975): 42–46.

⁸ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Business Publishers, 2001), 3.

Phase 1

In this initial step, Collins establishes the grounds for creating his list of “good-to-great” companies from which he would comprise his group of study.⁹ For me, this step equates to determining which film directors will be a part of my research group.

I will determine which of the “great directors” to conduct my comparison from based on preexisting measures of achievement in the film industry: best directing awards, specifically The Director’s Guild of America’s Award for Outstanding Achievement in Feature Film and the Academy Award for Best Directing. The Director’s Guild Award is given annually to the best directing in a film released that year, voted on by members of the DGA, which is made up of directors and other members of the directing team such as assistant directors, unit production managers, and stage managers.¹⁰ The Academy Award for Best Directing is given to the best directing performance of the year, as voted on by members of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, which is comprised of high-level members of the film industry.¹¹ I am choosing these two awards to draw my subjects from because the winners are chosen by the director’s peers who also work in the industry, giving them more insight into what actually represents an achievement in directing. My list will be comprised of the last 25 directors who have won both the DGA Award for Best Directing and the Academy Award for Best Directing in the same year of nomination. From here on, I will refer to these as “dual-winning directors,” meaning they have won both awards in the same year of nomination. Including only dual-winning directors will help ensure that my list is comprised of directors who are truly considered “greats” by mitigating the outside effects that may contribute to a win of just one, but not both,

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹⁰ “About the DGA,” *DGA.org*. Director’s Guild of America, 2019, (accessed December 8, 2019).

¹¹ “Voting,” *Oscars.org*. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2019, (accessed December 8, 2019).

awards. I will be comparing only the past 25 winners of this award in order to account for the ever-changing medium of film, which would surely create differences among any conclusions. This will help ensure the relevancy of my conclusions within the quickly evolving film industry. For the years in which the winner is previously represented in my list, I will not count this year as contributing to the total of 25 winners, meaning I will study the past 25 dual-winning directors, which is distinct from the dual-winning directors of the past 25 years.

Phase 2

Jim Collins describes his next steps as creating a list to which the “good-to-great” companies would be compared.¹² This ensures that the qualities that were identified were not also common to all other businesses as well, meaning they are qualities that determine success and are not just present with success. Collins uses a relevant metaphor that helps explain the importance of this step:

“Suppose you wanted to study what makes gold medal winners in the Olympic Games. If you only studied the gold medal winners by themselves, you’d find that they all had coaches. But if you looked at the athletes that made the Olympic team, but never won a medal, you’d find that they *also* had coaches! The key question is, What systematically *distinguishes* gold medal winners from those who never won a medal?”¹³

With this idea, Collins uses companies within the same industries as his “good-to-great” companies, in order to establish a level of comparison based on those that had similar resources and similar opportunities as the companies, but were not able to improve their market value.¹⁴

With this idea of “similar opportunities and resources” in mind, my comparison group will be comprised of directors who directed a movie of a similar budget and genre in the same

¹² Collins, *Good to Great*, 7-8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

year of nomination as my dual-winning directors, but did not win, and were not even nominated, for a DGA Award or Oscar for Best Directing in that year. If a director that fits this criterion also appears on my list of dual-winning directors, then they will be removed from the comparison list, meaning the qualification as a dual-winning director takes precedence over the qualification for the comparison list because they have achieved “greatness” in a given year.

This distinction will help remove the identification of qualities that are not critical to success as a director. For example, if I identify that all of the dual-winning directors are male, but the majority of the comparison list is made up of male directors as well, then “male” would not be considered a trait that distinguishes the success of “great” directors, but perhaps is a quality linked to other contributing factors, such as the volume of opportunity given to certain groups but not to others.

Phase 3

The next step in Jim Collins’ research is to gather information about and to analyze each “good-to-great” business and comparison business.¹⁵ To perform this analysis, his team collected as many materials as they could find on each business and coded the material into categories.¹⁶ From this research, they developed empirical answers from the data, closely evaluating how the similarities between the “good-to-great” business set the group apart from the comparison businesses.¹⁷ A critical aspect of their methods includes that they did not go into the project with specific information that they were looking to find.¹⁸ They did not make assumptions before beginning research and orient their searches toward those assumptions. By simply collecting as

¹⁵ Ibid., 9-11.

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

much information as possible, they let the data speak for itself, without allowing the direction of the findings to be based on the biases or theories they had going into the project.

I will follow the same methods in my project. For each of the dual-winning and comparison group directors, I will compile information that fits into a variety of categories related to their style of work, technique and methods exercised on set during the directing process, and background influences visible in their work.

I cannot lay out my categories before going into my project, so as to not create biases prior to research. If I determine set categories that I will be using to evaluate each director, I will not be allowing the data to speak for itself, to point me in the direction of what areas are critical to a director's success. It is only after gathering information about both the dual-winning directors and the comparison group, that I will be able to create categories that are indicative of the body of data that could be critical to my comparison and could indicate "greatness."

Phase 4

Collins describes his final phase as where he analyzes the data to draw conclusions of what allows a company to make the transition from "good" to "great."¹⁹ For a concept to be considered significant in Collins project, it had to be present in 100% of the "good-to-great" companies, and in less than 30% of the comparison companies.²⁰

Upon gathering information within each of these categories across all directors for my own project, I will create a spreadsheet on which the directors will be listed along the y-axis and the categories along the x-axis. Each category will be represented within one of a few options. For example, the data of "attended film school" which would fall under the category of

¹⁹ Ibid., 11-12.

²⁰ Ibid., 12.

“background influences” would be denoted for each director with either a “yes” or a “no” delineator. It is in this process of going from gathered information to a distinct answer among predetermined options that the process of going from qualitative to quantitative data will occur. This is an important step, however, because the transition to objective data will allow for a cross-comparison.

From these answers among a variety of categories, I will begin the search for one or more key traits. I will consider a trait to be “indicative of greatness” if, like Jim Collins, 100% of my dual-winning directors share it, but only less than 30% of my comparison group.

Expected Results

Upon comparison of the directors, I will hopefully be able to identify one or more traits that are commonly shared among all of them. The identification of these traits would allow me to establish a standard of what contributes to a director’s success, or makes a director “great.” If my comparison yields no common traits, then I will be left with the conclusion that success in an artistic line of work, specifically directing, is unique to each person. While this will not help establish a clear set of standards for hiring or education, it produces a different viewpoint that can be used in education which is that there is no one defining factor that leads to success, and therefore all students should be encouraged to use their individual strengths in their career rather than adapting to a certain pre-defined view of success.

Conclusion

The entertainment industry, like all creative industries, faces a large problem in hiring the best director for the job as well as educating the next generation of great directors. If I can

identify a set of common traits among the greatest directors, these traits could be indicative of future success, both when making hiring decisions, as well as within education in film schools. By comparing a group of directors who have achieved “greatness” with a similar group who have not, I will identify traits that distinguish the “great” directors. With this set of standards, producers will have an additional form of information to reference when making hiring decisions, and film school educators will have a set of guidelines that can help improve the quality of directors entering the workforce. Together, these two benefits can help create a more efficient and better-serving film industry.

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Proposed Timeline/Budget

Timeline

Phase	Time Frame
Phase 1: Create dual-winning directors list	January 1 st 2019 – February 1 st 2019
Phase 2: Create comparison directors list	February 1 st 2019 – March 1 st 2019
Phase 3: Gather information about dual-winning and comparison directors	March 1 st 2019 – August 1 st 2019
Phase 4: Draw comparison and identify traits	August 1 st 2019 – October 1 st 2019
Write report	October 1 st 2019 – December 1 st 2019

Budget

Item	Description	Amount
Hours Worked	~5 hours/week x 48 weeks x \$14.25 (Los Angeles minimum wage)	~\$3,420
Research Materials Not Available Through Library	Books, Access to Articles, etc.	\$500
Total Estimated Budget		\$3,920