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Interactive TV Too Early: The False Start of QUBE

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Dossier: Perspectives on Failure

Media history is lined with failures, flops, and false starts across the areas of aesthetics and style, technology, social and political representation, media studies' methods and models, and industry and business. We approached a number of well-known media scholars working in a variety of fields and asked them to discuss a favorite, overlooked, or particularly important instance of failure in one of these five arenas. Their thought-provoking answers complement and extend the concerns raised elsewhere in this issue, covering a range of topics from submarine movies to PowerPoint presentations and from telephonic cats to prepositions. We thank our contributors for their responses and hope that the reader will find this collection as engaging as we do.

Aesthetics and Style

The Aesthetics of Failure

Jason Mittell

To study the aesthetics of American television requires us to examine failure. Not because, as many might assert, television fails as an aesthetic medium. In fact, I would argue that television of the last twenty years is arguably our most robust aesthetic medium. Rather, television creativity itself is immersed in failure, and failure needs to be seen as the default norm, not the exception.

Clearly, this is tied to the raw numbers of television programming. In the commercial American system the vast majority of program ideas never get optioned into a script, and most scripts are never filmed as pilots, and a small fraction of pilots makes it into an aired series. Thus, simply getting a show on the air should be regarded as a

success. But the economics of television place the failure threshold much higher, as most series only turn profitable after multiple seasons, making failure a nearly universal condition by the only measures that matter to the television industry.

From a creative perspective, failure is much more muddy. Many programs that have turned a profit via the magical realm of syndication are viewed by critics and creators with scorn—sure, programs like *Gilligan's Island*, *Empty Nest*, and *Coach* could be seen as successes, with long, profitable runs both on- and off-network, but it would be hard to find a serious defense of their aesthetic achievements. Meanwhile, television history is littered with “Brilliant but Cancelled” pilots and abbreviated first seasons, programs whose aesthetic choices fail to find their groove in the commercial system—think *Firefly*, *Frank's Place*, and *Freaks & Geeks*, just from the F file.

But it's a mistake to link innovative aesthetics with commercial failure and industrial success to formulaic retreats. If you ever get a chance to see an unaired pilot, odds are it earned its failure. Likewise, some of the most successful shows in television history were incredibly innovative and adventurous aesthetically, from *Dragnet's* paradigmatic telefilm style to *Seinfeld's* narrative architecture, *Cheers* as a trailblazer for sitcom story arcs to *ER's* groundbreaking visual style. Instead of bemoaning the failed aesthetics of television, we should look to what both successful and cancelled innovations can teach us and how they help shape the possibilities of the medium.

For my own current project analyzing contemporary American television narrative forms, launched here in *Velvet Light Trap* 58, I have been forced to think about how narrative innovations stem from both commercial successes and failures—and rethink that very boundary itself. I have kept a running list of programs that might

be categorized as part of the mode of narrative complexity I outline in that article. As of January 2009 I count ninety-seven narratively complex series that made it to television since 1999, which I see as the moment when a few innovations coalesced into a full-fledged trend. Of those, forty-two might be deemed successful, gaining a renewal beyond a single season, with a few still too recent to judge.

A nearly 50 percent success rate is remarkable for commercial television, where failure is much more commonplace. For comparison, thirty new series debuted on network broadcast television in 1997, with only three lasting beyond that season. To be fair, many of the shows on my list aired on basic or premium cable, where competition is thinner and the ratings thresholds are lower. But nonetheless, the commercial success of these programs suggests that the aesthetic trend of narrative complexity is not a short-lived cycle common to television but a more widespread and deeply felt shift in the possibilities of television storytelling.

In thinking about the terms of success and failure that operate around these programs, the gray area between the two is vast. Take *Pushing Daisies*, an ABC series cancelled in late 2008 after two half-seasons—by commercial measures, it was a failure, as it did not generate sufficient ratings to sustain itself and reach syndicated bounty. However, it did generate twenty-two episodes of truly original and innovative storytelling, pushing beyond many norms of network programming and thriving in DVD release. Likewise, beloved Fox comedy *Arrested Development* is bemoaned for its cancellation, yet fifty-three episodes over three seasons make it hard to regard the show as a failure compared to the majority of shows that never get beyond the first season. Both of these shows certainly mattered, even if they did not achieve commercial success—they will be written about and viewed for years to come, even if they did not get to conclude on their own terms.

Looking backward into the history of television's narrative innovation, it is clear that many shows made their mark despite their status as failures. *Twin Peaks* is certainly a key landmark for many contemporary programs, but despite its critical acclaim and initial ratings buzz, its thirty episodes make it no more of a commercial success than *Pushing Daisies*. And although its innovations are a frequently cited touchstone for contemporary television producers, both *Twin Peaks* and the more commercially successful *The X-Files* are frequently highlighted as partial

failures—producers of *Lost* and *Heroes* mention these programs as object lessons on how *not* to handle the long-term dynamics of serialized storytelling.

Other early influences are more explicit failures, with *Crime Story*, *Wiseguy*, and *Murder One* all trying to foreground arc-driven complex stories but failing to sustain themselves beyond short runs with mediocre ratings. Even farther back in the archives of failure, the series *Coronet Blue*, about an amnesiac searching for his identity and why he was targeted for assassination, was shelved for two years before CBS decided to air it in the summer of 1967, with the network afraid that the narrative would be far too challenging for audiences. Such failed programs may not have been direct influences on the creators of today's serialized dramas, but they helped set the norms and expectations for networks about the limits of narrative experimentation.

Thus, studying television aesthetics cannot limit itself to the study of unmitigated successes. There's far too much happenstance that allows a hit to avoid failure—after all, *Seinfeld*, *Lost*, and *CSI* were all nearly pulled before even airing. Failures help us understand the limits of the system as well as the possibilities that got passed over, and thus they need to be viewed alongside clear successes and within the gray area in between.

The Return of Jezebel James

Michael Z. Newman

Admirers of *Gilmore Girls* (The WB/The CW, 2000–2007) were largely disappointed by Amy Sherman-Palladino's subsequent effort, *The Return of Jezebel James*, which ran for three episodes in early 2008 before the Fox network killed it. (As I write in early 2009, all seven completed episodes can be viewed online at Hulu or downloaded from iTunes.) Reviews were scathing and ratings were low when *Jezebel James*, a half-hour comedy starring Parker Posey and Lauren Ambrose, first aired on a Friday night in March. Among its most despised aspects was the sound of audible laughter from its studio audience.¹ A critic for the *New York Times* compared it to peanut butter on pizza (Bellafante). It was the show's misfortune to have arrived at a moment in television history when most of the aesthetically advanced comedies had abandoned the audience laughter (real or fake) that had been part of the sitcom format since radio days and that Brett Mills calls “the convention which has traditionally most simply and

effectively defined the genre” (38). It was the curse of *Jezebel James* to aim to be too classy, and its failure is in part a testament to the fickle arbitrariness of taste standards as they change over time.

While it has suffered a decline in mass popularity, the sitcom genre has enjoyed a creative renaissance in the aughts, largely a function of having cast aside many of its most enduring conventions. In addition to the laugh track, many sitcoms jettisoned the three-wall set, the live studio audience, the pattern of verbal setup/punchline humor, and theatrical entrances and exits. (The shorthand distinction between old and new styles is multi- versus single-camera, though “single-camera” shows like *The Office* might shoot with multiple cameras.) New sitcoms replace audible laughter with wacky music and ironic voice-over narration, as in *Scrubs* (NBC, 2001–08, ABC 2009–) and *Arrested Development* (Fox, 2003–06), or awkward pauses, as in *The Office* (NBC, 2005–). Many shows interpolate hyperclever, ultrabrief fantasy or flashback scenes that would be impossible to include when shooting in front of the traditional live audience. New sitcoms forgoing the three-wall stage would thus appeal as more cinematic and less theatrical. The absence of audience laughter would likewise signal a move away from a theatrical style that has been essential to the sitcom aesthetic throughout its history.

When *Jezebel James* debuted in 2008, the multicamera sitcom had not vanished from the scene. Indeed, the most commercially successful sitcoms on the networks, including CBS’s *Two and a Half Men* (2003–) and *The New Adventures of Old Christine* (2006–), were shot in the multicam style. *Hannah Montana* (Disney Channel, 2006–) had recently launched an impressive tween brand using the multicamera sitcom as a base. But between the original premium cable shows like *Entourage* (HBO, 2004–) and *Weeds* (Showtime, 2005–), whose visual style is hard to distinguish from a prime-time drama, and the upscale, critics’-darling, single-camera network shows like *30 Rock*, it was clear that the adult “quality TV” half-hour comedy had largely cast aside the cluster of conventions that had made mass-appeal hits of shows from *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–57) to *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) in favor of something ostensibly more visually and narratively sophisticated.

It was *Jezebel James*’s misfortune to attempt to fit into the old-style set of conventions that had worked so well for classics like *Cheers* (NBC, 1982–93), which Amy Sherman-Palladino named as an influence on the show (Armstrong). By 2008 these had become too familiar, especially after

having seen them so effectively defamiliarized by a new generation of television comedies that eschewed theatricality. In many ways *Jezebel James* came across as aiming for aesthetic sophistication. It was a product of the same creators who had made the beloved screwball dramedy *Gilmore Girls*, renowned for its smarty-pants writing and engaging characters. *Gilmore Girls* had become many viewers’ favorite, and expectations were thus high for its successor, which mimicked the *Gilmore* fast-paced, culturally literate verbal style. But as well, the casting of Lauren Ambrose, veteran of HBO’s family melodrama *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001–05), and Parker Posey, identified so much with indie cinema, suggested that *Jezebel James* would be highbrow TV. The associations the creative team’s previous work evoked would not seem to jibe with the conventions of the traditional sitcom, a genre wanting in cultural legitimacy.

With TV series, success and failure have so many dimensions. Shows start out weak in some respects and adjust over time. Audiences become familiar with characters and feel strong affection for them but rarely in the first few weeks of a show’s airing. Pilots are notoriously unlike typical episodes, so we must be willing to stick with a show to figure out what it will really be like in the long run. Commercial and creative successes often are misaligned. After watching all seven episodes that will ever exist of *Jezebel James*, I found myself wishing there might have been more. I was just getting to like it. By the twelfth or fifteenth episode it might have been pretty good, and by then we would have become accustomed to its laugh track along with the rest of the show’s quirks and mannerisms. Maybe eventually people would have felt as warmly toward it as they did eventually toward *Cheers* and *Gilmore Girls*. Not likely, but we will never know.

Note

1. For instance, see Alan Sepinwall, “Sepinwall on TV: ‘Jezebel James’ Review,” 14 Mar. 2008, http://blog.nj.com/alltv/2008/03/sepinwall_on_tv_jezebel_james.html; “Pilot Watch: The Return of Jezebel James,” 6 June 2007, <http://www.buzzsugar.com/289522>.

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Dissolved Away

Barry Salt

The first and biggest false start in film history was made by Georges Méliès. As soon as he began regularly making multishot films in 1899, he started putting a dissolve between every shot in his films, regardless of the temporal relation between the adjoining shots. And he continued to do this to the end of his filmmaking career. But this peculiarity is obscured because later showmen and collectors who obtained prints of his films made a habit of cutting these dissolves to fit in with what had later become the standard convention for joining shots together. However, if you look carefully at such altered prints frame by frame, you can usually find a few frames of the beginning or end of the Méliès dissolve that the showmen and collectors missed when they attempted to cut it out. To just mention prints in the British National Film and Television Archive, in that of *Cendrillon* (1899), all the dissolves are still there, whereas the print of *Rêve de Noël* (1900) has some dissolves still in place but others missing. Even at the end of Méliès' career, *Tunnel sous la Manche* (1907) was made with dissolves between all the shots, as can be seen from the odd frames of superimposition from the removed dissolves that still remain. On the other hand, the print of *Barbe-bleue* (1901) retains all its dissolves and shows that at this period a dissolve did *not* represent a time lapse, as the climax of the film shows Blue-Beard's last wife opening the forbidden door at the end of one shot, with a dissolve to the inside of the room containing his dead wives, which shows the opening of the door seen from the inside, with perfect time continuity.

Méliès' way of joining all shots in a film together did not last, because the early British filmmakers had already begun making multishot films with simple cuts between successive shots, starting with Robert Paul's *Come Along, Do!* of 1898, and this more efficient way of putting films together triumphed quite quickly. The only way of making a dissolve between shots in the early period was to either make it in the camera or make it in the printing of the release prints. In the first alternative, a fade-out was made at the end of the first shot by closing the lens aperture, then the film was wound back the over the length of the fade-out, and then the second shot after the dissolve was taken with the aperture being opened over the same distance. This was obviously a certain amount of extra bother,

but not that much if the filmmaker was also doing other trick effects in the film and also shooting everything on a fixed stage, as Georges Méliès did. The second alternative was to use the same process at the printing stage for each print of the film that was being made. This was definitely a lot more work and only really made any sense if there were only a small number of shots in the film and also a relatively small number of prints being made.

Despite these drawbacks to putting dissolves between every shot, Méliès' prestige was so great at the beginning of the twentieth century that other filmmakers briefly tried out this technique. The first long film made at Pathé, *Histoire d'un crime* (1901), had dissolves between every shot, despite the fact that there is no time lapse over the last two transitions between shots in it. In the United States Edwin Porter started putting dissolves between shots in 1901, as one can see in *Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison* and *Life Rescue at Long Branch*, but Porter's adoption of this technique only lasted two years. By 1903 the multishot films made by the British filmmakers, which were all done with straight cuts between shots, definitely established what is still the standard convention, though Méliès ignored this for the rest of his career.

I first commented on this whole episode thirty years ago at the 1978 FIAF conference at Brighton and subsequently (see my *Moving into Pictures* [Starword, 2006], 52, 89). I also discussed it on pages 52–53 of *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (Starword, 1992), but the strange thing about the matter is that most of the people writing about early film history avoid mentioning the phenomenon, even though they have seen it in some of the films in question. I can only conclude that this is because it conflicts with the old conventional notion that either Georges Méliès or Edwin S. Porter invented the basics of film construction, depending on whether you are French or American.

Losers

Charlie Keil

The landscape of early cinema history is littered with losers, if one measures victory in terms of vocational longevity and influence. While Carl Laemmle, William Fox, Mary Pickford, and D.W. Griffith, to name only the most obvious candidates, all made names for themselves in the history books by sustaining their careers until at least the end of the silent era, the vast majority of players in cinema's first

few decades vanished almost as quickly as they emerged. If, as in most domains, the spoils go to the victors in the annals of history, one might argue that the deck was unfairly stacked against many who toiled away in the fields of early cinema. More often than not, key personnel went unidentified and thus remained anonymous, a sure way to be ignored by posterity. Until on-screen credits were established, attribution was typically withheld, leaving historians the task of piecing together who might have done what based on trade press reports, production records, and autobiographical reminiscences. Compounding the problem has been the regrettably low survival rate of titles from the period.

All this helps explain why stylistic histories of early cinema have tended to veer in two distinct directions, each revealing its own historiographical assumptions about the relative significance of winners and losers. The first has been to identify the few directors whose work can be verified and whose output has survived in sufficient quantity to allow for an adequate assessment of their contribution to the evolution of film style. This has led to the anointment of the Lumières, Méliès, and Porter as the Holy Trinity of seminal figures, with due appreciation of the English pioneers Williamson, Smith, and Hepworth if the historian is feeling expansive. D.W. Griffith arrives just in time to take over the reins from Porter and push style to another level, with Biograph supplanting Edison as the key manufacturer in the North American context. Griffith handily assumes the role of Celebrated Innovator until the dawn of the feature era, when early cinema style gradually cedes to the consolidation of classicism, on the one hand, and the eventual emergence of an oppositional modernism, on the other. The second type of history finds less interest in the achievements of distinctive filmmakers and looks instead for general tendencies. If the first approach is dependent on the existence of key figures, the second thrives on discernible trends, apparent patterns, and emergent formulae. I have pursued this type of stylistic study quite deliberately in my own work, particularly when devising the notion of a transitional cinema. I wanted to gain a sense of what American cinema's governing stylistic norms were for a defined chunk of time, and surveying the output of what can only be described as history's losers seemed the most appropriate way to do so.

But there is another kind of loser that both models fail to accommodate in part because neither model is designed to account for such a figure. That would be the

filmmaker who stands apart from the norms of the day, offering an example of stylistic distinctiveness but failing to be acknowledged for such, either because we can't be sure who directed the film in question or because the film failed to survive to the current day. Some would say that we misdirect our energy to speculate about films no longer extant, but how might our sense of early cinema style expand (though not necessarily change in its broad contours) if we could see films now lost to us but that rivaled the best of Griffith for their narrational inspiration, their bravura performances, or their compositional dexterity? I will summon up only one such example, a film entitled *Jealousy*, released by Vitagraph in 1911. Apparently, the film focuses entirely on Florence Turner as a woman abandoned by her lover, the latter viewed only partially when his hands emerge from behind a curtain that otherwise blocks his body. Perhaps the film was nothing more than a novelty item, foregrounding the relevance of off-screen space to the point of self-parody; still, one can't help but wonder how the conceit was sustained for the length of a single reel and how it showcased the acting of Turner, who was undoubtedly one of the most expressive and talented of the early film stars.

Griffith's preeminence during the transitional period has been cemented by the fact that he stayed at one company throughout the first five years of his filmmaking career and that virtually all of his films have survived. This does not detract from the fact that he was also likely the most gifted director at work during the period. Even so, he has been the beneficiary of an accident of history, one that saw Biograph's output preserved, while those of its competitors exist only in a piecemeal fashion. Some historians have made the mistake of allowing Griffith's work to function as the equivalent of the ordinary film for the transitional period; we should be equally cautious in assuming that Griffith was the sole director capable of stylistically accomplished work during these years. The more we can learn about the losers of the transitional era, both those rightly unheralded and those unjustly neglected, the more it sets into relief the accomplishments of those designated as winners.

A brief coda, possible in part because I have yet to exceed my one-thousand-word limit: I would like to tip my hat to two concepts devised to describe early cinema style that have never received due recognition. Both are attributable to Tom Gunning, the latter in collaboration with André Gaudreault. I wouldn't go so far as to suggest

that they are losers in the historiographical sweepstakes, but they are concepts that have tended to be overshadowed by an indisputable winner, the cinema of attractions. So let me suggest that both the noncontinuous style and its companion, the cinema of narrative integration, are supple ideas that have proven responsive to the stylistic attributes of two phases in early cinema's formal development. We would do well to pay them more attention.

Fuller's Most Fascinating Flop: *Park Row*

Lisa Dombrowski

Samuel Fuller experienced so many disappointments over the course of his years in Hollywood—the collapse of his independent production company, Globe Enterprises; the sharp decrease in his ability to mount and maintain control of his films after 1964; the studio-mandated reediting of his autobiographical war picture *The Big Red One* (1980); the misinformed controversy surrounding his antiracist thriller *White Dog* (1982)—that it is a testament to his optimism, passion, and fortitude that he stayed active in the industry so long. Among his many films that received mixed reception or outright rejection from critics and audiences, the most revealing of his artistic sensibilities and the challenges of his career was *Park Row* (1952). A low-budget valentine to the history of American journalism, *Park Row* was independently produced and financed by Fuller and distributed by United Artists. Underappreciated yet completely the vision of its creator, *Park Row* offers an instructive lesson in Fuller's unbridled aesthetic as well as the rewards and risks of independent production.

As the writer-director-producer and sole financier of *Park Row*, Fuller enjoyed a degree of artistic freedom never again matched in his career, enabling him to challenge the classical conventions that held sway at his then employer, Twentieth Century Fox, and to engage fully his aesthetic preferences. His script for the film displays a willful indifference to cohesion, clarity, and verisimilitude, embracing instead an uneven combination of melodrama and historical lecture. *Park Row*, set in 1880s New York, teems with sensational incidents, as the professional and romantic rivalry of two newspaper publishers sparks newsstand destruction, fistfights, a firebombing, and a child's maiming; meanwhile, we learn about Mergenthaler and Linotype, printer's devils and "30," how Lady Liberty got her pedestal and why Steve Brodie jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge.

The packed, episodic narrative serves Fuller's twin goals of emotion and truth yet forsakes the tight plotting and carefully motivated action championed by the major studios. Simply put, it does not adhere to contemporary definitions of quality storytelling.

Park Row's visual design is similarly indicative of the more extreme aspects of Fuller's aesthetic. His proclivity for staging scenes around long-take master shots runs rampant, resulting in an average shot length of thirty-six seconds, more than three times the contemporary norm and the longest of his career. Fuller tries a little bit of everything during the long takes, bringing style to the fore to a degree previously unseen in his work. The long take master shots within the offices of the *Globe*—the hero's paper and Fuller's main source of interest—carefully direct the eye through deep-space staging, high-contrast lighting, camera movement, and selected cut-ins to extreme close-ups. In one sequence the camera arcs without apparent motivation around the kissing protagonists, positioning dark vertical bars between their embrace and the camera in an overt example of authorial commentary. In another, handheld traveling shots exaggerate the kinetic propulsion of the action on-screen, sacrificing a steady image for an energetic one. Even the optically processed close-ups within the neighborhood bar illustrate a recurring aspect of Fuller's visual style: economy often trumps coverage. *Park Row* provides an early indication of how Fuller's stylistic tendencies will manifest in a more excessive fashion in his independent features than in his studio releases.

The passion Fuller felt for *Park Row* went largely unreciprocated by critics and audiences. Though critics noted the director's evident enthusiasm for the material, many cited its lack of marquee talent and found the picture disappointing. In particular, reviewers at national publications targeted those aspects of the film most exemplary of Fuller's nonclassical inclinations: its overstuffed narrative, rambling plot, and "visible" style. The *New York Times* review epitomizes this critical strain, describing the film as "more diffuse than convincing" and "more confusing than forceful," while *Newsweek* goes a step farther: "*Park Row* not only sentimentalizes journalism, it makes it grotesque."¹ Audiences responded in kind. After a month of headlining double features in large houses and receiving exhibitor comments of "disappointing," "slow," and "drab," the film was demoted to the bottom of the bill.² The advice that Fox production chief Darryl Zanuck gave Fuller when he first pitched the film proved correct: audiences would not

go for a low-budget, black-and-white period piece lacking a star name.³ Fuller lost his entire investment in the film and returned to Fox to finish his contract.

Park Row failed to fulfill commonly held assumptions regarding what a well-made historical drama should be, but this failure is also the film's value, as it illustrates the appeal and the pitfalls of unfettered independence. As his own financier and producer, Fuller was freed from the executive supervision and quality control that helped maintain the dominance of classical conventions at the major studios. This allowed him, for better or for worse, to indulge his artistic preferences to the best of his ability, given his limited budget. The upside was increased choice and control; the downside, decreased collaboration and oversight—and, of course, greater risk. The finished film may have pleased Fuller (it did), but he also paid a critical and financial price for its deviations from expectation. In order to secure financing and distribution, independent filmmakers had to demonstrate a track record of marketable and moneymaking films. Yet films that defied norms in content, narrative structure, or style proved a tough sell. *Park Row's* flop at the box office foreshadowed the financial struggles Fuller later faced with Globe Enterprises and helps explain why he only completed one of the five potential independent projects he was free to produce while under contract at Fox. He needed first to direct more bankable films at the studio in order to raise independent production money. He did. None of the bankable films he made will remind you of *Park Row*.

Notes

1. Rev. of *Park Row*, *New York Times*, 22 Dec. 1952: 20; rev. of *Park Row*, *Newsweek*, 4 Aug. 1952: 84.

2. See Picture Grosses columns, *Variety*, 10 Sept. 1952: 10; 15 Oct. 1952: 10; 5 Nov. 1952: 9; 19 Nov. 1952: 10, 11, 20; 26 Nov. 1952: 13; 3 Dec. 1952: 8; 10 Dec. 1952: 8; 24 Dec. 1952: 16; 14 Jan. 1953: 9.

3. Samuel Fuller, *A Third Face* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 280.

The Bionic Woman 2.0

Heather Osborne-Thompson

My favorite recent instance of a failure in television style was NBC's 2007 remake of *The Bionic Woman* (hereafter referred to as *BW*). Like its predecessor, it was a program that sought to negotiate the dilemmas of an "artificially

enhanced" (read: liberated) woman—the terrain of science fiction—by couching her in the realm of the domestic—the terrain of melodrama. Despite the fact that this hybridization is a common strategy in media texts that deal with anxieties around social change (see Spigel), there were a few important stylistic differences in this new version that both shaped its demise and signaled a change in the depiction of the "balancing act" faced by female action heroes on television.

First, in contrast to the 1970s program's "zero-degree style" (Caldwell) and sunny southern California location, the 2007 *BW* takes place in the Pacific Northwest, a location that seems more suited to the moody *X-Files* than to a straightforward tale about feminine power. When put into the context of contemporary television programs featuring female action heroes, the darkness of the new *BW* is not so striking, as characters from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* Buffy Summers to *Alias's* Sydney Bristow did much of their ass kicking in damp, poorly lit alleys and spooky warehouses. Such environments gave those series' heroines a fearless, gritty quality, a demonstration of their power and willingness to persevere in the face of scary things.

What distinguished the new *BW* from both her predecessor and these more contemporary heroines was that the "scary things" she faced were depicted as being a part of her: organisms called anthrocytes that were introduced into Jaime's body by her bioethicist boyfriend without her consent after a near-fatal car accident. Moreover, the way the show presents these organisms is through the expressionistic lighting and special effects of horror; when Jaime pulls back the covers of her hospital bed and sees the fluorescent green entities pulsating through her limbs for the first time, she screams continuously until the screen goes black.

The significance of this style choice is its signal that the new *BW* was not meant to be a straightforward celebration of female power in the same way that the original series often was. From the moment that a groggy Jaime wakes up in the underground super-secret facility in which her bionicization took place, we are given the impression that, like the rest of her life, her new abilities came about without her permission and are therefore alien—and possibly dangerous—to her. Whereas Lindsay Wagner's *Bionic Woman* depicted its heroine's power as a "happy" accident (they saved her life and allowed her to do things like frighten her unruly high school students into submission by tearing a phone book in half and clean her new

apartment in record time), Michelle Ryan's Jaime recoils from her new body, rues the day that she ever met her so-called bioethicist boyfriend, and vows to thwart the aims of the mysterious Berkut Group, which employs her.

Additionally, despite the darkness of the new *BW*'s world, it is also punctuated with moments of humor, as if the show isn't sure whether to laugh or cry about the reappearance of Jaime Sommers. After her boyfriend is brutally assassinated by her bionic doppelgänger, Sarah Corvus, Jaime tries to bury her grief and sense of betrayal in an evening of tequila shots and casual sex. However, because she doesn't know her own strength, she injures her prospective lover by slamming him passionately against a bathroom stall, and he runs away in fear. The scene ends with Jaime vomiting while her new boss—who presumably had been hanging out in the bathroom listening to the goings-on—lectures her about her new responsibilities. The dramatic tenor of the show's mise-en-scène makes such moments (and many others like them) awkward because of their sitcomlike “wah-wah-wah-wah” ending, during which Jaime learns a new lesson about what she can no longer do now that she is bionic.

These inconsistencies can be—and, indeed, have been—explained as the identity crisis that the show seemed to have experienced as a result of numerous personnel changes and scrapping of storylines that occurred before the 2007 Writers' Strike effectively killed it. But they also arguably speak to a kind of discomfort with the legacy of feminism in popular culture in a way that's worth noting. As much as the remake was an attempt to, as *TV Guide* put it, “turn 70s cheese into gold” (Hochman), it was also Eick's self-proclaimed goal to move the *Bionic Woman* beyond a “discussion . . . [of] equal rights for women” and ask the question, “[H]ow [do] we feel” about the fact that “a woman can do what a man can do” (White)? The answer within the stylistic boundaries of the new *BW* seems to be a pretty resounding “not good,” as women like Jaime Sommers and the murderous Sarah Corvus are depicted as horrific cyborgian monsters who have been betrayed by their own strength and by their trust in institutions like romantic love and the state. In turn, this combination has destroyed their ability to balance their desires with their responsibilities. Some of these desires are depicted by the show as horrifically tragic, as when Jaime discovers her new body postaccident, and others are depicted as comical, as in the failed seduction scene. Together they create an uneasy new *BW* that rejects the “pleasure in the confu-

sion of boundaries” that Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg promises (424).

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Technology

The Cat Telephone

Jonathan Sterne

In 1929 two Princeton researchers, Ernest Glen Wever and Charles W. Bray, wired a live cat into a telephone system and replayed the telephone's primal scene. Following a procedure developed by physiologists, Wever and Bray removed part of the cat's skull and most of its brain in order to attach one electrode to the animal's right auditory nerve and a second electrode to another area on the cat's body. Those electrodes were then hooked up to a vacuum tube amplifier by sixty feet of shielded cable located in a soundproof room (separate from the lab that held the cat). After amplification, the signals were sent to a telephone receiver. One researcher made sounds into the cat's ear, while the other listened at the receiver in the soundproof room (Wever and Bray 344). The signals picked up off the auditory nerve came through the telephone receiver as sound. “Speech was transmitted with great fidelity. Simple commands, counting and the like were easily received. Indeed, under good condition the system was employed as a means of communication between operating and sound-proof rooms” (Wever and Bray 345). After their initial success, Wever and Bray checked for all other possible explanations for the transmission of sound down the wire. They

even killed the cat to make sure there was no mechanical transmission of the sounds apart from the cat's nerve: "[A]fter the death of the animal the response first diminished in intensity, and then ceased" (Wever and Bray 346). As the sound faded from their cat microphone, it demonstrated in the animal's death that life itself could power a phone or any other electro-acoustic system—perhaps that life itself already did power the telephone.

To put a Zen tone to it, the telephone existed both inside and outside Wever and Bray's cat and, by extension, people. They believed that they had proven the so-called telephone theory of hearing, which had fallen out of favor by the late 1920s. Here it is worth understanding both their error and their subsequent contribution to hearing research. While Wever and Bray thought they were measuring one set of signals coming off the auditory nerve, they were actually conflating two sets of signals. The auditory nerve itself either fires or does not fire and therefore doesn't have a directly mimetic relationship to sound outside of it—there is no continuous variation in frequency or intensity, as you would have with sound in air. A series of experiments in 1932 revealed that the mimetic signals they found were coming from the cochlea itself. Called "cochlear microphonics," these signals were responsible for the sounds coming out of Wever and Bray's speaker in the soundproof room. Hallowell Davis wrote in a 1934 paper on the subject:

The wave form of the cochlear response differs from that of the nerve. From the latter we recover a series of sharp transients having the wave form and the polarity characteristics of nerve impulses [which fire three to four thousand times a second in the auditory nerve but only about a thousand times a second in the midbrain], while the cochlear response reproduces with considerable fidelity the wave form of the stimulating sound waves. Even the complex waves of the human voice are reproduced by it with the accuracy of a microphone, while from most nervous structures there is so much distortion and suppression of high frequencies that speech may be quite incomprehensible. (Davis 206)

Davis thus suggested that nerves are bad circuits for reproducing sounds, but the cochlea is an excellent circuit for reproducing sound—much like a microphone.

Davis and his collaborators' work on cochlear transmissions paved the way for a wide range of subsequent research, and cochlear microphonics are still important today. While they did challenge Wever and Bray's conclusions about the telephone theory of hearing, Davis and his collaborators continued down the same epistemological

path where ears and media were interchangeable; in fact, one was best explained in terms of the other. One of the most widely acknowledged and controversial achievements of this work has been the development of cochlear implants. Previous treatments for hardness of hearing or deafness involved interventions in the middle ear; cochlear implants resulted from the project of intervening in the inner ear, a practice that was possible in part because of the line of research begun by Wever and Bray. Meanwhile, the brain's work of translation—from firing neurons to the perception of sound—became a major preoccupation of psychoacousticians as well and remains an open question down to the present day (Blume 99). As for the cats who played a surrogate role for humans in these experiments, theirs is another story.

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The Story of 50mm Film

John Belton

One of the unwritten histories of widescreen film is the story of 50mm, which was innovated by Fox in ca. 1930 as an alternative to the failure of 70mm film. A review of this history reveals that Fox's experiments with 50mm indirectly led it to the successful invention, innovation, and diffusion of CinemaScope in 1953.

One of the chief attractions of 50mm in 1930 was that it was the widest gauge that could be accommodated by existing theater projection equipment, eliminating expensive

conversion costs. A standard 35mm projector could be converted by simply changing sprocket wheels, rollers, the aperture plate, and the doors on the feed and take-up magazines. Projectionists could switch back and forth between 35mm and 50mm after making minimal alterations to the equipment. One of the chief drawbacks of the 65mm/70mm gauge was that the majority of projection booths in the country were too small to accommodate wide film projectors *and* standard 35mm equipment.

In explaining their selection of 50mm film, a subcommittee of SMPE engineers cited it as “an intermediate film size that would have most of the advantages of wider film but that could be used interchangeably with 35mm film in existing projectors.”¹ The new standard, however, was not officially submitted for formal approval “due to the present lack of interest in wide film on the part of the producers.”

At Fox in August 1931 chief engineer Earl Sponable converted some 70mm equipment to 50mm so that he could film test footage (which he did on A. J. Hallock’s duck farm in Speonk, Long Island).² At around the same time Sponable tried to interest the studio in using this converted equipment to film “library” material or stock footage, arguing that it would provide higher quality images for process shots.³ Sponable was even able to put together a demonstration film on 50mm in June 1932. After that engineers at Fox continued to think about 50mm, but all further work on a wide film format was put on hold—until 1944.

Starting in January 1944, Fox conducted a series of tests in conjunction with Electrical Research Products, Inc. (ERPI) on both black-and-white and color 50mm film stock, using stereo optical sound. Using a converted Movietone News camera, Sponable filmed scenes of New York Harbor, the George Washington Bridge, and Niagara Falls.⁴ By December 1945 Fox had agreed to shoot a more extensive demo film based on a short script set in the Civil War era called *The Clod*. Written by Dorothy Bennett, photographed by Joe McDonald, and directed, gratis, by Henry King, the film was budgeted at \$15,000 and came in at \$25,000.⁵

The film and the 50mm shorts that accompanied it were designed to sell Fox executives on 50mm film and stereo sound. An initial demo was held in Hollywood on 25 June 1946 to which Fox executives and engineers working at other studios were invited. Apparently, the nonfiction demo footage involved switching back and forth between

35mm black-and-white monaural footage and 50mm color stereo sound footage. Columbia’s John Lividary stated that his wife was impressed by the differences between stereo and monaural sound and wide and normal images. Lividary himself praised “the photography of events too large for the regular screen to digest” and noted that “with color, these scenes would have terrific public appeal.” He continued, in language that foreshadowed Cinerama, that “pictures capitalizing on this ability of the wide film by bringing to the screen scenes of natural beauty that the present medium is incapable to properly represent would offer new and desirable elements of enjoyment.”⁶

Another demo was held later that year in Hollywood in October. It was specifically for Fox executives and was discussed in an internal memo that reflects the disappointment on the part of the engineers in the executives’ response: “October 25, 1946. Held demonstrations for Skouras, Michel, Adams, officials of ERPI, Eastman Kodak, Joe Schenck and others, in Grandeur projection room at Western Avenue, Hollywood. (Mr. Zanuck did not choose to attend this demonstration.) The conclusion expressed by Schenck was that the motion picture business was so good that it was difficult to serve the theatres with 35 mm. product so why get into something new? Skouras said if executives on the Coast did not support the program it should be tabled.”⁷

It is clear from these comments that Sponable persisted in viewing 50mm film as the ideal format for widescreen cinema. When Sponable first viewed Cinerama in a converted indoor tennis court in Oyster Bay, Long Island, he noted that he was “not impressed with its commercial possibilities as compared to our own wide film systems.”⁸ In another memo Sponable noted that Cinerama “has many technical limitations and is of no interest to Twentieth Century-Fox in its present form. The work we did on 50 mm. film in an experiment performed on the Coast a few years ago is a much more practical approach to the problem of making wide angle pictures with stereophonic sound.”⁹

Because of their prior work with 50mm film Fox engineers knew that whatever widescreen system they chose to develop would have to be compatible with existing theatrical equipment. Fox executives rejected 50mm (possibly because its aspect ratio was only 1.8:1 as opposed to Cinerama’s 2.77:1, i.e., the format was significantly less wide than that of its competition). When Fox president Spyros Skouras and Sponable selected Henri Chretien’s

anamorphic Hypergonar lens, Fox engineers viewed it as the basis for a spectacular widescreen system that, like 50mm film, was essentially compatible with existing 35mm theater projection equipment and that could generate an image of near-Cinerama proportions with an (initial) aspect ratio of 2.66:1.

A study of Fox's experiments with 50mm reveals that technological development takes place within a complex field of events, activities, strategies, ideological assumptions, and marketplace forces that interact with one another in chaotic and unpredictable ways. The story of 50mm illustrates an attempt to guide a particular technology through this minefield of conflicting forces and infinite possibilities. 50mm never made it, but it left its mark: the development of CinemaScope takes the specific shape that it does in consequence of lessons learned with 50mm film.

Notes

1. "Committee Activities: Report of the Standards and Nomenclature Committee," *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 17.3 (1931): 431.

2. Herbert Bragg to A. J. Hallock, 7 Aug. 1931, "50mm" folder, box 8, Sponable Papers, Columbia University Libraries.

3. Memo, Sponable to Harley L. Clarke, 11 June 1931, "50mm" folder, box 8, Sponable Papers.

4. Unsigned memo, 2 Feb. 1945, "50mm" folder, box 8, Sponable Papers.

5. Ray Klune to Sponable, 3 Dec. 1945, 13 Mar. 1946, "50mm" folder, box 8, Sponable Papers.

6. John Lividary to Sponable, 29 June 1946, "50mm" folder, box 8, Sponable Papers.

7. Memo, Sponable to Otto Koegel, 31 May 1956, "History" folder, box 97, Sponable Papers.

8. Memo, Sponable Otto Koegel, 31 May 1956, "History" folder, box 97, Sponable Papers.

9. Memo, Sponable to Otto Koegel, 31 May 1956, "History" folder, box 97, Sponable Papers.

Nitrate's Still Waiting

Leo Enticknap

If it is a "common assumption of historical scholarship that history is written by, about, or for the winners," then where does this leave a technology that has both won and lost? To its supporters cellulose nitrate film was the substance that made cinema possible in the first place, that enables an aesthetic quality of the photographic image unmatched by any other film support, and that, if stored in ideal en-

vironmental conditions, will preserve its contents almost indefinitely. Paolo Cherchi Usai, for example, characterizes the projection of a nitrate print as "razor sharp exteriors, the gauzed close-ups, the ravishing use of tints and tones and the sheer depth of the image."¹ To its detractors nitrate is a difficult and expensive fire hazard that, if not stored in ideal environmental conditions, will destroy itself in a few short decades. As a former curator of film at the Library of Congress put it, "There's an end point—the stuff just goes."²

The invention of nitrate represented a holy grail, the end of a long and tortuous road that had begun in the middle of the nineteenth century. The pioneers of Victorian optical media realized that in order to reproduce the illusion of continuous movement in a sequence of photographic images, a support for the photosensitive emulsion was needed that was flexible, transparent, and tough enough to withstand intense heat and intermittent movement. The alternatives, principally paper and glass slides projected in rapid succession, had proven not up to the job. When in 1889 the Eastman Dry Plate Company supplied its first roll of coated celluloid base, nitrate was very much a success story. Its flammability was considered a minor inconvenience, and at that stage no one was worrying about preservation.

This verdict persisted, largely unchallenged, until after the Second World War. While film bases less flammable than nitrate, principally diacetate and butyrate, were developed and marketed for amateur cinematography and other niche applications, their lower tensile strength and higher cost caused them to be rejected by the professional film industry. At the SMPE conference in 1948 Eastman Kodak changed all that at a stroke. Possibly utilizing the results of research and development captured from the Nazis, an "improved" acetate base film was launched.³ Not only that, Kodak announced plans to immediately phase out the manufacture of nitrate.⁴

At around the same time, archivists were discovering that nitrate decomposed. The earliest documented description of the five-stage decomposition process was by the British preservation pioneer Harold Brown in the mid-1940s. But at that stage the underlying cause—and, crucially, the fact that all cellulose esters decompose in a very similar fashion, regardless of whether nitric or acetic acid is used to dissolve the wood pulp—was not known, and so the new acetate film was considered a savior on two scores. Not only was cellulose triacetate a "safety" film in the sense that it was

no more inflammable than paper, but it was also believed to be immune from the decomposition process that the world's nascent moving image archives were rapidly having to face.

Nitrate, therefore, went from being a technological success story to a moribund and dangerous failure within the space of a few short years. Between the 1950s and 1970s its use for exhibition was banned in all but a few arthouse projection booths, which by legal decree had to be equipped with far more elaborate safety precautions than most had had when nitrate was in mainstream use. The studios and public archives adopted the policy epitomized by the title of Anthony Slide's history of the American film archiving movement, *Nitrate Won't Wait*. The former made crude 16mm optical reduction prints of many of their features and then destroyed the original elements in the belief that their only future value lay in TV licensing. The latter adopted a "copy to preserve as quickly as possible" approach as well, leaving, in many cases, a legacy of poor quality preservation elements.

Then in the mid-1980s the tables turned on nitrate once again. Research carried out by the Image Permanence Institute in New York and Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK established two important discoveries. The first was that, when stored in a cool and very low humidity environment, the process of nitrate decomposition could be retarded almost to the point of being arrested: the film's lifetime could now be measured in centuries. The second was that acetate film decomposes as well (deacetylation, better known by the infamous nickname "vinegar syndrome") and is in many ways more difficult to store than nitrate. This was immediately followed by the emergence of new photochemical and later digital duplication technologies that revealed for the first time the full extent of the contrast, density, and detail captured on a typical 35mm nitrate negative. Although the health and safety issues haven't gone away, archivists and historians now generally regard nitrate elements as valuable cultural artefacts and the bedrock of any preservation strategy rather than unexploded bombs that must be neutralized and destroyed as quickly as possible.

This debate has polarized film archivists and historians of media technology in the last two decades. It has produced no consensus of historical opinion, unlike the debate around most other prominent and obsolete technologies, for which the criteria for success that have generally been applied are that a technology must have been in widespread

use and for a long time. Even though they "worked" in a strict technical sense, the Eidophor (in use for a long time but only on a very small scale) and Dufaycolor (on a large scale but only for a short time) are generally regarded as failures and footnotes, while chromogenic dye-coupler color and VHS (in use constantly and worldwide for many decades) as successes and underpinning technologies for the moving image as mass culture. Nitrate film does not really fit into either of these categories, and even those who claim that it does are constantly revising their opinions on the matter. Nitrate is still waiting for history's verdict, and it'll be a long time coming.

Notes

1. Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Burning Passions: An Introduction to the Study of Silent Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 2.

2. Interviewed in the documentary *Keepers of the Frame* (1999, dir. Mark McLaughlin).

3. Leo Enticknap, "The Film Industry's Conversion from Nitrate to Safety Stocks in the 1940s: A Discussion of the Reasons and Consequences," *This Film Is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film*, ed. Roger Smither and Catherine Surowiec (Brussels: FIAF, 2002), 202–12.

4. Charles R. Fordyce, "Improved Safety Motion Picture Film Support," *Journal of the SMPE* 51 (October 1948): 331–50.

Plug and Pray: Performances of Risk and Failure in Digital Media Presentations

Lisa Nakamura

"Failure" has an exalted status in new and digital media culture. For years, digital technologists such as Steve Wozniak have proudly characterized projects such as the Macintosh Lisa, an early personal computer that found few buyers, as "failures" (or, even better, as "complete failures"). Such objects benefit from being described as failures because they then seem like examples of overreaching, products of their maker's excessive ambition and vision, whereas devices that sell well or perform reliably must be boring. Of course, characterizing an object as a failure is a much more successful strategy if it was an early iteration of one that later became extremely popular or admired. Media producers as well as media critics and scholars create genealogies of development that emphasize the false start or flop but to different ends. What is neglected in these discussions is the role of failure in individual new

media *performance* (a phenomenon best described as the Powerpoint That Wasn't), a far more familiar and indeed ubiquitous scenario in everyday life.

The history of media technology is full of failures, flops, and false starts. The recent popularity of digital media technologies as means of production, distribution, and reception has given rise to some valuable archives preserving the memories of these digital and predigital lemons and losers. Science fiction writer and journalist Bruce Sterling started the Dead Media Project in 1995 as a critical intervention into the pervasive hype around digital media, reminding us not only of the bumps in the road along the seemingly triumphant and precipitous rise to predominance of digital media but also of the status of *all* media technologies as subject to obsolescence—the Betamax was once as “alive” as the Web page is today. Though the Dead Media Project suffered its own online death in 2001 as the list went moribund from lack of contributors, the effort to archive the past lives of objects such as the electric pen, Hollerith punch cards, the mood ring, and the car phone remains. The Dead Media Archive attached to the NYU Media Archaeology seminar taught in the spring of 2008 in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication (see http://cultureandcommunication.org/deadmedia/index.php/Main_Page#Dead_Media_Dossiers) continues this work. These histories of media apparatuses of the past share the laudable goal of reminding us of their ephemerality as well as the role of contingency in shaping technology adoption—commercial, cultural, and industrial factors all had a hand in determining whether a device might turn out to be a winner, a loser, or something in between.

Viewing the history of media technologies in this way, as a stream occasionally or even frequently diverted by failures or false starts but inexorably set upon a triumphant trajectory toward better and more reliable performance, is to ignore the current, slightly hilarious state of new media presentation performance today, one defined by risk and failure. As the slide projector and transparency overhead have given way to the digital projector in classrooms, at conferences, and during scholarly presentations of all kinds, the predominance of presentational failure becomes painfully clear. A well-known joke about an imaginary debate between Bill Gates and Jack Welch dating from 1998 illustrates how failure is tolerable in personal computing in a way that it is most certainly not in other industries such as automobile manufacture. According to this joke, Welch claimed that if GM had developed its technology

like Microsoft had, “for no reason at all, your car would crash twice a day.”¹

Every conference I have attended has been plagued by at least one or two instances of sometimes quite spectacular presentational failure, due more to administrative mismanagement rather than human error or device failure. Presenters desperately canvassing hapless audiences for flash drives, dongles, adapters, and even whole laptops is not uncommon; the impulse to rescue the by-then sweating and pleading presenter results in the desired equipment usually appearing somehow. A personal high point in presentational failure occurred during a panel on digital media technologies at the International Communication Association in 2004 when a presenter who had planned to give a Powerpoint presentation but was assigned to a room with an overhead transparency presenter was reduced to flashing a sheet of paper printed with his slide deck while giving the presentation with references to “slides” that nobody could see. This ostrichlike impulse to carry on as if the presentation were working as one had hoped is not uncommon. The attempts of presenters to re-create visual objects in oral form constitute a genre in and of themselves, one characterized by starters such as “if my clip/demo/slide were working, you would see . . .” and much gesturing toward blank screens. The on-the-fly oral description of unavailable visual evidence jolts the prepared presentation into an unscripted and sometimes painful moment of vulnerability, one that can be played for laughs by the skillful but can be the bane of many a young job seeker or conference goer.

Unlike the wax cylinder or Panaroma, devices that are comfortably behind us, the ongoing riskiness of new media presentation technology is very much with us. Moments of presentational failure lard conferences and classrooms like raisins in a pudding—they are everywhere, albeit not all the time. Just as much media software is “permanently beta,” continually in flux and somewhat unreliable, so too must our expectations about presentational competence shift to acknowledge this.

One might expect that older, less experienced presenters who work on topics such as medieval literature or Renaissance painting might be more subject to Powerpoint failure than younger ones in more technical fields. This would be entirely incorrect. Indeed, presentation technology failure has become a defining feature of new media production and art. Of the Near Future Laboratory’s “Top 15 Criteria That Define Interactive or New Media Art,” the first is “It

doesn't work," and the second is "It doesn't work because you couldn't get ahold of a 220-to-110 volt converter/110-to-220 volt converter/PAL-to-NTSC/NTSC-to-PAL scan converter/serial-to-usb adapter/dongle of any sort and the town you're in is simply not the kind of place that has/cares about such things."² Rather than bemoaning our ability to correctly manage the necessary welter of cords, adapters, remotes, power sources, and flash drives, perhaps we ought to learn to view these supposed failures as marks of distinction and paradoxical displays of expertise.

Notes

1. The genealogy of this joke, which snopes.com defines as an urban legend, can be found at <http://www.snopes.com/humor/future-autos.asp>.

2. Bruce Sterling reproduced this list in a *Wired* blog post on 8 September 2008; see <http://blog.wired.com/sterling/2008/09/near-future-1-1.html>. I'd like to thank Bonnie Fortune for sending me this link.

Social and Political Representation

What We Can Learn from *King*

Jennifer Fuller

As I found when I was researching and presenting papers on it, few people are familiar with the 1978 miniseries *King*. I myself had only "discovered" it while researching another topic. *King* was a 1978 miniseries about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights movement. It was a major undertaking, one of several historical docudramas that networks showcased in the late seventies as evidence of their dedication to quality and public service. It cost NBC \$5 million (an enormous sum at the time) and had top-notch talent: stars Paul Winfield (Dr. King) and Cicely Tyson (Mrs. King) were Oscar nominees, and writer-director Abby Mann won an Oscar for the screenplay of *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961). *King* was expected to be a hit on the "blockbuster" level of the previous year's *Roots*. But instead it was a "failure," coming in near the bottom of the week's Nielsen ratings. I suspect that *King*'s failure is the main reason for its current obscurity. And yet its failure is perhaps what makes it most significant to media studies.

King tells us something about history, reception, and identity. We marvel at *Roots*' success because its predomi-

nantly black cast and the difficult subject matter of slavery managed to appeal to a white audience. *King*'s failure exposes the limits of what aspects of the racial past white audiences were willing to consume at the time. There was widespread speculation that the difference between *Roots*' staggering success and *King*'s shocking failure was that while white viewers felt distanced from slavery, it was "too soon" for them to confront a dramatization of the civil rights movement without guilt and anxiety. According to Todd Gitlin, *King*'s unexpected failure led networks to reconsider concept testing because, apparently, people were more willing to say they'd watch a movie about King than would actually watch it.¹ Meanwhile, some black interviewees felt sad and angry, but the notion that it was "too soon" was overshadowed by claims that the timing was perfect to remind people about the civil rights struggle. And indeed, while *King* was viewed in less than 10 percent of white households, it was viewed in about 70 percent of nonwhite households. This fact complicates any easy categorization of the miniseries as a "failure."

To be precise, *King* failed to draw a large white audience during the classic network era, when an 18 share (which its lowest-rated episode got) was dismal. Today we are well into the era of audience fragmentation, when an 18 share is fantastic and when we recognize that "successful" shows can vary greatly along racial lines (among other demographic segmentations). We shouldn't map contemporary industrial standards onto historical programming. However, just as we use our contemporary understanding of race, gender, and sexuality to analyze historical texts, we can use our "postnetwork" knowledge to contextualize and perhaps destabilize the industry's notion of "success" or "failure."

King also tells us something about the writing of television history and criticism. More than thirty years later *King* continues to be the only biopic about Martin Luther King, Jr. This has made *King* quite easy to access, as historical television goes: it was widely available on VHS for years and was released on DVD (with featurettes!) in 2005. Compare that to the difficulty of finding other late seventies docudramas such as *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald*, *Washington: Behind Closed Doors*, or even a full version of *Holocaust*, which garnered high ratings and a slew of Emmys. *King* also persists as late-night and weekend programming around King Day or during Black History Month. There is no shortage of discourse about *King*, either, as controversies about the miniseries' rendering of King

and the movement led to eight months' worth of press coverage. *King* has been silenced for this long in television scholarship not by lack of sources but by lack of interest.

King falls into the cracks between areas of media and cultural studies; it is an easy text to overlook. It is television, while most scholarship of history/memory and the media is about film. It is a miniseries, while most television history and criticism focus on series. Most of its characters are black, while most U.S. media scholarship is about white-cast productions (or minority-cast productions with significant appeal to white audiences). And, of course, it "failed," while most media scholarship plumbs success.

As television scholars we study "the popular." But we should be careful to not collapse "the popular" with "the successful" or "the cool." *King* not only failed but lacks the cachet of other failed programs with "cult" followings among affluent, educated whites (white youth, in particular). I don't mean to admonish scholars for not writing about *King* in particular; television studies is still a relatively young and small field, and there are myriad texts and industrial trends yet to be analyzed. *King's* obscurity, brought on at least partly by its ratings "failure," is an example of how our marginalization of "failures" can be complicit with industrial practices that privilege some audiences over others. This complicity not only contradicts our political imperative to engage with social hierarchies but can impoverish our understanding of television and its relationship to society.

Note

1. Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 46–47.

The So-Called Fall of Blaxploitation

Ed Guerrero

What was clear by 1976 wasn't so much the "fall" of blaxploitation as its "falling away," a controlled demolition precipitated by a dialectical turn on several fronts—cultural, critical, political—but mostly determined by film industry economics. In the material order of things industry finance had already mapped it out. But one must also consider things in the broader historical-cultural frame: protesting students were gunned down at Kent and Mississippi state colleges; the Vietnam War ended in a stunning defeat; work

boots and surplus army fatigue jackets were replaced by platform shoes and velvet Edwardian waistcoats; social message soul music was replaced by "shake your booty" disco; the black power Afro was replaced by the flowing Super Fly coiffure. By middecade black people had shifted from the collective "we" of black rebellion and "equal rights" to the economic self-interest of the "equal opportunity" "me." The sixties (1967 through 1976) were definitely over, and the Reaganite "greed is good" eighties were just over the social-material horizon, a few years away.

Certainly, by the midseventies the black cinema interlude (in Hollywood's parlance, a short term for quick profit, subgenre cycle), universally known as blaxploitation, had reached its zenith in terms of popularity and number of films. From there, blaxploitation went brain dead and was subsequently euthanized. The cultural-critical turn came for blacks early on, in late 1972, as things once admired and celebrated turned into their opposites. "Type" soured and turned into "stereotype." The hit releases of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and *Shaft* in 1971 launched blaxploitation. Melvin Van Peebles with *Sweetback* provided the rebellious inspiration and a business model. Van Peebles demonstrated that there was a huge, insurgent African American audience thirsting to see winning, heroic black images on the big screen and that through "guerilla financing" and increased control over distribution and exhibition a brother could actually walk away with what he called the "fuck you money," that is, a substantial profit. Additionally, *Shaft*, directed by Gordon Parks, filled in the rudimentary brush strokes of the blaxploitation formula. John Shaft is a macho black detective, with black and white girlfriends throughout New York City, who negotiates between the black and white Mafias, and worlds, to heroically solve everybody's problems in spectacular action-adventure style by the end of the flick. And as commonly noted about blaxploitation films, the music was at least as good or even better than the film's visuals and narrative. Written by Isaac Hayes, *Shaft's* score went astronomically platinum, so popular that it was being played at half-time during nationally televised football games.

In a subtly converse way, *Super Fly* (1972), directed by Gordon Parks, Jr., further refined the formula, resulting in hit box-office profits. Made for \$500,000, the film grossed \$11 million in its first two months of exhibition. So the tale goes, kingpin dope dealer Priest, addictively snorting coke and increasingly disillusioned, wants out of "the life." He accomplishes this by running one last "fantastic

number,” outsmarting “the Man” and exiting the gangster world with a “cool million” in cash. For visual and sonic style, the film was an aesthetic blaxploitation marker. Priest rolled through NYC in a tricked-out Cadillac El Dorado, sporting wardrobe (hovering somewhere between pimp and gangster) that was worthy of Louis XIV in terms of sartorial display projecting political street power. Plus, the *Super Fly* soundtrack, written and performed by Curtis Mayfield, was absolutely socially relevant and went megahit platinum. It remains a much-sampled and honored classic album to this day. “I’m yo Mama. I’m yo Daddy. I’m that nigga in the alley. I’m the pusherman.”

Yet all things must turn. Consequently, a rush of forty or so cheap imitations and variations on the blaxploitation theme quickly followed *Super Fly*’s success, with titles like *Trick Baby*, *Black Caesar*, and *The Mack* in 1973 and *Black Godfather*, *Willie Dynamite*, *The Take*, and *Foxy Brown* in 1974. Prototype quickly stumbled into stereotype and stale formula, and critical blowback from black activists, intellectuals, and political organizations was intense. The Reverend Jesse Jackson called for a boycott of theaters trafficking in the “vulgarity, violence, and vanity” of blaxploitation. Leading black actors, like Bea Richards, Cicely Tyson, and Ossie Davis expressed their dissatisfaction with the genre, as the activist organizations NAACP, CORE, and SCLC formed CAB (Coalition against Blaxploitation). Perhaps Junius Griffin of the Hollywood NAACP put the argument most wryly, commenting that “the stereotyped Stepin’ Fetchit to Supper Nigger . . . is just another form of cultural genocide.”

Hollywood was also reading these cultural-critical reversals along with its own economic smoke signals. Commercial cinema initially got into blaxploitation as the result of an almost complete industrywide economic collapse that culminated in the late sixties. This was incentive for commercial cinema to recognize that a full 25 percent of their audience was black and that black films because of their high “profit related to cost ratio” almost always made money. Consequently, the industry fronted the cash to finance blaxploitation, and the resulting profits literally saved Hollywood from total bankruptcy. But by 1972 Hollywood was fat again and returned to making “blockbusters.” Mega-hits like *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973), with audiences that were fully one third African American, further convinced the moguls that, in light of the critical storm raging against blaxploitation, they no longer had to produce a specifically black product line to attract African American audiences. So the plug was

pulled on the genre, and hundreds of black film workers were once again shut out of the industry. Yet in closing, I would argue that one should view blaxploitation more as discursive cultural compost rather than a dead genre. It definitely fed the rise of today’s black celebrity culture, from hip hop, gangsta’ rap, to star status black filmmakers and actors. And even in a subtle, counterpunctual manner, blaxploitation facilitated the Ages of Cosby, Oprah, and now Obama.

Failing Women: Hollywood and Its Chick Flick Audience

Diane Negra

Let me be clear that the title to this piece is not meant as a double entendre. In suggesting that Hollywood is failing women, I don’t mean to imply that the failure is on women for allowing this state of affairs. When you watch a lot of female-centered media representations, you get used to this sort of formulation, but I want to emphatically reject it. “Failing Women” doesn’t carry the same implication, then, as the title of *Judging Amy*, the former legal/domestic drama whose female protagonist metes out justice in her courtroom and whose personal decision making is in turn judged by series viewers, or that of *Raising Helen*, a film in which the presumptive immaturity of the career-minded protagonist is corrected when she inherits three children and marries a minister.

The version of failure I am interested in is the failure of contemporary Hollywood to take seriously the interests of its female audience. The “chick flick” category feels more and more formulaic and impoverished even while its commercial clout (exemplified in the summer of 2008 by hits like *Sex and the City*, *Mamma Mia*, and *Baby Mama*) remains strong, a sign I believe of the conspicuous interest of female moviegoers in representations of the struggle to cultivate and maintain intimacy. When I attended *Sex and the City* on the first day of its “event” opening, I witnessed the first theatrical display of rapt, avid consumption I had seen in years. A happy murmur went through the audience as the familiar series theme music began to play; however, the spectators’ proficiency with the text exceeded simple gestures of recognition. Exclamations of delight could be heard in the cinema when early on Carrie arrives home and, searching for her partner, calls out “John,” a moment that could pass for trivial to the unfamiliar viewer, but to

those who interpreted *Sex and the City's* refusal throughout its series life to name Carrie's long-term boyfriend as anything other than "Mr. Big" as a sign that her relationship with him was always unequal and unstable, this was an auspicious moment.

The thrill that went through the *Sex and the City* audience that day at the apparently straightforward action of a familiar heroine addressing her male partner by name resonates in a larger context—it speaks of/for a broad range of female filmgoers whose interests are poorly served by the current cinema and who are looking to be meaningfully interpellated and to have the power to interpellate.

I want to argue that film studies should be talking more about the contemporary industry's deep reluctance to treat adult female audience interests in a serious way. That reluctance is validated by a postfeminist cultural environment that often positions women's interests as banal and cheap. As I have argued elsewhere, there is a clear paradox at work in the way that women's interests and pleasures are simultaneously commercially privileged and pejoratively conceptualized. The chick flick, the cinematic form most directly and consistently fashioned to attract female spectators, has now come to be defined by what A. O. Scott has identified as "a lack of emotional risk."¹ Even as the industry becomes fitfully aware of new audience formations/constituencies such as "*Twilight* moms," it rigidly adheres to a stunted imaginative brief when it comes to depicting women. Our experiences, interests, concerns, and dilemmas come across as depressingly conceptually unvaried and run through the following formulae again and again:

- *Women find their femininity through acts of consumption.* Accordingly, commodities must be put to use in an intense, ongoing staging of the self. When this dynamic is repudiated, as in *Sex and the City*, it is only because Carrie's affiliations with the female world of fashion have crowded out Big's patronage, which is restored in the image of the resplendent closet that is the scene for the couple's reunion.
- *The mandatory concession of the working woman.* Professional achievement for women has to be accounted for, as it is automatically understood to be a compensation activity of some kind. In order to earn romance the female protagonist must repudiate her profession, downsize her ambition, or retire (*You've Got Mail*, *Someone like You*, *Two Weeks' Notice*, *The Accidental Husband*). The concession narratives of the contemporary chick flick

stand in marked difference to the more equal allocations of gendered power that marked precedent forms such as the screwball comedy.

- *The procreative epiphany.* The frequency of this gambit as a gesture of closure in female-centered films speaks to a culture unwilling to surrender belief that motherhood is female destiny (and possibly anxiously reassuring itself of its own continuation). Films like *Waitress* and *Premonition*, the remake of *The Women*, and the otherwise tart *Four Christmases* rely on procreation as an all-purpose solution to relationship trouble and life course uncertainty and as a limp gesture of narrative conclusion. The correlative here is that determined women are likely to be driven by a righteous maternity (*Changeling*, *The Orphanage*), as filmmakers seem unable to conceptualize any other imperative for female tenacity. (Even 2008's *The X-Files: I Want to Believe*, in so many ways a feminist tour-de-force, suffers from this hindrance.)

We use the term "chick flick" to designate a set of films that enjoy great cultural familiarity, but it is a familiarity that is almost always acknowledged with embarrassment or chagrin. Meanwhile, Hollywood operates in a state of perpetual surprise when it comes to the spending power of its female audiences. At present, it is largely left to popular press critics and journalistic reviewers to note this state of affairs and to suggestively comment on it. The broad-based neglect of these gendered industrial and representational dynamics is a failure film studies scholars can and should redress.

Note

1. "Modern Courtship and Love Unsentimentally but Nimbly Portrayed," *International Herald Tribune*, 16–17 Feb. 2008: 14.

Methods/Assumptions of Media Studies

The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. Analog in the Land of the Pixels

Paolo Cherchi Usai

Given the degree of sophistication achieved by moving image studies in the past decades, I am puzzled by their relative indifference to the nature of the visual experience they're supposed to deal with. It all started in the 1980s,

when the mass distribution of cinema by electronic means began to reshape the scope and depth of our knowledge in the field: all of a sudden, we felt that film history and analysis could be pursued without being exclusively dependent upon our own memory. So we started watching, collecting, scrutinizing, teaching, and writing about cinema with the aid of videotape. Our loyalty to the big screen wasn't necessarily betrayed. Quite the contrary: videotape helped a new generation of viewers to fall in love with cinema and discover that there was so much to be seen beyond mainstream Hollywood. Then came the laserdisc; then the DVD; then the long-awaited (and still unfulfilled) promise of worldwide digital distribution.

Again, this is all fine. There was one thing, however, that we were strangely reluctant to come to terms with. Our perception of cinema was changing, and we were unwilling to admit it. To make things worse, we fell prey to a subtle, pervasive form of intellectual blackmail, promoted and disguised by the industry under the appearance of a straightforward technical comparison between image quality in film and other media. This strategy was introduced in a very subdued—almost subliminal—manner during the era of analog videotape, but the message was already there: it's the narrative, stupid. Why be so anxious about the fidelity of the copy to the original? That will come soon; it's only a matter of time. When the time came with the so-called digital revolution, we were ready to be drawn into the next phase of the process with the ideology of image definition. Like all successful ideologies, its mantra was deceptively simple: digital looks as good as film, and it will soon look even better than that.

It is at this point that I would have expected film scholarship and criticism to stand up and fight. We could have argued that it is not a matter of "better" or "worse," we could have said that drawing a parallel between the analog and the digital experience by counting the number of pixels in a film frame is like comparing apples and oranges. We just didn't do it. Most of us didn't even try. By the time a scholar like D. N. Rodowick persuasively presented the case in his remarkable book *The Virtual Life of Film* (2007), the game was already over. Digital ideology had promptly developed its fundamentalist corollary: if you're not in favor of analog cinema projected digitally, then you're against digital as such, therefore you're an enemy of democracy (digital is for all, analog is elitist). Besides—this is the ultimate argument of the digital dogma—photochemical film is dying anyway and the public doesn't seem to mind, so

why bother (to add a touch of guilt complex to the mix, we are reminded that the boundaries between analog and digital filmmaking have become so blurred as to make the distinction irrelevant).

Aside from its dishonesty, this rhetoric is ironically self-defeating: digital reformers would have plenty of reasons to be concerned about the future of their own domain. From the perspective of a scholar of the predigital moving image, the core point would have been that a medium called film has its own distinctive (however obsolete) modes of perception: after all, no art historian would argue that oil painting is better or worse than tempera; it's just different. Artists working with digital and those who assess or exhibit their work are faced with the infinitely more complex challenge of emancipating a newly established medium from the traditions and methods once established by its predecessor. Their problem is that digital is still thinking very much in analog terms, while its creative potential goes far beyond that.

It would be equally misleading to assume that the issue belongs to the realm of academic inquiry and has no significant bearing on cultural practice. Festivals, for instance, have by now realized that an increasing number of works produced by photochemical means are no longer available on film prints in good condition and that there's no high-quality digital ersatz to replace them, even if they were willing to accept the compromise. In all likelihood, the experience of analog cinema as a collective event will suffer from the lack of suitable projection elements. Could this phenomenon have been avoided? Probably not. If so, would it have been useful to make an effort all the same? My answer is yes, as it would at least have prepared the ground for a more responsible study of a form of aesthetic expression soon to be superseded by history. Etruscan art has been extinct for a while, but there's nothing wrong with researching it.

I have often suggested that predigital cinema may begin to be taken seriously once it is gone, and we're getting close to both. In his perceptive review for *Variety* (23 November 2008) of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, Todd McCarthy complained that despite its absorbing narrative, David Fincher's work maintained "a slightly remote feel." "It is possible," he says, "that the picture might have been warmer and more emotionally accessible had it been shot on film. It has been argued that digital is a cold medium and celluloid a hot one and a case, however speculative, could be made that a story such as 'Benjamin

Button,' with its desired cumulative emotional impact, should be shot and screened on film to be fully realized. These are intangibles, but nor are they imaginary factors; what technology gives, it can also take away."The belated emergence of this viewpoint gives me reason to believe that if our duty to treat analog cinema on its own terms has been fatally neglected, there still is time to recognize what we have lost and be prepared to apply the lesson to the demise of digital, whenever it will occur.

Vagaries of a Concept: The Culture Industry

Dana Polan

It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that any contemporary consciousness that has not appropriated the American experience, even in opposition, has something reactionary about it.

—Theodor Adorno, "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America"

Over the years I've joked with my academic friends that I'd like to create a line of T-shirts that bear the slogan "Adorno was right." My friends generally chuckle at the idea and the irony of it—the quintessential curmudgeonly critic of commodification reduced to a commodity himself . . . and then they generally say that if I actually did it, they'd buy one.

In film studies, media studies, cultural studies more broadly, Theodor Adorno's take on everyday culture—especially the U.S. culture that he sort of lived through as an exile—is pretty much assumed to be a failure. "Adorno" stands here as the shorthand name for an attitude toward culture as unredeemable manipulation, as the unambiguous hypodermic infusion of ideology into the minds of the many. Adorno, then, for his detractors would be the supreme example of that failure of encounter that Andrew Ross argues in his groundbreaking *No Respect: Intellectuals and Mass Culture* was the lot of so many postwar intellectuals when faced with an American popular culture they could only view through the prism of a priori denunciation.

A first corrective to the demonization of Adorno might involve research into and then reference to those moments when his approach to everyday culture isn't as monolithic as all that. Thus, one could argue easily that the famous "Culture Industry" essay by Adorno and Max Horkheimer allows for many moments for progressiveness and subversiveness from within the heart of the very mass culture that Adorno is supposed to deem so frighteningly

beyond redemption: for examples, while Adorno and Horkheimer certainly inveigh against the false promises of commercialized popular culture, they do so because they feel it renders ersatz the ebullient eroticism they find in a folk culture that stretches from popular carnivals up to the B-movie and anarchic Marx Brothers comedy. In this vein one can even recount instances in which Adorno himself tried to employ mass culture in potentially progressive directions: this is the gambit of David Jenemann's intriguing book, *Adorno in America*, which, among other things, traces Adorno's efforts to recruit Hollywood filmmakers to the cause of antiprejudice pedagogy rendered through popular storytelling.

It would also be useful to show that, even as they impute an immense ideological intent to the culture industry, Adorno's writings on that industry don't necessarily assume that this intent was ever fully effected for the social subjects on the receiving end of culture's mass diffusion. In this respect, a 1960s essay by Adorno on leisure culture entitled "Free Time" is often cited for its mention of a radio broadcast about royalty that the masses received basically in indifference: the point here is that Adorno saw mass apathy less as ideological obeisance than as itself a potential resistance to enthusiastic acceptance of dominant ideological messages.

These means of redeeming Adorno on popular culture basically try to show ways in which Adorno didn't view that culture as really so bad. And I do find this closer, better reading of what he actually said and argued quite salutary. But I think it worthwhile to take the even bolder position and wonder if Adorno couldn't be right about the culture industry after all. Instead of suggesting that his admonitions really aren't so extreme or that there are exceptions to his critique, might there not be virtues to accepting the arguments that indeed culture has been industrialized and instrumentalized, that standardization of product is often the rule (with seeming difference often being little more than a seductive appeal through pseudo-individualization), and that culture is deployed as a tool of commercialized ideology, that culture industries do seek to manipulate masses (now treated, in the trenchant phrase of media industry mavens, as "audited eyeballs" to be sold to)?

Theories may fail to resonate in their first moments of encounter with history only to gain new relevance and new salience under changed circumstances. In an age of war reportage reduced to a carefully censored embedded journalism, of intense media consolidation (Rupert

Murdoch!), of political debate rendered as sound-byte dueling, of a popular cinema luxuriating in the seductions of glossy and noisy special effects, of a loss of historical and critical consciousness, of an empty proliferation of sites (blogs, facebook, and so on) where we can mythologize our ability to talk democratically and collectively; of the dismantling of labor organization and the increasing exploitation of intellectual labor—in such an age, the theory of culture industry can look more pertinent than ever.

The argument here would be as much about history as about theoretical concept. It's not that Adorno is right in any pure, absolute, transhistorical way but that historical development has made his theoretical claims resonate in a new way to match new conditions today. This is the Adorno that Fred Jameson qualifies as a "late" Marxist—insofar that his concepts have a belatedness in which their import emerges only when and because history has (sadly) caught up to them: for Jameson, Adorno is the philosopher of the age of the economic—of the extreme imposition of logics of capital so strong they make even the aesthetic realm one of full marketability.

Teaching Adorno's savage book-length analysis of 1930s evangelical, right-wing radio several times during the years of the Bush administration, I kept feeling that little had changed in media's role in the dissemination of rabid ideologies—from one period to the other, shock jock purveyors of hatred wove their spell over myriad listeners—except that what in Adorno's time had been the media of marginalized fanatics was now that of mainstream politicians (even the president claimed to have direct communication with God). I write these lines just a few days after the inauguration of a new president, and it's good to feel the hope and the sense of promising change. But it's also worrisome to note the persistence of other logics: on one side, at the top, to take just one example, it's worrisome to note how democratic access to the inauguration event has been controlled by the censoring arm of HBO to whom exclusive media rights to parts of the inauguration celebration were sold; on the other side, at the level of everyday media production, it's worrisome to note how the shock jocks are still given great amounts of media time to spread demonizing and tenacious lies about the politics of the new administration. Dialectical thinking advises us to commingle the celebrating with caution and to carefully analyze our historical situation rather than dance joyfully over it. Supposedly the intransigent pessimist, Adorno defies the common conception of him and holds

out an ultimate optimism: "The only philosophy which can be justified in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption . . . Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspective without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects—this alone is the task of thought" (*Minima* 247).

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Of Prepositions: Lost and Found

Edward Branigan

Everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it.¹

—Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.002

Prepositions and their neglect is what the below is about. Deleuze poses the question, "What is it to have an idea 'in' something?"² But why settle on in with "in"? Additional prepositions come to mind, for example, having an idea "of," "about," "from," "through," "with" (beside, alongside), "due to," or even "apart from" (standing outside of, notwithstanding, contrary to, in spite of, instead of, thanks to, from off of) a thing.³ Perhaps Deleuze is thinking about an idea in the same way as a pain: "I have a pain . . . here *in* . . ." Paradoxically, when watching a film, there is no preposition: "I am watching a film" or "I saw a film last night" or "I had an experience."

Why should the fateful preposition be missing in the case of "seeing" a film—an inexistence that apparently gets in the way of having an idea "in" film—notwithstanding such philosophical agitprops as a belief in "seeing-in,"

in which a hyphen imprisons a nominal “in”? Perhaps the proper preposition to accompany “seeing” is simply implicit in some way, being a sort of see-through floor that an idea or “meaning” arises thereupon. Do we see film, then, as a type of “virtual window” onto visibilia (Arnheim, Bazin, Friedberg) or as (about) an “event” on view (Benjamin, Kracauer, Altman) or as a stage for mythologies (early Barthes) or as a mapping of actors onto previously seen scenarios (instantiating psychoanalytic gazes or looks)?

Alternatively, film may resemble a “language” where the ordering of things counts—a text to be read out in some ordinary, embodied,⁴ ekphrastic,⁵ synoptic,⁶ unconscious (i.e., from the without within), or symptomatically figurative way, like a hieroglyph, sign, or mental rebus. The notion of film as symbolic of mind—as representational (i.e., at a remove) or procedural rather than representative—would seem to stretch back to the beginning of film theory with Vachel Lindsay, Münsterberg, Eisenstein, and Metz, depending on one’s sense of history, of the vast past—or employing a stronger, prescriptive preposition—of what belongs *in* history, in a narrativized account of film theory.

Film theorists have failed to appreciate the history of film theory and have taken too little note of how they deploy prepositions in their propositions. Following up on Deleuze’s question, one may ask, “Of *which* something does a theoretical idea reside in?” What mental picture goes together with this Deleuzian word “in”? Is a state of being “in” (as indwelling) the only way to insist on a material basis for an idea? Consider the related question, “What is it that film is made *out of*?” The double preposition seems naturally to call *out for* an investigation that will lead into a way of thinking about a “what,” a “thing,” and an “it” in which an idea can be *ingrained*, finally coming to rest after moving to and fro across a defined boundary after having been *injected* or *outcast*. That is, Deleuze’s preposition “in” seems to direct us toward a search for a select set of properties that will identify a *container*—either existent or subsistent—capable of making intelligible material form—that is, a place where *medium and temporal specificity* will enforce identity, crystallize thought, and explain expression: *whatsit* is located exactly *there*. The insubstantial of thought is merged into—becomes—material. But how many properties does a specified material or a given mental construct possess? In relation to what other things? For which uses? On or about which occasions?

Deleuze’s search has its analogue in film theorizing. That is, there is a temptation to ask into which material medium a theoretical idea must be lodged, for example, in a film, in the production of a film, in a history of films, in a film that can be made, in a person who can watch a film, and more. Many film theorists aspire to transform a way of thinking-in into a mental framework of theses that can be built up into an intricate edifice or broken down into essential constituents and then used to locate properties of interest in a world. Within this picture, and without, there are numerous theoretical frames to choose from.⁷ Nonetheless, with respect to the nature of a film “medium,” which has been invented by theorists for explaining acts of seeing (in) film, why not lean more toward Baudry’s assertion in 1975 that “[i]t is very possible that there was never any first invention of cinema,” nor, one might add, is there likely to be any last invention.⁸

Prepositions are known to invade interpretation as well. When we reflect “on” a film or exclaim “about” a film, we are, in effect, trying out alternative and intermittent relationships between some fictional object imagined from the film and our beliefs concerning perceived/desired worlds for that object. Theorists, too, seem drawn to concrete cases for reflection. Theoretical examples and illustrations are often introduced using such “marginal prepositions” as “given,” “including,” “concerning,” and “considering.” Consider, for example, *Viaggio in Italia*, a 1954 Rossellini film that has acquired two English titles, *Voyage to Italy* and *Voyage in Italy*.

Preposition trouble?! An important interpretation of the film’s narrative and style turns on the prepositions of these titles: “to” and/or “in.”⁹ These are not the same prepositions with respect to how one sees the film. Both may be justified, but in different ways. Latent also in the prepositions are “ambiguities” that contribute to the film’s status as perhaps the “first” of the post–World War II European art cinema movement.

In particular, since Rossellini’s film begins with a married couple from England who are already traveling in Italy, the “to” of the title suggests that a certain mental resistance will continue to hold the couple back from encountering the authentic Italy. The film will seek to demonstrate that to travel truly to Italy will require an open mind about local customs. More importantly, the “in” of the title suggests that the voyage within Italy will also involve a disquieting interior journey—a moral arc toward self-awareness not unfamiliar to/in classical narrative. A third title for the film seeks to

cut straight to the heart of the matter, omitting such finery as this or that preposition: *The Lonely Woman*. But where is the husband in this story of mutual marital dissonance (i.e., of mutually falling *in/out* of love)? Where, in short, is the title “The Lonely Man”? Obviously, Ingrid Bergman as the Lonely Woman is an actress with whom no male actor can compete (with) and a formidable character type in need of no further predication, no prepositioning (of).¹⁰

Whether or not a person elides or carefully specifies for an object a preposition, an analyst, by focusing on the person’s words, will be able to examine how an assortment of critical *languages* is being manipulated and managed in the effort to see. A key goal for the analyst is to reveal the diversity of language-games (i.e., the collection of collective representations) being played upon by a spectator or theorist. A preposition must almost always have an object, whereas an object may appear by itself in a sentence (as if born in a pure state, inborn). One of the analyst’s goals, then, is to discover the prepositions that are implicit or hover about or are possible for such a bare object, specifically, for an object defined by a film theory. A spectator, too, in watching and hearing a film is experimenting with prepositions by converting a given moment *into* textualities from “ways of living.” As Deleuze shrewdly argues, “Cinema’s concepts are not given in cinema.”¹¹

To state the goal differently: the analyst should strive to uncover significant permutations of the middle word in “point of view.”¹² Omitting this preposition cancels difference, creating an illusion of convergence and unity in a simple “viewpoint,” while a fully reduced, sutured form of “medium” requires only that a spectator (character, narrator, author-visionary) take in “the view.” By contrast, expanding the middle word of “point of view” will open up difference beyond that which is in sight toward an insight into a topography of community values, practices, and sites of viewing. In short, positions from prepositions. This is not Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” but rather what might be called a “hermeneutics of entangled grammars,” akin to Bakhtin’s heteroglossia.

Prepositions should be put back into scholarship or, rather, their presence more keenly felt.

Notes

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1. P. M. S. Hacker elaborates on the centrality of everyday language for Wittgenstein: “[T]here is nothing trivial about language and its uses,

or about the confusions into which we are led through our failure to have an overview of a domain of grammar that causes trouble. We are the kinds of creatures we are because we possess a language. Our distinctive capacities, e.g. our rationality, our knowledge of good and evil, and our possession of a conscience, our self-consciousness, our capacity for apprehension of necessary truths, are all functions of the fact that we are language-using creatures.” G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*, vol. 1 of *An Analytical Commentary on the “Philosophical Investigations,” Part I: Essays*, 2nd rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 301.

2. “Qu’est-ce qu’avoir une idée en quelque chose?” is rendered by the translator as “What is having an idea in something?” Deleuze continues: “One does not have an idea in general [*en général*]. An idea—like the one who has the idea—is already dedicated to this or that domain. It is sometimes an idea in [*en*] painting, sometimes an idea in fiction [*en roman*], sometimes an idea in [*en*] philosophy, sometimes an idea in [*en*] science. And it is certainly not the same thing that can have all that [*le même qui peut avoir tout ça*]. Ideas must be treated as potentials [*potentiels*] that are already engaged in [*engagés dans*] this or that mode of expression and inseparable from [*inséparables du*] it, so much so that I cannot say that I have an idea in [*en*] general.” Note that Deleuze converts the preposition “in” into something “inseparable from” and “engaged in” some thing (note the etymology: *en/in*) as well as invulnerable inside someone (“the one who has the idea”). Gilles Deleuze, “Having an Idea in [*en*] Cinema (*On the Cinema of Straub-Huillet*),” *Deleuze & Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy, and Culture*, ed. Eleanor Kaufman and Kevin Jon Heller (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), 14. See also Deleuze, “What Is the Creative Act?” *French Theory in America*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2001), 99–107.

Deleuze states that “I can have an idea in a given domain [*dans tel domaine*], an idea in [*en*] cinema” and asks, “What is it to have an idea in [*au—at the?*] cinema?” (14). For Deleuze, cinema’s unique “mode of expression” of an idea is to be found in “blocks of movements/duration [*des blocs de mouvements/durée*]” (15). But is Deleuze, in effect, overgeneralizing the word “particular” here by using it in three senses: a particular idea in a particular someone only in a particular medium? Is the particularity of “particular” in a given circumstance to be determined first or last? I think the latter, which leaves open all the interesting questions.

Furthermore, what is the precise status of Deleuze’s particular photographic “movement-time” of cinema? Is it to be representative like a sample and the mirrored, reiterated presence of *mise-en-abîme*? Is it representational and displaced like an emblem? Or might it be something *in* between like a hypnagogic state, neither exactly presence nor absence, for example, a condition descended from Derrida’s “trace” or some notion of “intermediality”? A further possibility: might the particularity of cinema be something simply without, which is impossible to map *in* these terms of “presence,” “absence,” and “betweenness” (e.g., contingency, excess, or use)?

By the way, when talking and writing about film experience or about “blocks of movement-time,” does “aurality” demand a different theorization—a different preposition, predication, or governing frame—than does “visuality”?

3. Although one may remain “within” a given framework—hanging “on to” something already-familiar—such a course may be perilous when writing a dissertation, since “this approval form must be signed

'off on by' each committee member."The present commentary, in fact, comes from a question that I drafted for a Ph.D. qualifying exam.

4. On embodiment see, for example, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

5. On ekphrasis see W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994).

6. On synopsis see works by David Black, Bryan Vescio, Robert Stam, and Henry Jenkins cited in Branigan, *Projecting a Camera: Language-Games in Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 318n58. Cf. Tom Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991).

7. The word "preposition" comes from the Latin and means "placing in front [of a noun phrase]."The relating power of prepositions is enormous. They typically perform an adverbial or adjectival role and may relate (to) spatial position, temporal position (as in the durable "once upon a time . . ."), orientation, possession, movement, causality, method, circumstance, and many other things that are literal and (possibly inventively) figurative. For more on prepositions and the language frames of film theory see my *Projecting a Camera* as well as "Teaching Film Theory," *Teaching Film*, ed. Lucy Fischer and Patrice Petro, Options for Teaching series (New York: Modern Language Association Publications, forthcoming in 2010).

8. Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), 307.

9. A prepositional *shift* like that of *Voyage to/in Italy* is also used to insist on the necessity of a mental state being conjoined with an object and to measure a felt change of direction between two important mental states and their objects, namely, shifting from an external to an internal object: intention/attention *to* (an external object of thought) versus awareness/possession/consciousness *of* (an internal object of thought). This prepositional shift raises plenty of questions for philosophers who seek to keep the word "object" in one piece by finding different types of "existence."

10. A few films with preposition trouble: *Waltz with Bashir*; *A Passage to India*; *Coup de Torchon*; *Au hasard Balthazar*; *La vie de Jésus* (Bruno Dumont); *John from Cincinnati*; *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (should it be "at" or "in" Marienbad?); *Hable con ella*; *Made in U.S.A.*; *Two or Three Things I Know about Her*; *Let the Right One In*; *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice*; *The Taste of Tea*; *A Taste of Cherry*; *A Room with a View*; *Room at the Top*; *Secret beyond the Door*; *The Door in the Floor*; *Beneath the Valley of the Ultra Vixens*; *The Edge of Heaven*; *To Have and Have Not*; *The Element of Crime*; and, if I may be allowed to extend the title of *La moustache*: "La moustache de Marc."

11. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989), 280. Cf. the special issue on social approaches to consciousness, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 15.10–11 (2008); see also 15.12 (2008).

12. There may be a connection of consequence between prepositions and "point of view." Prepositions in modern English are closely related to the six cases (noun endings) of Latin and Old English as well as, for example, to the sixteen cases of modern Finnish. I believe that a spectator's projection of a "point of view" onto the semantics of a film text may be analyzed through the model of a generative case grammar. See *Projecting a Camera*, chap. 2.

From Failure: On Prepositions and History

Charles Wolfe

Early in his collected lectures on the nature of historical inquiry entitled *What Is History?* Edwin Hallett Carr poses the question: "What is the criterion that distinguishes the facts of history from other facts about the past?" (7). In light of Edward Branigan's discussion of the linguistic functions of prepositions, we would do well to attend closely to Carr's choice of words. For Carr, "facts *of* history" are a special subcategory of "facts *about* the past." Facts of history "speak only when the historian calls on them" (Carr 9). They are placed in the service of a historical interpretation that grants them particular significance. Facts *about* the past have no such standing. They are not *in* the past, enclosed within a clearly delineated space. They are not yet *from* the past, as would be facts made available to the present through a historian's interpretive act. We might say they remain in waiting, *about* to be *of* history, but only if a historian lays claim to them in a plausible way. (Carr describes a process whereby facts of the past are "proposed for membership of the select club of historical facts" [10].) "Facts of history," in contrast, have a determinate status; they are fully legible in relation to a particular historical narrative. Carr secures the bond between such facts and historical narrative even more firmly by referring to "facts of history" also as "historical facts." As Branigan observes with respect to the difference between the notions of a "point of view" and a "viewpoint," the omission of a preposition may cancel the difference between the linked nouns, in this case the distance between knowable facts and the particular historical meaning ascribed to them. Facts, so conceived, are wholly ingredient to or constituted by a given historical account. Although Carr does not explore the possibility, the phrase "facts of history" opens up space, however slightly, for us to imagine that a *historicized* fact, by virtue of the work of historical inquiry and writing, can serve different historical accounts in different ways.

These distinctions may shed light on the function that words like "failures," "false starts," and "dead ends" play in the writing of film history. To describe a historical event, metaphorically, as a "false start" or a "dead end" is to presume that history follows a certain direction and consists of motivated acts. The motives may be ascribed to human agents, to world historical forces, or to historiographical practice itself. Marked by multiple starting points and end points, history here unfolds along a set of branching

pathways, some of which are blocked, others of which continue on. To characterize an event as a “success” or “failure,” moreover, brings evaluative language to bear on how we understand these motivated historical trajectories. This evaluative impulse may be even more urgently felt or acutely articulated when the terms of assessment are reversed and failures are prized over and against successes or triumphs. Failures, after all, have narrative significance not only for the victors, in triumphalist accounts, but also for those with another story to tell. From failures new energies can be summoned. Political communities, for example, often cultivate a sense of loss, and grievance over such loss, in a phenomenon Wolfgang Schivelbusch labels “the culture of defeat.” Acts of failed resistance to prevailing forces may be mined in retrospect for signs of both perfidy and hope. It may be misleading, then, to think of any “failure,” *so named*, as a “dead end,” for, at least conceptually, failures remain productive. In Carr’s formulation failures would not be considered “facts about the past,” awaiting identification, interpretation, and adjudication, but are fully historical, occupying a place in both dominant and dissenting historical narratives. To think of such failures as “facts of history” rather than as “historical facts” may open up greater space for multiple interpretations. In any case, at issue is our capacity to recontextualize these failures, to activate them *for* a different historical narrative.

Consider Nataša Ďurovičová’s 1992 essay, “Translating America: The Hollywood Multilinguals, 1929–1933,” an account of the short-lived phenomenon of foreign language version films produced in the United States and Europe during the transitional years to sound. The production of a Hollywood “talkie” in multiple languages entailed the cumbersome process of reshooting individual scenes with different actors speaking in different languages so as to accommodate linguistic differences among international audiences. Given the striking inefficiencies of this practice, film historians have had no difficulty explaining why it came to a (dead) end and why subtitling and dubbing were embraced as superior solutions to the problem of linguistic translation. A fuller history of multiple language version films, Ďurovičová asserts, requires close examination of Hollywood’s “quest for the proper site of language,” with that site understood in relation to both the bodies of performers and different geographical locations (“Translating” 142). Ďurovičová does not challenge the economic “fact” that the production of multiple language version films was profoundly inefficient or that their systematic

manufacture by the Hollywood studios was relatively brief. Rather, she seeks to demonstrate how the historical import of this seemingly anomalous experiment necessarily shifts when these events are folded into another historical narrative, one concerning the ongoing fabrication of a speaking body and the circulation of languages globally.¹ This narrative extends to our contemporary moment “when English, in its increasing dominance of the global mass media, is about to render obsolete the very idea of a ‘foreign language’” (“Translating” 139). A case study of the “failure” of Hollywood multilinguals thus brings the complex history of other cultural forces to the fore, with the production of foreign language versions understood to offer resistance to something more than simply the efficiency of production practices. Ďurovičová concludes on this speculative note: “Overcoming the resistance of which the foreign language versions offered a first and last sign, the admired and feared ‘international dream factory’ may have become instrumental in making the world dream in Hollywood’s English idiom—or dream *for* that English, the stars’ lips coming to mouth the shadow of that wish, beyond the inefficient cacophony of the world’s separate tongues” (“Translating” 151). The emphasis is the author’s, and it reminds us, with admirable transparency, of the causal implications of the preposition through which her argument takes its final turn.

Note

1. Ďurovičová continues her exploration of this history of the abstracted speaking body and the circulation of languages globally, through various transnational configurations and on into the digital era, in “Local Ghosts” and “Vector, Flow, Zone.”

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Nine Theses on the Failures and False Start of Filmic Ontology

Brian Price

1. Ontology is first philosophy, a ground clearing. What is cleared in every instance is the notion of ground as something given, iterative, or durable. “Not a ground, but a horizon,” says Ernesto Laclau.

2. To ask an ontological question is, as Heidegger insisted, to question after the meaning of being. However, it is a meaning that can only come *after* being. It is contingent and porous in every instance of apprehension. It can include images, but no more than it involves other people, animals, rocks, trees, music, water, wind, ideas, and air.

3. An image has no being, even if it moves.

4. The moving image does not think, nor does it remember, even if it is capable as material of being fashioned after someone else’s thought, someone else’s memory. What it makes possible for our own memory, our own thinking, is a function of relation, an encounter that is neither guaranteed nor fixed. Its effects—like color on color, or color beside color—cannot be staged in advance. A plan is not a result. When Astruc celebrated the 16mm camera as the philosopher’s pen, he was making no claim about how a medium comes into being, only what we can think through this medium that makes thinking-with-images possible because affordable. Video makes this even more possible because it is less expensive: what it wastes costs much less. But this is not to make an ontological claim.

5. Any claim about the essence of a medium—for what constitutes its singularity as a medium, especially as its singularity is understood as an expression of that which brings an image into being—ought to prevent one from making claims about how a medium will or ought to develop. Style is an act of will, not an inheritance, even when what we will is repetition or resemblance. One can reproduce what one has seen and been moved by before, but that is simply a matter of representation and a desire for belonging, or an overcoming. Belonging is always imagined, always representational. *This is where I imagine myself to be.* Sometimes I get there, and when I do, it always looks different from my imagining.

6. The camera is not going to decide when to begin and when to end, even if we are not present for that beginning or that ending. Our absence guarantees nothing so much as representation itself: what will get said or shown

without my saying. Images can do this; they can become a vessel of the spoken for, the spoken with, or the spoken instead of. That is what can be done with them, and they do nothing without us. What appears in an image will tell us absolutely nothing about origin, only that origin itself follows representation and is unthinkable without it. Representation occurs at the moment in which we perceive something to have gone missing, or that is about to.

7. Heidegger’s question: Why is there something instead of nothing? Images can only be a way of imagining and posing an answer. They are not otherwise implicated in the question. To think otherwise is to give into the religious illusion. I have been to the Arena Chapel and wondered after the serial succession of frames that is Giotto’s frescoes. If they caused cinema or are a chain in a longer network of successive and imitative forms, that is only a matter of representation and identification—an identification that is nothing more than a way of saying: “I want to believe this too (for some reason).” The chain does not go backward to infinity. Or as Deleuze has put it more succinctly, “The Search is oriented to the future, not to the past.” Our inquiries never lead us backward, always forward. If they lead us forward, “backward” is necessarily constitutive. There is no backward, not in time or in space. Representations—road signs, odometers, compasses—prevent us from bumping into one another, but that only makes them charitable, not metaphysically stable. Signs themselves cannot take us anywhere. They can contribute to what will come into being, but what comes into being has no cleanly demarcated past. If it has a past, that past is uniquely its own, a constellation of signs that bears no indexical or iconic relation to a noumenal formation. Hence the pleasure of contingency and being: intersection, recurrence, mutation, surprise, superimposition, difference. We could go on.

8. The moving image, digital or analog, is something with which we intersect; it is something that we reflect on and live with in partiality. Sometimes we like the same things, but not always for the same reason, and what arrives once we have admitted what we share is the awareness of what separates us. The mirror stage is a frightening aberration, something best left to horror films. Being is partial, fluid, multiple, and always our own, but our own as uniquely multiple and occasionally shared. We can speak without the subject. We can *be* without the subject. The question, then, is not about how an image comes to being, but how we come to being-with-images. Not the purity of *dasein* and the retreat from the social, but the full, happy, contested,

and immersive field of *mitdasein*, of being with others. To be is to be thrown, Heidegger would say. We arrive at being, to *dasein*, only because we have already been thrown. *We can only be once we have been thrown*. Being-with-images, by contrast, is to live in a state of thrownness and to seek no way out. There is no way out, and we do not need one.

9. The ontology of the moving image, then, is not a matter of cause, origin, and stylistic fidelity. It is being-with-images. It is to question after the meaning of being-with-images and the possibilities of shared partiality. What gets shared, however, is not the same in every instance of sharing, every conjugated instance of being.

Notes on the Emergence of Failure Studies

Charles Ramírez Berg

One of the students I had the pleasure of teaching back when I was a part-time lecturer at the University of Texas at El Paso in the late 1970s and early 1980s was Olympic runner Suleiman Nyambui. A prodigiously talented athlete from Tanzania, he was a humble, gentle, and kind human being. As good a runner as he was, he didn't win every race he ran, and I asked him once what he thought about when he failed to win a race. I'll never forget what he said, and I've tried to adopt it as a credo: "As long as you try as hard as you can, you cannot fail."

I was asked to be on the original Failure panel at last fall's FLOW Conference. The topic was so popular that a second panel was organized. Now I've been asked to contribute here. Despite all the interest in failure studies, I must confess I have two reservations. The first concern centers on what might be called the methodological ethics of the project. A second set of qualms has to do with failure studies' foundational premises.

Encountering successful works is a humbling experience. The critic stands in wonder at so many pieces fitting together so perfectly and tries to comprehend how another human being accomplished such an extraordinary feat. It's a daunting task, and we usually end up understanding only a small part of the creative puzzle. Still, we do our best.

The problem with analyzing failure is just the opposite. It's easier to pan a flop than to appreciate a masterpiece. Because a failure's flaws seem all too evident, the danger for the critic is assuming a superior position to the work and the maker. If failure studies is to become a viable critical approach, a great deal of humility will be required. No

one intends to make a failure. Someone tried their best. This time it didn't come together. But there is something sacred about the trying. What, we should ask, can maker and critic learn from the experience?

My other problem with the emergence of failure studies has to do with one of its central hypotheses: the underlying assumption that failure goes unexamined. I think we study failure all the time. If you accept the maxim that holds that 90 percent of everything is junk—even if you think the ratio is more like 80/20 or 70/30—then most of what we do is pursue, research, describe, analyze, criticize, debate, and theorize mediated mediocrity.

Of course this begs some big questions: Who gets to decide what is called junk? And on what basis?

So partly the problem is definitional—what *is* failure? It depends on several factors, context being one of them. Determinations of success or failure can change with time. *Citizen Kane* was a box-office failure, far from unanimously acclaimed, and certainly not universally regarded as a great film—maybe the best ever made—when it was first released in 1941. The same is true of *Vertigo* and *The Searchers*. The film considered Mexico's finest in a recent poll of that nation's film historians and critics, *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* (1936), was a failure in its initial release, bankrupted the producing company, and was nearly lost and critically neglected until it was rediscovered and restored decades later.

These are failures that aren't failures, redeemable works that turn out over the course of time not to be failures at all. Through the efforts of film historians, scholars, critics, and filmmakers they were resurrected and restored to their successful status. These "failures" were and continue to be studied.

What is failure? Part 2. Beyond context and timing, determining failure depends on the yardstick. There are different kinds of failure. There are creative/artistic failures: failures of imagination, failures of taste, moral, ideological, or ethical failures, failures of execution, failures due to inexperience or ignorance, failures due to lack of inspiration or talent, failures of nerve, failures of overreaching. We account for these. Flawed films are routinely criticized, as are interesting failures, which are often dealt with by arguing that a film may be wanting at one level (artistic or formal, for example) but noteworthy at another (ideological, say, or because it set an important industrial or technological precedent).

There are also failures on the reception side: box-office failures, recognition failures (no festival or industry awards),

and our failures as critics when we fail to appreciate a new voice. I think reception studies is already poised to handle such cases.

As for irredeemable failures, we cover them too. An entire book was devoted to *Heaven's Gate*, a certified business failure (it took down a studio) and a critical one too. After its disastrous release the film was given another hearing when it was broadcast in its full-length director's cut on Los Angeles' Z Channel. Robin Wood did his best to recuperate the film by praising it as a subversive masterpiece. For all that, the film has yet to shake the taint of failure. But the point is, we studied it. Other generally agreed upon awful films get attention too: appreciated by fans (some of whom, let's be honest, are us), resuscitated by cults, adored as camp, or, as I said above, analyzed by critics who look beyond popular measures of success (profitability and/or formal mastery) and concentrate instead on thematic, ideological, industrial, technological, cultural, or representational issues.

So for now the call to focus on failure rings hollow for me. I wonder if we have the humility for it. And I wonder, What media failures are we failing to recognize?

Seven Reasons Why I Love Submarine Movies

Bill Nichols

Not quite flops or failures but hardly the top tier of genres and subgenres either, sub movies get short shrift. Treated as a minor variation on the war movie for the most part, sub movies actually create a cinematic world quite unlike most war movies. The mix of men at war, technology at work (sonar, periscopes, torpedoes), sneak attacks instead of frontier showdowns, and minimal romance makes these films feel, for some, like fallen angels. The key failure here is not the films' but ours: critical inquiry has not been up to the task of taking these films on as seriously as they deserve. Seven reasons:

1. They routinely achieve what Noel Burch went gaga about in Renoir's *Nana* (1925) in chapter 2 of his *Theory of Film Practice*: they exploit off-screen space systematically and creatively. An imminent sense of threat envelops the submarine crew as surely as the sea itself. Sonar provides a technological pretext that critics have taken with far too much literalism: we watch and listen as intently as the baby sitter home alone in an old, creaky house, a crazed killer lurking somewhere in the shadows, out of sight but capable

of lethal violence. Long stretches of *Run Silent, Run Deep* and other classics involve intense listening that destabilizes the most stable of visual compositions.

2. Submarine films invoke the metaphors of depth and surface and play them out in life-and-death terms. There is more to reality than the eye can see. A fear of the unknown and unseen pervades these films; it makes almost all submarine crews heroic, even when they belong to the enemy, as they do in *The Enemy Below* or *Das Boot*.

3. Submarine movies are the most hermeneutic of genres. Like the silent cinema, much must be understood through signs, signifiers that must be interpreted correctly. Every sign belongs to a semantic chain, and survival depends on reading these signs quickly and surely. Is it the oil slick of a destroyed sub or a ruse? Has the enemy set their depth charges shallow or deep? What does each sound or blip that turns up on a sonar screen truly signify? From *Destination Tokyo* to *The Hunt for Red October*, we, like the characters, strain to make meaning from the signs we're given. It is what the cinema was born to do.

4. Clearly, submarine movies are a homosocial and sometimes homoerotic genre par excellence. Homoeroticism remains strongly in check in almost all cases, but the aroma of hovering desires is hard to miss. The conventions of the action film prevail, but we are never far from those languorous moments of repose and longing that Eisenstein inserted at the start of *Battleship Potemkin* or that Genet pushed to an oneiric extreme in his delirious *Un chant d'amour*. It is a genre of desire in a minor key.

5. Suspense possesses a relentless quality in the submarine film. It is next of kin to the horror film, with the sub replacing the home as the locus around which deadly threat circles. Be it the self-made and deadly hazard of a nuclear reactor run amok in *K-19* or the actions of the sub's commander in *The Crimson Tide*, suspense is far more than the "how will they get out of this one?" style daring of James Bond movies and more the intricate play of nerves and will that takes us back to Hitchcock. It is little wonder that Darren Aronofsky wrote the script for *Below*, which is as much ghost story and horror film as sub movie (and as vigorously heterosexual as any sub movie ever made).

6. These films have a profound stake in the question of death. More than the western and the war movie, with its vision of transformation, the submarine genre knows it can transform nothing. A deadly game must be played out. Some will die, some will live, and the sea will remain

the sea. No memorials, no new settlements, no territories or reservations follow as a result. Sacrifice has a limited, largely uncommemorated quality.

7. And thus there is the ultimate descent, the one Cocteau, who never made an actual submarine movie, explored with such lyric grace in his deliriously beautiful film about the lower depths, *Orpheus*, where, as he puts it, “une seule verre de l’eau éclaire le monde.” To drink and see, to immerse oneself in what lies beneath, and, with the luck of the gods, to return from this special world to the ordinary world a transformed being. That is the journey this neglected genre charts for us.

One Reservation

Scott MacDonald

Exploring and exploiting (in writing that can help begin or sustain an academic career) failures, flops, and false starts is already providing bases for insight and discourse about the ways in which the moving-image works so defined relate to a range of issues. The definition of this body of work as “interesting” and “illuminating” will allow further articulation of scholarly conversations that have been under way for some decades and perhaps instigate new conversations.

My reservation about this new avenue is that the system for maintaining a broad range of cinema experience—and especially those film experiences that instigate our interest in and commitment to the field (as well as the rebellions against them)—is itself in crisis, and partly because my generation of academe has come to reward scholarly writing about cinema, the *literary* discourse about cinema, far more regularly and substantially than it rewards those who see to the distribution, exhibition, and preservation of an energetic version of *cinematic* discourse.

Of course, every cultural manifestation of whatever kind can serve as a doorway into “illumination,” or at least into a reconfirmation of what we’ve decided are the various compromises and tensions of modern culture. But within this infinite and unending variety of “illuminating” artifacts and experiences, some films also illuminate *us*, not so much with information about a culture or culture in general but by means of a psychic expansion that affects our assumptions about how cinema can function, about how we can function in relation to it, and about ourselves. These films are not only entertaining or interesting, they

appeal to and energize what Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.”

The discourse of cinematic experiences has always been more interesting for me than the literary discourse about cinema (including my own: cinema preceded my desire to write and helped to create it). My hope is that this new interest in failures, flops, and false starts does not simply provide another avenue for the literary discourse about cinema while distracting us (and those we teach) from powerful experiences of cinema and especially of cinema’s most remarkable accomplishments, many of which have never received serious attention within academe.

So, the biggest “flops”? Many avant-garde films, for most audiences, on first viewing. Taka Iimura’s *1–60 Seconds* can serve as an instance. *1–60 Seconds* is a 30.5-minute film during which pairs of numbers, each scratched into the emulsion of black leader (the first, the number of seconds of the duration of darkness the audience just sat through; the second, the total elapsed time to this point). In a few minutes the audience knows that the film will last twenty or so minutes longer and that (in all likelihood) it will not change its form: the pairs of numbers will continue until 58/28.31, 59/29.30, 60/30.30; and the film will relentlessly continue to slow down. *1–60 Seconds* is a “flop” in my introduction to history and theory of cinema classes, year after year, but the direct experience of its “flop”-ness in the theater literalizes the fact that film is essentially a way of measuring time and confronts our assumptions about what films are supposed to do (and not do) and what filmgoers are supposed to do (and not do) when they’re together in a theater.

A Skip in the Record of Media Studies: Why the Failure to Better Understand Popular Music as Media Matters So Much Today

Tim J. Anderson

For myself, the most significant failure that weighs upon me results from media studies’ continued obsession with the ocularcentric, screen-oriented mediums of film, television, and, now, the many frames that fill the digital monitors of our work/leisure lives. This particular result is painful and not simply because this lack of attention has been lavished upon an area of my interest. Much worse is the fact that due to relative inattention paid to popular music in our curriculums and research priorities, media

studies has unwittingly articulated blind spots that make it unable to fully understand what is at stake today. For as we have begun to switch our focus on the transformation from media systems that were once analog and privileged mass networks and narratives to those from a digital ecology that pursue micro/social networks of interaction and exchange, the diligent study of popular music holds answers for the many issues that this new media regime entails. For the next three paragraphs, please allow me to explain in a manner that, albeit abrupt, exacts a concision that makes my remarks clearer to digest or dispute.

1. *Since its industrialization popular music has been actively engaged in hardware and software models.* Both in general and academic discourse coupling the terms “hardware and software” is all but code for computers and programs. Still, the pair claims a specific cultural and material value in popular music. This is not a new claim. Simon Frith noted over twenty years ago that throughout the twentieth century the music industry was particularly invested in the production of both hardware and software, with hardware being “the equipment, the furniture, the permanent capital of home entertainment” and software “what the hardware plays—particularly records and tapes” (14). Certainly, the rise of the iPod and iTunes under the aegis of Apple is indicative of how pertinent this fact remains today. And well before VCRs, DVDs, and hard drives stored catalogs of film and television, music collections were developed through the acquisition of multiple formats. Still, we know very little about how these media acquisitions were made at both the macro level of business dealings and the micro level where friendships, clubs, and other associations moved popular music media between groups and individuals.

2. *An engagement with popular music would open us up to a more vigorous discussion about the ludic potentials of media.* Just as people operate and play with those programs they have on their personal computers as they wish, people have been programming and playing their personal stereos for over a hundred years. Unlike film and cinema, media that have only recently had to engage the many fanciful considerations that accompany an ever-expanding palette of personal recordings and playback devices, this has been an issue the popular music industry has engaged for close to a hundred years. Nevertheless, one of the more vexing questions I have with popular music studies is that I still do not have an adequate grasp on what it means to “play” a piece of sheet music, a record, or an

mp3. Of course, I understand it means that one turns on a machine and listens, but it doesn’t necessarily mean “to listen.” One can play music for any number of reasons, ranging from contemplative listening to background noise; however, neither media studies nor musicologists have fully investigated the many pleasures that come from being able to manipulate media in manners that range from the most banal (programming what kind of music you wanted to hear and when you wanted to hear it on your playback system of choice) to the most experimental (from Conlon Nancarrow, to Terry Riley, to Christian Marclay, to John Oswald, to Negativland, etc.). The ability of listeners to use popular music technologies for their own expressive means has a long history and set of practices that, if better understood, would give us a better understanding of the ludic aspects of media that have become so much more pronounced with the growth of game studies in the field of media studies over the last few years. As screen-based media become more and more objects of “play,” understanding what makes and has made media “fun” will grow in both financial and political importance. Turning to a proper investigation of this aspect of popular music would be a good place to begin our understanding of what it means to play media for the purpose of having “fun.”

3. *More so than film and television, the issues of data portability, format standards, and “social media” content have deep roots in popular music.* It is simply wrongheaded to assume that these issues have only now become important because of the powers of digitization and broadband networks. For years, popular music scenes, whether they are pop, punk, country, hip-hop, salsa, metal, etc., have developed social networks based around the circulation of print and recorded materials. Long before LiveJournal, Blogger, Facebook, and MySpace allowed everyday people to post clips and songs and easily share their opinions. Music fanzines, clubs, and record exchanges served these functions that are so vital to making music popular. In every case, these systems were and continue to be dependent on standard sets of media formats and social protocols that allow the exchange of data and information. While some of these scenes have been well documented by the likes of Barry Shank, Ruth Finnegan, Lise Waxer, and Tim Lawrence, the connections between these sociological and musicological examinations and “new media” formations have yet to be fully grasped by media scholars. Indeed, if we want to better understand how “trust-driven networks”

exist in the creation and exchange of micromedia, then we not only should turn to past audience and fan scholarship in TV and film but also look at examples where long-term patterns of socialization and exchange exist. This is where the expert contribution of media studies, an understanding of the creation, formation, and sustainment of communication systems and mediums, would find a substantial space to contribute answers and, more importantly, find answers to the many new and unanswered questions that the field confronts today.

There are certainly many more issues I could engage, but before I end this, allow me one more comment, one about pedagogical purpose. If our field has any primary purpose, it is to bring to light the forces and meanings that undergird the media that we love. With this in mind I can think of no better reason to correct our collective failing, extend ourselves, and begin to seriously develop curriculum where popular music has a much stronger place on the table. To be sure, the only reason I am doing this work today is because professors who taught film and television paid attention to a young person who wanted to better understand why popular music media meant so much to him and were willing to extend themselves into arenas in which they were not expert. In other words, they were willing to learn about an arena from a position where they could claim no training and from programs that engaged in popular music studies. I like to think that their discomfort and uncertainty was a gift that continues to give. My only hope is to convince many of you that if media studies could give up some of the comforts of the screen, the field will not only find the pleasures of an underinvestigated popular medium, but we will discover those narrative strands that connect directly to those many problems that today's social and micromedia formations give us today.

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Industry and Business

Economic Externalities: Looking beyond Box-Office Revenues

Douglas Gomery

In studying the industrial history of media industries, I have always assumed that the goal of business operations was to maximize profits. Here is where I take issue with the first set of terms: “failures and flops.” This always refers to just theatrical revenues. But the definition of profit is revenues minus costs. Why, then, does the industry view a flop as a film that generates low revenues, with no consideration given to costs?

We need, I argue, to redefine the true economic meaning of film profits so as to include *all* deducted costs as well as *all* revenues. In recent years the Hollywood industry has used theatrical revenues as a source of publicity. But from my studies I have learned that grosses at theaters offer less and less of the total revenues. DVD sales are where the bulk of the revenues lies. Cable TV is also a significant contributor. When the A&E network started, it was to cablecast operas, ballets, and other elite arts. It now runs movies every day. I estimate that today theatrical revenues contribute but one-sixth of a film's total revenues.

Costs are widely publicized as well but in actuality are an unknown variable. Stars, directors, and any others listed in the credits strive to gain a share of revenues—the broader defined the better. So as revenues grow over time, so do costs. We should abandon the idea that costs are accumulated upfront, and, once some static figure is passed, all the rest are profits.

This short reformulation simply tells us that it is very hard to calculate an unprofitable film. In my study of the Hollywood film industry, any film distributed by a major studio always makes a profit—if one waits long enough. As an economic artifact, *Citizen Kane* is always said to be an aesthetic success, on the one hand, while being an industrial failure, on the other. But with its constant revenues from showings on television sets—starting with *Million Dollar Movie* in New York in 1954—through other TV presentations, rentals of 16mm to DVD, sales from home video and DVD, *Citizen Kane* became profitable by the twenty-first century. In other words, there are really very few flops. That is how Hollywood maintains its tight oligopoly.

Yet economists have examined more than simply profit maximization. I could take a multiple set of approaches to this point, but to keep this essay brief I shall choose one—an externality. This is defined as an economic outcome of capitalism that stands outside the industry itself. So in making chemicals, one negative externality has been pollution. This cost or benefit is usually not borne by the industry that created the chemical. If negative, it is borne by governments; if positive, it is called a windfall by those companies that benefit.

For moving image mass media, there has long been an assumed negative externality—what I shall call the dumbing down of youth. Thousands of studies have sought to prove that movies have made youth stupid, violent, and any negative trait one can think of. What has been lost is the possibility of positive externalities. Movies and TV can and do expose us to images and sounds that we might never even encounter otherwise. I shall use music as my case study, but this could be done with other aspects of sound, editing, camerawork, and mise-en-scène.

The movie *Sweet Dreams*, a bio-pic of the singer Patsy Cline, was released in October 1985. Columbia had high hopes, as it starred Jessica Lange, as big a star as possible at the time. Unfortunately, it grossed less than \$10 million in the United States and Canada, a failure by standards of the time. Further play on HBO, plus revenues from the markets abroad, made this film profitable by the twenty-first century.

Chuck Mulvehill, coproducer, shrugged off questions about Jessica Lange's lack of singing ability. "Jessica Lange is not a singer. And, anyway, Patsy Cline was incomparable, wasn't she? We can just use Patsy Cline." Lange lip-synched such classic Cline tracks as "Walkin' after Midnight," "I Fall to Pieces," and "Crazy" plus lesser-known songs like "Foolin' Round," "Half as Much," "Blue Moon of Kentucky," and "Sweet Dreams." Cline had last recorded in February 1963, and her *12 Greatest Hits* album was issued in 1967. So while the film was not a box-office success, it was shown on pay-TV constantly from 1987 on. Why? Because a whole new generation had discovered Patsy Cline.

In May 1991 the means for tabulating music sales changed. Standard practice up to this point was that *Billboard* staff members would simply call record stores and take their data from answers given by employees. Starting in June 1991, computer lines were run into stores directly to cash registers. No answers by teenaged employees but real sales data.

Once compiled and reclassified with the vast amount of new data, what turned out to be the top seller of all country albums that had been out more than two years? Answer: Patsy Cline's *12 Greatest Hits*. Prior to SoundScan, Patsy Cline's *12 Greatest Hits* was on no chart.

And as time passed Patsy Cline's *12 Greatest Hits* did not budge from its spot as number 1 "catalog" country. Even as contemporary country artists put out their "greatest hits" CDs, Patsy Cline's *12 Greatest Hits* remained number 1 for five straight years.

There are many reasons for this rediscovery, but among the most significant was the movie *Sweet Dreams*. Surfers of the new cable-TV world would come across *Sweet Dreams*, hear Patsy, and want a CD. (No downloading then.) Her *12 Greatest Hits* had been out a quarter century—in LP, 8-track, and audio cassette. But the low-priced CD became a top seller—to say the least—because of the movie.

Thus, in this short case study of failures and flops, *Sweet Dreams* was both. As a film, it was no great success. As a seller of CDs, it was a blockbuster.

Interactive TV Too Early: The False Start of QUBE

Amanda D. Lotz

Perhaps the case of QUBE implanted itself in the nether regions of my brain because it too was born in Ohio, and Columbus, while valuable for its middle-of-America market testing, never struck me as a hotbed of television innovation. Nonetheless, a fair amount of scholarship notes QUBE in footnotes or in passing as an early experiment with interactive television. To learn more, though, I turned to less official sources available to me in this era of Internet self-publishing.

QUBE has its own nostalgia Web site (<http://www.qube-tv.com/>), YouTube hosts a number of clips of QUBE programming and promos, and papers on QUBE are available at various television technology blog-type sites (<http://media-visions.com/itv-qube.html>; www.electrable.com/bluesky/qube/interactivetvpuzzle.html; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/QUBE>) and also support the rich Wikipedia entry. Admittedly, these are not my usual sources, but the history of television's technological "failures" isn't as readily available as its successes.

First, the basics: QUBE was an interactive cable system launched as an experiment in Columbus, Ohio, in December 1977 by Warner Communications. Subscribers

required a set-top box and received a remote with “five interactive buttons which were used to play games, shop at home, and answer questions” (<http://www.qube-tv.com/>). The service provided thirty channels: ten broadcast channels, ten community channels, and ten pay-per-view channels (a new feature for cable at the time). At least one of the community channels featured locally produced programming designed to showcase QUBE’s interactivity. This programming included a local talk show (*Columbus Alive*), a variety show with local talent, and various children’s shows (*Larry’s Room*, *Flippo’s Magic Circus*). At one point the service reached thirty thousand homes.

The added value of the interactive television service is explained by Ken Freed as a strategy in the franchise wars of the late 1970s as the first round of government-granted franchises came up for renewal (<http://media-visions.com/itv-qube.html>). Warner also won franchise bids to build similar thirty-channel systems in Houston and Milwaukee and in Chicago and St. Louis suburbs as well as a sixty-channel system in Cincinnati, Dallas, and Pittsburgh (<http://media-visions.com/itv-qube.html>). The key problem with QUBE was cost. By 1982 Warner Cable was running a \$99 million loss and by 1983 a total debt of \$875 million (<http://www.qube-tv.com/>). By all accounts, the technology was adequate, but the additional technology costs plus the expense of producing the local programming were considerable.

While QUBE was phased out in the early 1990s, many of its features remain part of contemporary television. One of the community channels, Pinwheel, was later reworked to become Nickelodeon; it featured a live talent show that could be described as a blend of *The Gong Show* and *American Idol*, with viewers voting midperformance in regard to whether the contestant deserved to continue—arguably exceeding contemporary interactivity. Its shopping features reportedly developed into QVC’s format.

In watching the old QUBE clips, I’m astounded by the fact that they are thirty years old. In many ways the technology I use today is not exceptionally more advanced; indeed, the interactive features, most widely hailed in the press coverage of the time, are still beyond those available to me today. Second, I’m amazed and impressed by the role original local programming played as a central feature of the service. Indeed, the production values aren’t overwhelming, but the architects of this system had a sense of something that will likely play a key part in determining the coming winners and losers of postnetwork television

technology. If you can’t provide the best production values and every imaginable niche has been filled, people like to see themselves and their world—and this was a core part of QUBE’s original design.

What seems unusual about QUBE is that it was so far ahead of its time—and I think it is this that accounts for its perception as a “failure”—when a closer look makes clear that it is a direct predecessor of contemporary on-demand and interactive multichannel capabilities. In a recent *Media Post* column Frank Maggio calls for greater interactivity and for television to develop into a two-way communication medium as its only possible future (http://www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.san&art_aid=96609). I have to say I’m skeptical (surely there remain a fair number of us who are eager to be told a good story), but the proliferation of social networking interfaces and experiences suggests that some too seek for connection through media. I’m also not sure interactivity would bring us back together in the manner Maggio suggests, but it could be applied to television as a narrowcast medium as well—and perhaps more interestingly. Surely interactivity in the form of live audience polling will again be part of a conventional television experience. The question is, How many years after QUBE’s debut will this moment arrive?

Franchise Failures

Kristin Thompson

Films that fail at the box office may be of interest to historians for various reasons. They may be aesthetically worthy films that did not deserve to fail and warrant having attention called to them. Their failures may reveal something about the workings of the production system that made them. They may reveal the decline of a hitherto important genre. None of these considerations, however, are what I want to discuss here.

From 2002 to 2007, when I was working on *The Frodo Franchise: “The Lord of the Rings” and Modern Hollywood*, I became intrigued by the failure of films that had been intentionally planned as the beginnings of new franchises. To anyone interested in the workings of the film industry, such failures can reveal a lot. For a start, there is much more at stake than with individual films. Not only are successful sequels envisioned, but the sorts of lucrative video games, DVDs, licensed products, and other ancillaries that form

part of franchises depend on the success of the initial film. Huge amounts of hypothetical revenues stretching into the future are scuttled by the initial entry's failure. Second, as the potentially biggest money-makers that Hollywood creates, franchise launchers tell us what studio executives think their audiences want. Shifts in their assumptions affect the history of genres in Hollywood. Third, since most franchises are adapted from some popular source, they reveal how the film industry is tied to other forms of popular culture like comic books, video games, and even theme-park rides.

Nowadays most films seem to offer the possibility for sequels. Often, though, that possibility is not expected to arise. The open ending of *The Silence of the Lambs* permitted a sequel, even though the film was initially dumped into release in February 1991 because the studio had no expectation that it would be a success. *Back to the Future* was a surprise hit in 1985, and it became a franchise without being planned as such.

I'm equally interested in the planned sequels that fail. The notion of big-budget franchises was remarkably slow to catch on. *The Godfather* (1972) was a surprise success that led to two sequels and a reedited television version. It also lent respectability to the gangster genre. *Jaws* (1975) spawned a franchise, which was not surprising, since successful horror films often did, but Steven Spielberg hadn't foreseen that. *Star Wars* (1977) may have been the first A-list franchise to be launched as such. George Lucas had envisioned at least three films, and his Fox contract gave him control of potential sequels. The first film set the pattern that still persists: science fiction and, more recently, fantasy narratives form the basis for most such series. Comic-book superheroes are particularly promising, since they tend to involve multiple adventures, either self-contained or serial, stretching on indefinitely. Indeed, *Variety* has suggested that in 1989 *Batman* set the pattern for tentpole, summer-release, high-budget franchises.

We can all think of successful franchises. What about those that fail to launch? Often we're not aware that certain films were hoped to be the first of a series.

Disney may not have originally planned to make a franchise of *The Rocketeer*, its 1991 adaptation of the comic-book series of the same name published sporadically beginning in 1982. By its release in 1991, however, Disney was planning a sequel. It marketed the film's protagonist as another Indiana Jones (whose third film had appeared in 1989). After *The Rocketeer* earned about \$47 million do-

mestically on a budget of \$35 million, the studio dropped that idea. (All budgetary and box-office figures are from Box Office Mojo, www.boxofficemojo.com.) I suspect that the same studio's *Dick Tracy*, released to lukewarm success in 1990, was also a deliberate attempt to establish a franchise.

For every successful superhero or comic-book-based franchise launched, there is probably at least one that fails or splutters along briefly. *Daredevil* (2003) had a modest success, grossing \$179 million worldwide on a \$78 million budget. Its resulting spin-off, *Elektra* (2005), had a production budget of \$43 million and lacked Ben Affleck, the original star. Its worldwide gross was around \$57 million. We have heard no more of this franchise and are unlikely to.

Other failed films that I suspect were attempts to launch franchises include *Howard the Duck* (1986), *Barb Wire* (1996), and *Hulk* (2003). The latter was particularly ambitious, with a \$137 million budget. It grossed \$245 million worldwide and generated no sequels. Instead, so unsuccessful was it in generating a sequel that in 2008 it was remade under the original comic-book title, *The Incredible Hulk*. This time a \$150 million budget led to \$263 million internationally. At an even lower level of failure, *Captain America* was produced by Stan Lee himself in 1989. It sat on the shelf for two years, was announced for a 1990 release, and finally came out direct to video in 1992.

The parallel success of the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* films (the first installments of which came out in November and December 2001, respectively) started a fashion for fantasy franchises aimed at children or family audiences. So far that fashion has created mixed results. Several big-budget franchises derived from popular children's or young-adult book series have failed. Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2004) took in \$209 million worldwide, not enough to break even for a film that reportedly cost \$140 million. Christopher Paolini's wildly successful book *Eragon*, the first of a series of three published volumes and a fourth announced, was adapted in 2006 on a \$100 million budget. It was met with indifferent reviews and a \$250 million international gross. Paramount's *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (2008), based on a popular series of children's fantasy novels, grossed \$163 million internationally on a \$90 million budget, with no sequel announced or likely.

New Line Cinema in particular battened onto potential fantasy franchises. It tried to follow up its *Rings*

success with an ambitious planned trilogy based on Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* novels. Released in late 2007, *The Golden Compass* had a disappointing gross of \$70 million domestically, though it reached \$372 million worldwide. (Some industry analysts blamed a poor domestic marketing campaign for the American failure.) Given that it had cost \$180 million, considerably more than the average of the three *Rings* films, New Line lost money and dropped plans for the other two films. New Line's next prestigious fantasy adaptation, *Inkheart* (2009), derived from a best-selling trio of novels. I write this the day after *Inkheart*, one of only two films to open wide on 23 February, came in at number 8 in the box-office rankings, with a low per-screen average.

Even *The Chronicles of Narnia* series had problems. The first film, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), also made for \$180 million, was an undoubted success, with a \$745 million worldwide gross. Its successor, *Prince Caspian* (2008), cost \$200 million and grossed \$419 million—a decline that led Disney to drop its distribution deal for the series. Producer Walden declared itself determined to continue the franchise through the rest of C. S. Lewis's seven books with another partner.

Thus, the fantasy franchise, at least in live-action filmmaking, seems on the wane. In 2008 the double box-office triumphs of the latest entry in the Batman series, *The Dark Knight*, and of *Iron Man*, with a sequel quickly announced, suggest that the comic-book/superhero-based franchise will dominate the fantasy genre for years to come. The entry of Marvel into film production almost guarantees it.

For Hollywood studios, franchise failure is failure compounded. Accordingly, studios dither and demand rewrites, and projects move into turnaround time and again before

finally seeing the light of day or, more properly, the light of projector. New franchises and new entries in successful franchises can linger in development hell for years. The June 1995 issue of *Premiere* listed a group of films in "development limbo" (22). They included *Blade* (eventually released in 1998 and followed by two sequels), *Daredevil* (2003, with one spin-off), *The Fantastic Four* (2004, with one sequel so far), "a new Superman movie" (*Superman Returns*, 2006), *X-Men* (2000, with two sequels out and *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* [2009] initiating a spin-off franchise), and *Watchmen* (2009). In 2008 we saw the fourth *Indiana Jones* film, twenty-six years after the first in the series and nineteen after the third. If *The Hobbit* comes out as planned in December 2011, it will have been eight years since the third part of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was released.

Clearly, franchises, successful and unsuccessful, are important to historians of the modern film industry. So far, franchise failures have probably not been aesthetically important enough to distress those of us who value cinema as an art form. Yet we may be on the verge of such a situation. When a respected art-cinema director like Guillermo Del Toro committed himself wholeheartedly to the *Hellboy* series, it was arguably a good thing that the DVD sales for the original film were strong enough to counter its tepid box-office performances. Del Toro was able to make *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, a better and wittier entry in the franchise. It didn't perform well either. Perhaps the DVD sales will justify a third film, which Del Toro claims to very much want to make after his *Hobbit* projects. But whether we view franchises as simply an established, crucial product of the Hollywood industry or as a potential source for engaging, complex films, their success or failure should make a difference to us as scholars.