“F” is for Failure

Editor’s Introduction

Hagiography. Teleology. The March of Famous Men. However parsed, the discipline of media studies, and indeed the humanities and social sciences writ large, has long structured itself in discourses that focus on the success, praise, or coherence of the object at hand. Film histories of classical Hollywood, for example, adopt a position long bemoaned by historian Howard Zinn, frequently chronicling the victors: the moguls who have vanquished their competitors; the films that perform best at the weekly box office; the media technologies that have prevailed and persisted while others have been consigned to the industrial scrapheap. The same can be said for the texts that these media industries produce, which are organized according to “good,” or “appropriate,” objects. These constitute the bodies of work that shape and define the acceptable boundaries of our very discipline. These works are also presumed to possess a rhetorical coherence and consistency amidst changing cultural and historical circumstances.

Of course, these modes of expression are complicated as the field of film and media studies expands. The clarity of broad strokes historiography has been muddied and colored in at the margins with figures and organizations otherwise left behind by the dominant trends of historical narratives. Unruly film and media texts that subvert and resist dominant discourses have long since been incorporated into an expanded canon, as those classical works are reflected against others that differ in their financial disposition and aesthetic mien. Equally complicated is the interpretation of those texts. Much scholarship—such as Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp,” Jeffrey Sconce’s Sleaze Artists, and others1—has grappled with the appropriate orientation to works of film, television, and new media that resist easy classification. All of this is to say that media studies, as an ever-growing field, is always accommodating hitherto overlooked discourses under its purview. Yet even this expansive attitude has its thresholds. What do we make of objects that lie beyond the bounds of dominant discourse and fail to conform to the strictures of what has been traditionally understood as “acceptable?” How should we comprehend media, artists, and texts that do not “behave” as they ought to? How should we incorporate and communicate the value of texts that do not meet traditional measures of financial success, critical praise, or textual coherence? What happens when the logic of failure is positioned at the center of our critical praxis?

Scholarship in recent years has made gestures in that direction with, for instance, the burgeoning interest in trash and exploitation cinema, and though this work is undoubtedly valuable, this issue of Spectator is not merely interested in exploring those works once considered the detritus of both filmmaking practice and scholarship. We are committed to excavating the meanings of failure in their broadest possible contexts, not to see failure as an ending or a foreclosure, but as a point of departure that reinvigorates and recontextualizes the failed object. This issue of Spectator is committed
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to that proposition: to embrace the politics, histories, and aesthetics of failure as productive, generative frameworks and explore failure not only as a theme, or as a fact, but also embrace failure as an ethos—a way to reorient the discipline. Such an approach constitutes something of a paradox: when a so-called “failure” becomes the subject of academic study, it takes on a second life, a value that exceeds its worth or status from its original context. This is not to prioritize scholarship over artistic creation. Rather, it is to assert the role that scholarship can play in resurrecting that which has been lost to history and the changing parameters of popular and critical tastes.

“F” is for Failure

“F” is for Failure marked the fifth annual conference hosted by the Critical Studies division of the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts. Organized and facilitated by graduate students, the annual conference features presentations on a variety of topics concerning film, television, and other media—their specific qualities, and the industries that produce them. Past conferences each adopted a unique perspective on how to view these phenomena in the spirit of putting the various subfields of film and media studies (as well as their scholastic methodologies) in productive dialogue with each other. The purpose of the conference is also to provide a yearly venue for graduate students to share their material amongst their peers and participate communally in the intellectual life of the Critical Studies division.

This day-long conference took place on April 9th, 2011, at USC’s School of Cinematic Arts complex and featured a wide range of provocative original research. Panel contributors represented a balance between Critical Studies’ in-house Ph.D. and Master’s students and guests from other university programs, including UCLA, Northwestern University, University of Michigan, and University of Pennsylvania. The proceedings consisted of three panels and concluded with a keynote address from Ross Lipman, senior film preservationist at UCLA’s Film & Television Archive. Each presentation raised compelling questions that segued into lively panel discussions with audience members. The added triumph of avoiding any setbacks typical of such events—such as scheduling delays or technical difficulties—inspired the single most obligatory joke of the evening: “Failure” was a success.

Industrial Hubris

The opening panel for “F” is for Failure had a simple conceit, that the history of mainstream commercial filmmaking, predominantly out of Hollywood, is characterized just as much by a continuous series of failures—stagnant careers, box
office flops, missed opportunities, and mishandled creative properties—as it is by celebrated auteurs, success stories, and classical works. By placing its focus on an array of failed projects, this panel aimed to reassess academia’s scholastic and pedagogical priorities here and draw attention to our collective tendencies to develop film studies curriculums that primarily explore works of known historical, cultural, or artistic significance. On the understanding that no commercial project intends to fail, the panel was titled “Industrial Hubris” for its examinations of a studio machine that so frequently misjudges its audience and oversteps its bounds.

The hubris of the industry herein refers not merely to films whose production and marketing were wildly off the mark in anticipating consumer interest; it also references a particular type of commercial overreach wherein the studios or particular personnel venture into unrelated, ancillary markets. Self-assured that cinema’s popularity should guarantee viability in new areas, such personnel overestimate the translatability of “movie magic” into other commercial projects. Two papers from this panel have been selected for this volume, each presenting archival research on two distinct examples of Hollywood’s unsuccessful expansion into theme park attractions. Luci Marzola’s “Hollywood’s Lost World’s Fair” chronicles a 1920s attraction conceived as a public relations endeavor by Hollywood executives concerned that their industry suffered from public perceptions that it did not adhere to traditional American values. Narrating the Fair’s rise and fall through its press coverage, Marzola contends that, although the Fair attempted to counteract this negative image with a series of tableau-style exhibits featuring patriotic iconography, these ironically proved unpopular with patrons; instead, visitors took more interest in the Fair’s displays touting Hollywood’s own history, thereby offering visitors the illusion of interacting with the processes of film production. In the end, however, the persistent inability of the studios to unite in their commitment to the Fair led to its eventual demise.

In “1970s Disasters,” Jonathan Cohn explores the career trajectory of Irwin Allen, a prolific film and television producer whose perhaps most audacious venture was to use his prowess as a producer to convert the oceanarium “Marineland of the Pacific” into a major film studio attraction. Labeling him (somewhat affectionately) a “huckster-auteur,” Cohn portrays Allen as a ruthless self-promoter with boundless ambition and respectable credentials in disaster-themed blockbuster films. Eventually, Allen was unwisely handed the task of developing a theme park by studio heads. Cohn goes on to suggest that Allen’s lack of visibility in film history provides a way to complicate anew the hagiographies of the 1970s Hollywood Renaissance. By focusing narrowly on the artistic milestones and provocations of New Hollywood filmmakers, such scholarship has in large part left intriguing personalities like Allen by the wayside.

Reception, Value, Quality

Part of the impetus behind “F” is for Failure was to complicate the paradigms by which we designate terms like “success” and “failure.” This was to acknowledge that interpretations of these terms (whether artistic, financial, or critical) can be relative and multiple, to be sure; it was also to provoke debate on what preconceptions about quality and value are implicit in our expectations of certain media texts, formats, and trends. Shifting its approach from the previous panel, this collection of presentations considered media reception and the role of spectators and consumers in determining what media objects have failed to live up to or perform in accordance with certain preconceived notions of quality. Further, by scrutinizing the sometimes intangible, even arbitrary demarcations between success and failure, the panel threw into question the ways in which particular media discourses operate on unique delineations of quality and value.
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From this panel, this volume includes Dimitrios Pavlounis’ essay “Sincerely Celebrating Failure,” a study of Tommy Wiseau’s cult film *The Room* (2003), which is, by any traditional rubric, an aesthetic and narrative failure. Deconstructing the film for its purported camp value, Pavlounis argues that understanding the film’s unconventional popularity hinges first on appreciating the film for its monumental aesthetic and dramatic shortcomings. He cites the lack of certainty among filmgoers as to whether the film was made with serious intentions or is deliberate in its irony (Wiseau insists on the latter) and how these reading strategies complicate the reputation of sincere failure that the film must first bear in order for its camp-embracing fandom to itself be genuine.

Luke Stadel addresses similar problems of setting precise definitions and criteria for determining quality in his essay “From 35mm to 1080p.” In this case study of the history of HDTV, he deconstructs the transition to high definition television, including its initial failures, “at the levels of national policy and corporate strategy.” In doing so, Stadel considers the technical, aesthetic, and industrial discourses surrounding a technology that struggled to find its own identity in the marketplace. In particular, this research raises pertinent questions about image quality and their determinants across media, inviting comparisons between television, HDTV, and cinema by assessing their respective specificities and consequent audience expectations. This essay also represents the strong presence of research on non-cinematic media that was presented throughout the conference.

**Recovering Failure**

A third theme featured in “F” is for Failure was recuperation. The last panel of the conference, these presentations imagined failure as the first step in reassessing, and eventually reclaiming, the value of various media objects. Surveying several communication fields, including radio and the Internet, the panel sought to make a case for reconsidering the continued social relevance of media deemed to have “failed” as the result of cultural and industrial neglect and commercial obsolescence. The panel addressed the unique discursive spaces offered by new media, particularly the Internet, and their implications on notions of success and failure. By suggesting new uses for older media technologies, formats, and narratives, these presentations considered some of the unrealized advantages of such media and their impact on large and industrial, as well as personal and private, scales.

Representing this final panel in this volume is Jorge Cuéllar’s “Reconsidering the Radio in Media Studies.” Firmly grounded in discourses on globalization and the multidirectional character of contemporary media, Cuéllar’s analysis challenges the academic community to consider strongly the populist potentials of radio as a vehicle for social and political participation among disadvantaged and disenfranchised social groups. Cuéllar draws on a breadth of examples of progressive uses of radio communications in the world’s lesser-developed regions to frame contemporary understandings of power and resistance. His argument thus provides a fitting coda to a series of essays that begins by spotlighting the myopia and narrow, self-serving
patriotism of Hollywood and concludes on the transnational and genuinely transformative social possibilities of grassroots media.

“F” is for Failure concluded with Ross Lipman’s keynote presentation, titled “Digital Subjectivity: Restoring Barbara Loden’s Wanda.” Lipman’s address narrated the decisions made in restoring Loden’s 1970 film, shot in 16mm, and the process of utilizing available analogue and digital restoration tools without betraying the film’s low-budget independent origins. In this respect, the work’s “failures”—that is, its obvious lack of production value—become a central ethical consideration when preserving and restoring such a film to its original, materially imperfect state. The presentation melded a strong appreciation for the creative and interpretive aspects of his work with a reliance on detailed technical terminology, maintained deliberately throughout the presentation to provoke a multi-faceted and interdisciplinary approach to understanding film restoration on theoretical as well as mechanical grounds. The pervasive use of imagery and video clips in Lipman’s presentation made his keynote address unsuitable for inclusion in this volume in its original format. His presentation has instead been made the subject of an interview for this volume.

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End Notes