

Why I Failed to Come Up with Anything to Say

About Failure

By

Charles Ramírez Berg

Failure defines television. Most programs, TV workers, and policy goals fail. Yet, we don't study failure, we study success. Because we look at stars, successful programming, powerful executives, or the ruling ideas in broadcasting, success has become concomitant to cultural importance. Failure seems culturally irrelevant. What can we learn from failure? How is failure naturalized in programming, employment, and policy initiatives? What of reality TV's losers, celebrity meltdown, and beloved shows that get canceled? Is failure part of "successful" programming?

It looked like a great panel topic back when I was asked this summer to participate. But when I sat down to work on it, I found that I had nothing

to say. Which is rare for an academic, really rare for me. What to do? I considered my options. I could bow out. Which I almost did. But then I began to do the meta thing, and ask *Why was I having problems commenting?* So this is what I came up with. I take my examples from the world of film, the medium I am most familiar with as a media scholar, but I think the points I make apply to television as well as film.

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I have some problems with the Failure Panel's description and its central assumption. I agree with the first sentence ("Failure defines television."). But I don't accept the Panel's premise announced in the second: "Yet, we don't study failure, we study success." I think we study failure all the time. If you accept the maxim that holds that 90 percent of everything is junk—and 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, and theorize mediated mediocrity.

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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 from Tanzania. He was a prodigiously talented athlete and a humble, gentle, and kind human

being. As good a runner as he was, he didn't win every race he ran, so I asked him once what he thought about when he failed to win a race. I'll never forget what he said, because I've tried to adopt it as a credo: "As long as you try as hard as you can, you cannot fail."

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What *is* failure? What is considered a success or a failure can change with time. *Citizen Kane* was a box office failure, far from unanimously acclaimed, and certainly not regarded as the best film ever made when it was first released in 1941. The same is true of *Vertigo* and *The Searchers* and *The Rules of the Game*. The film regarded today as the best ever made in Mexico by that nation's critics, *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!*, was such a failure in its initial release in 1936 that it was nearly lost and critically neglected until it was rediscovered decades later.

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What is failure? Part II. There are different kinds of failure. There are failures of imagination, failures of taste, moral or ethical failures, failures of (the lack of) talent, failures of execution, failures due to inexperience or ignorance, failures due to lack of inspiration, failures of nerve, failures of overreaching. There are artistic failures, box office failures, ratings failures, and critical failures. Because of this multiplicity of failures, lumping actors,

executives and creative personnel together seems dubious. An actor may be talented, well trained, studious, ambitious, and hungry and still be relegated to waiting for the phone to ring. And it may never ring.

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We even cover certified, consensus failures. An entire book was devoted to *Heaven's Gate*. Later, Robin Wood did his best to recuperate the film as a subversive masterpiece. Blatantly awful films or programs can live on to be appreciated by fans, resuscitated by cults, redeemed as camp, or championed by critics like us who look beyond popular definitions of success (profitability and/or formal mastery) and concentrate instead on thematic, ideological, technological, or representational issues.

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What media failures are we failing to recognize?