Notes from Failure in Pop Culture
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Keynote de Jan Baetens (Université de Louvain)

The Failure that Remains Failure
Failure in Anglophone print and audiovisual culture

"Literature is news that stays news" (*cf*. Ezra Pound). One may link notions of failure with popular culture and cultural hierarchy.

Failure, in fact, isn't simply the unhappy flipside of success. It isn't a target missed or a goal not met. Failure is an absolute necessity.

One should remember the importance and meaning of "FFF" which stands for "Form Follows Failure". It simply means that new ideas can be socially accepted if the public manages to show how other ideas are a failure that hasn't met the expectations of the audience.

The extreme context sensitivity of failure is due to changes in time and place and has to do with certain criteria: production and reception aesthetics.

"Structures of feeling" (William Carlos Williams) is a brilliant way to tackle changes in time, space, production and reception aesthetics. Williams makes a distinction between the way we react to cultural products and the way we continue to stick to things that are no longer there. There are different structures of feeling: residual, dominant and emergent. They are context sensitive. For example, one may fail in making a living with comics (which equals a commercial failure).

However, something that is a failure now can be a success later and vice versa.

In *Qu'est-ce qu'un bon film?* Laurent Jullier explains how boredom (e.g. a boring movie) can be a synonym of quality, while another type of audience may define boring as a bad thing.

What Happens when Nothing Happens, by Greice Schneider, also focuses on boredom and everyday lives through contemporary comics.

Then there are high culture works that show the hegemonic way of doing elite arts = Modernist stance.

This clashes with mass culture that contaminates high culture. In mass culture, failure isn't an option, you have to be successful. You have to become an entrepreneur. This is very well explained by author Sarah Brouillette in *Literature and Creative Economy*, in which she speaks of the blurring of boundaries with high and mass culture in contemporary times. Italo Calvino also speaks of the notions of success and failure.

"Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (Samuel Beckett). This is a good quote but the idea of "failing better" is completely incorporated by corporate society today.

But what does it mean when we say we have to fail, as curious viewers and artists?

There are 3 ideas:

1) **Content:**
It's the praise and acceptation that the hero of a book must be the antihero, a misfit, a loser. This model has cultural roots. One can take for example *Héroisme et victimisation* by Jean-Marie Apostolides. He explains the need for the hero to not only be antihero but also a victim.

2) **Form:**
A need for an anti-style. Unconventional language, primitivism, madmen, children etc. It is possible to go beyond that. You can link it with the disappearance of beauty. Beauty has been replaced by many things. Examples:
- *Our Aesthetic Categories* by Sianne Ngai which is an attempt to rethink what is said on mass culture.
- Pierre La Police is a pseudonymous comics author who tries to do everything in order to fail through silly drawings etc.
- Kenneth Goldsmith and *Uncreative Writing.* The latter is the most boring book in the world. He defends his work by saying that in producing boring material, he's failing better as he is helping the audience reflect to a further degree.

3) **Antitext:**
In *Enemies of Promise*, the author Cyril Connolly launches a critical attack against that notion of success. When you're a really ambitious writer, you should create a masterpiece that is canonical. He explains that we need that ambition, and in order to have it you need to be void of success. Having success (thinking that we're doing well) before having created a masterpiece is the worst thing that can happen to a writer. He says everything needs to be messy and contrary to success in a writer's life to create a masterful work.

So, what does all this mean in the context of popular culture?

In popular culture we need superheroes, desire for box office success and good plots.

Today there are new forms of gatekeeping: Oprah Winfrey and the "bring on the books for everybody". As a matter of fact, gatekeeping is now done by other people (the users), not just the gatekeepers. We should not think of popular culture through the lens of dogmas coming from the higher culture, but simply close read these works and try to see how success and failure are managed in them.

One could apply this framework to a specific case – e.g. Daniel Clowes.
The heroes of his stories are anti-heroes. He doesn't have sympathy for the loser. He uses "weirdos" as characters and no empathy for their failure is made evident.
There is the praise of personal achievement.
So, Clowes refuses the antiheroes in stories that are about the antihero. Although he does stick to the old-fashioned style of comics. Other artists like Charles Burns start with this and then progressively appropriate a style.
All in all, it's safe to say that Clowes illustrates well the modern take on success and failure.

Atelier n°1 – Culture Visuelle:

Yohann Lucas (Université Rouen Normandie) – Survivre à l'épreuve du feu : *Fire !!* et son entrée dans un canon littéraire et culturel

Many magazines were used as forums by Black and White intellectuals to take down Jim Crow. They would report on events that might affect African Americans.
Fire!! wanted to attract the people in society who could change things (therefore White or Black elites as the magazine was quite expensive at the time).
There was much encouragement of the arts by Civil Rights leaders. But this wasn't without difficulty.
Editors came up with a symbolic name for their magazine: *FIRE!!*. It had multiple editors and it **failed miserably**. Yet *Fire!!* is a great example for reconciliation between failure and canonicity.
The editors' goal in *Fire!!* was to shed light on topics considered scandalous at the time (ex: prostitution, homosexuality etc.). Critics were displeased of course.
There were 7 editors in total and most of them were penniless. They encountered many difficulties in publishing their magazine. The initial reaction from the public and critics was quite rough (whether Black or White).
Fire!! also failed in attracting moral senses. But the magazine can be seen as an example of editorial maturation as the editors went on to create other successful works.

With time, *Fire!!* eventually wished to find a new audience. Today, Hughes and co.'s work has entered the canon. *Fire!!* initially failed, but its various contributors went on to overachieve.

Fire!! (whose unsold copies burned in an actual fire) contributed to the Harlem Renaissance. It demonstrates how failure can act like a gateway into the canon. The more a production fails, the more attention it receives. This is what brought light on *Fire!!*.

One may state that works that are ignored can't obtain canonicity, whereas works that are said to have failed, may catch the attention of critics and therefore enter the canon. Failed works are studied in order to avoid pitfalls. So, they automatically gain attention.

*Remember that canonical works reveal as many things about literature itself as much as the society and culture in which it is studied.

Laurence Grove (Glasgow University) – Going off track: monorails, failure and popular culture:

In 1929, George Bennie opened a prototype of his railplane line (monorail) in the north of Glasgow. There were plans for similar lines to run from London to Paris etc. But it was a failure, with the track dismantled in 1956. Bennie died bankrupt in 1957. The railplane is considered quite interesting in Scottish popular culture.

Monorails generally date from the early 20th century.
Monorails (be they with track above or below) take centre stage in ideas of the world of tomorrow (futuristic travel). Illustrations can be found in magazines. One could think of the "monorail trilogy" of James Bond movies, directed by Lewis Gilbert: *You Only Live Twice* (1967), *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977) and *Moonraker* (1979). Different and fictitious versions of the monorail can be seen in the films, which, for many, are the essence of James Bond films. Transport is always provided by monorail as it was seen as "sexy" and "efficient". However, it belongs to the archvillain and can always only go one way. In *The Simpsons*, you can see salesmen trying to convince the people to accept the installation of the monorail. But it is seen as a bad idea in the end because it's the "baddie" who controls it.

Most real-life monorails are present in Asia and there is one in Germany.

But, with many of monorails being fictional fantasy (ex: Disneyland Florida or Bush Gardens in Florida), they are very much part of Florida and LA culture. Summer camps in the UK had monorails too in futuristic fashion. But these failed and were dismantled.

Fictional monorails are a symbolic image of futuristic success, but they haven't yet got off the ground. So, it all lies in the excitement of having envisaged what they would be or what they could have been like.

To conclude, the monorail is therefore a metaphor for all single-minded and audacious projects that don't stick to the tracks.

Isabelle Licari-Guillaume (Université Côte d'Azur) – 1980s American comics: a post-mortem of the self-publishing movement:

The self-publishing movement began in the late 1970s and started to fade, or change shape, in the 1990s.

How does the example of female science-fiction allow us to refine the historiography of the self-publishing movement?

In the 1960s, mainstream market stories were very positive, the good guys always had to win. Mainstream comics were considered as work made for hire, not for art.

There was the emergence of the Direct Market which consisted in the creation of a new retail model. The Direct Market made it possible for independent self-published to sell to retailers. So, through this Direct Market, comic shops started to develop, creating a space for authors to find their audience.

Cerebus was a hit. It was a series written by Dave Sim who was in control of all the rights of his creation. He contributed to the role of the self-publishing author in the mainstream world.

Self-publishing meant more creative liberty. So, you can see the self-publishing movement as a victory in a way.

But what happens if certain self-publishing titles failed? There was a crisis in the 80s. The Self-Publishing market was a ruthless environment that had its share of failures.

Examples of failures:

Elfquest didn't work well with critics. It's feminist but has pulp roots so the series was criticised for not being hard science fiction. It was considered not pure enough in terms of genre. Therefore, economically it was very successful, but at the same time it was at odds with the comics culture at the time. So even this success story is an ambiguous one.

Then there are economic failures in the 90s (when things started to get more difficult) → Ex: *Finder* by Carla Speed McNeil or *Wandering Star* by Teri Sue Wood who had difficulties at the beginning of their runs. Very well-established authors also encountered obstacles in the 90s. Some creators moved to other publishers or online publishing.

Interpersonal tensions: Not all collaborations worked. For example, Colleen Doran (creator of *Distant Soil*) and Richard Pini who had irreconcilable differences. Doran walked away with all rights to her series.

In some cases, the creative process itself is doomed to failure. The amateur aesthetics of the books were not so geared towards efficiency. Doran started over several times (she had to discard pages and

redraw them), and even the way she drew was doomed to failure (she used to draw in pencil only, which caused her many problems as it was a time-consuming technique that hurt her hands). She therefore restarted her work. She didn't care about succeeding but was rather focused on aesthetics.

Galaxion was started over three times and was all about getting closer to the perfect image the author had in mind. It's a perfect example of unfinished work and a good example of leaving room for failure.

So one may wonder whether the self-publishing movement is really dead? What is certain is that the difficulties that many creators faced went beyond financial, and that is important to remember.

Atelier n°2 – Jeu Vidéo:

Nicolas Labarre (Université Bordeaux Montaigne) – What videogame crash? Economic catastrophe and catastrophic discourses

In 1983 there was a videogame crash. The crash was understood as having reshuffled hierarchies, it put an end to Atari's market dominance and very quickly, fans described that crash as putting an end to the "Golden Age". There was no crash in Europe, so here we're talking mostly about the US, although it remains important everywhere in the history of videogames.

The market was divided between a thriving arcade businesses and home videogames (meaning console games). Atari had 75% of the market share on home consoles. Game manufacturers could not ignore this fact.

Two games stand as symptoms of this crisis: Pac-Man and E.T (created over 6 weeks and released for Christmas 1982). No single game can explain the crisis, nonetheless, as it consisted of inflated expectations, overproduction, insufficient quality, dependence on the VCS.

According to Michael Newman (*Atari Age*) videogames as a cultural practice took shape around 1982/83. Meaning, the idea of understanding them "video games" as opposed to television accessories, for instance, appeared at the time

There were many US videogame magazines which were sites in which videogame culture was being invented. The first magazine to be published was by *Electronic Games*.

There were almost 400 games published a year, so the magazines could not cover the output each year. However, they didn't know how to review games, meaning giving critical comments about them. But many magazines tried to make sense out of who were creating the games (female or male) etc. So, these were ways of shaping culture. Making sense of the affordances of videogames was also essential (what they can and cannot do).

Cheerleading is what magazines had to do because their existence was predicated on the prospects of videogames. Hence, they were ill positioned to make sense of a crash.

How did magazines deal with *E.T.*? They all focused on the promotional elements.
How did they react to the fact that the game was dreadful? They did not.
So, you can't find evidence that the game did not live up to its expectations.

There was an eventual shift towards computer gaming, and they all embraced it even though it was a fragile ecosystem.
Economic Games wrote about how the crisis was good, that it could have surprisingly helped.
Some experts say that Wall Street completely missed the point of video games.
As early as December 1993, realization that the end of the "Golden Age of 2600" had ended.

Romain Becker (Université d'Angers) et Hakim Boussejra (Université de Bourgogne : L'échec dans les jeux vidéo *die and retry* à génération procédurale

Death in videogames is quite normal. If you die, you fail. If you fail, maybe it's because they want you to, so that you need to add another coin. If you didn't want to pay so much, you had to learn how to play. Death can also be used as a narrative device. In that way, death and failing might be a good thing. So in order to learn how to play with death, you need to find its weaknesses. A "Game Over" is a temporary failure. You can therefore repeat over and over again to practice.

When one speaks of genre, one may think of *Rogue* from 1980. "Rogue-likes" are other games inspired by *Rogue*. In Rogue-likes, players are expected to repeatedly fail. They are expected to develop strategies, an emphasis is put on player's progression and the game is perceived as a challenge to overcome. Upgrades and changes can occur. These games are sometimes call "rogue-lite" games because they can be seen as too simple.

Hades: The aim of this videogame is to escape your (the character's) father's clutches, the underworld and create a relationship with the character's mom. When the main character fails, he ends up in Hell all over again. There are no "Game Overs" in this game. You die again and again, and it doesn't matter. All the characters in it are included within the progression of the story (mythological characters etc.). You can upgrade certain aspects that make you stronger. The plot of the game wants you to escape the underworld, but you as a player want to die because it advances the story and it's actually necessary to complete the game.

The aim of the game was to deal with players of different levels. If you want to finish the plot, you need to lose at least 10 times. So, with each failed attempt, you learn more about the characters.

Death and Failure are therefore all around the main character.

Transistor: At the end of each game, there would be a downgrade of some of the character's characteristics, which forced players find new techniques. This would therefore make people want to quit the game before ending it in order to keep their tools.

Hades, which was all about failure, was actually rather successful. The latter is a result of failure.

In conclusion, experiencing failure is an integral part of video games. In the "Rogue-like" genre, hardship and failure is intended by developers to further the player's growth.

Jeune recherche – Atelier Masterant.es :

Auxence Robert (Université de Strasbourg) – Les échecs de triple-A et de leur promesse de liberté totale (2013-2023)

Les Triple-A sont les jeux blockbusters. Ce sont des jeux créés pour réussir.

***Cyberpunk 2077* :** Un jeu sorti en décembre pour capitaliser à Noel. Le jeu n'était pas vraiment prêt à sortir : il y a eu des bugs, des coquilles et il était injouable sur certaines anciennes consoles. Ceci a donc joué contre le studio.

Mais, 3 ans après, le jeu est ressorti sous sa forme définitive. Sa sortie est considérée comme la « résurrection » du jeu. Il a été vu comme l'un des meilleurs jeux de l'année.

Le *crunch* c'est le moment avant la sortie d'un projet (souvent la semaine avant mais cela peut être 2 ans pour les jeux-vidéos). Il y a de nombres cas de « burn-outs » dans le domaine des jeux vidéo, ainsi qu'une culture professionnelle fort toxique.

Ubisoft a créé de nombreux jeux populaires, par exemple *Assassin's Creed* ou autres. La série de *Assassin's Creed* s'est accélérée avec chaque jeu qui sortait tous les ans au lieu de tous les deux ans. Ceci a déclenché pas mal d'échecs.

Aujourd'hui on parle de *fatigue d'*Ubisoft car ils ont tendance de reprendre la même structure de gameplay dans tous les jeux.

Cyberpunk 2077 propose donc des solutions mais il y a toujours des problèmes néanmoins. Example : *Night City* et le principe de l'open-world.

L'immersive sim : genre vidéoludique peu populaire n'est pas un gros succès commercial. Il est « maudit » car il laisse trop de choix au joueur. Cette liberté totale pose problème aux jeux

Est-ce que développer des jeux de Triple-A peut devenir une contrainte ?

Les créateurs passent énormément de temps sur le côté esthétique du jeu afin de plaire au plus de monde possible, et développent des jeux en monde ouvert.

Donc, est-ce que le problème ne serait pas la promesse de liberté totale aux joueurs ?

S'ils ont trop de choix et trop de pouvoirs spéciaux parce qu'ils peuvent explorer le jeu comme ils le veulent, c'est trop facile. Il faut que le jeu ait le même challenge partout, mais cela n'attire pas forcément tout le monde en masse.

La promesse de la liberté totale (de l'industrie etc.) rentre donc en contradiction avec le but des designers et créateurs de jeux-vidéos.

Il existe néanmoins des jeux qui essaient de trouver un équilibre : qui plaisent au joueur sans qu'il ait trop de liberté (ex : *What Remains of Edith Finch*).

Zach Short (University of Tulsa, Oklahoma) – Tommy Wiseau's Unlikely Success in *The Room*

The Room was expected to become a successful film, but it didn't as it rejects fundamental expectations of film. But it is now considered a cult classic.

To understand *The Room* as a whole, you need to understand what it is *not* before understanding what it is.

Wiseau spent a lot of time and money on sets. He filmed his movie with 2 different cameras which cost a lot. He also invested a lot in the advertisement of the film.

Production, promotion and reception are the three important elements to keep a film alive. Cult classics are often a result of a mistake.

The Room creates a new category of "the bad" which pushes the viewer to think deeper. There is a certain disunity in the film that separates it from other films. The film's lack of fluidity is bad, and the lack of progression is impossible, but this makes it unique. It's a film that blurs lines.

Cult film consumption emerged in the countercultural wave.

Flavie Goupillon (Université Côte d'Azur) – *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the queering of commercial success

Rocky Horror is considered a cult classic today. It is simultaneously a horror, musical and comedy film. It was eventually adapted in the US. The makeup in the film was done by Laroche (David Bowie's makeup artist).

The film was pulled from theatres and replaced with another film in an attempt to boost sales, but this was a failure.

The nonsensical plot wasn't everyone's taste at the beginning. It's also horror, which could have added to this contempt.

Despite its controversial nature, an executive thought of the idea of making it a midnight movie in order to gain back the money lost. People take this film as a celebration of individuality. The allegory of queerness is present as well as the inversion of traditional power dynamics. Viewers identified with this film.

With the handful of midnight showings, it became very popular. The soundtrack allowed the audience to sing along and the plot frequently broke the fourth wall to that allow the audience to interact. The aspect of alienation and difference is important in this film.

To conclude, *Rocky Horror* is an important reference in pop culture. It transcends gender and race and serves as a model for many. Although, some people do consider the film to lack the dramatic flair of the stage.

Interview with Ollie Hicks

Ollie Hicks is a comics creator and editor.

Ollie explains how the comics industry in the UK is in its "success-era" at the moment (with works such as *Heartstopper* that is very popular, for example).

He also works for *Rebellion*, which seems to "do its own thing".

According to Ollie, there's another British invasion happening at the moment with UK works and creators. The UK kids' comics sector is also doing great.

How does Ollie, as an editor, decide what is worthy and what isn't? He explains how editors make a list of dream projects. It then goes to management for sign-off. In a year, they manage to get 2 or 3 of those comics signed off. In his opinion, girls' comics is a risky endeavour, as sales don't always follow.

Halo Jones has been rebranded as a feminist comic. It hasn't been finished and that's the beauty. But the true reason for it not being finished is linked to creative rights. It's therefore a failure of creative rights, of it not being finished.

A Very British Affair by David Roach: Ollie worked on the design in this project. He wished for the cover to represent romance (ex: a kiss on the cover). But they went for another.

The Best of the Cat Girl: They printed it all in purple. The goal was to get kids reading old comics through creating novelty.

What are the worst mistakes an editor can make? From Ollie's point of view, if you are a development editor, the worst thing you can do is overedit. Picking the right paper is also important.

Ollie's self-publishing activities:

Ollie explains how it's a difficult process. He constantly wonders about how his work is received. He started with *Sarararara* online on Instagram, and then transitioned to paper. Ollie has a love for materiality and books, hence the decision to change to paper.

In *Sarararara,* Ollie added coffee stains etc because he loves the physicality of doing this. He loves to ink and is addicted to the physicality of failure and the materiality of old and bad looking comics.

Ollie did a PhD, and it is what allowed him to get the opportunities he has had throughout his career. It largely contributed to his growth as a person.

Ollie also works with his wife. They have worked together on *Grand Slam Romance* (a 3-book series)*.* Thanks to their marriage and work ethic, the mix of both helps a lot with their working dynamics. Ollie rewrote one of the books (book n°3) five times. He considers this to be his failure.
Emma Oosterhous, Ollie's wife, worked on the cover and they were advised to make it look more adult (sexier) so that Young Adults would not think it's for them (because *Grand Slam* is after all an adult graphic novel).

Succulent: Trans-inclusive Sapphic Erotic anthology. Ollie worked with a team of editors for this project. The goal was to play with gender and have lots of trans women present and play with expectations.

Atelier n°3:

Jocelyn Dupont (Université de Perpignan) – Failing again better: The Fall of the House of – Flanagan's-Usher (Netflix, 2023)

Edgar Allan Poe was an American critic, philosopher and short story writer. He is often associated to the idea of failure. Poe's death is a mystery. Many call him the "failed artist".

In 1850s, Charles Baudelaire was keen to draw inspiration from Poe. He translated Poe's tales and capitalised off them. However, Baudelaire's translations are far from spotless as there are inaccuracies, additions and deliberate attempts at reorientating the original to better suit the poet's intentions. Still, these translations may have been what resurrected Poe as a writer who failed. According to Claro, translation is a repeated exercise of failing. Poe made failure a condition of creation.
Poe wrote many tales of psychological decay such as "The Fall of the House of Usher". The latter gained attention when it was first published and became one of Poe's most famous works on psychological terror and collapse. It is a paradigmatic take on failure. The demise of the house is inflicted by a mysterious illness. Usher descends into a dark reverie, dragging along his sister and his whole house into destruction. Poe's Usher is a so-called "tale of the apocalypse".

In many ways, the reader experiences a sense of failure: failures to fathom the nature of ailments, to decipher the final deathly embrace between siblings, and so on.

According to the Gavin Jones, "The Fall of the House of Usher" is Poe's biggest failure. Poe refuses to link cause and effect and is in compete denial.

Cinema has often adapted Poe's tales. *The Fall of the House of Usher* was adapted by Epstein (1928), Corman (1960) and Jan Svankmajer (1980) among others.

There have also been indirect adaptations of the tales: ex: *The Killer Inside Me* (2010) or Mike Flanagan's miniseries *The Haunting of Hill House* from 2018. It was quickly followed by *The Haunting of Bly Manor* in 2020, which failed to convince audiences.

Flanagan's *Usher* opts for a different take. The Ushers extend to beyond the initial siblings. Instead of living in a secluded mansion, Flanagan's Ushers live in contemporary Manhattan. Each episode links

one member of the family with a tale by Poe (ex: *The Black Cat).* This type of crossover isn't new for films of series, as Epstein's film mixed *Usher* and *The Oval Portrait.* This makes for hypotextual, elusive epiphanies.

But does this avoid failures? No. In general, audiences were pleased with the miniseries. The latter seems to captivate the fate of the real lives of the Sackler family. Some reviewers see the series as a "doomed success story".

But can the miniseries of 2023 be really considered a success or is it a true failure?

What makes a successful adaptation of a novel? It should not be the book nor a substitute of the book. Indeed, it should excite the reader to re-experience the world through another media.

Joao Pedro Mota (University of Sao Paulo) -Exploring the "So-Bad-They're-Good" Trash Aesthetic Australian TV Series *Danger 5* (2011-2025)

How does *Danger 5* (a comedy series) celebrate the aesthetic conventions of low budget cinema? It explores interesting characters and absurd plots. The acting talent for the production was often from less experienced actors. The aesthetics of the film is quite trashy and that is indeed intentional. These types of films embrace absurdity and over-the-top aspects. They were not bound by realist conventions. This unique failure aesthetics came from a willingness to experiment. These films were dismissed however as they were considered to lack artistic method.

Yet, these *once so bad* films, began to attract people who appreciated the unapologetic embrace of excess and wished to accept norms linked to failure aesthetics.

Even with the trash aesthetic, these films can of course deal with sensitive subjects such as WW2 in *Danger 5* but through a (subjectively) comedic lens.

One should know that considering the low quality of props etc. it was as if these films were from high school projects. These films can often include silly jokes and the special effects are purposely trashy. The dialogue is simultaneously absurd and hilarious.

In *Danger 5,* the soundtrack is carefully made with 70s and 60s inspired music. There are loud sounds for the special effects which reinforces the trashy aesthetic. It's safe to say that these films bring the viewers to laugh at intentional flaws.

Danger 5 is therefore a masterclass in pastiche and parody. It drew inspiration from spy films *like James Bond*. However, *Danger 5* subverts these tropes by exaggerating them, hence the hilarious effect.

There are also references in *Danger 5* to Japanese pop culture (such as with *Godzilla*). The series also points towards Quentin Tarantino's work in pop culture.

War films are a frequent target of the series' parodic gaze. They show WW2 and then reimagine it with comedic flare. It both satirizes and pays homage to German conventions. However, not everyone in Europe may find this funny (German audiences do not necessarily appreciate such satirizing of serious historical matters).

Danger 5 is therefore a perfect example of embracing failure.

Atelier n°4:

Sarah Hucy (Université Paris Cité) – Taram et le chaudron magique, l'échec qui fascine

The Black Cauldron is a movie, released in 1985, that seems to have been forgotten by many. Taram embarks on an epic quest to defeat a villain. This movie was supposed to be an easy success. It was under the name of Walt Disney Pictures. The movie was inspired by a book series by Lloyd Alexander which was quite well-known. So, the movie should have been the *Snow White* of the new generation. But it was a commercial failure. It didn't make up for half of its 44 million budget. It was a humiliation for Disney. There is a dark legend that surrounds this movie, even today. It is known to be the movie that almost killed Disney. Yet, over the years this film has gained a vocal fan community that took to the internet to write about everything that makes this movie unique.

How may one account for such a failure? How do we explain why such a movie, that was expected to succeed, failed? And how is there still a cult following nonetheless?

The film came out at the worst and best time. When we think of Disney animation, we tend to think of animation eras. The first Disney animated feature was *Snow White* in 1937. Since then, eras have been divided through several notions.

The Black Cauldron entered pre-production in the 1970s and was released in 1985 (so it went through a very long production period). It started its production during the Bronze Age (1970-1977) and was released during the Dark Age (1981-1988).
The Bronze Age follows the death of Walt Disney. The goal of the company wasn't clear and the movies that followed weren't as great as before. Disney had difficulties in meeting their audiences and lost a big part of them: teenagers (who no longer went to the cinema to see animated films. Teens emerged as a powerful consumer category and what defines them as movie consumers is partly that they don't wish to be treated like children. They want to watch movies that are for older people, they have a desire to watch riskier films). In 1984 PG-13 was introduced. Films like *Gremlins* or *Poltergeist* came out that terrified people. There were eventually films that were rated G but that were quite violent such as *Watership Down* (Martin Rosen).
In the Golden Age (which was before Walt Disney's death), Disney didn't shy away from films like this. Walt Disney did not initially believe in treating younger audiences like "fragile flowers". But as decades went by, Disney fell into the image of a family company, so they began to shy away from these violent types of visuals. Therefore, after Walt Disney's death, they had to think of a way to attract teenage audiences again. They attempted to do this through fantasy movies such as *Legend* or *The Last Unicorn.* But these films still included violent visuals that traumatized teens. This is therefore the approach that Disney tried to take with *The Black Cauldron* (they wanted to use the dark fantasy aesthetic). Some people loved this film because it was a step away from Disney's comfort zone at the time.
Many deleted scenes of *The Black Cauldron* became available later on. It is now well-known that this movie was a production "hell" as many things were removed. That is why many consider the film to be wasted potential. Creator and Director Tim Burton expressed his frustration for this. He offered a new vision that was refused by Disney.

Jeffery Katzenberg was brought to Disney from Paramount to try and fix the problem of lacking teens as an audience, but he was not appreciated. He edited the movie (*The Black Cauldron*) last minute as he considered it way too dark, which isn't how the process is supposed to work. This is why *The Black Cauldron* is seen as a "could've been".

According to Sarah Hucy, this might be the perfect moment in time to reevaluate this cult classic as films such as *It* or series like *Stranger Things* are very successful which based their around the 1980s.

Alex Benson (Bard College New York) – Dicky Moe's happy failure:

You may consider this episode of *Tom and Jerry* to be an adaptation of *Moby Dick*. It is seen as one of the worst episodes of *Tom and Jerry*.

"Happy Failure" is a short story by Melville. It appeared anonymously in *Harper's Magazine* in 1854. Critics use the failure explained in the story as an allegory of the author's failure in his career.
But the story is not just about the writer's failure but also a failure to stabilise the fate of the earth.
The cartoon *Tom and Jerry* included an episode entitled "Dicky Moe". Tom and Jerry try to murder one another whilst on a ship and there's a whale present too (echo to Melville's previous work). The creators were most likely thinking more about the film rather than the novel.

The run of episodes created under Gene Deitch was also a failure.

The episode of *Dicky Moe* originally included racist scenes of blackface (there is a scene in "Dicky Moe" where Tom becomes the captain's shadow). This wasn't the sole episode, as others of the series are now banned.

Atelier n°5-FILMS:

Patrick Adamson (University of St Andrews, Scotland) – The End of the Epic Western? Raoul Walsh's *The Big Trail* (1930)

This film often seems to mark the end of the period for the genre at hand. People keep coming back to the film today.

Why is this film considered a failure?

In the last years of the genre, *The Covered Wago*n was quite a success. It was a patriotic story that Hollywood's champions and industry could get behind. *The Iron Horse*, *The Vanishing American* etc (all films from the end of the decade) all aimed at telling the American story. Stories about what were seen as nation builders etc. are key to how Americans saw themselves at the time.

The Big Trail cost about 2 million dollars. It was John Wayne's first starring role. The idea of the trail is the idea of a direction towards something great. Walsh's images from the trail were varied: blizzards, scenes of immigrants moving (spectacle of migration), etc.

Something important to know is that the end of the 1920s and start of 30s represent an important moment for the wide screen. A switch to the wide screen and its future was said to "depend on Fox's *Big Trail*". The latter was filmed on a 70mm format known as Grandeur.

In the film, Walsh favoured unembellished prolonged long tapes. The way the scenes are shot allows one to understand the idea of community amongst the immigrants. The background is always an important part of the picture in *The Big Trail.* It was believed that the wide screen would help the success of the film. But it became a notorious flop. It wasn't just a failure, but was said to have consequently "buried the cowboy epic for several years". It wasn't until the end of the decade that they made their way back to the studios with John Wayne in *Stagecoach*.

Why did it fail? Well…no one actually saw the Grandeur epic. The wish was that the wider screen would attract more people, but it didn't, as movie theatres did not invest in the necessary equipment. Since

it premiered 1 year after the Wall Street Crash, it simply didn't interest people. People saw the film on a smaller screen.

2 versions were therefore made (Grandeur and standard), which made it a costly production. You then had French, Spanish and German versions all with different actors.

Westerns brought a vision of history, after the 1930s, that was distorted. The idea of optimism and triumph no longer had the same impact it did in the Silent era.

The Big Trail failed due to lack of attention, high cost etc. It is initially failed as it didn't take a certain path. It is a film that marks viewers today as something novel and unique, but back in the day, it didn't connect with audiences.

Andrew Nelson (University of Utah) – Better than *Jaws*…or Not: Revisiting *The Legend of the Lone Ranger* (1981)

After *Star Wars*, Jack Wrather, a TV producer, saw an opportunity to create a project with *Lassie*. But *The Magic of Lassie* (1978, based on the series) was a flop. He then decided to focus on films and create *The Legend of the Lone Ranger* with a prestigious cast and a young unknown actor called Klinton Spilsbury, to embody the lone ranger. The film was to be respectful towards the TV character of the lone ranger and producers reassured fans that it would be the film they wanted. Wrather promoted the film widely. However, fans eventually became unimpressed with the choice of their new actor for the ranger. They would say that Clayton Moore was the true lone ranger. Negative press continued to dog the movie for its photography and the main actor's behaviour became a problem and generated rumors.

Nonetheless, difficulties faded and enthusiasm began to develop with time. It was actually believed at one point that the film would be even better than *Jaws*… But when it came out, critics savaged the movie. People considered it to be the ultimate western's insult. Therefore, the film failed at the box office (it only earned 13 million). Spilsbury never made another movie afterwards. It was seen as too violent for younger kids and not interesting enough for adults.

Did Spilsbury let fame go to his head? Was he a drunk that picked fights or did he just defend himself? Was he truly difficult? He could not seem to live up to the "real" and "true" lone ranger (contrary to Moore). People had a clear idea of who the Long Ranger was, and it wasn't him.

People believe the film's failure to be linked to creative mismanagement. But we should know that there was also no more desire for westerns in cinemas.

There are plenty other films that failed when they came out such as *Annie* or *Popeye*, but today may be considered as campy cults.

This film has very soft cinematography which gives a dreamlike impression. Nearly every Western movie looks to offer an accurate representation of the past. But conventions have changed. *The Legend of the Lone Ranger* blurred some lines. The creators embraced a rose-coloured view of the West, they embraced nostalgia.

Disney decided to create their version in 2021. They wished to make a blockbuster, but also failed. Disney didn't need to try again because they purchased *Star Wars*. Let's just say they made up for their loss.

Jason Meredith (Stockholm University) – Representation through failure – Ed Wood's queer venture in sexploitation

Edward D Wood Jr was an actor and filmmaker. Shirlee was Edward's trans persona. They are said to be one of the worst directors of all time. Tim Burton even portrayed the image of the failed filmmaker in *Ed Wood.*

Jason Meredith uses underground and Avant Garde to discuss fusion between cinema and queer. He focuses on Trans/Queer theory through cinema studies.

Exploitation appeared between 1919 and 1959. Schaefer defines classic exploitation as films made independently and distributed independently, made cheap with therefore low aesthetics, engage with themes of hygiene, sexuality, drugs etc.

Sexploitation is seen as a progression of exploitation (1960-). It primarily relies on skin, nudity and sex.

Academia sees these films as inept, failure, unmeaningful…

Wood wished to explore Queerness in his films. Films within sexploitation cinema – example: *I Was a Man*.

Agency is a key notion in extinguishing queer sexploitation. Wood may have been exploiting in his debut film *Glen or Glenda?* (1953)*.* However maybe he gains agency through exploring queerness through queer lives and experiences.
The film represents trans experiences and however camp it may be seen, it represents trans debates held today.

Jeffrey Sconce states that exploitation films seek (and fail) to replicate the dominant codes of Hollywood realism. However, Wood wasn't looking to do this. Wood wanted to challenge these norms. He continued his career in writing scripts for others or short stories and novels with queer narratives. *Take it out in Trade* is about exploration of sexual freedom and it sees Wood in the return of the transgender character, but unlike in *Glen and Glenda* (where Wood goes back to heteronormativity), here he remains a woman.
A recurrent theme of Wood's is heteronormative couples in distress over their failing sex life.
The Young Marrieds is about the difficulties a hetero couple encounter, who indulge in new sexual and queer experiences. Indeed, Wood's plots were often about being or becoming queer.
The Autograph is a short story written at the end of Wood's life. It's about homosexuality.

All in all, Edward Wood did stand out with queer/trans narratives, and Jason Meredith therefore rejects the stance that Wood is a failure.

Thomas Britt (George Mason University, Fairfax Virginia) – Beyond Failure in *After Last Season*

The film didn't screen nation-wide. It was a limited theatrical release. It received a lot of attention online as it puzzled many. Critics weren't sure what genre it fit into. However, the attention (bad or good), eventually died down.

The film's budget was 5 million dollars but included poor direction, dialogue and production values. Where did all the money go?

Thomas Britt wishes to defend the film. He explains how the plot involves a serial killer, a ghost story and aspects of medical students' everyday lives. It's possible that some viewers haven't opened their imaginations enough to get it.

Example of the film's lack of quality: The MRI scene which was filmed in his room, and they used paper to build the props.

The film's values as a cult film are distinctive. Even though it fails in pleasing conventions, it still can be considered a success for certain viewers.

Watching the film necessitates the viewer to tirelessly attempt to fill in gaps (which is an attempt mirrored in the appearance of the title at the start of the movie). This recalls what one does with *The Shining*. In Thomas Britt's opinion, this film expresses thoughts and not just a mechanical story.

Many viewers had the opinion that the film was incoherent (due to the odd matching of characters etc.). Something that is close to incoherence is illogical, but this is far from what the film really was. The director wished to focus on schizophrenia and so didn't wish to fix the plot (many audiences were confused with the trailer) which many considered illogical, as in his eyes it was all but that. The trailer was just a shocking and confusing representation of the film.

Furthermore, the director includes many dichotomies in the film.

Many may consider the movie a failure because the film doesn't meet the requirements of his craft. But the indexicality of the people, places and objects in the film is what makes it interesting. There are social media groups and YouTube videos that have been made about it.

The film (which eventually reveals that it all was just a dream) as a whole, disengaged with normativity which in a way, makes it unique and can be considered a success for many. The film's spirit still lives on today. Instead of making fun of it, there is a need to see what is truly there: an exploration of subjectivity and mental instability.