

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/jokes/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-l-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