

Book review

Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander, *Failure*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019

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1. Introduction

This contribution aims to review the work of Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander, *Failure*, by providing a critical and structural analysis. This piece intersects the research of two academics already well-known in the world of media and digital culture studies. Arjun Appadurai is an anthropologist and Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University and is considered one of the leading exponents in the field of postcolonial studies. His contribution to *Failure* fits a research context that has always been interested in cultural reconfigurations and globalisation. Instead, Neta Alexander teaches Film and Media at Colgate University in New York. Her contribution to *Failure* fits into a strand of research that has already focused on media and its implications for digital cultures, such as past contributions to the following works: *The Netflix Effect* (Bloomsbury, 2016), *Compact Cinematics* (Bloomsbury, 2017), and *Pandemic Media* (Mason Press, 2021).

Failure aims to examine how individual failures are inscribed into a broader action net (Czarniawska, 2014) in which they are not just budgeted for but subsequently sought and monetized by Silicon Valley and Wall Street giants. In this work, the authors study the user, investor and debtor forced to turn a blind eye to inherent failures such as planned obsolescence, the broken promise of derivative form, or the unproductiveness of waiting and delay. Readers who approach this scholarly work are led to question immediately what kind of relationship they should expect with the book and, more broadly, with the authors (Todorov, 1978). The referential contract (i.e., the reader's skepticism exchanged with the author's knowledge) would seem to be the preferred way to seal such an agreement; ultimately, when it comes to failure, the other way – the reader's enjoyment – would seem to be less acceptable.

From the first pages of the introduction, the authors invite us to become aware of the habits that make us “automatons” concerning the phenomenon of techno-failure and unable to learn (p. 84) from the failures of our technological artefacts. The book touches the deepest chords of our living in contact with the *perceived infallibility* of technology, inviting us to regard failure not as an inherent quality or property but as the result of *judgment* negotiated according to places and times. Therefore, the question that prompted me to read the work was: *what happens if we observe reality and its derivatives, in this specific case failure, by assuming a non-possible suspension of judgment?*

2. Book's structure and articulation of chapters

The book is divided into five strongly interconnected parts. An introductory part opens the debate and then leaves to the remaining four chapters the aim to explore the issues in depth. The introduction clearly states the purpose of the book, which is to show how certain protocols of judgment produce specific regimes of failure (p. 2) and how modern capitalism, which in this work is materialized in the narratives about Wall Street and Silicon Valley, can produce, naturalise and commodify failure. Taking up the words of the book, the authors seek to study the unfulfilled promises of these two North American micro-worlds and the underlying processes, which are perhaps still poorly studied, by which failure has been resemantised to the point of being transformed into a strategic tool of capital valorisation. In this chapter, four directions of thought are also presented: scientific research, business literature, queer studies, and infrastructure studies. Four coordinates that ignite the challenge of creatively rethinking failure by discomfiting certain institutionalised beliefs (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The opening section then continues through a synopsis, which introduces the reader to the concept of routine failure.

Chapter 1 of the book is devoted to introducing readers to the concept of techno-failure and presenting a general theory of failure. Here the authors present the main themes of the book that will then reverberate through the remaining three chapters: how and why some failures make a difference and why others are consistently repeated over time and then forgotten, leading readers to question our collective memory and adopting a lens through which we view the human-machine relationship in our sociotechnical systems. In this part of the book, readers question the role of memory and memories, and the relationship with the internalizing process of guilt, somatization on body, anxiety and depression rather than externalizing them on the infrastructures and technology itself.

Here the techno-failure theory is presented as the other side of that business model focused on constant updating and obsolescence (p. 22) rather than maintenance and repair. Theories that the authors inherit from other thinkers such as Lisa Nakamura, Sara Ahmed, Jonathan Sterne, and John G. Burke, just to name a few. The chapter then continues with the isolation of three categories of analysis: the epistemology of techno-failure, the affective economy of failure and the economy of failure which are necessary for the formulation of the general theory. The chapter closes by questioning the promise of convenience of financial and technological systems which, however, clashes with the reality of the facts. By a kind of paradoxical outcome, the promise of greater practicality, efficiency and speed often and willingly results in painful regimes of failure.

This promise of practicality and its consequent paradoxes is further explored in Chapter 2. Here the App economy is investigated with a critical eye through the lens of failure – which here becomes fuel (in the metaphorical sense of the term) for a capitalist form centred on the concept of creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1942). The arguments introduced in Chapter 1 are then meshed and explored by highlighting the paradox of the Gig economy, consisting in constructing stable, enduring and more complex social structures with the increasingly prolific emergence of products and services, including apps, that promise to make life easier. The chapter continues with an analysis of how and why the mobile app market has come to follow its consumers everywhere and how such settings lead to different strands of narratives: from

those that magnify the phenomenon to those that frame it as an evil of contemporary society. Two interesting aspects are discussed in the chapter: the slow but gradual transformation of the end consumer into a constant beta-tester, and the subsequent transformation of employees into services, like the case of Uber. Two critical analyses that highlight the darker sides of the app economy. However, apps should also be regarded as part of our social acting to be rethought in its practicality, connectivity and identity. In this social acting, narrative takes space; individuals experience a constant negotiation of meaning in their stories, where autobiographical capacity clashes with the stories written by profiling algorithms, of which we are unaware, and which often do not reflect what we thought we were.

In Chapter 3, the authors discuss the relationship between memory, individual and collective, and forgotten failures. Here, they critically unveil the processes of monetisation of failures by withdrawing the threads of the themes introduced in Chapter 1 on techno-failures, thus rethinking failure as noise, as something abstract and dematerialised or, more ‘disturbingly’, as noise and loss of information/data. A deeper way of investigating those false promises presented in Chapter 2 where, as Sterne (2012) also suggests, once again the promise of ever-increasing fidelity inherent in scientific progress becomes, instead, an ever-increasing loss of original data. Therefore, the presence of noise is an essential and non-accidental aspect from which it is possible to understand how the race for high quality or bandwidth enlargement is realised in an economy of rejection and noise suppression.

Chapter 4 is devoted to critically reviewing the events of the two-year financial crisis of 2007-2008 and their connection to the unfulfilled promises of the derivatives market. The parallels with being a consumer in the eyes of Silicon Valley, in what seems to be an eternal race toward an innovative model of investment, which only results in perpetual expectations, are taken up and explored here. Accordingly, large institutions are considered too big to fail due to the responsibility shift, of which failure falls onto consumers-debtors.

3. Trauma and habitual failure: remembering and rethinking who and what technology is

The work is in a strand of analysis that aims to make clear the difference between traumas and habitual failures. Where the former can still be understood as real opportunities for growth, and which keep intact their ability to create new knowledge. In short, they make a difference. The latter, on the other hand, no longer operate as an epistemological device and therefore no longer make a difference. Right from the synopsis, three elements are the elements on which the investigation to failure is stretched: memory, narrative, and capital. Memory in its capacity to store, calculate (Edelman, 2013) and therefore remember. And it is this capacity to remember that warps the themes of naturalization, justification, and erasure of failure in everyday life. Instead, narrative returns in many dimensions (history, power, culture, and technology) and becomes a methodology (Czarniawska, 2004) with which to address the passage of failure in them. Social life is viewed as narrative (MacIntyre, 1981) by investigating the entanglements (Polkinghorne, 1987) that give authority to the stories (Bruner, 1990) of some failures rather than others with a watchful eye on the technological component with which the actions inherent in those stories connect and stabilize among them (Latour, 1993). Finally, the capital that serves as the glue between the discourse of the routinized nature of failure and the commodification of it. The first question then becomes “what failures become

real failures?” and again “what failures are remembered and why? The authors, then, propose to us a new way of reading (diagnosing) and writing (curing) failure (Sicca, 2010); where diagnosis plays the role of becoming aware of so-called routine failures, and curing comes through questioning. A view of failure as a judgment placed on the failure of something or someone rather than an inherent property of our artifacts. A lance is broken in favor of the human component of socio-technical systems where failure is always blamed on the first party, while technology remains blameless. Moments when failure is felt and remembered but associated with the wrong source. A theme that considering the past three years of pandemic goes out the door only to come back in through the window. Technology is just so finite as the beings who designed it and who suffer it, yet it seems infinite, therefore, infallible, and this we have experienced again and again in this period of forced coexistence with machines. The aesthetic element (Gagliardi, 1999) of re-organizing ourselves through technology have exposed us more consciously to the limitations of them and the constant exposure to failure. Yet, we seem to have learned nothing; failure ceases to operate as an epistemological implant producing no difference for the user. It becomes the heart of the work summarized by the phrase a difference that does not make a difference. Just as in times of commodity scarcity such as this, technology returns to appear as something not infinite, as something that is fallible and is designed to fail. Failure assumed to be a routine phenomenon becomes one of the primordial conditions for the limitless creative destruction of modern capitalism (p.108). And then the question changes leaving the reader with food for thought, about the primordial nature of failure. Is planned dysfunction still really dysfunction?

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I renew my invitation to approach this work with curiosity and desire to continue investigating the issues brought to light by the two authors. In the book’s conclusion, it is precisely the authors who invite readers to take the field and I want to renew this invitation.

Keywords:

failure, routine, digital technologies

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