

On creating your own metrics of success



Film/video programmer and arts consultant Carlos A. Gutiérrez discusses transparency, validation, and defining your own success in an industry obsessed with commercialization.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 3049 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Fundraising](#), [Success](#), [Promotion](#), [Process](#), [Politics](#), [Money](#).

You run Cinema Tropical. Can you elaborate on what it is?

Besides being an anomaly, Cinema Tropical is a not-for-profit organization. Our mission is to promote, distribute, and promote US, Latinx, and Latin American cinema. We have three big areas of work. One is programming of festivals and film programs. We also do distribution. The third area is the promotion of films.

How would you define what you do on your career path? Would you say that you have managed to create a path outside the established system?

Totally. I built a system completely outside of the system. If one follows the rules of everything, particularly in cinema, everything is set for you to fail. You have to create a system outside of it to navigate the complexities of the system. That's why Cinema Tropical, the organization that I run, is still running after 22 years. Creating a structure outside the traditional system has enabled us not only to survive but also thrive within this difficult context.

When you said everything is set up for you to fail, what do you mean by that?

Well, in terms of how everything's established within the film world, between production, distribution, exhibition, the old traditional model, if you follow all the rules, and if you do whatever you're told to do you're going to run into a lot of problems. As [Alex Rivera](#), a filmmaker whom I deeply admire, said, "one needs to fight for the right to fail." The system says that if you make one mistake, that can ruin your career, both as a filmmaker and as a film professional. One has to be careful to create a context where you can still experiment and make mistakes. I think that's important, but that one mistake won't ruin your career or ruin your organization. That's the sad part about the film world. We've seen so many organizations and companies disappear because of one bad decision. We need to create those settings where you can still experiment and one misstep won't kill you.

What would you say has allowed Cinema Tropical to succeed and prevail for 20 years?

Different reasons. One of them is keeping expectations at the minimum and then growing with them. I suggest that always to the filmmakers we work with. I think a big problem in life is expectations. When you start really with high expectations, you're bound to fail, and more so in the film world these days, because it's so complicated that it's better to be realistic and grow with expectations. Then life will surprise you. Also, if you start with

high expectations here, maybe life will give you even something better, but because you're so stuck in these expectations, you won't even appreciate all this. Keeping expectations and budgets in place and keeping budgets to the minimum, also. In terms of working with small budgets, it's creating synergy.

One of the problems of our society is that there are a lot of wasted resources. That's why we work in collaboration. We get some resources here, and others over there, that's how we can maximize the impact of the projects. In that sense, even though Cinema Tropical is a small not-for-profit organization in terms of operations, our visibility is pretty big. Sometimes we even surprise ourselves in terms of, "Oh my God, how is it that we are involved in so many of these projects without overdoing ourselves?" That has to do with working in collaboration with different organizations and different institutions.

You work with so many filmmakers at different stages of their careers and you also work with people that work in different film organizations. How do you navigate those environments that can be challenging and with people that have different interests?

I think of the question, "What's your focus?" Our mission is to support filmmakers and find audiences for their work. With that as a priority, then everything falls in almost automatically. One of the biggest issues in the film world is that there's a lack of relevance. How I see it is that basically, in the past 20 years, the past decade particularly, the production has democratized, took over, somehow. it's become cheaper and more accessible to make films, at least compared to 30 years ago. But the other parts, distribution, and exhibition haven't been democratized. In that sense, the gatekeeping process has shrunk instead of opening.

One of my mantras is that we need to bring out the films out of the film world because there's a lot of interest out there. Everybody loves cinema. A lot of the most interesting filmmakers are coming not from film schools, but from other artistic realms, from music, performing arts, and photography. We have fashion designers making films, and journalists, so it's also creating synergy outside the film world, and reaching out to allies outside the film world as well, like in academia.

You mentioned that more films are being made with less resources. But the gatekeepers in exhibition and distribution have shrunk. Sometimes I think that there is a feeling of scarcity in the industry, in both the resources and in the filmmakers' mindset.

I would probably challenge that notion. I don't think this is scarcity, in the sense there are millions of dollars in the entertainment industry, not so much in our specific realm, but there's a lot of money there. The problem is the promise that relates to how the resources are assigned. The important thing is knowing the context and learning how to make the most out of working with limited resources.

That's why Cinema Tropical is still existing. It also relates a lot to what I see in filmmaking, particularly in Latin America where filmmakers have very limited resources, they grab little money from public and private sectors, and local and international producers for funding, but they have complete artistic freedom, which is very important. But here in the U.S., we mistake both things. Here, it's usually the opposite. If you have resources you're losing creative control. That money has a lot of ties. In that sense, I think it's good to work with low resources because that allows you to work with complete creative freedom. In Latin America, we work with limited resources, but we have all the artistic freedom to do pretty much whatever we want, to dedicate our time and energies to what we think is important. It relates to breaking out from the traditional concept. In this capitalist society, the typical question is how you envision yourself with the idea that you're going to grow, expand, and conquer the world. It's important to refuse the capitalism inertia because, as I said, you make one misstep and you'll lose everything. It's in this kind of frantic career of expansion where you start making mistakes. Not everything needs to grow per se. You have to create your own metrics of success.

I've noticed that here in the US, because filmmakers need to get so many grants to get funding, they might lose freedom because they adjust to the agenda of funders, festivals, and other organizations. While in Latin America there aren't so many organizations that work that way.

I'm going to be very blunt. I think that in the US, we're very colonized by the mentality that you're explaining.

On one hand, the idea that you're an independent filmmaker, that you're going to invest, you're going to be in debt, you're going to sell your house, or put all the money in your credit card, make that independent film. You're going to get to Sundance, and then your life is going to change. It's an idea a little bit like the American dream, that you put all this effort, and then somebody's going to discover it, and you'll be making big mainstream films, which probably happens for one in every 100,000 filmmakers. Also, in terms of what kind of success, there are a lot of stories about filmmakers that have done well in those festivals, but then they just basically go to Hollywood, and they get all the bad screenplays that nobody wants to direct.

A lot of filmmakers that have succeeded in those big festivals in the US have had a hard time making a second film. I guess it's another side of the same problem, but even foundations give some little money. That relates to what you said about the scarcity of resources. I'm surprised that no more filmmakers are saying, "If I'm going to invest all this time and energy and get \$20,000 from this foundation, I think it's better just to use that time and energy to break the rules." I think that we have a very colonial mentality in this country that we are following the rules, and there are big exceptions, but in general, once you're getting that funding it takes out the energy of the projects.

I'm going to say something a bit more controversial. I've noticed there's been this space for many years, over a decade now, for a new generation of American filmmakers to reclaim independent cinema in this country. I'm surprised it hasn't happened yet. The independent realm got so industrialized between film festivals and funding, and now, coming after the pandemic, everything is award season. It's horrible. I think it's really good times for filmmakers, particularly in the US, to be rebellious and say, just make low-budget films. With all the creativity, we think we're going through major political changes. It's a very interesting moment in terms of creativity, but filmmakers need to own it to rethink and challenge the narratives.

Working with the same rules and systems also set filmmakers to compete with each other.

Just to continue the thought, and it's sort of a big generalization of course, but at the same time, it's pretty impressive how some US Latinx filmmakers are the ones taking the risks. Like Alex Rivera, Christina Ibarra, Natalia Almada, Jonathan and Elan Bogarin, all of these filmmakers have been making landmark films. The problem is that they haven't gotten the validation they deserve, even though they're the ones taking the risks and opening the doors for other American filmmakers. There's the talent and some filmmakers, but then also, it's a gatekeeping process, and the validation part. To what you were saying in terms of competition, of course. That's how the system also starts dividing.

Where do you think validation should come from? How is validation built and appreciated?

Two keywords in the work I do is relevance and validation. One has to find what's the relevance of a film, and why the film is important. The problem with the film world is that it just validates in very reduced terms. There are a lot of different relevances: artistic, political, social, cultural. The problem is that the film world just looks for some very specific types of films. The work that we do is finding that relevance. There are a thousand films, and only five or 20 will get validation. What happens to the other films? They completely disappear. For me, it's important to democratize that validation process. It's finding each film and seeing what's the relevance. I think that most films have some type of relevance, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, from the director's intentions.

One part is finding the relevance of each film. The second part is finding the validation but being very transparent with the audience about why the film is important. Besides the typical, "Oh, this film won that prize, the award," giving the elements to the audience why this film is important and being completely transparent is key. The audience will be appreciative of that. They can focus on what's important, regardless of all the imperfections of the film. There are a lot of imperfectly, artistically imperfect films, but they were relevant because they're tackling topics that have never been touched or they're challenging the hegemonic narratives. We need to democratize that validation process. Most of the films that get validation are not the most important films or the most relevant, but they create consensus in the funding process. Usually, the most important films are the ones that challenge and those are the ones that push the margins.

why it's very important to curate and have really good curation in terms of jury members for awards and for funding. One has to have good curating precisely to make sure the jury has the tools to recognize the groundbreaking films, the most relevant films, and how they are also relevant. What kills me in the film world is that the discourse is very basic. I travel to film festivals all the time and you come out of this film screening, bump into colleagues, and say, "Oh wow, did you like the film? Yes or no?" Everything's about "like." A lot of programmers program the films they "like." In funding, they give grants to the films they "like." I don't think it's about "like." That's completely subjective. My interpersonal taste is very subjective and in that sense irrelevant. Even if I don't like it, what is the relevance of that film? I think that's also important to professionalize our field. Again, for the most part, if filmmakers hear what they think about the films in those panels I think we would have a revolution years ago.

Can you elaborate on what you just said about professionalizing the field? What do you think would be the conditions, or what does professionalization mean to you? Like creating guidelines specific? What would be some good incentives?

The most important thing is being transparent. One of the big problems in the film world is the lack of transparency. We never know as an audience and as a film community why they program this film or that film. Those decisions are rarely made public. The same case with awards. I think some festivals are starting to make their deliberation processes public, which I think is very healthy. That's part of the professionalization because it's fine if the festival wants to give this type of award to this film, but tell us why. Just give us your parameters so we understand the decision. That is not happening.

A second element is that I and most of my colleagues I know is that we've created our careers because we didn't learn this in school. There is a big separation between film schools and communication programs. I majored in communication, but I had to build my career because I didn't know I could work in what I was doing here. All of our professional experience is very empirical. We need to make those connections between communication schools. We need to create better professionals, better distributors, better programmers, better publicists, and better people that accompany the wonderful work being out there.

Can simple actions like changing the word "films" to "content" have an impact on what is being made, and how it's being appreciated?

Of course. It's a major shift. They opened the gates between video, television, and cinema, so now we're competing all in the same category. We are competing with cat videos online. But I would probably even go a step back. I'm amazed by cinema and its obsession with its commercialization. I think that's part of the problem. No other art form that I can think of, probably music being second closest, it's so obsessed in terms of commercialization. In the film world, that equation, production, distribution, exhibition, which is completely capitalistic, which can be applied to shoes, to any product you produce, the distribution is that channel that you get to the store.

We need to be much more specific in terms of every single step of the commercialization process. You know what kills me also? Filmmakers, instead of watching films, which is the best film school, spend so much time on those silly distribution panels. We have put so much pressure on the filmmakers. They have to do their crowdfunding, submit to foundations, they have to make the film, but they also have to run the social media. They have to create an impact campaign. That's part of the problem. Instead of helping them focus on making the best films, we're distracting them by making other films that most of them are not good at. I think that's the problem, the films that get validated are the ones from the best marketers, but not necessarily from the best filmmakers.

Your full-time job is in what you love, you are your own boss. That seems like the perfect combo of a "dream job." What are the ups and downs of having and owning those three elements?

I feel very fortunate to have built my platform. I never thought of myself as an entrepreneur. Becoming one just by de facto, it's been amazing. I feel very privileged, particularly because these past two decades have been amazing for Latin American cinema, which is one of the issues that I've been focused on all the time.

One of the downs is that after two decades of working on this, certain things that you would think would become

easier are not. Then the other way around. Some things you think would be more difficult are easier. I feel very fortunate to be working in what I like, meeting amazing people, seeing great films, connecting people, creating audiences, and articulating all of my political beliefs and all my cosmogony into my practical and professional life. Making that connection in terms of how I see the world, and the things that I want to make a change in society, align them with the films and the filmmakers that I work with.

Carlos Gutiérrez recommends five films:

Neighboring Sounds (O Som ao Redor) by Kleber Mendonça Filho (Brazil)

Silvia Prieto by Martín Rejtman (Argentina)

The Tiniest Place by Tatiana Huezo (Mexico/El Salvador)

A Useful Life by Federico Veiroj (Uruguay)

The Wolf House by Joaquín Cociña and Cristóbal León (Chile)

Name

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Vocation

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