Contextualisation Essay

“Falen is ook een optie”

By Leanne Butter
AV2 - 1073390

When I started making “Falen is ook een optie”, I knew I wanted to make a film that questioned the concept of success. We are constantly told that success is a personal responsibility, a result of working hard, of pushing limits and overcoming challenges. But if that’s true, why do so many of us, including myself, feel like we’re failing? I wondered if I had somehow missed the memo on how to achieve this unreachable thing called “success,” so I decided to dive into it.



Filmstill

Many filmmakers I follow on platforms like Instagram create these stunning low-budget films. Or they are invited to shoot in the most incredible locations. These people are often my age, and their success makes me feel inadequate by comparison. They seem to have reached the level of achievement I aspire to, which leaves me feeling like a failure, because I have not yet reached that goal.

My project started as a way to dig into that feeling of failure. I want to attempt to understand the relationship between succes and failure. According to the sociologist Thijs Bol, the belief that success is a choice can easily lead to “self-blame and pressure”. This is especially true when the bar for achievement seems to keep rising (Bol, 2024).

As a bit of a space nerd myself, I compared the two largest U.S. space agencies in my film: SpaceX and NASA. SpaceX's approach to failure intrigued me: They are open about every failure, from mid-flight explosions and setbacks to crashed landings. For them, failure is just part of learning and therefor, getting better (Volkskrant, 2023). At the same time, SpaceX have incredible successes, like catching a "super heavy booster" in flight on the first try, which surprised many.
In contrast NASA handles the motto "failure is not an option." They makes it seem like avoiding mistakes is what is to strive for. But even though that sounds admirable, it has often slowed them down.



Filmstill SpaceX explosion



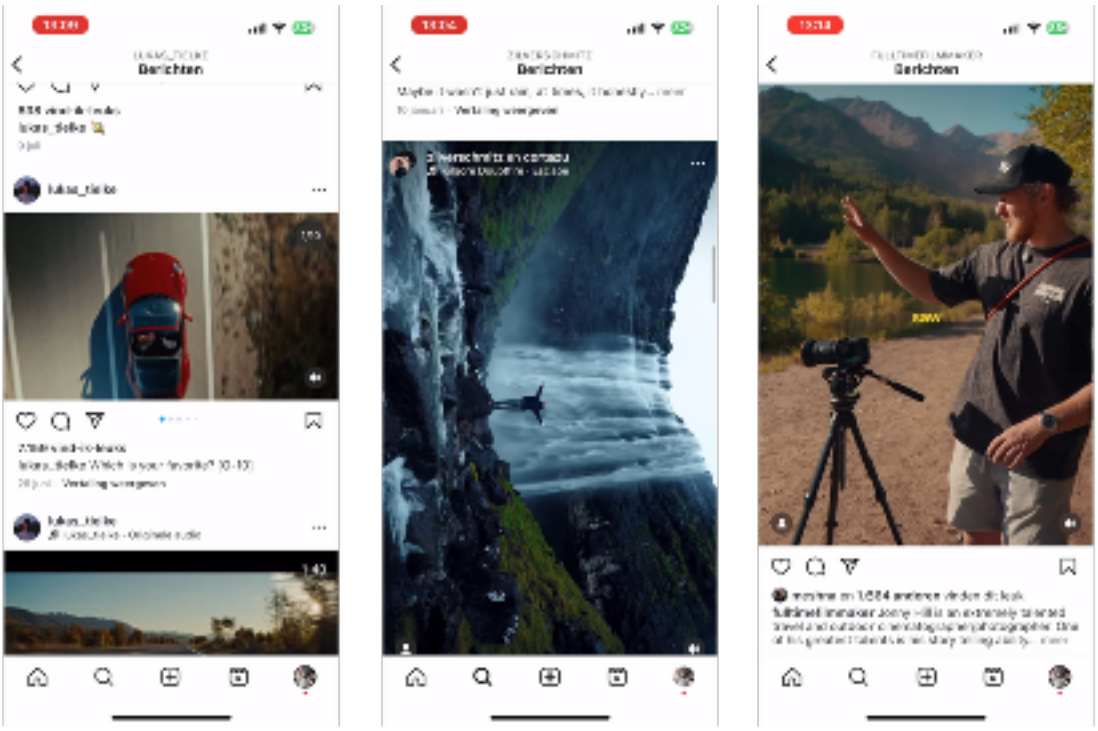
Filmstill NASA in the past

In my film, the parallel between NASA and SpaceX became a strong metaphor. It shows the benefits of embracing failure and the risks of avoiding it altogether. NASA and SpaceX frame success and failure in fundamentally different ways, which made their contrast even more interesting. Stuart Hall explains that *re*presentation isn't just about reflecting what's real but about actively creating meaning (Media Education Foundation, 1997). The idea of success will: *"always be a contested question. There will never be a finally settled, fixed meaning"* (Stuart Hall, 1997, p. 5). That's because, as Hall explains, people themselves actively seek meaning in the events they see. In culture we assign meaning to events and interpret them differently, depending on our perspectives. Hall talks about a "conceptual map" as the mental framework people use to make sense of events and understand the world around them (Stuart Hall, 1997, p.9).

This idea helped me see how SpaceX and NASA represent two very different approaches to success and failure. Personally, I have given greater weight to the meaning of "failure is necessary to achieve success" than to NASA's less innovative perspective, which doesn't see failure as an option. So SpaceX's conceptual map resonates more with my idea of success.

One of the starting points of my film is addressing how social media frames success. Instagram is especially powerful at only showing the success one accomplishes. We only see the great and beautiful projects they have made, and the struggle to get there is forgotten. For many, including myself, this creates a feeling of inadequacy. This is explored in Parool's article on mental health in the performance-driven society, where psychologist Thijs Launspach explains that constantly seeing others' achievements online can cause burnout and feelings of worthlessness (Parool, 2023).

I wanted to bring this self-reflection into the film by using clips from social media, and thereby a personal reflection on how this makes me feel. Social media has this way of amplifying self-doubt, especially for creatives. This is also something I asked to people on the streets. I wanted to show how easily we feel inadequate when comparing our work, and ourselves, to the polished projects others share. The gap between what we see online and the reality behind it is often hidden, but it fuels insecurity and makes us question our creativity.



Filmstill

My experience as a filmmaker isn't isolated; it's a part of a larger narrative about how we define and represent success. Laura Rascaroli's research on the essay film was crucial in my film as she states that essay films should be subjective and reflective in nature (Rascaroli, 2008). In a way, the film became a dialogue with myself. Throughout, I ask, "What if failure isn't something to avoid but something to embrace?"

When I compare SpaceX's mindset to the mental blocks I face, it reminds me that every step I take, even if they are not perfect, are still part of the journey. This reflection allowed me to tackle my own doubts and insecurities openly, making them part of the narrative of the film instead of hiding them.

Creating the film as an essay film gave me the freedom to approach these themes in a broader, more nuanced way. In an essay film the maker can pose questions, answer them or leave them unresolved. (Bill Nichols, 2001). All in order to intrigue the viewer and make them part of the film. I could capture the conflict I had about success, failing and self worth. An essay film allows for the self-reflection my film required.

The final cut of ‘Falen is ook een optie’ brings all these elements together. By combining clips of SpaceX’s failed launches, personal moments of self-doubt, and snippets from inspiring films and projects I’ve come across. I hoped to create a piece that feels both honest and relatable. It’s not about teaching a lesson but about inviting viewers to rethink their definitions of success and failure.

For me, the most significant realisation was that true success isn’t about *avoiding* failure. It’s about starting, even if you don’t know the outcome. What matters is the process—making mistakes, learning, and growing. I hope this film encourages others to embrace that journey. And to find that in every step, even in the wrong ones, lies value.