Triad Within Triad: Can Experimental Film be Profitable?

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Abstract: The Seventh Art - as the cinema is dubbed - is not the last in the list of arts but the most recent form of art. A century old already, the film industry has witnessed the emergence of the youngest member of the film family: the experimental film. This paper reports some results of a research-in-progress: a larger research project that started with setting the research framework of successive triads – specifically, the triad of experimental film. This model explores the interplay between artistic innovation, creative use of technology, and efficient resource management in the context of experimental filmmaking. While the mainstream film industry is astonishingly profitable, the experimental film ("indie") does not share a similar enjoyable fate. The facts that many great filmmakers started their careers producing experimental movies (on one side) and that experimental films feature minimal resources and costs, would incline to hypothesize their profitability. On the other side, the common knowledge is that production of short movies (as experimental films) is a "waste of time, money and other resources". Based mostly on secondary research, this essay launches the discussion on the profitability of the experimental film, challenging the above common knowledge. Two cases (results of primary research) are presented as argument for supporting the lead idea of this paper: the experimental film can be a profitable venture. The parallel discussion of cases uncovers, among findings, key factors for reaching profitability. Besides inherent limitations that indicate the paths for future research, this study has notable implications related to the sustainability and viability of experimental film production. Overall, practical arguments are brought in favor of the entrepreneurial potential of experimental endeavors in the film industry.

Keywords: Triadic Models, Triple S Holistic Approach, Triad Within Triad, Technology-business-art of Film, Experimental Film Triad, Experimental Film Profitability.

1. Introduction

Film has evolved as a "child of science and art" (Canudo, 1919), simultaneously being a technique, an art, and an industry (Lyon-Caen et al., 1957). Within this industry, experimental film represents a distinctive subgenre, born out of the desire to explore the boundaries of artistic and technical expressiveness. According to the principles of the triple S approach, this article proposes a triadic model for technology-based arts (Technology-Business-Art), specifically applied to cinema (Technology – Entrepreneurship - Art of Film) and experimental film (Technology-Entrepreneurship-Experimental Film).

The film industry, one of the most complex forms of art and entertainment, is a unique combination of technology, business, and artistic expression. Although marginal compared to commercial cinema, experimental film plays a significant role in the evolution of cinematic language. This type of film is defined by its exploration of unconventional forms and techniques, often rejecting traditional narrative structure (Sitney, 1974). Despite its artistic value, experimental film has rarely been seen as a viable business opportunity. Through an analysis based on triadic models, this essay aims to answer the central question: Can experimental film be profitable?

Cinema, referred to as "the seventh art" (Canudo, 2014), is a constantly evolving field, with experimental film representing a young and innovative branch. While the mainstream industry demonstrates impressive profitability, experimental films are often perceived as unprofitable - even though many famous directors began their careers in this niche (Le Grice, 2002).

"Today's cinema is taking on a new face... That is why I speak of the avant-garde. There is always an avant-garde when something new occurs... That is why I would like to call this new era of cinema the age of the camera-pen", wrote Alexandre Astruc in his article The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo (Astruc, 1948).

This research explores the premises of experimental film profitability using the triadic Technology-Entrepreneurship-Art of Film model and the holistic triple S approach. Innovations such as digital cinematography allow directors to create immersive experiences using advanced visual effects (Bares and Lester, 1997). Experimental films can thus visually compete with mainstream productions, without the high costs associated with celluloid film.

The COVID-19 pandemic also catalyzed this shift, pushing film festivals into digital spaces and prompting creators to experiment with alternative methods of funding, production, and distribution. Independent film often uses innovative financing models such as crowdfunding to reduce dependence on traditional investors, direct-to-audience sales, and partnerships with streaming services have become increasingly viable avenues for financing experimental projects, helping filmmakers maintain creative control while reaching wider audiences (Levison, 2013). This enables directors to retain artistic control and build a loyal audience.

Recent years, however, have witnessed a transformation in how experimental films are created, distributed, and monetized. The democratization of digital filmmaking tools and the emergence of distribution platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, and MUBI have allowed experimental filmmakers to reach global audiences without relying on traditional industry gatekeepers (Lobato, 2019; Tryon, 2013). This increased accessibility has not only expanded the visibility of experimental cinema but has also enabled the formation of loyal, niche audiences willing to support innovative content.

Contemporary filmmakers like Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Jennifer Reeder, and Sky Hopinka exemplify how experimental aesthetics can achieve both critical acclaim and sustained international presence. Emerging technologies - including artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and blockchain - further redefine the artistic and economic landscape of experimental film, opening new modes of expression and novel revenue streams. The concept of "expanded cinema" is being reimagined through immersive, multi-sensory formats that challenge the limitations of traditional screens (Smits, 2019, 2022).

Therefore, far from being merely a niche artistic endeavor, experimental film today serves as a dynamic space of innovation and creative entrepreneurship. This research proposes a reevaluation of its economic potential through the triadic Technology–Entrepreneurship–Art of Film model, arguing that profitability is not only possible but compatible with artistic integrity in the digital age.

2. Context and the Triadic Model

The triadic model of Technology – Entrepreneurship - Art of Film, as described by Scarlat and Zăvoianu, provides a conceptual foundation for investigating the interdependence between technology, artistic innovation, and the economic sustainability of film. This model emphasizes the interaction between technological innovation, entrepreneurial initiative, and artistic expression as pillars of success in this field (Zăvoianu and Scarlat, 2024). While the mainstream film industry is recognized for its profitability, experimental films are often perceived as occupying a marginal artistic territory with little economic potential, typically sustained by the enthusiasm of their creators. However, history shows that many renowned filmmakers - such as Tarantino, Jarmusch, and Scorsese—began their careers with experimental films, using them as a testing ground for their visions (Zăvoianu and Scarlat, 2024).

Furthermore, initiatives like the "Free Cinema" movement in England (Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz, and Lorenza Mazzetti, 1956) or "Dogma 95" in Denmark - a groundbreaking film production movement founded by directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, creators of the *Dogma 95 Manifesto* and the *Vow of Chastity* (*Kyskhedsløfter* in Danish) - have demonstrated that experimental films can be produced with extremely low budgets, using small crews and natural locations. These movements significantly influenced the development of independent film by promoting innovative and authentic ideas. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that experimental film can be profitable is examined from an entrepreneurial perspective.

This article explores the contradictions between the limited resources required to produce experimental films and the general perception of their low profitability, offering both theoretical and practical arguments for reconsidering their position within the industry. The film industry has evolved alongside technological development, becoming a global economic force. Experimental film, however, remains a niche subject, associated with artistic innovation but rarely with financial success. In this context, the fundamental question remains: *Can experimental film be profitable?*

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design grounded in conceptual analysis and the examination of selected case studies from the domain of experimental film. The primary objective is to investigate the interactions between technology, entrepreneurship, and artistic expression, as framed by the Triadic Model of Film (Technology - Entrepreneurship - Art), developed by Scarlat and Zăvoianu (2024).

Data collection was based on a comprehensive literature review, encompassing academic sources, manifestos from experimental film movements, and recent studies on film profitability. Predictive models used in mainstream cinema were also examined to assess their applicability to experimental film.

In order to substantiate the central hypothesis—that experimental film can become economically viable through the strategic integration of technological tools and entrepreneurial vision—the study identifies historical and contemporary examples of independent film movements, creative collectives, and grassroots initiatives that have achieved cultural or financial relevance. The findings are interpreted through an interdisciplinary lens at the intersection of creative economy, digital media, and cultural entrepreneurship.

This article applies the triadic model to experimental film, analyzing its economic potential through the lens of technological accessibility and entrepreneurial approaches. According to research, experimental film can be analyzed through two triads: (1) the general triad of cinematic art (Technology – Entrepreneurship - Art of film), and (2) the specific triad for experimental film (Technology – Entrepreneurship - Experimental Film).

The study explores the economic potential of experimental film using the Triadic Model of Technology - Entrepreneurship - Art of Film (Zăvoianu and Scarlat, 2024). This framework integrates:

1. *Technology* - digital tools and platforms reducing costs and fostering innovation;
2. *Entrepreneurship* - strategies like crowdfunding and niche marketing;
3. *Art of Film* - creative, experimental narratives diverging from mainstream cinema. The model views these as synergistic, not conflicting, elements driving cultural and economic impact. Supported by conceptual analysis, the research clarifies terms like “profitability” and “innovation,” positioning experimental film as both art and viable enterprise within media studies and creative industries.

This model highlights the interaction between technological innovation, entrepreneurial initiative, and artistic expression as pillars of success in the field. Moreover, a recent study analyzed the economic potential of films by developing a model capable of predicting their profitability based on various characteristics, including content, distribution, audience perception, and budget. This model could also be applied to experimental films to assess their commercial viability (Swami et al., 2021).

Additionally, involvement in experimental film communities and collectives, such as the Experimental Film Society, can provide opportunities for collaboration and distribution, contributing to the economic success of these productions.

In the paper *Analyzing Movies to Predict Their Commercial Viability for Producers* by Devendra Swami and collaborators, it is stated that “Although many high-budget films have achieved exceptional success, others have failed miserably. Therefore, it is essential to develop models that can predict a film’s profitability before release” (Swami et al., 2021). In the article *Box Office Collection of Sequel Movies: Exploring Brand Extension Effect* by Prem Prakash Dewani and collaborators, it is mentioned that “Collecting box office revenue data can provide valuable insights into the factors that influence a film’s commercial success” (Dewani et al., 2021). In *Experimental Film and the Development of Film Study in America*, Michael Zryd affirms: “Experimental film played a crucial role in the development of film studies in America, offering new perspectives on film theory and practice” (Zryd, 2008). Kathryn Ramey, in *Productive Dissonance and Sensuous Image-Making: Visual Anthropology and Experimental Film*, notes: “Experimental film and visual anthropology share a productive dissonance that stimulates the creation of sensorial imagery and new ways of understanding culture” (Ramey, 2011). In *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, Catherine Russell observes: “Experimental ethnography employs innovative filming techniques to explore the complexity of cultural representation in the video age” (Russell, 1999).

Therefore, integrating technology and entrepreneurship into experimental film production can open new opportunities for the economic success of this genre, transforming it from an artistic niche into a viable component of the film industry.

2.1 The General Triad of Cinematic Art: Technology–Entrepreneurship–Art of Film

The triadic model of technology-based art—*Technology–Entrepreneurship–Art of Film*—provides an essential framework for understanding the complexity and interactions within cinema, particularly in the context of experimental film.

This perspective integrates the technological, economic, and artistic dimensions, illustrating how each contributes to the evolution of cinema.

- Technological advancements are central to cinema's development, enabling novel artistic expressions while lowering production costs. Affordable digital cameras, advanced editing

software, and computer-generated imagery (CGI) have democratized access to creative tools, allowing filmmakers to experiment beyond previous financial constraints. Experimental cinema particularly benefits, using technology to explore unconventional narrative and visual forms. Innovations such as digital cinematography and CGI have reduced entry barriers, empowering independent creators to realize their visions (Whissel, 2014).

- Economic considerations remain integral, even in experimental cinema. Financing, production, and distribution demand strategic approaches to sustain projects. Platforms like film festivals, streaming services, and digital sales monetize experimental works, ensuring investment recovery while broadening artistic reach. Entrepreneurship has become vital, as filmmakers evolve into "*filmtrepreneurs*" (Ferrari, 2019), blending creativity with innovative economic strategies.
- Art lies at the heart of this triadic model, defining and distinguishing cinematic projects. As P. Adams Sitney asserts, experimental cinema arises from aesthetic, not commercial or technological, impulses, placing artistic innovation at its core. Iconic works by Maya Deren (e.g., Meshes of the Afternoon) and Stan Brakhage (Dog Star Man) exemplify art-driven cinema, emphasizing form, perception, and rhythm over financial or technological motives (Sitney, 2002). Experimental films inherently transcend genre boundaries, exploring new forms of expression that challenge and inspire audiences. While reliant on technology and economics for public access, their creative impetus lies in artistic exploration, often yielding impacts disproportionate to their resources.

Art's primacy in this triad is evident as technology and economics adapt to evolving artistic needs. As Manovich notes, digital tools are reshaped by artists to enable innovative storytelling (Manovich, 2002). This synergy underscores how artistic vision drives technological and economic strategies.

The relationship between *Technology, Entrepreneurship, and Art of Film* is symbiotic, with each component fueling and supporting the others. The triadic model offers a unique perspective on cinema, emphasizing the importance of balance between technological innovation, economic sustainability, and artistic expression. Especially in the case of experimental films, this interaction becomes the key to understanding and appreciating the role of technology-based art in the contemporary cultural landscape.

2.2 The Specific Triad of Experimental Film: Technology–Entrepreneurship–Experimental Film

The film industry has evolved dramatically over the decades, establishing itself as a global economic force through the integration of emerging technologies and innovative business approaches.

The mainstream film industry is traditionally structured around a triad comprising Technology, Capital, and Mass Audience Appeal. Technology facilitates large-scale production and visual spectacle, including innovations such as CGI, IMAX, and 3D. Capital, sourced from studios or investors, is driven by expectations of high financial returns. Mass Audience Appeal shapes content creation, often favoring tested formulas such as genres and franchises. This triad fosters a commercially oriented feedback loop in which significant investment supports advanced production technologies that enable the creation of visually spectacular products aimed at broad audiences, thereby maximizing revenue.

However, *experimental film*, a niche subject centered on artistic and narrative innovation, is often perceived as lacking financial viability.

This raises the relevance of the triad: *Technology–Entrepreneurship–Art of Film*, as illustrated in *Figure 1*. The analysis is conducted at a conceptual level, by examining each pair of components, followed by a discussion on a potential integrated study. The *Technology–Entrepreneurship* relationship has already been discussed (Scarlat, 2014), while the following sections on *Technology–Art of Film* and *Entrepreneurship–Art of Film* were explored in the study *Complexity of Triadic Models: The Triad Technology–Entrepreneurship–Art of Film* (Zăvoianu and Scarlat, 2024).

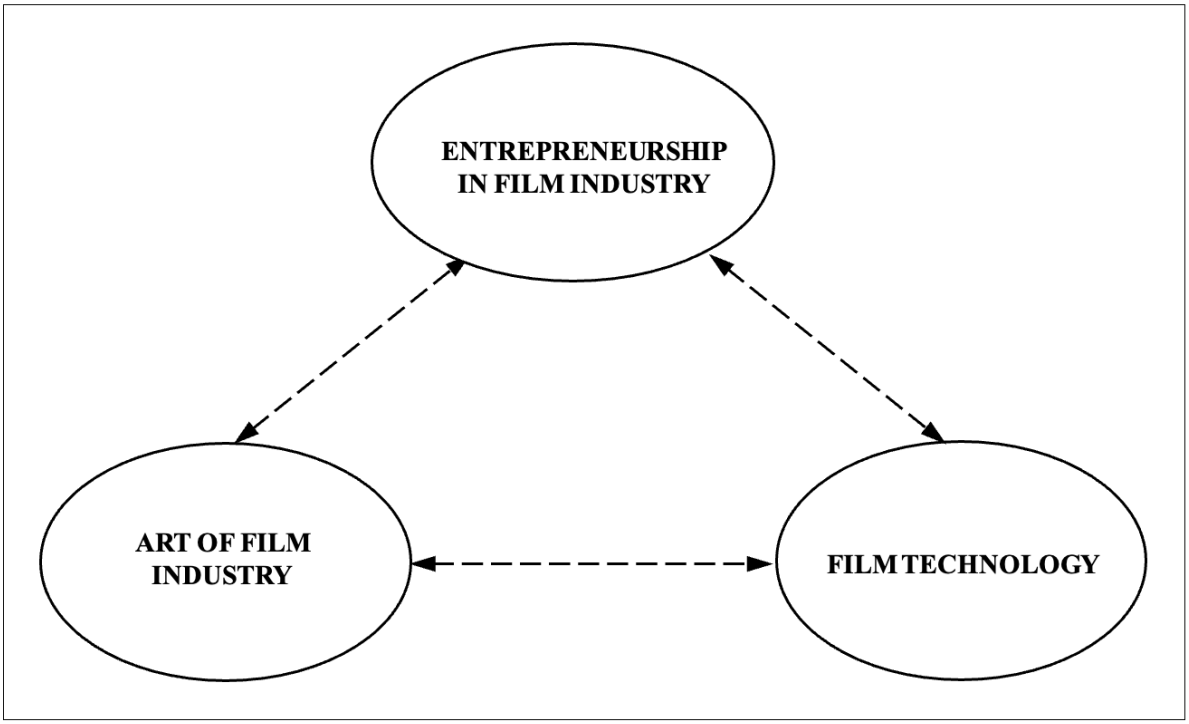

Figure 1: A particular model of the technopreneurship triad - *Technology-Entrepreneurship-Filmmaking* - in the case of film industry

Source: Authors' own contribution to the research

In this context, it becomes essential to investigate whether experimental film can become profitable by using the triadic model composed of *Technology, Entrepreneurship, and Experimental Film*. This model offers an analytical perspective for understanding the relationship between creativity and economic sustainability.

Technological progress has transformed the film industry by drastically reducing costs and democratizing access to production tools. In the past, producing experimental films was limited by the high cost of equipment and technical resources. Today, independent filmmakers can create high-quality productions using affordable digital cameras, advanced editing software, and online distribution platforms. Digital technologies allow creators to experiment with new visual and narrative aesthetics without relying on large budgets. For example, the use of AI-generated animation techniques or motion capture can add artistic value to experimental productions.

The financial success of experimental film depends on adopting an entrepreneurial mindset. Directors must identify alternative sources of funding, such as crowdfunding, which enables them to raise money directly from the public. Notable examples include platforms like Kickstarter and Indiegogo, which have supported numerous independent projects. Distribution also plays a crucial role. Experimental films can bypass the traditional cinema network by opting for digital platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, or online film festivals. Additionally, digital marketing—through the use of social media, viral campaigns, and partnerships with influencers—enables directors to reach niche audiences in a cost-effective way. A historically relevant example is United Artists, which supported independent productions through an innovative economic model.

Experimental film distinguishes itself by rejecting conventional narrative structures and exploring visual aesthetics. Although this genre appeals to a limited audience, its innovative character has the potential to attract attention at prestigious festivals such as Sundance or Tribeca. International recognition offers not only artistic prestige but also monetization opportunities, such as the sale of rights to streaming platforms or international releases. The success of this genre depends on creating an authentic and compelling product that resonates with audiences beyond the traditional visual experience. Experimental films, like those of Stan Brakhage or Maya Deren, have demonstrated that narrative and visual innovation can generate significant cultural impact, attracting a loyal audience segment.

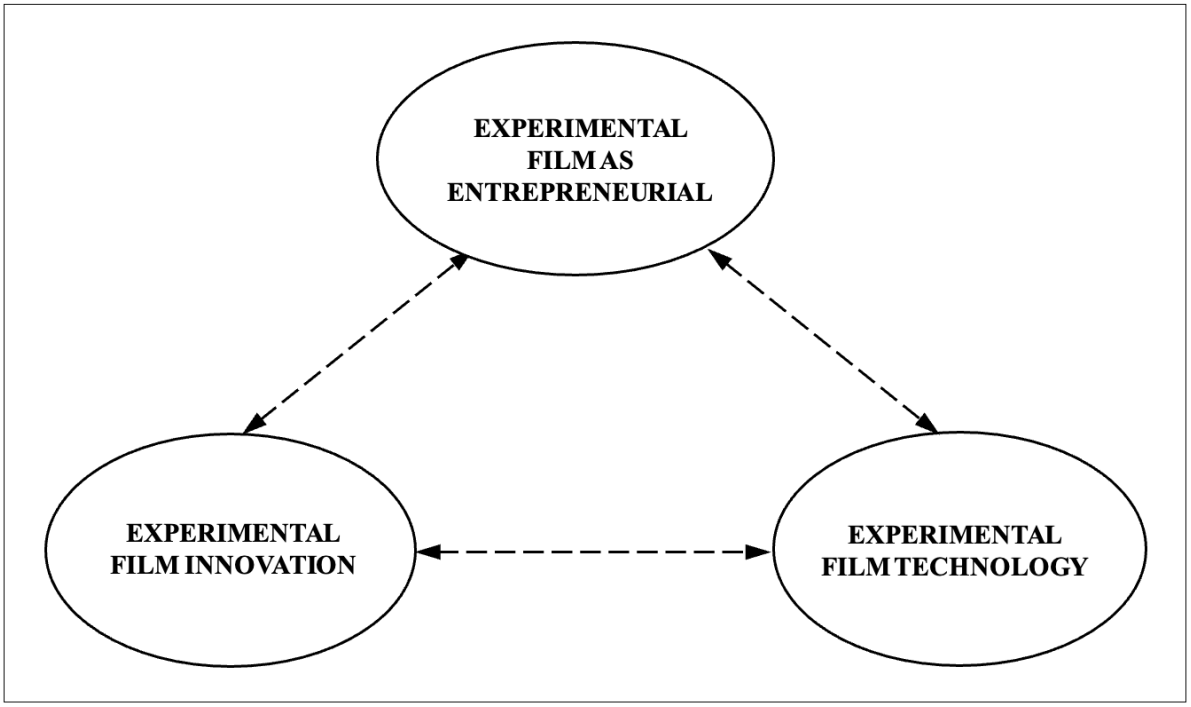

Figure 2: The triad of the experimental film as a particular case of the triad of the mainstream film: *"triad within triad"*

Source: Authors' own contribution to the research

The triadic model *Technology, Entrepreneurship, and Experimental Film* highlights the synergy between these essential components. Reducing production costs through technology, adopting entrepreneurial strategies for funding and distribution, and emphasizing artistic uniqueness are fundamental steps toward transforming experimental film into a profitable product. This model not only analyzes financial challenges but also offers practical solutions, demonstrating that the economic viability of experimental film is achievable, especially in the context of the digital revolution.

Mainstream film prioritizes profit through accessibility, standardized storytelling, and mass appeal, while experimental film emphasizes artistic innovation, niche audiences, and creative entrepreneurship. Both leverage technology differently: mainstream for scaling, experimental for cost reduction and individual creativity. The models contrast in goals but intersect as experimental film adopts entrepreneurial strategies while retaining its artistic essence.

While experimental film is often seen as an artistic niche, it holds the potential to become financially sustainable through the application of the triadic model. Technology lowers production costs, entrepreneurship facilitates access to resources, and artistic uniqueness attracts a loyal audience.

2.3 The Profitability of Experimental Film in the Context of the Triple S Approach

Often perceived as a purely artistic domain and difficult to monetize, experimental film nonetheless offers significant economic opportunities. Through the lens of the Triple S approach (Synthetic, Systemic, Synergic) (Scarlat, 2021), this form of artistic expression reveals its potential to become a sustainable business model.

2.4 Experimental Film as a Business Model

Experimental film stands at the intersection of technology, entrepreneurship, and artistic innovation.
In the context of experimental filmmaking, the triad evolves into a specific model: *Technology – Entrepreneurship – Experimental Film*.

The Triple S approach frames experimental film as a dynamic facet of the creative economy, blending technology, artistry, and entrepreneurship into a unified model. Digital tools democratize production, allowing filmmakers to innovate while minimizing costs. Simultaneously, directors act as cultural entrepreneurs, securing funding through grants, crowdfunding, and patronage. Systemically, experimental film exists within an

ecosystem of festivals, streaming platforms, art galleries, and niche cinemas, supported by policies, grants, and educational programs that enhance its viability and profitability.

The synergic dimension underscores the value of collaboration, where partnerships between artists, technologists, and institutions amplify creative and financial outcomes. Online communities, transmedia storytelling, and hybrid events expand audience engagement, fostering deeper connections and new revenue streams. This synergy transforms experimental film into a collaborative, sustainable enterprise. Through its synthetic, systemic, and synergic dimensions, the Triple S framework highlights how experimental film not only survives but thrives within the contemporary creative economy.

Table 1: Comparative case study for the films Primer and Tarnation

Case Studies	Primer (2004) Cinematic Experiment and Profitability	Tarnation (2003) Personal Story, Global Impact
Details about the Film and Production	**"Primer"** is a science fiction film directed by ***Shane Carruth***, who also wrote the screenplay, produced, directed, and edited the film, as well as starred as one of the main characters. Made on a minimal budget of just **$7,000**, the film focuses on the accidental discovery of a primitive form of time travel by two engineers. Its dense storyline and complex narrative structure have earned it a reputation as a cult classic.	**"Tarnation"**, directed by ***Jonathan Caouette***, is an experimental documentary that explores the director's life and his complicated relationship with his mother, who suffered from severe mental illness. Created on an incredibly small budget of just **$218**, the film was edited using iMovie, an accessible editing software. The filmmaker used personal video footage, including VHS recordings and photographs.
Key Strategies for Success	1. Low production costs: - Filming took place in real and affordable locations, such as garages or friends' homes. - Shane Carruth, with a background in engineering, designed and built many of the devices featured in the film, significantly reducing expenses. 2. The film was screened at the ***Sundance Film Festival***, where it won the Grand Jury Prize. This award brought visibility and attracted the attention of distributors. 3. ***"Primer"*** was acquired by THINKFilm for distribution, being released in theaters and later on DVD. 4. Total earnings exceeded ***$500,000***, demonstrating that a minimal budget can generate significant profits when creativity is at the forefront.	1. Authentic and personal story – the film is deeply emotional and genuine, capturing the attention of audiences and critics with its honest and innovative approach. 2. ***"Tarnation"*** premiered at the ***Sundance Film Festival***, where it received critical acclaim and caught the attention of distributors. It was also featured at the ***Cannes Film Festival***, where it continued to gain international recognition. 3. The film was acquired by Wellspring Media for distribution. 4. Total earnings exceeded ***$1 million***, a remarkable achievement considering the extremely low budget.
Impact and Influence	***"Primer"*** remains an iconic example of independent filmmaking, praised for its scientific realism and challenging narrative approach. The film proved that success doesn't always rely on big budgets, but rather on innovative ideas and creative execution.	***"Tarnation"*** changed perceptions of what an experimental film can be. It is considered a milestone in using accessible technology to create compelling stories and stands as a successful example of blending personal narrative with technological innovation.

Source: Authors' own contribution to the research

In a film landscape dominated by mainstream productions with exorbitant budgets and aggressive marketing campaigns, experimental films may initially seem like an artistic niche with little economic potential. However, the application of the Triple S approach (Systemic, Synthetic, Synergic) shows that these productions can be profitable, sustainable, and culturally relevant. By exploring accessible technology, creative entrepreneurship, and alternative distribution, experimental films not only survive—they thrive.

The examples of *"Primer"* (2004) and *"Tarnation"* (2003) illustrate this reality, demonstrating that success in experimental cinema is rooted in innovation and adaptability.

The Triple S model applies to experimental film through three essential components:

- *Technology* – The democratization of digital technologies enables film production with limited resources. Smartphones, DSLR cameras, and editing software like iMovie provide unprecedented accessibility. In the case of *"Tarnation",* Jonathan Caouette used iMovie to edit a deeply personal documentary, spending only $218. This accessible technology transformed an intimate story into an internationally recognized artistic product.
- *Entrepreneurship* – Experimental filmmaking often requires creators to take on multiple roles—directors become producers, editors, and even marketing specialists. Shane Carruth, the creator of *"Primer,"* used his engineering knowledge to cut production costs by designing the film's props. Moreover, both films gained visibility through festivals like Sundance, where artistic recognition led to commercial distribution.
- *Experimental Film* – The innovative nature of experimental film attracts a niche audience through festivals and online platforms. Unlike traditional films, these productions don't compete on commercial grounds but offer a unique artistic experience. Both *"Primer"* and *"Tarnation"* were praised for their distinctive approaches, becoming cultural landmarks in independent cinema.

By adopting the Triple S approach, experimental film can overcome traditional financial barriers. The analyzed case studies show that technological democratization and alternative funding models are key elements of success.

Although challenges remain significant, the cultural value and economic potential of experimental cinema confirm its sustainability in the contemporary landscape.

3. Conclusions and Perspectives

The triadic model Technology–Entrepreneurship–Experimental Film demonstrates that experimental cinema can be profitable when approached with an entrepreneurial vision.

Although experimental films are not as profitable as mainstream productions, they offer unique opportunities for entrepreneurship and artistic innovation. By adapting distribution and marketing strategies and tapping into new markets, experimental cinema can become a profitable niche, sustained by creators' passion and the growing public interest in authentic and unconventional art forms.

Digital platforms and accessible technologies represent key opportunities, and the cultural value of these productions justifies their support.

This work paves the way for future research into the integration of triadic elements and the development of sustainable strategies for experimental filmmakers.

Despite common perceptions, experimental film can be profitable when approached with an entrepreneurial mindset. Leveraging accessible technology and digital platforms, along with artistic innovation, can transform experimental films from niche products into economic opportunities.

The triadic model *Technology–Entrepreneurship–Experimental Film* offers a new perspective on this subgenre, demonstrating that financial success and artistic expression are not incompatible concepts.

While financial challenges remain significant, experimental film is not a lost cause. By exploiting the triad of *Technology–Entrepreneurship–Experimental Film*, directors can turn these projects into sustainable initiatives. With proper funding and distribution strategies, experimental cinema can overcome the stereotype of unprofitability and become a profitable part of the global film industry.

The profitability of experimental cinema does not lie in replicating the mainstream model, but in harnessing alternative markets and its unique status within contemporary art. With a well-planned strategy, experimental films can not only generate revenue but also redefine the film industry both artistically and entrepreneurially. This niche, although modest, can become an example of a future where technology, art, and business converge.

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