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Response to Roundtable Session 2—A: "Failure"
Shawn Shimpach (University of Massachusetts—Amherst)
shimpach@comm.umass.edu

Failure *is* important. A significant and productive perspective is added to any consideration of the way things are when an accounting for the way things are not and the way things might have been (but failed to be) is incorporated. Looking at the sealed-over fissures, the abandoned avenues, the options that were shut down, and the possibilities that—for any number of reasons—were never attained—in other words, looking at failure—at a minimum places what *is* in a more contingent, more specifically conditional context. It allows us to consider the possibility of the otherwise and requires us to seek out specific conditions of possibility.

Moreover—and more specifically—in television, failure is overwhelmingly the most common outcome. In the U.S. somewhere around perhaps 80% or more of new prime-time television programs fail each year—in that they are not "renewed" for the next year. And that is a small number compared to the programs in various stages of production that fail ever to be aired. Most actors, directors, and producers in television fail to become regularly employed in those positions, much less wealthy and famous celebrities.

Yet even in approaching questions of failure—rather than ignoring or rejecting failure—we are taking up an evaluative stance toward television that has itself led to a kind of failure. By what criteria do we judge failure? If we judge failure by the industry criteria employed by networks, channels, and advertisers, we look for not enough accumulated ratings points, too-short runs, and too-high finances. Is a program a failure when ratings and demographics merit its removal from the programming schedule? In primetime commercial television, this in turn leads to a failure of deficit financing with the production company now unable to recoup costs through syndication. While certainly fascinating to some of us, as cultural and media scholars, why should *these* questions resulting from the industry's own ratings and financial calculus form the basis of *our* inquiries?

If we judge instead by (the lack of, or wrong kind of) social, political, and artistic merit, we might look for failure in programs that lack motivated and/or subversive characterizations, complex and sophisticated narratives, or even carefully-considered production designs. But by any of these criteria, across a 500 channel, 24-hour television schedule, *most* television consists of failure.

So what of the programming that simply fails to register on the popular and critical radar? It certainly does not go unproduced, unwatched, unenjoyed,

perhaps not even unloved. It forms the majority of programming and the backbone of the industry. These are everyday television programs, exceptional neither in their prestige nor in their banality. Even if such programming fails politically or aesthetically at the level of the individual text by some criteria, as part of a larger programming strategy such programs may prove to be complex cultural objects, embodying contradictory discourses and multiple resonances as they travel to different viewing contexts, while charged with the task of fitting in and making as much sense textually and semiotically as the programming preceding and following them on each schedule. At the same time, they are often what we mean by "TV" when we say we're going to go watch some TV, rather than a particular program (which is in any case more likely on the DVR, DVD or internet). These are, instead, the shows you may occasionally notice are on—perhaps while otherwise engaged—but cannot figure out who would be watching.

Such programs (perhaps reasonably priced and reasonably entertaining) fill the programming gaps exposed by the rapid expansion of a multi-channel universe of cable, satellite, and digital distribution, marking the space between "hit" programs and critical darlings. Such programming tends to remain the overlooked everyday of television schedules, falling under the radar of cultural arbiters, rather than the exceptional object of either aggrandizing or disparaging discourse, but nevertheless comprising the bulk of television scheduling. These shows fail to register. But one might argue that this very uncommented-upon everydayness of such programs makes their production, circulation, and reception so intriguing and important to understand. How is it that they constitute the everyday of television? What does it mean that they fail to register beyond that? On everyday television schedules, it is not always the must-see programming nor the spectacular failure that has the most to reveal about audiences, viewing practices, textual signification, or even the geopolitical economic relations important to the circulation and meaning of cultural production.

In focusing on what's best (or very worst) about television, what's remarkable and extraordinary, television studies too often ignores the banal, plain, and predictable; the simply ordinary; the reliably regular. It often ignores, in other words, most television. And that is also a failure.