

Failure defines television. Most programs, TV workers, and policy goals fail. Yet, we don't study failure, we study success. Because we look at stars, successful programming, powerful executives, or the ruling ideas in broadcasting, success has become concomitant to cultural importance. Failure seems culturally irrelevant. What can we learn from failure? How is failure naturalized in programming, employment, and policy initiatives? What of reality TV's losers, celebrity meltdown, and beloved shows that get canceled? Is failure part of "successful" programming?

Response

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Consider the following post, taken from the blog of current Big Brother cast member Dan:

Regarding the actual game of Big Brother, it has been a lot tougher than even I imagined. I came in this house trying to play as hard as I can [sic] right from the start and I found someone with a similar mindset in Brian. When Brian was evicted it changed the entire game for me and I realized I had to shift gears to play the "weak player" strategy. I've had to throw A LOT of competitions to get to where I am now and being a competitive person it was a very difficult thing for me to do. I'm not a huge fan of losing so to intentionally lose is a lot harder than it may seem. But make no mistake about it, with every competition I have thrown (I like to call it the Art of the Throw) I have had SO MUCH fun doing so. Anytime I would throw a competition I would try to "one-up" or do a more convincing job of each throw, and whether I fooled anyone or not, I hope you all got a kick out of it!

This is followed, in the same post, by:

I may take some flak for things I have done in this game because I am a Catholic School Teacher, but I would just like to say that I take my job and responsibility as a teacher VERY seriously. It is my passion in life and I hope that the students that I have taught and players that I have coached have not lost any respect for me or look at me in a negative light, because no amount of money in the world is worth that happening. If I could deliver a message to the Men of St. Mary's it would be: Keep the faith in God even in the most crazy situations, trust Him for guidance, and play as hard as you can within the confines of the rules of the game!

Dan's posting is emblematic of a collapsing of categories in reality television. Success and failure, pride and shame, reality and fantasy are all amounting to largely the same thing: being shown. Perhaps it could be boiled down to an argument of form versus content: regardless of the content

(that is, regardless of one's performance – an increasingly complex and therefore profound descriptor), what is of paramount importance is the form of performance. Success and failure were once opposites, but no longer.

Shame is spectacle. There is a collective naming of the witch, as it were, the branding of the scarlet letter, which has existed for centuries as a part of social life (at least in the West). Part of this tendency can be chalked up to the close correlation between shame and blame. If we can name the perpetrator, we can shame him and blame him. We are then free of the evil he has brought upon us. We have purged. And “we” is crucial here. Shaming has never been anything other than a social event, an ostracism, an exculpation. There is no shame without an audience, be it real or imagined.

Shame is failure made collective: recognized, smelled, tasted and then spat back with a grimace upon the individual. ‘Your failure,’ the collective states, ‘is our failure. We must own that. But you must feel shame. You must feel your failure as personal so that we, the collective, may feel our success in concert with one another once again. We are responsible for you, but your responsibility for yourself is greater. And you have failed in that responsibility. You are shamed.’

So public failure begets public shame. Of course, one could succeed publicly and feel shame privately (as Dan may or may not), based on the means employed in pursuit of that success. But private shame is only public shame internalized. It responds to that imagined audience, that corporeal and emotional adoption of the public opinion we call by the name of conscience. But where are we now? If we take so-called “reality” television as our object of analysis and extrapolate from there, we see the collapsing of clear and rigid categories of success and failure, right and wrong, pride and shame. Few popular texts celebrate duplicity like *Big Brother*, a public display of personal manipulation so profound as to malign and deform the very concept of success altogether. The winner of *Big Brother* (much like, although perhaps to a lesser degree, the winner of *Survivor*) is the champion manipulator. In another context, she would be the most shamed, the loser.