

Failure and the price of success in television

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In his essay “The Catastrophe of Success,” Tennessee Williams describes the creative and critical paralysis that follows from popularity as worse than failure: as the playwright understood it, success inaugurates artistic death. At a parallel career moment, Bob Dylan reflected on his celebrity with a song about quiet dissent from conventional understandings of failure and success, describing a lover who—unlike his critics—“knows there’s no success like failure, and failure’s no success at all.” Pessimistic artists are expected in most media; we are familiar with disgruntled authors and musicians resentful of commercial reward. Are preventative gestures of self-sabotage and critical reflection on the price of success possible in the form of television? Can television texts convey the appeal of failure or present failure as a political act? Can they do so and counter the masculinist discourse on irony (not camp) that characterizes the question? If rejecting success has been an impossibility for the industrially produced television of the broadcast and cable eras, an ambivalent failure-success dynamic may remain antithetical to the TV text even in an era of auteur-style web series. This conceptual limitation reproduces television hegemony across the medium’s social and technological reconfiguration. How can TV studies intervene?

Explaining the importance of failure requires strategies for understanding the productive effects of censorship in the creation, reception, and criticism of corporate TV; network success usually entails assimilation and failure follows from market definition. The success of network and cable shows can be thought of as a series of defeats involving standardized compromise in casting, content, and target audience. We take what “airs” as our object, when consumers also buy these concessions. Attention to failure calls for a reassessment of what counts as television—in the contemporary field of culture and in the archive. Why not focus on taped pilots instead of programmed shows? What bias arises from the corporate control of rejected series proposals, nixed episodes, first draft dialogue, and script revisions? Is there a way to consider racist and homophobic memos from network higher-ups and the residue of source material from suppressed adaptations “television” in their indexing of radical antipathy to the dichotomous construction of failure/success? Television studies has indeed been blindingly preoccupied by success and yet profoundly about failure. It is important to imagine television pursuing obscurity so we do not forsake TV’s minority cultures for their failure to register as successes in the historical record.

Consider a series whose six three-minute episodes (free online), overlap gay vernacular and children’s cartoons through the same video game aesthetics and blank affect used by experimental videomakers Shana Moulton and Michael Robinson, but in a mode of absurdity branded by the easily canonized Adult Swim imprint of the Cartoon Network. Originally exhibited on MySpace and programmed by Channel101.com in spring/summer 2007, *Planet Unicorn* [<http://www.planetunicorn.tv/>] received passing mention in venues like *Time Out*, *New York Magazine*, and National Public Radio, and is affiliated with Tyler Spiers, an internet-based TV producer with 6,000 subscribers to his personal YouTube channel and publicity on several web stations (not to mention enough response to his *Cleveland’s Next Top Model* parody to warrant a “Where Are They Now?” special) but no apparent Hollywood film comedy crossover potential in the manner of a Sasha Baron Cohen. Critical review beyond the short-lived buzz of culture weeklies and blog plugs is required to convey artistic ambition (as opposed to web celebrity), a privilege denied to late-night cable and internet television until it amasses secondary attention such as that granted the *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* series in the *Flow* and *In Media Res* forums. Now that *Planet Unicorn* is on record, must we side it with either “smart” television texts or a femme aesthetic?

How appropriate *Planet Unicorn*'s exception from the failure-success dynamic is given the historic disposability of an historically "viral" queer culture. Rather than a smash hit or a flop, it is a catchy theme song, a web shout-out from Viacom's LGBT cable channel LoGo, American Apparel character T-shirts and the knowledge that, even in the thick of a gay pride programming niche, choice YouTube viewers will call a kid equipped with a fur coat, a flying car, and a diverse band of unicorn friends named Cadillac, Feathers, and Tom Cruise "too gay." In light of discussions at Flow 2006 about the appearance of an old-fashioned gender divide in a discipline with feminist origins, where does an animated series like *Planet Unicorn* fit in the meeting of new media technology, avant-garde television, and the insidious alliance of gender differentiated texts, producers, critics, and taste formations? If this is the field of TV studies, is the program a success, a failure, or just more evidence that "there's no success like failure, and failure's no success at all"?

