

Position Paper for Failure Roundtable

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Yes, failure defines television. But the organizing question of this roundtable presumes that we don't study failure, we only study success. I would argue, however, it's actually the other way around, that we don't study success. Scholars and critics seem most besotted with ratings disappointments: shows such as *My So-Called Life*, *Freaks and Geeks*, *Firefly*, *Arrested Development*, and *Friday Night Lights*. True, people endlessly dissect wildly popular shows such as *Seinfeld*, but where are the exegeses of the nearly-as-popular-but-not-so-acclaimed *Everybody Loves Raymonds* and *According to Jims*? I would suggest that we don't look at stars, successful programming, powerful executives, or the ruling ideas in broadcasting as much as we think we do; rather, we fixate on those shows we watch, even if we're the only ones watching them.

According to Nielsen, the top broadcast TV programs for the week of August 25, 2008 were *Deal or No Deal*, *America's Got Talent*, *Two and Half Men*, *60 Minutes*, *NCIS*, *America's Toughest Jobs*, *Criminal Minds*, *House*, and the Democratic National Convention. When I see a list like this – or when I hear, say, that they made 200 episodes of *That '70s Show* – the reaction I have is similar to Pauline Kael's when she heard Richard Nixon was re-elected in 1972: "How could this be? I don't know anyone who watches most of these shows." Indeed, if you only went by what journalists, bloggers, and cultural critics talk about, you might think the only shows on TV are *The Wire*, *Lost*, *Friday Night Lights*, *Project Runway*, *Deadwood*, *30 Rock*, *The Daily Show*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Sopranos*, *Arrested Development*, *South Park*, *Veronica Mars*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Colbert Report*, *Mad Men*, and *The West Wing*.

Now, it is not as if no one watches the latter list of shows (they do), or that no one writes about the former list of shows (they do), but increasingly it seems like there are two types of shows: commercial successes yet critical failures and critical successes yet commercial failures, and that the gap between the two has never been greater. In the 1970s, for instance, *All in the Family* was both the most popular and most critically acclaimed show on TV. I'm amazed, moreover, by the degree to which the commercial successes yet critical failures have been ignored in televisual discourse in favor of shows

that – let’s be honest – comparatively few people watch.

Of course, one might argue that this is what critics should be doing, that part of their job entails calling people’s attention to brilliant shows nobody’s watching, or that it’s the duty of fans to save the shows they love from cancellation. Yet I can’t help but wonder if we’re paying too little attention to the things people are actually watching?

This divide has resulted in a strange state of affairs: the most culturally important and relevant shows aren’t always the ones the greatest number of people are watching, but the ones scholars, critics, and fans have deemed the most culturally important and relevant. Furthermore, this divide only seems to be growing more pronounced as commercial failures find new life among the in-crowd on DVD. Recall, for instance, that *Twin Peaks* – generally regarded as one of the most original shows ever made, not to mention a precursor to shows like *The X-Files* and *Lost* – was a ratings disappointment. Many more people have seen *Twin Peaks* on home video than people who watched it on ABC in the early 1990s. In other words, as a television show, *Twin Peaks* was a failure; as a DVD box set, however, it has been a success. Similar examples abound.

Paradoxically, then, we might say that the shows we think of as being the biggest successes are often the biggest failures, and the shows we think of as being the biggest failures are often the biggest successes. It just depends on whether you’re talking about commercial or critical success – it’s never been more important to make a distinction between the two. There are television shows, of course, that are both commercial and critical successes (the aforementioned *Seinfeld* comes to mind), but such shows increasingly seem like the exception, not the rule.

In my view, the most important question isn’t “What can we learn from failure?” but “What can we learn from success?” When it comes to TV, sometimes nothing succeeds, critically-speaking at least, like failure. But to the extent that we’ve rechristened failures successes by deeming commercial failures critical successes, perhaps we’ve failed to thoroughly examine the shows that actually succeed on television. The truth about what people are really watching, I suspect, might be too tough for some cultural watchers and worriers to bear.