

Heather Osborne-Thompson

Flow 2008 Response Paper

“More Failure” Roundtable

Central Questions

“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

Failure plays a critical role in feminist television studies, despite a temptation to think of failed programs as akin to the theoretical tree that falls in the forest without a witness. In other words, whenever we study women in television, we are constantly confronted with the question of how to interpret failure because we are often looking for evidence of women’s significance in television history where it does not seem to exist. One fruitful approach to this problem has been to argue that there is plenty of evidence of women working in television, but that many of their achievements have gone unrecognized because of biases about the kinds of programs they were involved in or the kinds of jobs they performed in the production of those programs. But in addition to those examples, there are countless others that are distinguished by the fact that they did not succeed. Are those attempts culturally relevant? To put it another way, if we come across a television program made by, for or about women that deviates from the norm in an interesting way but is axed shortly after it airs or perhaps never even makes it to air, can we say that it makes a “sound” worthy of scholarly attention? And when we answer that question in the affirmative, are we simply inventing a kind of a celebratory, but indulgent history that ignores the *real* power relations in television production and spectatorship at a given time?

This dilemma is familiar to television scholars in general, of course, but it seems particularly relevant at a time when the issue of the lack of women behind/in front of the camera in American television is balanced by the recent success of several programs/program environments created by women that *depend* on the notion of women as failures. Typically, this version of failure centers on women’s inability to “measure up”—as professionals, wives or mothers, or as “good” feminists. Examples would include such comedy-reality series, such as *The Cho Show* and *Kathy Griffin: My Life on the D List* that use the confessional mode to document their stars’ failure in Hollywood/television, as well as networks whose brand identity is explicitly associated with

women “behaving badly,” such as *Oxygen!* Often, these “successes” in women’s TV rely on comedic versions of female unruliness, but others, such as *The Lipstick Jungle* or *Snapped!*, are melodramatic or tabloid-y in their representations of women who defy societal expectations.

Perhaps most importantly for my purposes, though, they offer another way of thinking about the history of women in television, which, as I have pointed out, is rife with examples of unpopular attempts at offering “different” images of women than the ones we have come to accept as “typical.” Admittedly, some of these attempts—the 1966 sitcom *The Pruitts of Southampton* in which Phyllis Diller sought to insert her eccentric female stand-up persona into a narrative about an eccentric and suddenly bankrupt widow of a wealthy Long Island man is one—are painful to watch. But for all the ways they fail as saleable narratives, their emphasis on unorthodox femininity links them to the current incarnation of “women’s television” referred to above, which explicitly promotes failure as a uniquely feminine mode of TV performance, narrative, and brand identity. It’s arguable that this situation is made possible by a more flexible post-network TV landscape that was not available to earlier generations of women; nonetheless, its roots can be detected in those generations’ failures and can provide a continuity that often does not seem to exist in women’s TV history. They also suggest some useful ways for thinking about more recent programs that were highly anticipated but cancelled for low ratings, such as the remake of *The Bionic Woman* and *The Comeback*, both of which feature female protagonists coming to grips (or not) with failure.

In short, when we imagine failure to be “culturally irrelevant,” we ignore the significant industrial, theoretical, and narrative roles that failure has played in television made by, for or about women.