

Ethan Thompson
Response to Failure

While one obvious question to consider on this panel is what constitutes failure vs. success, *John from Cincinnati* probably would meet any criteria for failure we could come up with. Personally, it was the greatest disappointment in television I have ever suffered. A program from David Milch, the creator of *Deadwood*, my Favorite Show Ever, about surfing, an obsessive part of my life since I was 12. Instead, it was a commercial and artistic disaster.

But the point here is the big picture of how questioning failure might be productive in TV studies. One thing that strikes me is how failure may force us to reconsider artistic “intent” — freedom from which I was quick to celebrate after my first grad school theory class. Consideration of failure is more clearly predicated on intent—the worth of the final product isn’t self-evident, so you have to show why it’s necessary to bother looking at the thing at all. What were the creators of a program, trying to do, and what went wrong?

When we study success, we can assume that things went right one way or another, and we can study them as they are. How did this successfully connect with an audience? What does this show about the future strategies of the industry or trends in taste? Studying success reaffirms our emphasis of the power of the audience as ultimate judge. When programs fail, we need to look to what they tried to do, and how they missed.

In the case of *John from Cincinnati*, David Milch’s status as TV auteur and HBO’s quality programming strategies means we assume that the program is created to appeal to a select audience, and will employ both style and content thoughtfully to “mean” something. We are more likely to work to make sense of the narrative content, to take for granted that sincere effort went into crafting it.

The closest *John from Cincinnati* came to success was its attempt to be true to authentic surf culture. Not only did the show feature a surfing family (the Yosts), but Milch worked (and wrote) with Kem Nunn, author of several well-received surfing-oriented novels. The series hired Steve Hawk, former editor of *Surfer* magazine and brother of skateboard god Tony, as a consultant; Hawk wrote two episodes as well. In another nod to authenticity, the non-actor Greyson Fletcher was hired to play the grandson at the center of the show’s mysterious resurrection. Fletcher’s real family is a surf culture institution and an obvious model for the Yost family. Unfortunately, the teenage Greyson was a horrible, horrible actor and any scene with him—while central both to the show’s authenticity and its narrative arc—was painful to watch. On the other end of the spectrum, the opening sequences of the show, which featured old surfing and skating footage, was a triumph of evoking authentic surf culture as both a narrative element and signifier of quality TV.

John from Cincinnati was also a promotional failure. The program had an extensive online presence, but failed to build an audience beyond the HBO subscriber core. There was a web site for the non-existent surf company Luke Perry’s character owned, Stinkweed, and YouTube featured clips by Meyer Dickstein (founder and president of Imperial Beach Surfing Attorneys Association), PSAs by Mitch Yost, and “Sponsor Me” surf videos by Shaun. This overflow

works to blur the line between program and reality and further claim authenticity. They are also fun to watch because they suggest some directions the program might have taken, but couldn't. There are some speculative pleasures there, but mostly they point to the promotional limitations of overflow.

While I began by considering aesthetic failure, I think studying failure for its industrial ramifications may be a clearer imperative. I fear that in terms of its collateral damage, *John from Cincinnati* may prove analogous to *Heaven's Gate*. While the debacle of that film helped kill the auteur era of 70s American cinema, Milch's series may have ended the power of the TV auteur, at HBO, at least. *John* was a highly idiosyncratic program that was allowed great license because of Milch's auteur status. I don't think that's the case with subsequent HBO series--Milch himself has been forced to return to a format closer to his proven track record, producing another New York cop show, *Last of the Nine*, which is set in the early 1970s, and filled with corruption, and, one can assume, plenty of "grit."

Still, the opening of *John from Cincinnati* with its vintage footage and scenes of southern California surf and skate culture, still gives me chills--not for what it was, but what it failed to be.

John from Cincinnati Opening Credits

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrWZlh7DnBE>

Surfside Realty Commercial

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYyQ0hul2GU>

PSA with Mitch Yost

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFQEe0K4q2A>

Sponsor Me Shaun Yost

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1kkOMqjl2o>