

## Failure

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I began thinking about this panel topic while reflecting on teaching undergraduates who want to be part of the television world. Perhaps you have the same experience; perhaps you, like me, have felt uneasy about the need to validate this desire of our students. I knew that most would never be able to be part of television, that the cultures around television are extremely tough to break without the proper social capital. Though I have always known this, I have never been able to tell any of my students the full reality. Instead I have answered to their request for advice or validation by grimacing and seriously stating “It is a hard industry to get into”. Performing proper care and gravity, I have mentioned that it is not only about merit, but also about luck. Like a parent trying to protect our idealistic kid who wants to do art, I have lied to them and, in the process, I have allowed them to bid in losing propositions and sent them out to fail. Yes, some will work in the industry, but most of them will fail or be abused by the tv industry.

My biggest fear is that in our effort to come together and constitute an academic discipline, we have developed an academic culture that re-constitutes, with distinctly sophisticated language, the social worth and value of our object of study; a bit like literature has done in the past; a bit like political theory and philosophy have also done. So, I ask, to which extent is our commitment to television a commitment to what is *on* television? For me, the thing that feeds my fear the most is our seeming endless commitment to speaking only, to theorizing only, to studying only, the televisual field by reference to those texts, peoples, and things that succeed in television. As importantly, I fear that there is a direct correlation between televisual success and academic interest. I know it’s not a direct correlation, as Matt points out; academics also tend to study their taste and will more likely write about *Buffy* than about *Everybody Loves Raymond*. That said, both shows were relatively successful either with the critics or with audiences. But what happens to people, texts, or efforts that fail to make it to television? Aren’t they negatively defining the televisual field, much in the way that the shadow gives shape to light?

I recognize that I may simply be a bit paranoid. After all, what is wrong with this way of defining the field? Shouldn’t the field be defined positively, by what happens *in* the field? Perhaps so, but I have several ideas that problematize an easy answer to these questions:

- Positively defining the field naturalizes the notion that television studies should be carried on in a top-down basis: at the top are the people who get to participate, organize, and influence the field. The bottom becomes part of our studies only as a phantasmagoric effect of the actual television structure. Our studies of audiences or symptomatic studies are the best examples of approaches that look at what lies below and yet, they are always inspired by successful programming, techniques, ideological textualizations, or genres.
- Positively defining the televisual structure actually limits our understanding of the televisual structure. Although we know, by heart, that the discourses that validate the

existence of programming (and employment, regulation, and so on) are the same racist, sexist, homophobic, classist, and ethnocentric discourses that validate injustice, our commitment to positively defining the televisual field makes it epistemologically confusing to try to map the field negatively. That is, though we all know that discriminatory discourses dictate who gets to participate in television (and who brings the what and the how and the why), by positively defining the field we lose sight of the negative structure that gives shape to television. We have glimpses of sexism, ethnocentrism, and the like, but we cannot fathom the structure. We have not thought enough about structures of absence as important and fundamental ways of thinking about television. Instead, we prioritize structures of presence or positive definitions.

- Unsurprisingly, we are slow at recognizing that the field itself is epistemologically ill-equipped to entertain the scholarship and questions of those defined by absence and failure. Unsurprisingly, we still perceive queer, feminist, postcolonial, Marxist, and critical race scholarship as niche work. Each comes to light as a niche only if we define the televisual in relationship to structures of presence. The structural absence of the laborer, of the poor, of the women, of the gay, of the brown, and of the non-English speaking, to name a few, become isolated and isolatable phenomena, best illuminated through reference to the particular node of the structure that they cannot occupy, namely writer, hero, producer, or audience. But, I ask, is there a structure to their absence?
- My last point is that there is a possibility that the structural absences I am referring to are not simply organized by the traditionally defined televisual field. Much in the way we can now imagine a televisual structure (composed of people, narratives, cultures of production, modes of reception, technological modalities and so on) that follows strict rules of participation, a grammar if you wish, we may find it productive to think that the absences themselves form structures with their own grammar and rules. This grammar, I venture to say, will have a lot to say about the structural and structuring possibilities of those below, their constituting discourses and social practices, and their weak articulations to the televisual.