

“#IHateThisShow!”: Anti-Fandom in the Digital Age

In sports fandom, “hate” is a given; it’s part of the overall experience for sports fans to revel in the failure of their enemies, and to cheerfully insult any friends who are rooting for the opposition. But does this kind of hate-as-entertainment have a place in the world of the arts—in television fandom in particular? Is there something to be gained from watching certain shows just to make fun of them, and from publicly disparaging anyone who might stand up for those shows?

Here’s one argument in favor of defaulting to negativity: Love is meaningless without hate. We define what we’re for by declaring what we’re against. When we’re stingy with praise, and then strongly approve of something, our recommendation has more weight. But more importantly, even if a viewer is watching a TV show with mockery expressly in mind—as opposed to offering real, incisive criticism—there’s some value to the effort. There’s no such thing as a “wrong” way to enjoy art, and no such thing as a “guilty pleasure.” Pleasure is pleasure, even when steeped in *schadenfreude*. Besides, with the wider TV-watching community that social media allows, some “hate-watchers” become more entertaining than the shows they skewer, and incidentally raise valuable questions about what does or doesn’t constitute creative incompetence.

The problem though is that even the worst shows usually have some redeeming element or two that keep them from being completely worthless—even if it’s just the sheer misguided gumption of the creators. It’s not easy to get a TV series made, and those who get the job done—however shoddily—deserve some measure of respect. Case-in-point: *Smash*, a highly hate-able show, but one that also in its first season made some daring creative choices, worthy of more sincere critical consideration than they received from the legions who were making cutting comments about *Smash* on Twitter. “Hate-watching” at times goes beyond the “isn’t it fun to kid the inept” impulse—beyond the relatively benign, even somewhat loving *Mystery Science Theater 3000* approach to making fun of the terrible—and into the realm of outright sneering. It becomes a knee-jerk rejection of *everything* a piece of entertainment might have to offer. Just as in politics some judge what a politician says based on whether there’s an “R” or a “D” next to his or her name, so *Smash* could conceivably deliver an outstanding episode full of great performances, sparkling dialogue, and heartrending songs, and certain viewers would never notice because the only reason they tuned in was to rip it apart.

Of course, hate too is a form of expression, and if viewers are making an effort to be open to what an artist is trying to say, then perhaps they should also be more open to the haters. But all things being equal, there's always going to be more to be gained from reading intelligent, impassioned defenses of an outré show than reading a "takedown" of anything—if only because the reader is more likely to learn something, rather than having his or her biases confirmed. At times, the "hate-watch" trend feels like a byproduct of the need in our culture for everything to be "the best" or "the worst," with no room for "lousy story but terrific lead performance," or really *any* degrees of good and bad. And in our preference for all or nothing—and our tendency to push everything into the slot we've already assigned it to in our heads—we sometimes miss what we're actually seeing and hearing.