

Creating a Canon or Articulating Archives: Some Thoughts on Televisual Hierarchy and Access

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The televisual canon fostered by its rerun economy has been rather different from literary or cinematic canons partly because the processes and politics of canon formation have flowed through different circuits of power and authority. Less the product of critical or scholarly acclamation than a byproduct of commercial practices and distribution culture and separate preservationist efforts by fans and collectors, the televisual canon has consistently been shaped by uncertain access to informal archives. Certainly, critics and scholars have played a role in making “Chuckles Bites the Dust” or “Betty, Girl Engineer” canonical episodes or in hailing various programs as quality television, but literacy in a televisual canon has depended more heavily on the calculations and guesses of distributors. As those calculations and guesses have been reconfigured into algorithms that promise an individually tailored yet ephemeral archive, we cannot look to streaming services as providing a canon but rather a catalog with changing stock. While this presents challenges for pedagogy, it also creates opportunities to examine how these services promote an asymmetric circulation of cultural currency that has both continuities and divergences from the hierarchical systems of taste that undergirded the canon of old.

I would argue that we should strive to be aware that canon formation is always bound up with the phenomenon that Michel Foucault deemed *reversal*, in which production and repression are the two sides of the same stroke of discursive power, in which to affirm one shared understanding of television and its past is to silence others. The rerun canon foregrounded situation comedies, highly episodic series, and programs with kid-appeal in ways that obscured large swaths of television’s past that are only recently being rediscovered. To name just two examples from primetime, the variety specials of the 1960s and ‘70s and ABC’s proto- and full-fledged serials *The Fugitive* and *Peyton Place* were largely excluded from this canon despite their industrial and cultural significance and far-reaching influences on televisual form. That said, pedagogically I found a great deal of value in a shared corpus of texts and cultural touchstones that I often miss in the streaming era. And to the extent that television broadcasting provided a “Cultural Forum,” there was real value in at least the aspiration of ritual, communal contemplation.

Nevertheless, the rerun canon was a fairly fragile and shallow archive built on sand. We should not be surprised that, as television has been reconfigured to fit a neoliberal vision through an ever-increasing emphasis on demographics and choice, our sense of a shared televisual experience is eroding. Moreover, we should also recognize that the challenges we television scholars now face as educators have (or should have) bedeviled our colleagues in other disciplines for quite some time, so one helpful step

might be initiating conversations with people who might help us avoid or at least mitigate the limitations of the Norton Anthology approach to canon formation.

We should also not be blind to the salutary characteristics of the current streaming platforms. Netflix and Hulu alongside non-pay sites arguably provide greater exposure to content from around the globe and the ability to scrutinize and review programs watched in an initially casual fashion, i.e. to subject the text to closer scrutiny. While this latter benefit lacks the same level of precise control facilitated by a VCR, DVD, or MP4 saved to one's hard drive, in my experience, the access enabled by streaming, whether through a commercial site or the library, at least allows for the expectation of close reading. The commercial sites also often permit students to access full runs of programs they have sampled in class, as happened with one of my students who decided to watch all of *Cheers* on Netflix after watching an episode in my TV Genres class. That's good as far as it goes, but she currently cannot use that subscription to go further back to watch *M*A*S*H* or forward for *Northern Exposure* (to pick one branch of the tree of textual influence), nor can she see that *Living Single* established paradigmatic patterns that preceded current Netflix staple *Friends*.

These limitations bring us back to the fraught relationship between the canon and the archive that has haunted my response. One approach to assembling a canon is to make it compact enough that it can be relatively easily and inexpensively accessed, but, whether bug or feature, exclusion will be a product of such a process. In the alternative, we might better invest our energies in building a deep, broad, and accessible television archive, in re-imagining what a televisual library could or should look like, in considering how preservation intersects with and interrupts our stifling intellectual property laws. Then, if as scholars we feel the continuing need for a canon, we can build it in concert with the archive.