

Syndication, Box Sets, & Streaming: Forming the Television Canon

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As we consider the ways in which streaming services fit in to the canon-forming practices undertaken by designated channels, time blocks, and box sets, I am interested in the effects of these services' categorizing mechanisms and browsing logics on the functional meaning of "classic" television. Compared to older formats for delivering "classic" TV, streaming services ostensibly offer viewers greater choice, both in quantity of available content and in number of customizable features to filter that content. Those promises of increased choice and customization have rightly been stripped of their user-oriented facades by journalists and scholars who examine these features in the context of Big Data and larger corporate strategies. Without going down the rabbit hole of Netflix's recommendation algorithm, which the company keeps quite close to the chest, I want to examine how these services categorize and organize "classic" television to see if we can draw any tentative conclusions regarding their participation in canon formation and the limits of their archival practices.

While time blocks and designated channels welcome viewers to tune in to a curated selection of "classic" television, streaming services distinguish "classic" content from their vast catalogs through generic classifications which vary from platform to platform. Netflix offers a "Classic & Cult TV" genre, curiously subdivided into "TV Comedies," "Trending Now," "TV Shows," and "Casual Viewing." These subcategories offer little customization, resulting in interesting side-by-side program listings, some that seem logical (*Twin Peaks*; *The Twilight Zone*), and some that seem to defy intentionality (*The Dick Van Dyke Show*; *Trailer Park Boys*). The genre offers no distinction between "Classic" and "Cult" television, so *Freaks and Geeks* resides in the same generic bucket as *The Andy Griffith Show*.

Hulu's "Classics" genre does not attempt to bridge the divide between sixties sitcoms and early-aughts cult favorites, perhaps because Hulu boasts a deeper roster of programming from previous decades, including *I Love Lucy*, *The Golden Girls*, *Brady Bunch*, and *Living Single*. The subcategories, like those on Netflix, do little to organize the programs into useful groups; "Popular in Classics," "Recently Added in Classics," and "Recommended in Classics" all offer the same titles, albeit in different arrangements. While the above-listed series embody an understanding of "classic" as popular programs from previous decades, certain anomalous titles trouble Hulu's adherence to this definition. Two BBC miniseries – *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) and *Emma* (2009) – take their place among Hulu's "Classics," suggesting that this genre also accommodates period dramas. *Pride and Prejudice* has perhaps attained "classic" status akin to that of Hulu's other offerings, but *Emma*, at less than a decade old, is not a relic of a bygone era that can be introduced to new generations of viewers.

These streaming services' "classics" genres and their rough subdivisions do not feel sufficiently coherent to serve as definitive archives of popular television from the past, and to expect them to do so in the post-network era may be foolhardy. On Amazon, "Classics" is not a genre, but rather a subgenre of "Comedy" and "Drama," minimizing its status as a meaningful, easily-discoverable category of television. Amazon's approach to grouping content may be more useful; perhaps *I Love Lucy* should be placed alongside *Parks and Recreation* rather than *The Twilight Zone*.

But these categories shape our understanding of "classic" television; the "Classics" shelf of DVD boxsets, the offerings on Nick at Nite and TVLand, and "Classics" genres on streaming services delimit what counts as "classic," both cult and canonical. Dismissing these categories as clumsy, impractical, and incongruous, as I have done with Netflix and Hulu's "Classics" genres, overlooks our reliance on these formats as effective archives of television's past. My childhood viewing of Nick at Nite led me to believe that "classic" TV meant *I Love Lucy* and *The Cosby Show*. Tuning in to Nick at Nite now might lead one to conceive of "classic" TV as *Friends* and *Spongebob Squarepants*. These various mechanisms for defining and delivering "classic" TV to new audiences are tasked with anointing a selection of programming from over seventy-five years of television history, which accounts for the unwieldy nature of "classics" categories. That task will become progressively difficult with the ever-burgeoning glut of content in the peak TV era, and we, as viewers and scholars, should approach these unwieldy archives with scrutiny while remaining mindful of how they shape contemporary notions of "classic" TV. At the same time, as we move more or less reluctantly into television's streaming-focused future, it would be prudent to pursue a more rigorous taxonomy of "classic" TV to improve upon streaming services' clunky browsing features.