

Steven Universe Critical

Downfall of Meaningful Critique

Steven Universe Critical was a fandom-movement originating on Tumblr and somewhat spilling into Youtube which revolved around criticizing and to an extent, nitpicking the titular show, Steven Universe and later Steven Universe Future. It came to prominence in early 2017 and while it largely died out, some of the same sentiments born out of SU critical still surround the show to this day.

Throughout this video essay, I don't want to pin-point the SU critical movement onto any one individual, largely because some of the people involved were minors at the time but also because the sentiment surrounding the show can't officially be pinned down to one person. I'd also like to keep them anonymous because I don't know whether or not they're okay with being associated with this movement anymore or if they just want to move on.

What I do want to point out is how a movement of pent-up frustrations on the part of very real and very hurt individuals, sparked a new and damning way of viewing media that we haven't quite recovered from. A kind of "critical culture" which is not to be confused with critical theory, but more along the lines of a social consciousness CinemaSins. To put it lightly, anything that can be interpreted in bad faith and seen as bad representation... Will be.

How It Started

Many people won't necessarily remember the original reception to the show and how it was generally regarded online but as someone who was already an adult when it aired, I can recall that it was extremely positive. A show which managed to be fun and enjoyable while also having complex themes and hints of LGBT representation (in the beginning it wasn't so overt) and a diverse cast, Steven Universe managed to hit the mark on what people really wanted in terms of animated TV especially for a teenage audience.

That's where we get into our first problem however. Steven Universe was aired on Cartoon Network which, while they've obviously had some wider audiences before and definitely had a fair number of shows that appealed to a teenage audience, is still a children's entertainment network. Some shows that skirt the audience line into more mature themes like Infinity Train, get canceled before they can really explore some of their own themes. Middle grade and YA as a market is thriving in publishing with books and graphic novels selling amazingly to that particular middle school and teenager demographic but animation doesn't exactly have an avenue for exploring things at that level so by necessity, you're going to have a few things that are either pared down or written out completely for the sake of maintaining what's called a "child entry point".

Regardless of that, Steven Universe did work very hard to not only be inclusive in its own way but also to be strikingly mature while maintaining a delicate balance and especially earlier seasons, didn't have a condescending tone or talk down to kids about emotional problems. This gave it a wide net for a large following/fandom and certain aspects of the show created authentic fan engagement such as fan creation of their own gems (gemsonas) and fan theories about bits and pieces of worldbuilding/lore that was centered around the past of the show. Like it or not, the show was beloved and people had a lot to say about it. Back in those days, criticism of the show was scarce and hard to find, I definitely saw it here and there but mostly on Youtube and from reviewers taking notice of subtle oddities in the animation, not so much the content of the show itself though.

I think this lack of critical reception started to annoy people a little bit when as the show went on, there started to be some problems and inconsistencies as new artists were brought on and the story developed. Some of the criticism people brought up was legitimate and predicated on the fact that this is a show primarily aimed at a child demographic. It's one thing to tell a story and it's another thing when you're a story on a major network for kids. At that point, and especially when the crew working on the show, adeptly named the Crewniverse, postured as though the show was about representation or at least that this was something they cared about a lot.

Criticisms

Like I said before, some of these criticisms were legitimate and as someone who was pretty active in the community and maintained a sideblog of my own where I, myself, critically analyzed the show, I can see where a good portion of it was coming from.

Certain characters getting shafted and the politics surrounding that, racial coding, mixed abuse metaphors, and a rocky production schedule seemed to all be understandable critique coming from a disgruntled portion of the fanbase. However, there was a lot of pushback for this kind of criticism, at least during 2016 and some parts of early 2017. At this point, 2 "factions" seemed to evolve, people called "SU stans" or people who felt that the criticism was unwarranted and "SU crits" who had dedicated blogs devoted to criticizing the show. I think that looking back, the hesitancy to critique in a meaningful way and a highly devoted fanbase that was so closely connected to the personal blogs and Twitters of their creators fueled a lot of SU crits resentment and in turn, resulted in the amount of harassment that some of the Crewniverse got.

When I was an SU crit, from what I remember of that time, people weren't overtly hostile until there was pushback and then everything seemed to ramp up. People were truly just separating their thoughts and feelings on a show that they felt promised them something and from which they were disappointed. I think that the environment prior, in which there was a sort of reverence towards the Crewniverse, was hostile to critique. There was also the fact that fans of the show were getting industry jobs based on their fanart, there was a sense that you too

could get on the show and maybe insert whatever you wanted onto it and be respected for your work in the same way. It was certainly the narrative spread around certain members of the Crewniverse, namely Jesse Zuke which resulted in a harassment campaign from SU crits. I think it would be lying of me to say that resentment around not getting hand-picked to be on the show from your awesome fanart wasn't fueling some people's resentment that they projected onto Zuke.

But what are the criticisms that I actually agree with?

- Some characters are racially coded, in particular Garnet as being black. I think it would be really hard to say that she doesn't look like a black woman and that being said, it's disappointing that sometimes she has to be tough for everyone or isn't able to address her own feelings. This may be good character-wise and story wise, but optically it sends a bad message to kids and if this were a show not aimed at kids or if there were more significant black characters this didn't happen to, then maybe it wouldn't be an issue.
- Some of the inconsistencies in the color design particularly in scenes where characters are in broad daylight are a bit jarring to look at. I think this is largely a production issue, but it was unpleasant if a nitpick.
- Aspects of the story aren't very satisfying from what's built up. The Pink Diamond reveal was interesting but at the same time, it was done in such a way that it felt like the Crewniverse was trying to obfuscate it instead of leaning into the reveal when it would make more sense.
- Pearl is an abusive character who gets forgiven by the narrative way too often for a kids show and it can be potentially triggering for kids of abusive parents that she doesn't really have to be accountable for much. I think it's a realistic portrayal of an abusive character, but the context is important too.
- Sometimes the way that the show utilizes its very complex subject matter is done in a way that's messy and mixes metaphors.
- There were also racially insensitive caricatures in the art book for the show, which doesn't have much to do with the show as a whole but it is relevant in the sense that it was production notes and the Crewniverse did apologize for it.

This being said, I don't think that all of that is worth the critique that it got as a show on its own.

SU is a very interesting show to dissect because while it is a Western show, it follows a more anime-inspired structure in the sense that there are overarching plots with some episodes being considered "filler". When it started out, it could be classified as a "monster of the day" which a lot of Western shows fall into as well but as it progressed, there was more of a focus on the idea of a space opera. It's kind of like if Scooby Doo gradually turned into Star Wars, while this is a fairly natural progression for anime, Western audiences could be confused by the change.

Typically anime is done on a weekly basis with new episodes coming out and being either aired on TV or being added to a streaming service like Crunchyroll that week. Some Western shows are like this too but it's normal for a Western show to go into hiatus to catch up with production deadlines. Because of the fact that SU was very inspired by anime it was kind of a shock to people when the first hiatus happened and I remember criticism of the show bubbling at that time which was back in July of 2014 even though people were largely understanding. It was clear people were rewatching old episodes and starting to put some pieces together not just for the story but also for things that didn't sit well with them.

At some point though, after the hiatus, SU returned with a particular advertising strategy that, I personally think, settled the show into a nightmare of production and storytelling flaws... The Stevenbomb.

The first Stevenbomb was a series of episodes that aired one after another throughout the weekday, so Monday through Friday would be all new episodes. In this though, the Stevenbomb focused on a mini arc of the show. The first one was so successful that they did it again and after CN presumably found out that it drew in a lot of viewership and *consistent* viewership, they continued this airing strategy for a lot of the series. Instead of weekly episodes (though there were still sometimes that weekly episodes would air), opting to air these mini arcs in Stevenbombs.

This is a problem both production-wise and storytelling-wise. So the first time that it was done, episodes that would have been airing weekly were moved around so as to make the plotline flow better and mark the introduction of the new season. This doesn't always work because for one, you're not always ending a season or an arc of the show and storywise, it means that everything is going to have to be condensed and neatly tied up if you're in the middle of an arc or at least lead to something big if it's at the end of an arc. To me, it doesn't give the characters a lot of room to breathe and in my opinion, one of the things that made SU such a good show were these subtle moments that let the characters breathe and feel. It can obviously be a good thing though, for high intensity moments that need decisive conclusions or that lead into something big for the series or characters as a whole I think it works really well. People on the SU crit side of things were critical of Stevenbombs probably for this reason though I will say that they were largely not knowledgeable of or refused to acknowledge the production problems on the other side of it.

There was a tendency to characterize the Crewniverse as irresponsible on the side of the SU crits. So any kind of sympathy about the production situation they were in and the need for hiatuses and keeping up with the constant demands for answers from fans, wasn't really a favorable position to take. It's important to remember that production and scheduling is up to CN and not the Crewniverse, that the way that things were being done was driven by a market first and foremost and some things are literally just out of their hands. SU crits were mostly animation fans and I didn't really see anyone that I either knew of or who I talked to that was even interested in animation production. There might have been some with a passing interest, but not anyone engaging with it as a job potential. So, there's a lot of stuff they'd assign

personal responsibility to the Crewniverse for which just wasn't their fault. There was also the tendency to blame board artists for color design decisions, blame the storyboarders for revisioner problems, blame the showrunner for storyboarding issues, and so on, completely confusing jobs and attributing blame where it never was in the first place by the nature of the jobs, it was kind of a mess. That stuff, even when I was interested in SU crit never sat right with me. I actually have friends either in industry animation or who were in the animation department of the school I went to and I've seen firsthand how difficult it is to produce these shows. Animation goes through several stages and as we've seen with New Deal For Animation that's been being talked about on Twitter, people on the Crewniverse couldn't have been treated particularly well while making the show.

Bad Faith

The reason that I think that the show has a lot of bad faith interpretations of it and inflammatory things said about the creator and Crewniverse who worked on it is because former fans with a vested personal interest in the characters, who felt slighted by some of the decisions. Whenever you have a show which has a reputation for being inclusive and about representation, there's a tendency for people to have a degree of projection. People see themselves in these characters and to an extent feel like what's done with the characters is a reflection on what the creators think of them and people like them. I think that to a certain degree, that's very natural for audiences to feel that way.

However, as we start to develop more meaningful ways of looking at media we start to see that just because a character looks like us, doesn't mean that they're a reflection of us and are in their own right a character to be utilized in a story. We have to do that because until we do, there's no effective way to tell stories about marginalized people with any nuance.

Like I said before, the environment in SU crit was hostile and every bad faith interpretation that could be had of the show, was had of the show. For instance, I had personally seen someone say that Ruby/Sapphire the ship that makes Garnet, was codependent and unhealthy. I saw people reading into the idea that Peridot is meant to be a canonically autistic character and therefore, certain promos for the show or her being kept on a leash was infantilizing her. I saw people say that Amethyst is Greg's abuser because she shapeshifted into Rose to make him uncomfortable in a particularly heated moment. You get the idea, basically. And I won't lie, people's matter of fact way of speaking about it, their concise language and appeal to emotion saying they've personally been through this or that to support their criticism... Really appealed to me and made me think maybe they're right. But I want to stress that a lot of these were over the top emotional reactions to a show which was just telling a story, sometimes in a messy and awkward way, prone to production and scheduling issues that made it a lot harder, but it wasn't ever intended to hurt anyone. Hell, even much of the racial undertones that people attached to it were, while inappropriate, through fantasy racism with no real world comparison. Regardless of that, people were harassed and Rebecca Sugar, a bisexual Jewish

person, was branded a Nazi sympathizer without any regard to how triggering and inappropriate that is.

To air out some more personal complaints about stuff that even I thought was ridiculous at the time, I'll say that Ruby and Sapphire got the first on screen kiss between a same gender couple and the first on screen wedding between them as well, Rebecca Sugar fought tooth and nail for this at the risk of her job and cancellation for the show. This was seen as not enough by SU crits at the time, they weren't even happy about it. It wasn't gay enough, they were unhealthy, it wasn't the right time in the story, whatever bullshit excuse to be mad about two lesbians getting married. This is the extent of how hostile of an environment it was, nothing is good enough.

When I went into making stories for myself based on nothing but my own interests and characters I thought were interesting, I struggled for a long time. Both my problems were with wanting it to be a good representation like SU and then after SU crit, not wanting it to be a bad representation like SU. I struggled more after SU crit because I started seeing the bad faith interpretations of my stories and themes, themes that felt personal to me and so any criticism of those would be hard to take. I finally found that I was more comfortable writing a story about a cis het white man (something completely outside my experience) who was already kind of bad on his own, so any bad faith interpretation wouldn't bother me too much.

Bad faith criticism limits the ability to tell stories about marginalized identities because the people who are acting in bad faith often have a double standard where they're a lot more harsh on media created by marginalized people and which has representation of them in it. I don't think we'd be in the kind of media landscape we're in now without the SU crit movement that normalized being harsh on movies and TV shows written by marginalized people or starring marginalized characters. I don't even think they realize that it's limiting people's ability to tell diverse stories, I think they're just lashing out because of constant disappointment. Maybe it's easy for me to say this, but sometimes things just aren't made with you in mind and that doesn't mean the experience is less than for it. Not every piece of media sets out with the goal to validate you and while it's nice when you are validated by a piece of media, in order to have some media literacy, you need to understand that this doesn't mean the creators personally hate you. That being said I don't think you should never criticize something either, I think criticism if it's healthy, measured and takes into consideration the context of things, is generally a good thing.

SU crit set the stage for bad faith interpretations that unfortunately go through several games of Telephone and abstraction to get to a point that was largely personal in the first place and carried a level of both disappointment and resentment. The large fanbase which was encouraged to make a lot of fan creations, felt very attached to those and the precedent that you could get a job through popular fanart, meant that people were kind of bitter they didn't get picked to write their fanfic into the show. Were there some genuinely meaningful critiques that hinged on issues of representation and appropriateness? Yes, but they were drowned out by the sea of bad faith. This bad faith has led to a kind of "Critical Culture" in which overly negative,

bad faith interpretations of primarily media made by marginalized people is just as scrutinized by the people it's for as it is by the people who would have hated it in the first place. The one time Horseshoe Theory seems to be valid.

Solutions

I think if we want more diverse media that's interesting and nuanced, we need to be willing to give some people a pass for trying and to measure the criticisms we have. Part of the problem I think is that all criticism for a story is out in the open, going viral on Twitter and back in the day sparking popular tags and dedicated blogs on Tumblr. When I think about it, criticism has always existed and bad faith criticism has too, maybe not in this specific way where we count the social justice sins but in some form. Maybe, if we all go back to individual blogs or forums we can put all our criticism there and it won't deteriorate the reputation of our media and the personal lives of the people who create it.