

The New York Times

Arts

TV's Black World Turns - But Stays Unreal

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Published: November 12, 1989

There is a telling moment in the 1986 film "Soul Man" when a young man explains to a friend why he has decided to down a bottle of tanning pills and turn himself black. The friend is skeptical: What's it actually going to be like, being black?

"It's gonna be great," the hero assures him. "These are the 80's, man. This is the 'Cosby' decade. America loves black people."

Alas, he soon discovers the gulf that separates the images of black people he sees on television and the reality that blacks experience every day.

Even black Americans sometimes need to be reminded about the deceptiveness of television. Blacks retain their fascination with black characters on TV: Many of us buy Jet magazine primarily to read its weekly television feature, which lists every black character (major or minor) to be seen on the screen that week. Yet our fixation with the presence of black characters on TV has blinded us to an important fact that "Cosby," which began in 1984, and its offshoots over the years demonstrate convincingly: There is very little connection between the social status of black Americans and the fabricated images of black people that Americans consume each day. Moreover, the representations of blacks on TV is a very poor index to our social advancement or political progress.

But the young man is right about one thing: This is the "Cosby" decade. The show's unprecedented success in depicting the lives of affluent blacks has exercised a profound influence on television in the last half of the 80's. And, judging from the premiere of this season's new black series - "Family Matters," "Homeroom" and "Snoops," as well as "Generations," an interracial soap opera - "Cosby's" success has led to the flow of TV sitcoms that feature the black middle class, each of which takes its lead from the "Cosby" show.

Historically, blacks have always worried about the image that white Americans harbor of us, first because we have never had control of those images and, second, because the greater number of those images have been negative. And given television's immediacy, and its capacity to reach so many viewers so quickly, blacks, at least since "Amos 'n' Andy" back in the early 50's, have been especially concerned with our images on the screen. I can remember as a child sitting upstairs in my bedroom and hearing my mother shout at the top of her voice that someone "colored . . . colored!" was on TV and that we had all better come downstairs at once. And, without fail, we did, sitting in front of our TV, nervous, full of expectation and dread, praying that our home girl or boy would not let the race down. 'White' Money Vs. 'Colored' Money

Later, when American society could not successfully achieve the social reformation it sought in the 60's through the Great Society, television solved the problem simply by inventing symbols of that transformation in the 80's, whether it was Cliff Huxtable - whom we might think of as the grandson of Alexander Scott (played by Mr. Cosby in "I Spy," 1965-68) - or Benson (1979-86), the butler who transforms himself into a lieutenant governor.

Today, blacks are doing much better on TV than they are in real life, an irony underscored by the use of black public figures (Mr. Cosby, Michael Jackson, Michael Jordan, Bobby Ferrin) as spokesmen for major businesses. When Mr. Cosby, deadpan, faces the camera squarely and says, "E. F. Hutton. Because it's my money," the line blurs between Cliff Huxtable's successful career and Mr. Cosby.

This helps to explain why "Cosby" makes some people uncomfortable: As the dominant representation of blacks on TV, it suggests that blacks are solely responsible for their social conditions, with no acknowledgement of the severely constricted life opportunities that most black people face. What's troubling about the phenomenal success of "Cosby," then, is what was troubling about the earlier popularity of "Amos 'n' Andy": it's not the representation itself (Cliff Huxtable, a child of college-educated parents, is altogether believable), but the role it begins to play in our culture, the status it takes on as being, well, truly representative.

As long as all blacks were represented in demeaning or peripheral roles, it was possible to believe that American racism was, as it were, indiscriminate. The social vision of "Cosby," however, reflecting the minuscule integration of blacks into the upper middle class (having "white money," my mother used to say, rather than "colored" money) reassuringly throws the blame for black poverty back onto the impoverished.

This is the subliminal message of America's weekly dinner date with the Huxtables, played out to a lesser extent in other weekly TV encounters with middle-class black families, such as "227," "A Different World," "Amen" (Sherman Helmsley is a lawyer), and with isolated black individuals, such as the dashing Blair Underwood on "L. A. Law" and Philip Michael Thomas on "Miami Vice." One principal reason for the failure of Flip Wilson's "Charlie & Company" was the ambiguity of his class status; Wilson's character, Charlie Richmond, was an office worker at the Department of Highways, his wife (Gladys Knight) a schoolteacher. Wilson once joked, acidly, that he was the star of the black version of "The Cosby Show," which may have been true in ways that he did not intend. The Great 'Amos 'n' Andy' Debate

In 1933, Sterling Brown, the great black poet and critic, divided the full range of black character types in American literature into seven categories: the contented slave; the wretched freeman; the comic Negro; the brute Negro; the tragic mulatto; the local color Negro, and the exotic primitive. It was only one small step to associate our public negative image in the American mind with the public negative social roles that we were assigned and to which we were largely confined. "If only they could be exposed to the best of the race," the sentiment went, "then they would see that we were normal human beings and treat us better."

Such a burdensome role for the black image led, inevitably, to careful monitoring and, ultimately, to censorship of our representations in literature, film, radio and later television. The historian W. E. B. Du Bois summarized this line of thinking among blacks: "We want," he said in 1925, "everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one. We fear that the evil in us will be called racial while in others it is viewed as individual. We fear that our shortcomings are not merely human but foreshadowings and threatenings of disaster and failure." And the genre about which we were most sensitive, Du Bois wrote, was comedy. "The more highly trained we become," he wrote in 1921, "the less we can laugh at Negro comedy."

One of my favorite pastimes is screening episodes of "Amos 'n' Andy" for black friends who think that the series was both socially offensive and politically detrimental. After a few minutes, even hardliners have difficulty restraining their laughter. "It's still racist," is one typical comment, "but it was funny."

The performance of those great black actors - Tim Moore, Spencer Williams and Ernestine Wade - transformed racist stereotypes into authentic black humor. The dilemma of "Amos 'n' Andy," however, was that these were the only images of blacks that Americans could see on TV. The political consequences for the early civil rights movement were thought to be threatening. The N.A.A.C.P. helped to have the series killed.

What lies behind these sorts of arguments is a belief that social policies affecting black Americans were largely determined by our popular images in the media. But the success of the "Cosby" show has put the lie to that myth: "Cosby" exposes more white Americans than ever before to the most nobly idealized blacks in the history of entertainment, yet social and economic conditions for the average black American have not been bleaker in a very long time.

To make matters worse, "Cosby" is also one of the most popular shows in apartheid South Africa, underscoring the fact that the relationship between how whites treat us and their exposure to "the best" in us is far from straightforward. (One can hear the Afrikaaner speaking to his black servants: "When you people are like Cliff and Clare, then we will abandon apartheid.") There are probably as many reasons to like the "Cosby" show as there are devoted viewers - and there are millions of them. I happen to like it because my daughters (ages 9 and 7) like it, and I enjoy watching them watch themselves in the depictions of middle-class black kids, worrying about school, sibling rivalries and family tradition. But I also like "Cosby" because its very success has forced us to rethink completely the relation between black social progress and the images of blacks that American society fabricates, projects and digests.

But the "Cosby" vision of upper-middle-class blacks and their families is comparatively recent. And while it may have constituted the dominant image of blacks for the last five years, it is a direct reaction against the lower-class ghetto comedies of the 70's, such as "Sanford and Son" (1972-77), "Good Times" (1974-79), "That's My Mama" (1974-75) and "What's Happening!!" (1976-79). The latter three were single-mother-dominated sitcoms. Although "Good Times" began with a nuclear family, John Amos - who had succeeded marvelously in transforming the genre of the black maternal household - was soon killed off, enabling the show to conform to the stereotype of a fatherless black family.

Even "The Jeffersons" (1975-85) conforms to this mold. George and Louise began their TV existence as Archie Bunker's working-class neighbors, saved their pennies, then "moved on up," as the theme song says, to Manhattan's East Side. "The Jeffersons" also served as a bridge between sitcoms depicting the ghetto and those portraying the new black upper class.

In fact, in the history of black images on television, character types have distinct pasts and, as is also the case with white shows, series seem both to lead to other series and to spring from metaphorical ancestors. Pure Street in A Brooks Brothers Suit

Let's track the evolution of the "Cosby" type on television. While social engineering is easier on the little screen than in the big city, Sterling Brown's list of black stereotypes in American literature proves quite serviceable as a guide to the images TV has purveyed for the last two decades. Were we writing a new sitcom using these character types, our cast might look like this - contented slave: Andy, Fred Sanford, J. J. ("Good Times"); wretched freeman: George Jefferson; comic Negro: Flip Wilson; brute Negro: Mr. T ("The A-Team"), Hawk ("Spencer: for Hire"); tragic mulatto: "Julia," Elvin ("Cosby"), Whitley ("A Different World"); local color Negro: Meschach Taylor ("Designing Women"); exotic primitive: Link ("Mod Squad" 1968-73); most black characters on MTV. If we add the category of Noble Negro (Cliff Huxtable, Benson), our list might be complete.

We can start with George Jefferson, who we might think of as a Kingfish ("Amos 'n' Andy") or as a Fred Sanford ("Sanford and Son") who has finally made it. Jefferson epitomized Richard Nixon's version of black capitalism, bootstrap variety, and all of its terrifying consequences. Jefferson was anything but a man of culture: Unlike the "Cosby" living room, his East Side apartment had no painting by Jacob Lawrence or Charles White, Romare Bearden or Varnette Honeywood. Despite his new-found wealth, Jefferson was pure street, draped in a Brooks Brothers suit. You did not want to live next to a George Jefferson, and you most certainly did not want your daughter to marry one.

"The Jeffersons" was part of a larger trend in television in the depiction of black men. We might think of this as their domestication, in direct reaction to the questing, macho images of black males shown in the 60's news clips of the civil rights movement, the Black Panthers and the black power movement. While Jefferson (short, feisty, racist, rich, vulgar) represents one kind of domestication, a more curious kind was the cultural dwarfism represented by "Diff'rent Strokes" (1978-86) and "Webster" (1983-87), in which small black "boys" (arrested adolescents who were much older than the characters they played) were adopted by tall, successful white males. These establishment figures represented the myth of the benevolent paternalism of the white upper class, an American myth as old as the abolitionist movement.

Indeed, one central motif of 19th-century American art is a sculpted tall white male (often Lincoln) towering above a crouched or kneeling adult or adolescent slave, in the act of setting them free. "Webster" and "Diff'rent Strokes" depict black orphans who are rescued from blackness and poverty, adopted and raised just like any other upper-middle-class white kid, prep schools and all. These shows can be thought of as TV's fantasy of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" and the war on poverty rolled into one.

The formula was not as successful with a female character: An attempt to use the same format with a black woman, Shirley Hemphill ("One in a Million," 1980) lasted only six months. "The White Shadow" (1978-81) was a variation of this paternal motif, in which wild and unruly ghetto kids were tamed with a basketball.

These small black men signaled to the larger American audience that the very idea of the black male could be, and had been, successfully domesticated. Mr. T - whose 1983-87 "A-Team" run paralleled that of "Webster" - might appear to be an exception. We are forced to wonder, however, why such an important feature of his costume - and favorite fetish - was those dazzling gold chains, surely a subliminal suggestion of bondage.

This process of paternal domestication, in effect, made Cliff Huxtable's character a logical next step. In fact, I think of the evolution of the Huxtable character, generationally, in this way: imagine if George Jefferson owned the tenement building in which Florida and her family from "Good Times" lived. After John Amos dies, Jefferson evicts them for nonpayment of rent. Florida, destitute and distraught, tries to kill George. The state puts her children up for adoption.

They are adopted by Mr. Drummond ("Diff'rent Strokes") and graduate from Dalton, Exeter and Howard. Gary Coleman's grandson becomes an obstetrician, marries a lovely lawyer named Clare, and they move to Brooklyn Heights. And there you have it: the transformation of the character type of the black male on television.

And while Clare Huxtable is a refreshingly positive depiction of an intelligent, successful black woman, she is clearly a descendant of "Julia" (1968-71), though a Julia with sensuality and sass. The extent of typecasting of black women as mammy figures, descended from the great Hollywood "Mammy" of "Gone With the Wind," is astonishing: Beulah, Mama in "Amos 'n' Andy," Geraldine ("Flip Wilson," 1970-75), Florida, Nel in "Gimme a Break" (1981-88), Louise ("The Jeffersons"), Eloise ("That's My Mama," 1974-75). Is TV Depicting A Different World?

And what is the measure of the Huxtables' nobility? One of the reasons "Cosby" and its spin-off, "A Different World," are so popular is that the black characters in them have finally become, in most respects, just like white people.

While I applaud "Cosby's" success at depicting (at long last) the everyday concerns of black people (love, sex, ambition, generational conflicts, work and leisure) far beyond reflex responses to white racism, the question remains: Has TV managed to depict a truly "different world?" As Mark Crispin Miller puts it, "By insisting that blacks and whites are entirely alike, television denies the cultural barriers that slavery necessarily created; barriers that have hardened over years and years, and that still exist" - barriers that produced different cultures, distinct worlds.

And while "Cosby" is remarkably successful at introducing most Americans to traditional black cultural values, customs and norms, it has not succeeded at introducing America to a truly different world. The show that came closest - that presented the fullest range of black character types - was the 1987-88 series "Frank's Place," starring Tim Reid and his wife Daphne Maxwell Reid and set in a Creole restaurant in New Orleans.

Unfortunately, Mr. Reid apparently has learned his lesson: His new series, "Snoops," in which his wife also stars, is a black detective series suggestive of "The Thin Man." The couple is thoroughly middle class: He is a professor of criminology at Georgetown; she is head of protocol at the State Department. "Drugs and murder and psychotic people," Mr. Reid said in a recent interview. "I think we've seen enough of that in real life."

But it is also important to remember that the early 70's ghetto sitcoms ("Good Times" and "Sanford") were no more realistic than "Cosby" is. In fact, their success made the idea of ghetto life palatable for most Americans, robbing it of its reality as a place of exile, a place of rage, and frustration, and death. And perhaps with "Cosby's" success and the realization that the very structure of the sitcom (in which every character is a type) militates against its use as an agent of social change, blacks will stop looking to TV for our social liberation. As a popular song in the early 70's put it, "The revolution will not be televised."

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