

Pitfalls of Positive Representation II

Candice Haddad

In discussing representations of minorities in the media, there are two main responses and topics I want to address during our roundtable discussion. First and foremost, I believe we must begin by acknowledging the pitfalls in all representations – "negative" and "positive" alike – and the innate fallacy in trying to deem representations as either one or the other. Working from this either/or approach to media representation keeps us stuck in a binary mode of theorizing and, thus, inhibiting our ability to explore the rich complexities in all representations. Therefore, we should discuss how we can break away from this mode of asking whether a representation is positive (i.e. "good" and/or progressive) or negative (i.e. "bad" and/or regressive). The keyword of this roundtable -- pitfalls -- exemplifies how our current language for describing and exploring mediated representation of racial, or any aspect of, identity limits us. Further, one of the most problematic aspects of deeming representations as either "negative" or "positive" is the implicit implementation of a certain value system. We need to question the value systems that we bring to our labels of "positive" and "negative". From what underlying position are we asking these questions? My inclination is that it stems from a Western, Euro-centric mindset. In addition to questioning the implicit values of labeling representations, I suggest we push our research questions and language in ways that will also us to explore outside the positive/ negative binary. What these different research questions and terminology look like is a topic I propose to discuss, for the premise of this entire roundtable is indicative of the fallacies of our current paradigm of inquiry.

Second, I am also interested in how we can steer this question that focuses on television to discuss representation in the context of media convergence and the Internet. We need to rethink representation outside the confines of the television screen to include their reinterpretations online in order to better understand the complexities of mediated identity representation. The reinterpretations I suggest for consideration include both network-produced interactive media and representations online, but also user-generated and remixed content. When looking only at television screen representations, we are limiting ourselves to only a portion of the entire visual repertoire of a given text. For instance, if we were interested in examining representations of race and gender in *America's Next Top Model*, we could engross ourselves in watching all 14 cycles (and the upcoming 15th cycle) as our main body of texts to explore. However, what if we opened up our objects of analysis to include the CW-produced website for *America's Next Top Model*? We would then include additional features like extended footage of scenes edited out of episodes, episode previews, in-depth interviews with contestants and judges, photo-shoot photos, and biographies of contestants and judges. (This does not even begin to tap into the fan message boards area of the website and other fan websites not produced by the CW. For purposes of concern to the scope of this roundtable, I am wanting to stick to moving images as objects of analysis.) In addition to considering network-generated online content of television texts, user-generated videos featuring *America's Next Top Model* personalities are in abundance on various video-sharing websites. One example is of a video uploaded to YouTube that has edited together a scene of Tyra Banks exploding her frustration towards a contestant during a Cycle 4 elimination and video of Britney Spears during her MTV Video Music Awards performance and an interview with Matt Lauer (both appearances are from the troubled/ attempts at rehabilitation stage of Spears's career). Tyra's screams of disappointment and disapproval, originally directed toward an African-American contestant on the show, garner new meaning when they are edited between a crying, breaking down Britney Spears. With over 5.5 millions views, it is hard to deny the importance of considering online texts such as this one into our understandings and research of minority representations.