

## The Pitfalls of Positive Representation I

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#### Hiding Representations, Hidden Lives

As an answer to criticisms about continually negative representations of racial and ethnic minorities on television, program writers and producers have attempted to insert more positive representations of these groups. While perhaps well-meant, these attempts have several rather nasty side effects. First, they often obscure and de-politicize the realities of day-to-day life; they tend to give the appearance of changing things which have not changed at all. Second, these representations obfuscate the fact that they are *still representations*. By appearing more 'true' or more 'just', they conceal the fact that they still necessitate an approved gaze and, as such, often work against those they are purported to work for. Just like a magician's illusion, everything which happens prior to the final moment of representation is erased; on-the-street reality is made meaningless, and in the same moment political concerns are squashed.

In terms of representation, perhaps one of the most virulently criticized TV genres has been the cop show. From Jack Webb's first iteration of *Dragnet* in the 1960s to the present day, many crime-focused shows have been obsessed with portraying young black and brown men as criminals. Under increasing pressure from critics, the terrain has begun to shift so that there are both more varied criminal characters and more high-ranking minority police officers and officials. While the critics behind this drive no doubt had every right to oppose the racially charged representations of criminality, their correction on TV serves as a small salve at best and as a wool-pulling trick at worst. The representations have changed nothing; the fact stands that young Black and Latino men are still incarcerated at a disproportionately high rate in the U.S. These new representations, positive though they may be, work to hide a central truth about the racially charged nature of the justice system in America. They present a pretty lie which allows the TV viewer (whose criminological imagination is informed by such programming) to believe that justice is actually just. Because so many crime shows are set in the inner-city, these representations have also had to gloss over the very real struggles urban poverty presents. Of course, inner-city denizens are shown almost singularly as minorities, so that even when the representations of criminals shift, the subtextual insistence that to be poor is to be deviant stands.

The equation of poverty to deviance, and of skin color to poverty, has also been harshly criticized, and since the 1980s several shows have emerged which revolve around economically and socially successful minority families (Bill Cosby, George Lopez and Tyler Perry have been important anchors). It is difficult to criticize these representations at face-value, because they do reflect the reality of many minority viewers, and they do help to counter the representation of all minorities as poor inner-city people. Nonetheless, what makes these families read as successful—home ownership, respected professions, economic stability—are hegemonic values which fit perfectly with the dominant Capitalist ideology which overshadows so much TV programming (and the rise in these representations certainly coincides with the increased consumer power of these minority groups). To buy into the success of these TV families, we must buy into an approved way of seeing success, an approved gaze. Alternative models of happiness are scant on TV for any racial or ethnic group. Reinforcing the dominant ideology, and boxing minorities into believing in the 'American Dream' on TV, is an operation *par excellence* of televised representation. The trickiest thing about positivity is that we want to believe in it: we want to believe that our world is equal and just. But these representations are not necessarily accountable to reality and, at least on television, their power to change the on-the-streets lives of people for the better is minimal. They simultaneously hide themselves and force the disappearance of political concerns.

Some argue that positive representations raise consciousness; that they direct us to want the world we see and to effect change. And yet this has not born itself out. Despite the play of negative and positive representations of minority economic status and the 'rise above the inner-city' storylines that are popular, the ghettoization of the poor inner-city has grown worse and worse. Victims of police brutality continue to be primarily members of minorities, and the wrongfully convicted are still mostly Black and Latino men. To fix the negative representation has not fixed the system which drove it in the first place. If anything, the criticisms of negative representational tendencies which gave rise to these new, positive representations needed to be directed at their roots in the popular imagination, not just their particular iterations. Which brings us back to the magician who has hidden all reality to make us buy the illusion: televised representations are a comparable illusion, in whose thrall we lose track of the world.