

The Pitfalls of Positive Representation II

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Toward a Materially-Centered Positive Representation

The idea that media are empowered to unilaterally impart beliefs and evoke behaviors from audiences has been effectively contested (and caricatured) over the course of decades of theorizing and research surrounding media effects. Nevertheless, mediated content rightfully continues to warrant and capture critical attention for the large and ever-increasing place it occupies within societies' larger discursive formations. Mass-mediated messages uniquely offer people the opportunity to expand their understanding of the world beyond the bounds of their own experiences. Thus, the media are well positioned to show audiences broad systems of privilege and domination that may be too diffuse and naturalized to be easily recognized in their everyday lives. As such, I believe that it is acceptable and indeed necessary for marginalized individuals, activists, and communities to critically engage the manner in which they are represented within the mass media and to insist upon more positive representations where they seem necessary.

I think, though, that it is easy to be uncritical about what "positive" representation means. Often what is or isn't deemed positive seems to hinge upon the immediate aesthetic and affective qualities of a character or plot. Although these elements are understandably salient on a very visceral level, they may or may not bear any relevance to the real subjugation of the marginalized individuals/groups being represented. As a corrective, I propose a materially-centered perspective on media representation that assesses the ultimate positivity of an image, character, or plotline based upon its ability to highlight and/or intervene in the real-world disparities of economic capital, discursive capital, and bodily autonomy faced by marginalized subjects. Within this frame, it would be insufficient (and potentially irrelevant) to simply assess whether an image, character, or narrative is agreeable or disagreeable, stereotypical or challenging, sympathetic or antagonistic, or even central or peripheral. Each of these considerations can only act as a vehicle to understanding a larger question: whether or not the representation offers audience members an avenue toward exploring mechanisms and matrices of privilege that would otherwise fall outside their perception, consciousness, or lived experience. In so far as they are unproductive in this task, we are obliged either to look elsewhere for representations' progressive political utility, or finally to critique them for their complicity in their subjects' domination.

By way of an example, I'd like to explore what this outlook might offer in assessing representations of gay men on television. As a relatively well-studied topic in recent years, activists and academics alike have discussed ad infinitum the relative effeminacy of Will versus Jack on *Will & Grace*, interrogated the unflinching promiscuity depicted on *Queer as Folk*, objected to the inordinate celibacy of *As the World Turns* characters Luke and Noah, questioned the productivity of Kurt's unrequited love for Finn on *Glee*; and celebrated Kevin Walker's matter-of-fact homosexuality on *Brothers & Sisters*. While many of these discussions might still be germane to the materially-centered repositioning of representational politics that I am advocating, I believe that they should be treated as evidence within a broader discussion rather than as consequential discussions unto themselves. For instance, do the respective masculinity

and effeminacy of Will and Jack help to elucidate and underscore the variable opportunities and obstacles afforded to gay men embodying different gender performances, or does *Will & Grace* merely employ this difference as fodder for its narrative? Likewise, is the sexual hyper-reality of *Queer as Folk* simply a source for voyeuristic gratification, or could a viewer reasonably glean any sense of the queer sexual politics implicated within frequent (and sometimes public) non-monogamous sex? Did *Queer as Folk* work toward promoting both of these readings/uses, or might sexuality have been represented in a more liberatory way? Finally, even if Kevin Walker's personal adjustment, familial integration, and romantic success might offer a measure of para-social satisfaction and a sense of possibility, does it help its audience members to grasp the political urgency of LGBTQ community resources or to understand the manner in which Kevin's intersecting class, race, ethnic, religious, and gender identities inform his particular capacity to live as an "out" gay man? Although the answers to these questions are varied and complex, I believe that they need urgently to be asked by members of marginalized communities and their political allies.

Ultimately, while the presence/visibility of diverse and complex characters belonging to marginalized groups is a necessary condition for their politically productive representation within the media, it is not sufficient on its own. Simply because marginalized subjects can be seen in the most banal sense, doesn't mean that the structures and discourses maintaining their subjugation can be. Activism surrounding "positive" media representation must be refocused so that this more complex visibility becomes the litmus test for the positivity of existing media representations as well as the standard to which future representations are expected to aspire.