

The Pitfalls of Positive Representation II

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A Conversation about Positive and Negative Representations

I'd argue that as critical media scholars, we often find ourselves trapped in a contradiction: our theories tell us to avoid identifying positive/negative images, yet our political impulses lead us to make those kinds of judgments all the time. While this contradiction might not necessarily be bad, I do think we could find strategies to move beyond it productively. Here, I briefly identify some of the reasons I think we get trapped and propose ideas for shifting our approaches.

1. Despite our theoretical understanding about the limited nature of representation, I think a utopian hope in the possibility of representational transparency persists (i.e., the wish that media images would represent the complexities of "reality" becomes a belief that they can). Such utopianism productively fuels our motivation to intervene, certainly, but I wonder whether it (or perhaps a tendency to let it go unacknowledged) also keeps us from developing an effective approach to critiquing representations. I've noticed this problem most when teaching undergrads. For a long time, I was frustrated when students whined that the authors of the articles they had to read constantly complain about media images but never provide a solution. When I started reading the articles from their perspective, however, I could see where they were coming from. So often, our criticism of "negative" representations implies that there are actually "correct" representations.
2. Although we acknowledge that definitions of what's positive or negative reflect the perspectives of distinct social positions, we often operate (in our writing and academic conversations) as if there is a "correct" politics and that everyone in the room (i.e., a conference room at SCMS or Flow) is on the same page with what we want the world to look like. I don't think either is true. Like everyone else, media scholars have different political priorities and goals and there is no objective location from which to identify the "right" ones. I'd argue that we need to develop a professional culture where we discuss those differences explicitly and respectfully. Doing so would open new ways of talking about representational politics. Currently, it is much easier for us to critique problematic images than discuss positive ones, in part because of the nature of commercial media representation, but also, I think, because we are afraid someone might expose our positive reading as naïve (or worse, politically retrograde). This fear impacts the kind of work we feel comfortable doing and is exacerbated by an academic culture that doesn't seem to know how to have a "safe" conversation about differing political values. We need to find a way to talk about politics and about representation that helps us better navigate between an apolitical nihilism ("who's to say what's positive and negative since such assessments are always partial and socially situated") and a naïve utopianism ("if only we could get producers to listen to us, media images would be accurate/good"). We need to think about politics and cultural representation as an endless process—an ongoing conversation in which we try to communicate our assessments about media images clearly, listen to others' views openly, and think about changing our minds even as we hope to change others'.

3. Aspects of our profession often contribute to the problem. Pressure for experts to provide valuable insights encourages us to give the definitive reading of a text, and in a wider culture that frames media in a good/bad binary, it is easy to feel that the source of our expertise comes from explaining why a certain text is positive or negative. I'd urge us to found our expertise not on being judges but facilitators. We do have knowledge and conceptual tools others don't, but those can't help us sift positive images from negative images on behalf of the public. Instead, we should see them as helping us, our students, and the public have a more nuanced, reflexive, and productive conversation about representation and politics. I keep wondering: how can we abandon the idea that we have the right reading or necessarily the right politics—even as we insist that people listen to our expert opinions and moral positions? One way might be to change how we publish. We should foreground our personal political priorities in our writing much more often. We should experiment in new forms of publication, like multi-voiced pieces centered on conversations about media representations. We certainly have plenty of articles giving different media scholars' takes on films like *Precious*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and *The Blind Side*, but how might we create a genre that shows what happens when those different perspectives engage with each other? Finally, we could combine media criticism and oral history by using our expertise to help circulate the views of non-academic people.