

Enlightened Racism

*The Cosby Show, Audiences and the
Myth of the American Dream*

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I

Introducing *The Cosby Show*

Neither *The Cosby Show* nor its star, Bill Cosby, need much introduction. By the early 1980s, Bill Cosby—stand-up comedian, actor (most remembered for his costar role in the 1960s *I Spy* TV series), voice behind *Fat Albert*, and star of TV commercials—had established a modest and respectable place in the history of North American popular culture. It was, however, *The Cosby Show* that allowed Cosby to move from celebrity to superstardom. Whether one measures success in terms of wealth, fame, popularity, or respect, Bill Cosby is now undoubtedly among the most successful entertainers in the United States.

When it began in 1984, *The Cosby Show* did not look like a surefire hit. Its all-black cast offered viewers a gentle comedy without gimmicks, zany situations, or intriguing plot lines. Yet *The Cosby Show* has become the most successful TV show in recent history, the pinnacle of Cosby's long career. It topped the annual ratings lists year after year in the second half of the 1980s, and, although it has been displaced from the number one spot in the 1990s, it retains an enduring place in the world of prime-time television.

For those who have managed to avoid seeing it, *The Cosby Show* is a half-hour situation comedy about an upper middle class black family, the Huxtables. Cliff Huxtable (played by Bill Cosby) is a gynecologist and obstetrician, and his wife, Clair, is a lawyer. They have four daughters and a son; as the series has grown older, they have acquired in-laws and grandchildren. The Huxtables' attractive New York brownstone home is the setting for an endless series of comic domestic dramas. There is little in this description to distinguish this TV fiction from many others: we are used to a TV world populated by attractive professionals and their

good-looking offspring. What makes the show unusual is its popularity, its critical acclaim, and the fact that all its leading characters are black.

These distinctive achievements and features have made *The Cosby Show* the subject of much speculation. At the heart of much of the discussion lies an apparent contradiction. The United States is a country that is still emerging from a deeply racist history, a society in which many white people have treated (and continue to treat) black people with contempt, suspicion, and a profoundly ignorant sense of superiority. Yet the most popular U.S. TV show, among black and white people alike, is not only about a black family but a family portrayed without any of the demeaning stereotypical images of black people common in mainstream popular culture. Commentators have been provoked to try to resolve this apparent paradox and, in so doing, to ask themselves about the show's social significance.

—The most prevalent critical reaction, particularly during the first few years of the show, was to applaud Bill Cosby's creation as not only a witty and thoughtful sitcom but also an enlightened step forward in race relations.—After decades of degrading media images of black people in other shows, the Huxtable family presented black characters that black and white audiences could relate to. In this sense, the show was conceived in contrast to the stereotypical shows that preceded it. Psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, an adviser to *The Cosby Show*, is highly critical of the black sitcoms of the 1970s—shows like *The Jeffersons*, *Sanford and Son*, and *Good Times*, which are, argues Poussaint “full of jivin’, jammin’, streetwise style stuff that is the worst kind of stereotyping” (quoted in Hartsough, 1989).

The Cosby Show, however, portrays comedic black characters with dignity and humanity. On a TV celebration of African-American comedy (*A Laugh, a Tear*), actor Tim Reid praised the show as “a breath of fresh air,” showing, at last, “the reality of what was good about our neighborhoods . . . a reality of what was good about a black childhood.” Here was a show that not only overcame traditional stereotypes but, in so doing, was both funny and incredibly popular. The celebratory tone of many reviews contained genuine hopes for what such a cultural intervention might achieve in dispelling racial prejudice in the United States.

The history of critical response to popular culture often follows a similar pattern: elaborate praise becomes an increasingly difficult burden, and critics' euphoria is almost invariably followed by cynical backlash. *The Cosby Show*, for good or ill, is no exception to this rule. Critics have begun to accuse the show of presenting a misleadingly cozy picture, a sugar candy world unfettered by racism, crime, and economic deprivation. Some have argued that the Huxtables' charmed life is so alien to the

experience of most black people that they are no longer “black” at all—but, as Henry Louis Gates (1989: 40) puts it, “in most respects, just like white people.”

Gates's argument is not simply about whether *The Cosby Show* is “realistic”; he is also concerned about the show's effect on its enormous viewing audience. The crux of his case is that these “positive images” can actually be counterproductive because they reinforce the myth of the American dream, a just world where anyone can make it and racial barriers no longer exist:

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 miniscule integration of blacks into the upper middle class, reassuringly throws the blame for black poverty back onto the impoverished (Gates, 1989: 40).

At the risk of simplifying critical opinion, most analyses of *The Cosby Show* fit broadly into one of two views: the show is seen either as socially progressive or as an apology for a racist system that disadvantages most black people. Both views carry with them assumptions about media effects. The debate, therefore, concerns the nature of the show's social effect and raises questions that we hope to resolve in the following chapters about the meaning of the show for black and white audiences. But first it is useful to dwell a little longer on the issues that have earned the show both praise and condemnation.

COSBY: THE CASE FOR

If we are to do battle over the nature of what gets shown on prime-time television in the United States, we should be well versed in the art of the possible. Any attempt to change the form or content of mainstream television will come up against two powerful bastions of conservatism: the profit-oriented predilections of network and advertising executives, and the expectations and tastes of well-conditioned TV audiences. We can exhaust ourselves creating innovative programming ideas, but if the networks, advertisers, or viewers don't respond, then we are wasting our time.

The Cosby Show's focus on a black family and departure from accepted racial stereotypes did not make the series an obvious candidate for prime time. ABC turned the series proposal down. Without Bill Cosby's track record (including, significantly, his ability to sell products on TV commercials), the series would probably never have made it onto the air. To attack the show because it panders to the needs of a mainstream white

audience is to attack its lifeblood: in the TV culture of the United States, audience ratings determine whether a series lives or dies. This bottom line gives a TV program very little room to maneuver. To have confronted the audience with the uncomfortable realities of racism would have been commercial suicide.

John Downing (1988: 68) argues that any evaluation of the show must take account of this conservative cultural climate, and that, despite its limitations, "to be as good as it is *and* to have gotten past these barriers is a major achievement in itself." Ultimately, Downing acknowledges, the show does let "racism off the hook." It is, nevertheless, a considerable step forward in the history of media representation. There is, Downing (1988: 61) argues, "an abundance of black culture presented in the series, expressed without fanfare, but with constant dignity." The show celebrates black artists, from Ellis Wilson to Stevie Wonder, and political figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., and events like the Civil Rights march on Washington have been interwoven, albeit ever so gently, into the story line.

The naming of the Huxtables' first grandchildren is a typical example of *The Cosby Show's* quiet style. Their eldest daughter, Sondra, decides to call her twins Nelson and Winnie. The episode that deals with this decision highlights the issue of naming but makes no comment on the chosen names' overt political connotations. The reference to the Mandelas is made quietly and unobtrusively, relying upon the audience's ability to catch the political ramifications of the statement.

If such subtlety is a virtue, it was one born of necessity. During the show's second season, NBC tried to have the anti-apartheid sign on Theo's bedroom door removed. Bill Cosby, empowered by the newly achieved high ratings, successfully stood his ground to keep the sign. What is interesting about this event is not only Cosby's triumph (would the network have capitulated to a show receiving a few less ratings points?), but the almost pathological fear of certain kinds of political discourse by executives in charge of TV entertainment. The fuss was made about a sign expressing a sentiment that is, outside the comparatively small TV market of white South Africa, *supposed* to be fairly uncontroversial. The anti-apartheid sign made no intrusion into the plot, and many viewers probably did not even notice it. The network's desire to remove such a meek symbol of black resistance from the airwaves demonstrates what progressive voices on prime-time television are up against.

The seriousness with which *The Cosby Show* approaches the issue of cultural representation has invited critical scrutiny of the series. As Bill Cosby and program consultant Alvin Poussaint point out, few other sitcoms are attacked for their failure to deal with issues of racism. This is, Poussaint argues, a particularly unfair constraint to put upon a situation

comedy. Writing in *Ebony*, Poussaint (quoted in Hartsough, 1989) points out that

* audiences tune in to be entertained, not to be confronted with social problems. Critical social disorders, like racism, violence, and drug abuse, rarely lend themselves to comic treatment; trying to deal with them on a sitcom could trivialize issues that deserve serious, thoughtful treatment.

* The limits of *The Cosby Show*, are, according to Poussaint, the limits of the genre. This is a point, indeed, acknowledged by some critics. Gates (1989: 40) in an otherwise fairly critical piece, accepts that the very structure of a sitcom "militates against its use as an agent of social change."

* Despite these constraints, what *The Cosby Show* has confronted, many have argued, is the deep-rooted racism of white Americans who find it difficult to accept racial equality. Michael Dyson (1989: 29), for example, has suggested that one of "the most useful aspects of Cosby's dismantling of racial mythology and stereotyping is that it has permitted America to view black folk as *human beings*." Here, at last, are media representations of successful and attractive black people whom white people can respect, admire, and even identify with.

It could be argued that references to discrimination and black struggle would, in this sense, be counterproductive, alienating substantial sections of the white audience and making identification with the Huxtables more difficult. We should also be aware of the particular nature of the TV world. The Huxtables' class position may be unusual in real life (for black *and* white people), but to be an affluent, attractive professional on television is to be normal. This argument makes assumptions, of course, about the audience, just as do the arguments of persons critical of the show's lack of discourse on racial discrimination.

Some of the more positive evaluations of the show have made this interesting point: the discourse of discrimination that does find its way into the script is not about racism but sexism. The show frequently uses humor to expose the inadequacy of the sexist or machismo attitudes of some members of its male cast. Some characters, like son-in-law Elvin or Rudy's friend Kenny (who spouts the sexist platitudes of his big brother), are deliberately set up to be undermined. Although it is Clair and her daughters who take the lead in these instances, they are usually supported by Cliff, who has traveled some way beyond the sexist male stereotype so common in TV sitcoms.

It is unusual to find strong male characters in sitcoms who support a feminist stance taken by female characters. The male in a sitcom who adopts such a position invariably still risks ridicule. Downing (1989:

60) suggests that, although *The Cosby Show's* challenge to patriarchy has its limitations, Cliff's involvement in these comic episodes plays an important role in legitimating the show's feminist sentiments: "His condemnation of everyday sexism perhaps communicates itself all the more powerfully to male viewers precisely because he cannot be written off as a henpecked wimp."

Downing's defense of *The Cosby Show* is not apologetic: it is a reminder that, however we judge it, the show is, in many respects, one of the more progressive forces in popular culture to emerge from the United States in recent years. This may not be saying very much—we are, after all, talking about a televisual history steeped in sexist and racist images—but it is worth remembering before we embark on a journey to scrutinize the North American audience. Even if the audience study confirms many of the critics' worst fears about *The Cosby Show's* contributions to racism, there are countless other TV messages whose ideological consequences are almost too oppressive or frightening even to contemplate.

COSBY: THE CASE AGAINST

Few would argue that *The Cosby Show* presents a realistic view of the lives and experiences of typical black Americans. The Huxtable family, like its creator, has attained a level of wealth, comfort, and success shared by only a tiny minority of black people in the United States. The period that produced *The Cosby Show* has also produced, the show's critics argue, a deterioration in the social conditions of most black Americans.

The success of *The Cosby Show*, according to Gates, has led to a curious divergence between media images and social realities. Bill Cosby has broken the mold of black media stereotypes and opened up our TV screens to a host of black performers:

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 . . . "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 (Gates, 1989: 1).

Yet, outside the world of television, there are abundant social statistics to demonstrate that many of the advances made by black Americans in the 1960s and 1970s are being reversed in the 1980s and 1990s, so that, as Gates (1989: 40) puts it, "There is very little connection between the social status of black Americans and the fabricated images of black people that Americans consume every day." This argument is an important one. It relies upon specific claims about the nature of the worlds within

and outside television and places *The Cosby Show* in the context of a more general argument about representation and reality. We shall, with the aid of social statistics and our own content analysis, consider its validity in more detail in Chapter 4.

The gulf between television and the world outside is, some have argued, propounded by the Huxtables' charmed lives, a utopian familial harmony that has caused some critics to wince in disbelief. Mark Crispin Miller's (1986: 206) description is characteristically derisive:

And then there is the cuddliest and most beloved of TV Dads: Bill Cosby, who, as Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable, lives in perfect peace, and in a perfect brownstone, with his big happy family, and never has to raise his hand or fist, but retains the absolute devotion of his wife and kids just by making lots of goofy faces.

The problem that Gates and Miller are identifying is not simply that the show is an unrealistic portrayal of black family life (few sitcoms, after all, make any claim to represent social reality) but that the Huxtables sustain the harmful myth of social mobility.

The Huxtable family appears to have glided effortlessly into the upper echelons of American middle class society. The show never offers us the slightest glimpse of the economic disadvantages and deep-rooted discrimination that prevent most black Americans from reaching their potential. Michael Dyson (1989: 30), in an otherwise positive assessment of the show, makes this comment:

It is perhaps this lack of acknowledgement of the underside of the American Dream that is the most unfortunate feature of the Huxtable opulence. Cosby defends against linking the authenticity of the Huxtable representation of black life to the apparently contradictory luxury the family lives in when he says: "To say that they are not black enough is a denial of the American Dream and the American way of life. My point is that this is an American family—an *American* family—and if you want to live like they do, and you're willing to work, the opportunity is there."

But, as Dyson suggests, this is a cruel distortion: "Such a statement leads us to believe that Cosby is unaware that there are millions of people, the so-called working poor, who work hard but nevertheless fall beneath the poverty level." And yet, writes Dyson, "surely Cosby knows better than this."

Whatever Bill Cosby's intention, some critics argue that the result is extremely damaging. The Huxtables' achievements ultimately lend credibility to the idea that "anyone can make it," the comforting assumption

of the American dream, which is a myth that sustains a conservative political ideology blind to the inequalities hindering persons born on mean streets and privileging persons born on easy street. As Miller (1986: 210) puts it, "Cliff's blackness serves an affirmative purpose within the ad that is *The Cosby Show*. At the center of this ample tableau, Cliff is himself an ad, implicitly proclaiming the fairness of the American system: 'Look!' he shows us. 'Even I can have all this!'" This mythology is made all the more powerful, Miller argues, by the close identification between Cliff Huxtable and Bill Cosby. Behind the fictional doctor lies a man whose real life is *also* a success story: fact and fiction here coalesce to confirm the "truth" they represent.

Herein, the critics argue, lies the popularity of the show in the United States. The show may appear to herald a new dawn of racial tolerance, a world in which white people accept black people into their living rooms as equals. This appearance, according to Miller, hides the more subtle fears of white viewers, to whom black people still seem threatening. Cliff, or Bill Cosby, is attractive to white viewers because, as Miller (1986: 213-214) puts it, he represents "a threat contained," offering "deep solace to a white public terrified that one day blacks might come with guns to steal the copperware, the juicer, the microwave, the VCR, even the TV itself" and at a time when "American whites need such reassurance because they are now further removed than ever, both spatially and psychologically, from the masses of the black poor."

Despite Miller's hyperbole, the thrust of this argument may provide us with an insight into the ideological state of white people in the contemporary United States. *The Cosby Show* is not simply a source of gentle reassurance; it flatters to deceive. The United States is still emerging from a system of apartheid. Even if legal and political inequalities are finally disappearing, economic barriers remain. In an age when most white people have moved beyond the crudities of overt and naked racism, there is a heavy burden of guilt for all concerned. *The Cosby Show* provides its white audience with relief not only from fear but also from responsibility.

ASKING THE AUDIENCE

How well do these differing assessments explain the show's popularity and significance? More than any other, this question motivated us to go beyond conjecture and seek the answer from the show's viewers, about whom both arguments make assumptions. Accordingly, we designed and carried out a major qualitative audience study not only of opinions about *The Cosby Show* but also of attitudes toward the issues raised by commentators and critics.

The results of this study, as we shall demonstrate, are extremely revealing. We find that they enable us not only to clarify and develop the debate about *The Cosby Show* but also to comment more generally upon the whole issue of stereotyping on television.

At an early stage, we realized that whatever an audience study might reveal about these arguments, it would lead beyond the usual limits of TV audience research. It is impossible to design an audience study that, in a simple and straightforward sense, measures the effect of the series on attitudes toward race. Such an issue cannot be resolved from the responses to simple multiple-choice questions. An exploration of the show's influence forces us to delve into the complex interaction between the program and the viewer. From that point, we can look into the delicate ideological suppositions that inform the sites where program and viewer meet to create meaning and pleasure.

Our approach was modeled on recent qualitative audience studies from within what can be broadly termed a cultural studies tradition. We assume that the significance, or meaning, of television in popular culture is a product of the interplay between a television program and the attitudes the viewer brings to it. We accept, therefore, that television is influential. But we also accept that the precise nature of its influence is unpredictable: it will depend upon viewers who have thoughts, interests, and opinions before they sit down in front of the screen.

Research of this kind is, nevertheless, easier said than done. Establishing connections between attitudes and perceptions is technically difficult and demanding. It is a little like a trial in which the jury can only reconstruct events from evidence and testimony presented to it after the fact. So it is with this kind of investigative audience research inasmuch as we cannot perch inside people's brains and watch ideas and opinions forming. Like the prudent jury, we must use our knowledge and skill to interpret what people tell us rather than accept all testimony at face value.

This must necessarily be a painstaking procedure, and we will not try the reader's patience by detailing it completely. Suffice to say that we decided to carry out a number of in-depth discussions with people about not only the show but also the issues that we felt might be relevant to their understanding of it. Each discussion was recorded and transcribed, providing us with voluminous data to be analyzed and interpreted.

Our respondents came from Springfield in western Massachusetts. In many respects, Springfield is a fairly typical small North American city. It has rich neighborhoods and poor neighborhoods. It has housing projects and leafy suburbs. It is, like the United States, racially mixed: predominantly white, but with prominent black and Hispanic populations (particularly in the poorer neighborhoods near the city center). Its "ordinariness" indeed, was commented upon by journalist Bill Moyers, who

in 1990 chose Springfield as the venue for a TV program because he felt it was a microcosm of national attitudes and opinions.

We structured the selection of participants so as to test certain variables that might influence viewers' interpretations of the show: in particular, race, class, and gender. We then organized the people we interviewed into 52 small focus groups (a large sample for a qualitative study): 23 black, 3 Hispanic, and 26 white. The black and white interviewees were subdivided by social class (using standard socioeconomic occupational categories). Most groups included men and women, although there were some groups of all men or all women. The only requirement that all interviewees met was that they were either frequent or occasional viewers of *The Cosby Show* (a qualification that, in the United States, is inclusive rather than exclusive).

Focus group interviews usually involve bringing together people who have certain things in common (age, social class, gender, interests) to generate a structured conversation around certain topics. The conversations that ensue, we have found, are usually slightly formal among people who may not feel entirely at ease with one another. Many are shy about expressing their thoughts and opinions in such a contrived situation. Because we meant to delve into some often sensitive areas (such as attitudes about race, gender, and class), we were keen to create a comfortable atmosphere for the focus groups.

To encourage a relaxed air of easy informality, we conducted all the interviews in people's homes in groups of two to six people who knew one another well. The groups were made up of families and/or friends; our main requirement was that group members should be close to one another and feel comfortable about watching television together. In an informal setting, conversation could be allowed at appropriate moments to flow freely without interruption by the interviewer.

Each interview began with the interviewer and the group sitting down together to watch a video recording of an episode of *The Cosby Show*. Apart from being an obvious way to begin a discussion based on the program, this experience created, from the outset, a certain amount of common ground between the interviewer and the respondents. The interviewer could then use the show as a reference point for the exploration of issues and ideas.

The episode chosen for the viewing/interview sessions was fairly typical in a number of respects (a synopsis of the episode appears at the end of this chapter). It develops two interweaving narratives and resolves them in the style of a gentle moral tale. The issue dealt with in this episode, as in many others, is sexism, and the main characters strike familiar attitudes. Clair Huxtable is a figure of moral authority; her husband, Cliff, the key player in the episode's comedy, is allowed to

vacillate between the wisdom of fatherhood and a childlike, comic self-mockery; their son, Theo, is the good-natured but typical male adolescent, full of bravado and misconceptions (for his parents to put right); and the two youngest daughters, Vanessa and Rudy, are both cute and mischievous.

The Huxtables are an upper middle class black family, and one of the study's aims was to explore how audiences interpret images and issues of race and class. These issues are explicitly raised in the show only rarely, although they are both alluded to very gently. References to black culture and black history, for example, are invariably apolitical. In this episode, we are reminded that the Huxtables are African Americans by the presence of a visiting friend from Trinidad, Dr. Harman. During the show, Cliff teases his friend about his accent, symbolizing both the unities and differences between the two black cultures. The presence of another doctor also emphasizes the Huxtables' own class position: here we are seeing professionals mixing with other professionals.

For viewers familiar with *The Cosby Show*, any episode carries with it a multitude of allusions and references to other shows. Although respondents were asked in the interview to address this episode specifically, they were also encouraged to talk about *The Cosby Show* more generally.

In the interviews we wanted the discussion to flow freely. The questions were quite open-ended, particularly during the first part of the interview, to allow respondents the freedom to set their own agenda. Respondents were first asked simply to describe the story they felt they had just been told. Then they were asked a series of general questions to stimulate conversation, questions like, "What do you think this episode was about?" and "What do you think of Clair Huxtable?"

These innocuous questions often succeeded in opening up the discussion by giving respondents the opportunity to remark on attitudes toward class, race, or gender, attitudes the interviewer could then explore. If respondents were less forthcoming, the interviewer would ask them to comment on these topics—for example, "How would you feel if the Huxtable family were white?" and "Would the show be as good if the Huxtables were a blue-collar family?" Because the initial responses to these questions were sometimes ambiguous, guarded, or even misleading, the answers were carefully explored in the ensuing discussion.

The subject that provoked the most cautious or evasive reactions (among white groups particularly) was race. In order to ease the discomfort people might feel in addressing this issue, white groups were interviewed by white interviewers and black groups by black interviewers, a strategy that was clearly validated when we analyzed the transcripts. Attitudes to race were also approached from two different angles: first, in relation to *The Cosby Show*; and second, toward the end of the interview, in

relation to more general perceptions of race relations. The two conversations regarding race were separated by a discussion of the commercials shown during the episode. As it turned out, the two discussions were often very different; when analyzed together, the differences were often extremely revealing.

SYNOPSIS OF *THE COSBY SHOW* EPISODE SHOWN TO RESPONDENTS

Scene 1: Theo's Bedroom

Clair comes into Theo's bedroom (Theo is reading). She accidentally knocks a pile of his books from a table, and as she picks them up, discovers a copy of *Car and Woman* magazine. A comic discussion follows as Theo tries to argue, ingeniously but unconvincingly, that his interest is in the technical articles rather than the scantily clad women draped across the automobiles. Clair condemns the magazine for its degrading images of women and tells him to throw the magazine out.

Scene 2: The Living Room

Clair is on the phone. Cliff enters. She tells him that she has invited their friends the Harmans for dinner on Sunday. Cliff becomes animated as he looks forward to renewing his rivalry with Mr. (Dr.) Harman in a game of pétanque (a backyard version of lawn bowling). Clair chastizes him for his childishness and reminds him of the fuss they caused the previous time they played. She proposes that they should simply dine and discuss "world issues."

Theo enters with a large pile of magazines to throw out (his copies of *Car and Woman* are supplemented by copies of *Bikes and Babes*), and Cliff leaves, rather mischievously, to prepare the pétanque court in the backyard.

Scene 3: Sunday, the Living Room/Kitchen

The Harmans arrive to Clair's enthusiastic greeting. The Harmans have brought their daughter, Lindy (who has grown up since the Huxtables last saw her). Cliff enters and engages Dr. Harman in competitive banter about what will happen later on the pétanque court. The women protest and then sit down, Clair asking Lindy about the Outward Bound trip she is about to go on.

Theo enters and is immediately captivated by Lindy (as Cliff tells him: "They grow up, don't they, son"). Theo and Clair exit to the kitchen to "check the roast." In the kitchen, he complains to his mother

that she gave him no warning that Lindy had become a beautiful woman; had he known, he would have dressed for the occasion. Clair scolds him and makes fun of his sexist attitude.

Scene 4: After Dinner, the Living Room

The families enter the living room. The two men immediately try to escape to the backyard. Theo makes clumsy (and slightly comic) efforts to impress Lindy, for which his sisters Vanessa and Rudy tease him. Lindy offers to show Theo more information about Outward Bound, and they exit (to the taunts of Vanessa and Rudy). The men finally escape to the backyard to play pétanque.

Commercial Break

Scene 5: The Backyard

The two men prepare for their game, bantering in a parody of competitive machismo. Even though the temperature is below freezing, both men display bravado by stripping down to their shirts.

Scene 6: The Living Room

The two women are playing cards. Lindy is telling Theo about her interest in rock climbing (part of her Outward Bound trip), a subject in which Theo suddenly declares a long-standing interest. Clair teases him, speculating on his subscription to *Rock and Woman*. Theo takes Lindy into the basement so that she can teach him about rock climbing.

Scene 7: The Basement

While Lindy tries to teach Theo some basic rock-climbing techniques, Theo tries to turn on the charm. Theo decides, against Lindy's protest, to show off by climbing the side of the basement staircase.

Scene 8: The Backyard

The final and deciding game. After more competitive (and comic) banter, the last balls are thrown. Both fall at about the same distance from the target ball, leading to a dispute about who has won. The two men go indoors to ask their wives to decide which ball is nearer.

Scene 9: The Living Room

The two women are reading magazines. Their husbands enter and ask them to resolve the dispute. Clair responds by making fun of their

childish predicament. A crash is heard from the basement; all four go to investigate.

Scene 10: The Basement

Theo has fallen down the stairs, having attempted to do a handstand on the banister. Drs. Harman and Huxtable use the occasion to joke about each other's medical ability (to attend to Theo).

Scene 11: The Living Room

The two women are looking out of the front door. Theo enters and Clair describes the scene to him: the Harmans' car would not start, and both men's attempts to fix it succeed only in dismantling the engine. Lindy, a student of car maintenance, steps in to help them out. This, Clair tells Theo with a smile, is where women should be: under the hood rather than draped across it. The men are left "sitting on the curb."

2

Television and Reality: How Real Is *The Cosby Show*?

One notion, perhaps more than any other, limits our understanding of television's influence: the idea that we are *rational beings*, incapable of holding two contradictory ideas in our heads at the same time. It is an attractive notion. If we accept it, the world becomes a logical and straightforward place, inhabited by people with definable and coherent attitudes. If a social scientist wants to find out how people think, all he or she needs to do is ask them.

If only it were that simple. Unfortunately, the more we investigate something as imprecise as attitude and opinion, the murkier things become. Attitudes are slippery, ill-disciplined creatures; they can slide around our brains without our ever pausing to reflect upon their mutual compatibility. We are able, in other words, to think in entirely contradictory and illogical ways. We can, for example, be aware that commercials seek to manipulate us but still be seduced by them. We may be skeptical about a political candidate's promise not to raise taxes but nevertheless vote for them partly on the strength of that promise: in polls following the 1988 presidential race, voters indicated that they did not believe George Bush when he promised he would not raise taxes, but they wanted to elect someone who *seemed* to believe a promise that they thought he would not keep.

In a sophisticated world shaped by complex human achievements, how can we account for such commonplace lapses into irrationality? One answer is to look not so much at the *substance* of our thoughts but at their *form*.

Though attitudes can be based upon the logic of a series of propositions, they can also rest upon a much flimsier foundation. We can develop an attitude about a thing simply because we *associate* it with another thing.

We may choose a particular brand of soft drink, for instance, because we associate it with having a good time. In much the same way, we may feel good about our country because we associate it with a set of selective but positive images. These are not attitudes solidly constructed on reason; they are ideas built by association. This mode of thinking has been a prominent part of culture in the United States ever since the advertising industry discovered that appeals based upon association were much more effective than appeals based upon providing consumers with rational information about products.

Our ability to construct a consistent worldview depends upon linking these associations; otherwise our ideas may swim around disconnectedly like fish in an aquarium, drifting independently, never touching. In a world where we are exposed to thousands of messages every day from different sources (Coke, Pepsi, McDonalds, Levi's, Chevrolet, etc.), connecting the dots into some kind of coherence takes more time, effort, and thought than most of us can give. Accordingly, we can, and indeed do, hold two conflicting ideas in our minds without ever realizing it. Such thinking allowed many people to vote for Ronald Reagan (because he made them feel good about being "American") though they disagreed with many of his specific policies on matters of great importance.

A number of observers have become aware that television is not an innocent bystander in this matter. Television has become increasingly adept at using the language of association rather than the language of persuasion and argument. It is easier, now, to sell a product or a politician on television by constructing a simple association (breakfast cereals with the healthy people who eat them on commercials, politicians with the flags they surround themselves with on news appearances) than by developing an argument. The latter requires the viewer to pay attention—which, in an age of channel switching and instant gratification, most viewers are not inclined to do (and most TV producers know it).

Television's easy (easy to watch, easy to absorb) utilization of these discrete and separate messages creates not only superficiality but incoherence—it blurs the line between sense and nonsense. A detailed examination of attitudinal data suggests that the more television we watch, the more we are able to hold contradictory ideas simultaneously. Michael Morgan (1989: 250), following an exhaustive review of television viewing and survey data, offered this conclusion:

Television cultivates a set of paradoxical currents. In a nutshell, heavy viewers think like conservatives, want like liberals, and yet call themselves moderates. They are less likely to vote but quicker to turn against an incumbent. They think elected officials don't care about what happens to them but are more interested in their personal lives than in their policies. They want to cut taxes

but improve education, medical care, social security. They distrust big government but want it to fix things for them, to protect them at home and from foreign threats. They praise freedom but want to restrict anyone who uses it in an unconventional way. They are losing confidence in people who run virtually all institutions, including religion, but they express trust in God, America—and television.

This is not stupidity or insanity; it is merely a response to the way television speaks to us, in a voice whose clarity is brief and discontinuous, with the ankle-deep profundity of unrelated epigrams.

At the heart of this televisual bounty of mixed messages is our ambivalence toward their reality. Many of us know that most television is fiction, yet we see television as a key source of information about the world we live in. It is simultaneously real *and* unreal. We may know, for example, that television exaggerates the scale of violent crime for dramatic purposes; nevertheless, studies show that the more television we watch, the more violent we assume the world to be. Our awareness of exaggeration, in other words, is only momentary.

This grants TV producers and program makers the enormous luxury of power without responsibility. They have the means to influence our view of the world without ever claiming to do so. Most television, goes the gigantic disclaimer, is (after all) nothing more than "entertainment." This grants television an insidious form of poetic license, apparently innocent because it is achieved with our complicity. Producers and consumers enter into a kind of conspiracy of cognitive dissonance, proposing two contradictory ideas at the same time without acknowledging the contradiction. This is an unwitting form of manipulation that occurs because we, as TV viewers, suspend our disbelief so automatically that we forget that we are in a state of suspension.

We shall, in this chapter, develop and illustrate this point with viewers' reactions to *The Cosby Show*. This is not an argument of merely passing interest: it implicates the whole process of watching television with having social significance. Television provides us with pictures of the world, of *our world*, and the knowledge that most of these pictures are fictional does not immunize us from believing in them. The beliefs we form become part of the context within which we understand who we are. To understand prime-time television, then, is to understand an important part of the way we view the world and ourselves.

TALKING ABOUT REALITY

One of the more curious aspects of our attitude toward television is that most of us feel far more able to comment on the merits of TV

fiction than on news or current affairs. It is revealing to think about *how* people talk about different forms of television.

People will often charge the TV fictions that they dislike with being "unrealistic." Most qualitative audience studies are peppered with such remarks, praising or damning TV programs because they are or are not "real." Although many TV fictions strive for realism and can be subsequently held accountable, this is a criticism that could more appropriately be leveled at TV news. More than any other TV form, news purports to represent reality. We might, for example, accuse TV news in the United States of giving an unrealistic portrayal of Central America, or crime, or the president, or simply the world we live in—yet we prefer to criticize forms we know are fictional.

Why do we do this? Not simply because viewers assume unquestioningly that the news is "real." Most of us find it difficult to get close enough to the news to make any form of critical judgment. A detailed analysis of TV talk suggests that most people feel more able to evaluate TV fiction because it seems much closer to their own lives and the world they live in than does TV news. The worlds of soap operas and sitcoms are often worlds TV viewers can relate to—and if they can't, that becomes a direct ground for criticism. The contents of TV news, contrarily, often might almost be beamed in from another planet.

TV news, as a form of communication, is thus deeply flawed; but we are more concerned here with how it contrasts with TV fiction. Though the pictures of the world painted by news programs often seem remote, the visions conjured up by sitcoms, soaps, and drama series intrude far more intimately into our lives. As Ruth Rosen (1986: 46) has commented, it is fairly common for people to see characters on TV more often than they see members of their own family. These characters become part of our social milieu, people we can gossip about and discuss in the familiar terms that we use for friends or acquaintances. Further, the stronger our emotional investment in a character or situation, the harder it becomes to separate fantasy from reality. Actors and actresses who play characters in soap operas regularly report that they receive mail for their characters and that many people engage them in the everyday world as if they were that character. For actors and actresses playing the part of villains, this is not always a pleasant experience.

Television allows us to regularly invite a select group of people into our homes. Though most of these people are fictional characters, their regular visits create a sense of familiarity that is hard to resist. These visits are all the more pleasurable because the visitors are "real" enough to be incorporated into our lives. Even if we know, in the end, that these TV characters are too good to be true, we enjoy, in a very real

sense, having them around. Some people in our study articulated that feeling fairly clearly:

The part of me that gets sucked into TV really wants to go over and have dinner with the Huxtable family, 'cause I feel like it's one of the few instances on TV where I've watched it on a regular basis, and feel something for the characters and kind of wish they were real people and someday bump into them, meet them.

He's so likable, and I get the feeling if he were your neighbor or your relative, you'd love to see him come in. I do, anyway. I think he's just a real nice guy.

Even when TV's characters are demonstrably different from anybody (anybody real, that is) we know, the familiarity may still remain. Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes, in their cross-cultural study of audiences of *Dallas*, discovered that this response does not depend on our having economic or cultural characteristics in common with our televisual visitors. For example, regular *Dallas* viewers from outside the United States developed a "feeling of intimacy with the characters," and viewers' conversations about them have

a "gossipy" quality which seems to facilitate an easy transition to discussion of oneself and one's close associates. It is likely that the continuous and indeterminate flow of the programme, from week to week, in the family salon invites viewers to invest themselves in fantasy, thought and discussion (Katz and Liebes, 1985: 32).

Once we allow ourselves this degree of familiarity, it is possible to see how fantasy and reality fade quietly into one another, how our TV friends and acquaintances take their place within our "real" world and jostle for attention and support with our "real" friends and family. This blurring of the distinction between fantasy and everyday life was a constant feature of nearly all our respondents' comments. Particular attention should be paid to the way in which people speak about characters on the show, not just to the specific content of their comments.

We found that many viewers were so engaged with the situations and the characters on television that they naturally read beyond the scene or program they were discussing and speculated about them as real events and characters. During discussions of the prehistory of the show, for example, Cliff and Clair's lives before their appearance on television are sketched out by viewers as if they were real people with real histories. One discussion among upper middle class white respondents focused on how Cliff must have taken care of the kids when Clair was going to law

school. One female respondent remarked: "He had to have used babysitters. He had to have used babysitters." It did not matter that the prehistory was concocted by a scriptwriter to give some background. For this viewer, the situation *demand*ed additional explanation.

Similarly, another (black) female respondent, while reconstructing for us the show she had just watched (which included a comic story told by Clair of a previous visit by their evening's guest that resulted in the next door neighbors calling in the police to sort out a quarrel over pétanque) remarked:

What was interesting was if the neighbors were white. . . . You always think of that, you know. At any rate, the police came, and you wondered if the police were white or black too, because they got right into the game.

Once again, the realm of speculation goes well beyond the fictional confines of the script. This respondent's comments reveal quite a remarkable degree of engagement with the messages of television.

In a similar way, viewers would, without any prompting, speculate about the motivations of the characters. In the episode we showed our respondents, Theo's mother catches him looking at girly magazines that are thinly disguised as car magazines. Although some viewers found the ease with which he gave in to Clair unrealistic, one woman read it as a sign that he wanted to be discovered with them so he would be forced to remove them:

RESPONDENT: *And I think he really wanted his mother to find that magazine.*

INTERVIEWER: *Oh, why's that?*

RESPONDENT: *No, I think so. You don't think so? I think it's kind of a boy's ploy because they um, I can see it with my kids at school. They will leave things around hoping that you will find it but not wanting to say please find it.*

INTERVIEWER: *Why would he want her to find it?*

RESPONDENT: *I don't know whether he was just going through that phase and . . . he didn't want to get rid of it because she said get rid of them, he did. . . .*

INTERVIEWER: *Someone [in the interview group] made a comment like "Gee, he sure behaved."*

RESPONDENT: *Yeah, that's what I'm saying.*

In this instance the viewer was intermingling her experiences as a schoolteacher with what she saw on her periodic visits to the Huxtable household and creating a complex web of motivations to explain Theo's behavior.

We also found that many viewers empathized to such a degree that they quite freely attributed flesh-and-blood feelings such as sympathy and jealousy to the characters. In the following case, a white middle class woman refers to a scene in another episode when a fellow student had planted a joint in Theo's book (later found by Cliff and Clair):

I felt sorry for Theo because having, you know, been in school [as a teacher] just up to a little over a year ago, I have seen that happen. Kids do that to each other, set each other up . . . or plant things to protect themselves. Not necessarily to set the other kid up, but just to protect themselves, sometimes. . . . So that really bothered me, to see poor Theo having that done to him.

Discussions of relations between characters thus take on the tone in which one discusses one's friends and family. The following is a discussion between four of our respondents (three female and one teenage male) concerning the relation between Rudy and Olivia:

F1: *Rudy to me now is getting sort of grown. She's different than when she first started out.*

F2: *She's so different, mean. She's not the nice little girl she used to be. She's so mean to . . .*

M1: *Rudy's not cute.*

F2: *. . . to the little girl. Her . . .*

F3: *The new little girl?*

F2: *The new little girl.*

M1: *She's cute.*

F2: *She wants to be the boss.*

F1: *. . . jealousy.*

F2: *Yeah. The one with the ducks. She didn't want her playing with her little duck. And I thought she was too big to play with that duck anyway.*

F1: *She's been the baby in the family all along.*

F3: *Is this the grandchild? Who is that little child?*

F2: *Is that Elvin's?*

F3: *Oh, Lisa Bonet's.*

F1: *Lisa Bonet's daughter.*

F3: *Oh, okay.*

M1: *She's wonderful.*

F1: *The little girl. She's taking Rudy's place 'cause she's really good.*

F2: *I think maybe that's, you know . . . and then another baby comes along, and she's been the baby for so many years.*

F3: *Look how old she is. She's what, twelve? Eleven?*

The respondents are not only commenting on the fact that the youngest Huxtable daughter is not as cute as she used to be; they explain why this might be. Notice also that no one questions the blurring of the line between reality and fantasy. Lisa Bonet the actress is the mother of Olivia the character. There is no need to question this relationship because Lisa Bonet *is* Denise.

This blurring, this mixing of fantasy and reality, is always present in our engagement with the symbolic forms of our everyday lives. At its most straightforward, it can be expressed as a wish that everyday life were like television. A middle class black teenage female respondent commented on Clair Huxtable:

I think she's nice. She's patient. Sometimes I wish Ma would be patient. She's just a nice person. She's not mean, and she's patient, and she's a good wife and a good mother.

A young black couple, identifying themselves with the Huxtables' sense of loyalty and love, exhibited a similar sense of blurring in discussing the sexual infidelities of their friends. The wife commented:

We feel like fish out of water. It's . . . maybe we want to identify with the Huxtables. You know [with] that couple that they love each other, they stay home.

Thus the justification for their own lifestyle comes from another part of their significant reality, television. Cliff and Clair are part of a circle of friends with whom they can form an emotional attachment and alliances of identification against their other, real friends.

We are returned to television's central ambiguity: we know that these characters are not real, yet we gain pleasure from them in part because they *seem* real. Of course people know that Clair Huxtable is a fictional

character enacted by Phylicia Rashad. They can distinguish between character and actress, especially if prompted to talk critically about a TV show; yet how Clair functions in terms of viewers' maps of the world is the same as if she were real. Television characters, especially those whom we recognize as realistic, become part of the framework within which we make sense of the world.

THE ABSENCE AND PRESENCE OF CLASS

An alien researching life on Earth would certainly learn a great deal by scrutinizing satellite broadcasts of television from the United States. The inquiring alien might, nevertheless, ponder various curiosities: Who collects the garbage or cleans the streets? Who builds the houses, farms the land, or works on production lines to produce all those delightful gadgets? Strangest of all, How does the economy sustain all those lawyers and doctors, who seem to be everywhere? This planet, the alien might conclude, is chronically overpopulated by members of the middle and upper middle classes.

These curiosities are, in a different way, also confusing to us earthlings. We may realize, unlike the alien, that normality in the TV world is rather different from normality of the world beyond it. But because we spend so much time watching television, we are prone to lose our grip on distinctions between the two. A good example is *The Cosby Show*, which is about a professional family whose social class makes it unusual in the real world but decidedly average among the privileged populace of television. So, do we see its members as normal or as belonging to a privileged class?

One of the most striking features of our audience study is the ability of most people to see it both ways at the same time: to combine an awareness of the Huxtables' upper middle class status with the idea that they are a normal, everyday family. These contesting strains of thought were manifested repeatedly. The apparent contradiction is only resolved if we make the distinction between the TV world and the world beyond it. One group of respondents saw the Huxtables as "very typical" and "universal" in one context and "kind of a highbrow, upper middle class professional family" in another. Thus we are able, as this white working class viewer did, to see the Huxtables as both typical and atypical:

The little sister is adorable. I like to see the interaction. I think it's very typical. I think it's great to show that they're just like we are, in fact, they're higher socially than we are, have more money.

The Cosby Show has a particular place within the genre of situation comedy. It has developed a style that is credible rather than ridiculous.

It explores the comic potential of the everyday, offering us neither slapstick nor absurdity. As one respondent put it: "They keep themselves down to earth" so that they appear to be, in the words of another, "just like any other family." In some ways, the show has successfully incorporated the day-to-day realism of soap opera, without the melodrama, into situation comedy. As we watch the characters develop through a myriad of everyday, domestic events, they take on a three-dimensional quality; the more stereotypical characterizations common to African-American sitcoms are avoided.

The notion that the Huxtable family is "just like a real family" was one of the most powerful themes running through our focus group discussions. Few respondents saw *The Cosby Show* as simply an enjoyable fantasy; rather, the show was praised repeatedly for its "realistic" and "believable" qualities. These qualities were grounded in the viewers' perceptions of their own reality. The Huxtables were "real," in other words, because they were "regular," "everyday," and "typical"—just like the viewer.

The plausibility of such an assessment, we might suppose, depends upon similarities between the viewers' world and the world they are watching. Middle class viewers should, for example, find it easier than working class viewers to relate to an upper middle class television family like the Huxtables. What we discovered in this connection was rather surprising: in most cases, working class respondents were just as likely to relate the Huxtables' world to their own as middle or upper middle class respondents. The reality of television, in other words, does *not* seem to rest upon the reality of the viewers' own environment.

The following comments were all made by people whom we might expect to have little in common with the Huxtables—working class white people:

[The Cosby Show is] really making a satire of life the way they're doing it, average everyday things that happen every day. . . . Because what they do, is they really carry it off and say these are the things that can happen to anybody, I don't care if you're white, black, pink, yellow, or green; this happens to everybody in everyday life. That's what they do. They just satirize everything that happens in normal life.

It's good family humor. You can put yourself in that situation, and I can see where it can happen; and it really makes fun of the everyday type of thing and all that.

[Compared to other black sitcoms] Cosby is much better. . . . The actors are much better, a lot funnier, more stuff you can relate to, they're a lot funnier than the other two. . . . Like Amen, the daughter

who dates the priest, or whatever he is, you know she's just not realistic, from my point of view anyway. With 227 and Jackie, I don't relate to her or care for her at all as an actress, and she's hardly a realistic person. You can get involved in The Cosby Show and feel that you understand it; you're a part of it and can relate to it while on these other shows there's not even usually a whole plot; it's just kind of there.

It's an all-round easy-going atmosphere. . . . It's just family oriented, where you can relate to something it brings to mind in yourself. It's not too far-fetched; some sitcoms get so far out.

Those teasing moments they had, when she found the magazine, you know, and he was saying "Oh, I read it for the articles"; you know, that's the kind of humor I kind of relate to, you know; you grow up that way. . . . That's just so normal, it would happen like that.

[I can] relate to it a little more than the others. The others seem to be, I mean, that Amen is not quite a family show. I don't think it's . . . although some people's families are like that. I shouldn't say that; it's just not like ours.

It is interesting to note that the sitcoms these respondents dismiss as being less realistic (and more difficult to relate to) contain characters who are, in a material sense, much closer to themselves than the Huxtables are.

The ability of working class people to relate to the Huxtables has also been observed in a recent study of female audiences by Andrea Press (1991: 156):

Cosby is another show which garners praise from working-class women for its overall portrayal of American family life. Several working-class women, when initially describing the show, immediately bring up their belief that *Cosby* is a show that portrays a "typical" family. . . . "I watch the Bill Cosby show. It's an average family, working parents, nice house, not wealthy but . . . and that to me is more an American family, you know. Like people from other countries see *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, they think that's how we all live. Watch *Cosby*; I think that's more of a typical American family."

The Cosby Show is playing a kind of conjuring trick with its viewers, one that is made possible by the distorted image of the world that television in the United States presents. The Huxtables are an upper middle class professional family, and we can recognize them as such. Yet within the middle class world of television, the Huxtables are no longer privileged but normal, "basically a regular family." Thus working class viewers can relate to a family that, in the world beyond television, would be separated

and distanced from them by the many class barriers that determine our social lives.

Press discovered that the viewers most critical of the show's lack of realism were not working class but middle class. Although this finding was also apparent in our study, middle and upper middle class respondents were still able to identify with *The Cosby Show* in much the same way. The following comments are from white middle class respondents:

We were in Provincetown, at a nightclub; there was one of those female impersonators. And this announcer came out and did a little comedy routine. There were a lot of same-sex couples in the audience. He took one look at Harriet and I in the front row and said, "Oh, the Cosbys are here too." He had us pegged.

[Regarding Theo's sisters teasing him,] I could feel a sense of annoyance, because I have little cousins who do that! So I can relate to that.

The one point where the men are trying to sneak out to play the game. . . . I was just thinking, we're having the Superbowl this Sunday, and I don't know where I'm going to be Sunday, but I can just picture the same sort of thing happening . . . or I thought of Thanksgiving where that will happen.

What makes it funny is that it's humor around universal developmental issues, the kind of stuff that adolescents go through, the kind of stuff that young-marrieds go through, the kind of stuff you go through with your first baby, your first job. They're situations that everybody can relate to and in which nobody has to get put down; you don't have to be really crass. And I think that's one of the really nice things about the show.

Just a typical scene of American families . . . something that probably occurs in every household.

[Regarding A Different World] I watched it a couple of times, and I didn't care for it too much. . . . I didn't think the characters were as realistic. I think I like this because, yeah, and we have three kids too, and you could, I could, relate. I related to so much of some of the things that took place, I think that's why I like that one better.

The very title of *The Cosby Show*, we should remember, encourages viewers to assume it has a real-life identity. The lead character, Bill Cosby, plays with the boundaries of fact and fiction by blurring the line between himself and the character he plays. Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable and Bill Cosby are, in this sense, the same person. The viewers we spoke to

would often refer to the Huxtable family as "the Cosbys," a confusion facilitated by the well-known similarities between Bill Cosby's real family and his televisual one. The notion that the Huxtable family is based upon the real-life Cosby household increases its claims to verity, clinching the perception that what we are watching is, indeed, just like real life:

I kind of think Bill Cosby could be Cliff Huxtable.

I like it. I think that's the way he is really, in real life with his own kids. I'll bet that's how he is. . . . That's how he is as a father, he's not acting.

The proof of the Huxtables, in other words, is Bill Cosby himself. As one respondent put it: "I like Bill Huxtable."

COSBY CONTRADICTIONS

One distinction we can make between the responses of middle class groups and working class groups was that, despite being much closer to the Huxtables' world, middle class viewers were much more likely to add caveats to their praise for the show's realism. There appear to be two reasons for this: middle class viewers feel a greater obligation to be critical of television (as a form of intellectual display), and they are in a better position to judge what is, for a professional family, realistic. Other studies (Press, 1991; Morley, 1986) suggest that, in much the same way, working class viewers are more able to question the realism of working class TV characters.

What does the ability to question *The Cosby Show's* realism signify? Our findings suggest that it means remarkably little beyond a tolerance for the kind of cognitive dissonance we have already described.

Many of these interviews followed the same pattern. Group members would begin by praising *The Cosby Show* for its "realistic," "true-to-life," and "everyday" representation of a "typical" family. Later in the discussion, the same respondents would criticize the show for its *failure* to be "realistic" or "believable." The coexistence of these contradictory attitudes was never resolved or (with one exception) confronted: the later judgment did not appear in any way to negate the earlier one. One respondent, for example, singled the show out as more "believable" than other situation comedies:

I would say that they appear to be a little bit more of a, like believable as real people. . . . Granted, um, they're a well-off family, and they may not be like most real people, but they're believable people as opposed to some.

When the discussion shifted toward individual characters, however, this respondent made the following observation:

I don't see him as a doctor. You never see him as a doctor. . . . He's not going to be home that much. . . . You never see him in his office; he's home all of the time, and he's essentially home more than his wife is. . . . He's a house husband, that's what he is. Um, so as a working man that's supposed to be a doctor and all of that, it's just totally unbelievable.

The show's characters are, at one moment, "believable as real people" and "totally unbelievable" at another.

Another group found the show "very realistic":

I think the way that he [Cliff] deals with people is pleasant and realistic. I think the way he deals with the kids and stuff, in terms of being stern and yet making jokes at the same time, is also very realistic. . . . I think he's a believable character.

—and yet "not realistic":

Well, we've talked about this about a lot of shows—he's never busy. He's never working, it's not realistic. . . . The time factor of the parents is usually so unrealistic. They're working, but yet they're never really frenzied, and they have so much time and energy to put into each of their kids' problems.

These apparently contradictory judgments are possible because the viewer is speaking (albeit not self-consciously) from two different points of view. When the show is praised for its realism, the viewer feels a closeness and an intimacy with the show. As these respondents put it:

I think that Cosby is much more true to life [than other sitcoms]; you can put yourself right into the picture. Just about everything they do has happened to you, or you've seen it happen.

There's no stereotype whatsoever, in these people [on The Cosby Show]. I think everybody can relate to somebody in that show—black, white, anybody.

Yet, when the viewer imposes a sense of critical distance, the show suddenly looks very different:

That show shows a really unrealistic view. I mean, can you think of anyone whose wife is a lawyer, and the husband's a doctor? I'm talking anyone. I mean, that's blowing off the spectrum. And then if

you talk about black or white children, or anybody, that are raised in this area, there's no way that they can really get the proper upbringing.

I don't think he [Cliff Huxtable] is a doctor type at all. . . . He's always happy, always rested, never on call. . . .

And never sued in five years that he's been on. An obstetrician, in five years of practice, would be sued, I'm sorry.

As these comments suggest, the show's perceived realism is a source of pleasure, enabling the viewer to identify with the characters and situations on the screen and to incorporate these identifications into their own lives. Viewers were therefore apt to link their enjoyment with their belief in the show's world: in this mood it is, as one white middle class viewer put it, "believable, and you laugh, and you relax, and it flows along." In many of the group discussions, there was a gradual shift to more critical and analytical thinking, to a perspective in which the show's status as a TV program is foregrounded. In the groups quoted here, the discussion moved from a comfortable and enjoyable acceptance of the show's realism toward a more critical appraisal. From this critical distance, it becomes appropriate to emphasize the differences between the show's world and viewers' perceptions of reality. This, ultimately, leads to the generally dismissive assertion that, after all, "it is a comedy. You can't expect it to be realistic."

It is significant, in this respect, that the one white respondent who saw *only* the fairy-tale side of the Huxtable family was also the only white viewer in our study to actively dislike the show:

If you're looking at the real world . . . [Roseanne] is much closer. And people don't like that. That's why [Cosby] is such a beautiful fairy-tale. Because it is so unreal in relationship to most people's lives.

My God, you're going to bring a crack house into Cosby? Come on, where do you think all the crack houses are? Who in hell do you think's running the crack houses? You think these are all white people selling dope? No! It's all his people selling dope, running the crack houses, and having all the problems. But we're not going to talk about that in this show. This is the show that ignores 100 percent of all the problems that exist in this country.

The only black group to unambiguously reject *The Cosby Show* did so for much the same reason, even if the reality they are measuring the show against is rather different:

The whole show is fake to me. It's just fake. . . . That show tonight, none of that was real. Like the two guys were out there, in the cold. What was it they were playing? . . . Hey, you don't see no black people doing that. They sit around watching football games and drinking beer. You know what I'm saying? It's just . . . it ain't real.

I can't stand her [Clair]. . . . Because she's not a typical black person. She walks around dressed up all the time, now come on. We don't walk around dressed up all the time. She's a lawyer and we understand that. She comes home from work . . . how come her hair's not in rollers? How come she can't walk around with her blue jeans on? . . . You know what I'm saying? Now come on.

[Theo]'s not your average black teenager either. Because the way he's under his mama all the time. . . . They're not like that. They say "hi," and they play their jiving music, as I call it; and no, not a black typical teenager. [He's] different from my two brothers. His room is always clean, and you never see him arguing—and my brothers argue all the time, call each other names and, you know.

These respondents' unusually vehement dismissals were based upon an inability to accept as real the images offered. Unlike most other viewers, they were simply unable to suspend disbelief.

The fact that the contradictory responses are more common suggests that our attitudes toward television are complex and ambiguous. Among other things, it reveals that the ability to construct a critical view of televisual realism does not immunize us from confusing television with reality. We may be as capable of dismissing *The Cosby Show* as "totally unbelievable" as we are of immersing ourselves in its "reality." The realization that the show is a fantasy does not stop us from discussing it as if it were not; as one white woman put it, "I forget sometimes, it's just a show, you know."

The implications of this are profound. We can no longer assume that the content of TV fiction does not matter simply because TV viewers understand that it is fiction.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO *COSBY*

We have detailed the ways in which TV viewers assimilate *The Cosby Show* into their worldview to emphasize the significance of such assimilations. Our study suggests that *The Cosby Show* has the capacity to influence people's perceptions of the world. It is from this starting point that we shall build our argument about the role of *The Cosby Show* in contemporary U.S. culture.

However skeptical we sometimes appear, most of us place a frightening degree of faith in television images. Andrea Press (1991: 163) recounts a conversation that exemplifies this trust: the discussion turns to women attorneys, and the respondent is asked to compare the only attorney she knows with the fictional attorney, Clair Huxtable:

INTERVIEWER: *You know one woman attorney. Did she remind you of Clair?*

RESPONDENT: *No. Not even closely. Because she wasn't as feminine as Clair Huxtable.*

INTERVIEWER: *Who do you think is more typical of women attorneys?*

RESPONDENT: *Clair Huxtable.*

INTERVIEWER: *Why?*

RESPONDENT: *Well, because I've seen other ones on television like on the news and things like that and they are all more feminine than the one I knew.*

This response is, in one sense, quite remarkable: TV images are not only trusted; they are given more credence than real-life experience. The respondent does attempt to legitimate her evaluation by referring to lawyers "on the news" (i.e., *real* lawyers) rather than in drama series like *LA Law*, *Equal Justice*, or *The Cosby Show*. However, because women attorneys are so rare on TV news and so plentiful in TV fiction, it is probable that her judgment is based more on the latter than the former.

Once we begin to think how central television is in most people's lives, this judgment, this faith in televisual truth, becomes less remarkable and more understandable. Because fictional characters invited into our homes come to appear routine or commonplace or predictable, we are bound to become more credulous.

What makes *The Cosby Show* particularly worthy of consideration is the fact that all its leading characters are black. Although (as we shall shortly demonstrate) *The Cosby Show* is no longer exceptional in its nonstereotypical portrayal of African Americans, it has shifted the TV world toward a new vision, a world in which blacks, and, moreover, *realistic* blacks, can be members of upper middle class society.

This shift, as we shall later suggest, is of great consequence. For the time being, let us simply assert that *The Cosby Show* matters because it informs people in the United States about the position of African Americans in the society.

The respondents in our study, both black and white, had no difficulty making statements about black people based upon their experience of

the Huxtables. The whites' statements often amounted to observations about black people in general, observations that their actual experience of black people did not equip them to make. The following remarks from two middle class and two working class white respondents were typical:

It looks to me in the family, that she [Clair] . . . that she's really the driving force behind the family. . . . I think that's very common, for one thing, in many black households.

But look how far we've come from the days of Archie Bunker, you know, when a black. . . . He was tolerant . . . but it was a different kind of tolerance; it was almost like he was being a big guy . . . to include them. . . . So now, I think it's good for people to see black families can own nice homes and have careers and have nice clothes and have goals for their children, where for so long, it was never even thought of, considered.

I think there's a lot of black families out there that are similar to the Cosbys that they're not such a stereotype black. You know, talking like the blacks' slang or that kind of stuff . . . being portrayed as intelligent, white-collar workers and that kind of thing. I should think, from a black perspective, The Cosby Show is more complimentary to blacks than some of the other shows. You know, the 227, the older woman hanging out of the window watching the neighbors walk by and stuff like that, which is reality in a lot of situations; but in terms of . . . it just seems to be heavy into black stereotyping.

I like the fact that they're black and they present a whole other side of what you tend to think black families are like.

It is interesting to note that these remarks include the phrase "I think" or "you tend to think," thereby acknowledging, albeit implicitly, that their understanding of what the show tells them about black people is not always confirmed by their own experience.

White viewers were a little more confident when they used the show to determine differences between black and white behavior; this respondent, for example, could speak from a position of at least partial knowledge:

Their [the Huxtables'] antics are just so . . . I mean white people don't act like that . . . just even their expressions.

A white person or someone else would be more tense. . . . I would tend to say most white people, if we're going to generalize, then I'd say white people, are much more tight, uptight. Like I can just see a white mother coming in and flipping out.

Although this respondent can assume knowledge of white people, both statements contain an assumption that was rarely challenged in the white focus groups, namely, television and *The Cosby Show* tell us something about black people. In the next chapter we will examine the nature of people's attraction to the Huxtables and how the strength of that attraction places *The Cosby Show* in a privileged position with respect to the ways in which U.S. society understands race relations.

3

The Success of *Cosby*

In the previous chapter we argued that television affects how viewers make sense of the world. It is not usually one episode or one series that influences the way we think; it is the aggregate of messages that enter our minds. These messages are part of our environment and, now that television has become ubiquitous, are consumed as automatically and unconsciously as the air we breathe.

Why, then, have we chosen to focus on a particular series in our analysis of contemporary television? And why *The Cosby Show*? *The Cosby Show* deserves this attention not simply because of its tremendous and enduring popularity but because it has influenced the way black people are represented on prime-time television generally. As we will demonstrate in the next chapter, the ratings success of the series has unleashed a host of black upper middle class characters across prime-time television. The show's impact upon the content of prime time goes far beyond the cozy Huxtable home. The show has been pivotal in redefining the way African Americans are depicted on television in the 1990s.

In this chapter, we consider what lies behind the power and influence of *The Cosby Show*. Few persons, inside or outside network television, would have predicted that the show would have such an impact. Why has *The Cosby Show* been so successful?

To answer this question fully, we need to address at least three different but connected issues. First, what is there in the show's writing and acting that attracts viewers? How, in other words, does the content of the show relate to people's needs and desires? Second, what is omitted from the show that, if present, would change viewers' identification and support? What does it not talk about; what themes cannot be introduced (without endangering the level of viewer support)? Third, what are the broader social and cultural contexts that make the show's content resonate with meaning and significance? What are the currents within the broader

society that make *The Cosby Show* so important for viewers? In this chapter we will deal mainly with the first of these issues, leaving the others for later chapters.

At one level, *The Cosby Show* is involved quite explicitly with issues of representation. In a society that is still largely divided along racial lines, the series is concerned with presenting images of a black family that are both positive and popular. In so doing, it addresses its white and black audiences in different ways.

For the white audience, it wants to make racial differences irrelevant. The white audience must be able to look at the Huxtables not simply as a black family but as an "Everyfamily." White viewers must be able to appreciate, understand, and identify with the Huxtables without forgetting that they are actually looking at a black family. It asks white viewers to accept a black family as "one of them," united by commonalities rather than divided by race. If *The Cosby Show* succeeds in this laudable mission (and we shall demonstrate that in many ways it does), then it would be easy to argue that the series plays a positive and progressive role within a racially divided society.

For the black audience, the series wants to provide a mirror that does not reflect the prejudices and stereotypes of white perception but instead shows black people as they would like to recognize themselves—strong, independent, intelligent—a mirror that shows the *dignity* of black American life. There is evidence from our interviews that black viewers evaluate the show in precisely this way.

The remainder of this chapter examines these issues in relation to white and black viewers more closely. Although the tone of this chapter is celebratory, we warn the reader that this celebration is only short-lived. The show's influence goes beyond its noble intentions. Later in this book, we shall demonstrate that the show has less salutary ideological repercussions, which clearly were not envisaged by its makers.

WHITE VIEWERS AND POPULARITY: THE SAME AND DIFFERENT

It became obvious during our interviews that Bill Cosby's presence as a comedian is an important part of the show's popularity. We have already suggested that Bill Cosby, the actor, and Cliff Huxtable, the character, often merge into a single identity: For many, Bill Cosby *is* Cliff Huxtable. The Cosby-Huxtable persona was specifically identified, by almost all of our white interviewees, as a significant part of the show's appeal. The following comments from a variety of white respondents are typical:

The way he acts, it's really good . . . his expressions and all that stuff. I don't think anyone could really get that across, like he does.

I think that he's very funny. I don't think it would be as funny—he's very funny. He has a lot to do with it, all of it together.

You have to remember that black or white, Bill Cosby is such an amazing talent that I mean, if he were Hispanic and had an Hispanic family, it would still be the top.

It's his facial actions; it's his body language.

He's so likable, and I get the feeling if he were your neighbor or your relative, you'd love to see him come in. I do, anyway. I think he's just a real nice guy.

The one white respondent who disliked the show (dismissing it for its sugar candy fluffiness) was still enthusiastic about the actor behind Cliff Huxtable: "I just love the man." When this viewer watched, he watched for Cosby and not the show. For this viewer, Bill Cosby transcended race—he was neither black nor white. Cosby "is a special person. You can't really put him in a context with all of television, because he is exceptional." This "transcendental" quality was frequently alluded to, as this upper middle class man put it:

When we see Bill Cosby in concert, I don't look at a black person. I see Bill Cosby up there. . . . If he was white, I think I would still enjoy his humor as much.

As indispensable as Bill Cosby is to the success of the series, it is more than simply a showcase for his comic talent. He is backed up by creative writers and a cast able to carry through his vision in a way that creates a powerful bond with a diverse audience. Apart from specific references to Bill Cosby the comedian, four additional popular themes emerged from our interviews with white respondents.

The first, oft-repeated theme was the show's ability to present everyday events and activities believably and realistically. The second theme appears to contradict the first: namely, the pleasure brought about by the show's elements of fantasy. We found that viewers seemed to enjoy the show's realism and escapism at the same time. Third, a number of viewers enjoyed the show's depictions of the minutiae of family life. Finally, the Huxtables appear to reflect a black culture that white audiences enjoy being exposed to (in many cases because of its familiarity rather than its difference). It is the intermingling of these themes that allows the show's style and content to interact so positively with the needs and attitudes of the white audience.

“THEY’RE THINGS THAT HAPPEN DAY BY DAY”

Most white respondents’ initial answers to the question “What do you like about the show?” centered, curiously enough, on its apparent ordinariness, on its ability to capture the typical, mundane aspects of everyday life and to draw humor from them. As a female respondent put it in comparing the show to other sitcoms:

I think that Cosby is much more true to life; you can put yourself right into the picture. Just about everything they do has happened to you, or you’ve seen it happen.

The fact that the show breaks from the normal narrative mold of television drama, in which the bizarre and the dramatic become the norm, was regarded with relief and pleasure by many white viewers:

So The Cosby Show, what we’ve seen of it, there aren’t many crises; they’re things that happen day by day.

In real families you don’t have an outrageous situation every week.

It is more realistic than most of the other sitcom shows. . . . This could happen. I could see this type of thing happening. . . . The other shows I think you have to suspend [dis]belief.

In relation to the particular episode that respondents watched before the interviews, many male viewers identified strongly with the competition between Cliff and Dr. Harman. Clearly, competition and fraternity accord with many men’s perceptions of their masculinity. The show, in characteristic style, succeeds in poking fun at this aspect of “masculinity” without actually undermining it, as these comments suggest:

I liked when they were arguing about which ball was closest, because I can imagine competitions I’ve had with my friends or relatives who are close; it’s almost juvenile that you’re doing it, but it’s the nature of the sport nonetheless. That really conjured up images in myself.

I could relate to Cliff and his doctor friend wanting to sneak away from the girls and wanting to go out and play a sport ‘cause they were both looking forward to it all week and had balls in hand when they met; and Clair was determined to have them stay in and enjoy conversation with the men. . . . I could associate with that as a sports addict myself. Wanting to go outside while the girls enjoy themselves and their own company while the girls wanted me to stick around and have a good time with them.

I guess sometimes when me and my buddies are playing games and things, we get into the same kind of thing, about quarreling about the ball or how close it was, or something; even when we’re playing badminton, we’ll argue about who got the point and who didn’t.

The identification between the viewers and the events depicted in the series runs so deep that the Huxtables are frequently seen as behavioral models. Cosby, like a televisual version of Abigail Van Buren or Ann Landers, advises us on how to live our own lives. One female respondent, for example, confessed to being “not mature” enough in handling her own problems with male teenage sons and sex magazines after she saw the way that Clair handled such a problem. She wished that she had handled a similar situation as Clair had:

I had to laugh because the only time that I found girly magazines in my son’s room, first of all they knew it was something I wouldn’t approve of, was when I turned the mattress one time. . . . There were like three copies of one of those magazines, which I definitely would not have wanted in the house, and I remember taking them downstairs and burning them in the incinerator. I did not behave maturely and say, you know . . . it was after I burned them that I said, you know, “This morning when I was turning your mattress I discovered something under the, you know, that really kind of bothered me and if you’re looking for them, they’re gone.” Now that wasn’t very mature, but that was my reaction; I mean, it was totally different than hers.

These comments suggest that the series does more than pleasantly wash over its viewers; it touches them, creating feelings of involvement and intimacy. This level of identification is important because it suggests that the series has a more profound influence than a show that is passively consumed and subsequently forgotten.

Although viewers referred generally to the typicality of the Huxtable family, Theo, their only son (played by Malcolm Jamal Warner), seems to be a key figure in the construction of this “ordinary family.” Respondents often referred to him as a “typical teenager” and usually as someone they liked. As one of our female respondents put it: “He is an awfully nice kid. I mean, if you could have a teenage boy who was like him, you’d be so lucky.” Despite this comment, this likability is not based upon perfection—quite the contrary. It is his amiable awkwardness and foolishness that make him so “typical” and so likable:

He’s a typical juvenile boy . . . any teenage boy that sees a girl that he says he’s attracted to is going to fall and do stupid things like he did and make a fool of himself in front of her.

I compare myself to him, when I was in high school; and he's not a show-off or nothing, he's just someone in the family.

Theo is more your typical boy, you know, scatterbrained. He gets himself in trouble; he doesn't do as well in school. We find out this year that he was dyslexic.

In the episode that had just been viewed, Theo is trying very hard to impress a young lady (Lindy) who is visiting the Huxtables with her parents. His clumsy teenage machismo is seen as endearingly ordinary by women:

That's very realistic. . . . That's what boys are like. . . . They'll make up things like they're interested.

and, in a rather different way, by men:

I can kind of sympathize with . . . Theo, in the awkward position; here's this gorgeous smart girl who's doing a lot of neat things, and he starts feeling kind of weird about it. I get brought back to that sense of being nervous. This new person you don't know, you're not fully in touch with what's making you feel funny around this person; but you can watch him stumble all over himself—I can pretty much relate to that.

One notable thing about these viewers' comments is not only what is said but the way it is said. Theo is discussed as a real person. One female respondent, for example, made the following comment about Theo's personality:

I think he's the only son in the family and that perhaps, I think, maybe makes him more social.

This is a thoughtful psychoanalytic comment about a character who, lest we forget, does not actually exist. One male viewer similarly analyzed the relationship between Theo and his father with approval:

I don't like his character on certain levels, but I like the relationship between his father and him. It looks to me like . . . that Cliff really has Theo as his favorite. He got all these girls, but he's only got this one son. One son to carve the turkey, one son to do this, etc.

Other viewers talked about the delight they experienced at seeing Theo's interactions with his buddy Cockroach:

But the two of them together is a riot. I mean, they work and talk so easily together over mutual problems, and it's really a delight to watch.

Perhaps the best assessment was given by a male respondent who observed of Theo:

That's real real because he's got the picture-perfect parents and he's a D-C student. So that's real. That's real real!

“IT HAS THAT KIND OF AIRBRUSHED QUALITY ABOUT IT”

As we observed in the previous chapter, in the course of the interview viewers would move from talking about the typicality of the Huxtables to commenting on their fairy-tale lives without any apparent sense of contradiction. Many comments revolved around Clair Huxtable. Few white respondents referred to her, in contrast to Theo, as typical. Clair is, in fact, admired for being atypical and a positive role model. The following comments reflect the degree of respect that she commands from the audience:

I like what she does with her children as far as she can “swipe and dye” them; she's almost like a cat, you know. She can “swipe and dye” them in loving care and kindness to them, you know . . . like a lioness, you know. You sit there and see a lioness that is very proud and protects her cubs and everything.

It's a perfect image of a working mother. She stands for what she thinks and all that stuff. Doesn't take any back talk.

She's a very good representation of women. I think she carries off the whole scene . . . with humor and dignity and intelligence. And confidence. . . . She dresses beautifully, yeah. And she always looks so beautifully groomed. Yeah, she's an inspiration.

She's gorgeous, she's well educated, she's well dressed, has a good sense of humor. She deals with the kids, certainly not like in real life, 'cause she's never angry, never loses her cool, but she's fun to watch.

Notice the connection in this last comment: “certainly not like in real life . . . but she's fun to watch.” This sense of the show as fantasy, escape, and entertainment seems to contradict the celebration of the ordinary. How can we resolve this paradox? Many viewers referred to the show as being “easy” to watch and resisted any suggestions that

might have dragged the Huxtables down into "harder" territory (for instance, questions about what the show would look like if the Huxtables were working class). This suggests that when people praise the show for its realism, this is not a straightforward reference to some objective state of affairs. It is, rather, an easy realism that people desire and not the sort that reminds them of the unpleasantness of ordinary life. The following comments reflect this attraction to an easy believability:

It's things that could happen and situations that are very close to children growing up. . . . They always look nice too; . . . they have ethics. They're neat and they always look nice.

Right; believable and you laugh and you relax, kind of and it flows along, but the other thing [other sitcoms] . . . the yelling and the screaming, I just, I don't know.

The *Cosby Show* appears to have cultivated a space where fantasy and reality are allowed to merge—without our suffering any philosophical qualms. As a male respondent put it: "It has that kind of airbrushed quality about it—everybody's a little too cute in the things they do, but aside from that, it still seems more realistic." This response was, nevertheless, unusual in its direct juxtaposition of the two responses. Most viewers tended to talk about fantasy and reality at different and discrete moments. The following comment is by a female respondent who had earlier praised the show for its realism:

*But maybe what you love about them too is that nobody wants to see repeats of what they're living. . . . It's totally a fantasy to me, a fairy tale; where I think if you bring in the real humdrum of what really life is all about, it would be a total bore, tragic smashing bore. The everyday struggle of living, I don't think people really want to see that all the time; they live it too much, they don't want to see that. They say "Please give me somethin' extra funny and special," and "Oh, look at their gorgeous sweaters." I would much prefer to see a little bit of fairy tale and make-believe rather than reality one-on-one because we know reality, we live it daily. . . . It [The *Cosby Show*] is entertainment.*

The references to the sweaters and the immaculately designed backgrounds were very strong in the white responses, particularly in working or lower middle class focus groups. Upper middle class respondents, however, were more likely to use the notion of fantasy pejoratively. For working class respondents, the enjoyment was more self-consciously aesthetic:

This is nice, it looks good and it's kind of, you accept it; they have a beautiful home and everything is okay.

I liked the background. I like to look at the background on a TV program, I enjoy that. I don't enjoy dismal backgrounds. . . . The setting, the clothes, that type of thing. And I enjoy watching Phylicia Rashad.

Here we need to pay attention to what is left out of the picture that makes it more attractive to white viewers (we will examine this issue more closely in a later chapter). The celebration of what is essentially an upper middle class lifestyle is the flip side of the rejection of a working class lifestyle. Indeed, it is this rejection of the discussion of broader societal issues in favor of interpersonal and family relations that appears to be the key to the popularity of the show:

I like the fact that they're not a working family. The money just seems to be there; they don't even seem to be working. A working class family, you'd almost draw relations to, they'd have troubles at work, or something like that, so you'd start thinking about something you'd have to do at work. It's almost a separation from that. It's never real issues in the real world; it's always family matters.

"IT'S ALWAYS FAMILY MATTERS"

Although identification with individuals and with specific situations is an important factor in the show's appeal, we found that it was the Huxtable family that attracted many people. The show's emphasis on family dynamics was a constant topic of focus group discussions, particularly for women. The following comments were made by women from a variety of class backgrounds:

They're always very warm. . . . They have a real, real family.

Family issues. . . . The real true family things. . . . I think it's more of a typical family.

Basically a regular family.

I like the sense of family they portray. The family is a real tight unit. The mother and father get along, and they give a sense of that to their children, I think, so that the family is real important to them and they solve their conflicts in their family.

It's also extended family, yeah; it's his parents, her parents, the grandparents are a type or part of the family. . . . It's like everything

is pulled into the family instead of the family just separating and all doing their own thing.

The broader sociocultural reasons for such strong identification are beyond the scope of our study, although we did find hints in our respondents' comments about the emotional needs that the show might be addressing. One woman in her early twenties speculated that the stress on family themes and situations resonates particularly strongly with people who have seen their own families disintegrate:

The show is successful because it's a family unit, and nowadays, that's real hard. . . . A lot [more] of my friends have parents that are divorced than parents that are still together. . . . I know with my friends, that everyone is looking for that stability.

The same woman also claimed that *The Cosby Show* played an important ritualistic function in the mid-1980s in university dormitories:

. . . six girls, so it was like, all of us would go and it was either, one person's room, we'd go in to somebody's room and we'd like pack in the room and sit down and watch this snowy TV, but we had to watch Cosby.

The stressing of family themes is nevertheless not enough to generate the type of emotional bonding that we discovered in our interviews (after all, literally hundreds of series have attempted to use this strategy of identification). To understand this requires filling out the "content" of the family themes. Cliff Huxtable's character seems to be key to this. A number of people mentioned how much they liked the way he interacted within the family:

I like how he plays it with children; I like his role with them. Because he treats them not as equals, but he doesn't look down on them and treat them like he's the father or the image of anything.

I basically love watching him [Bill Cosby], in that father role when all the kids are going crazy. It reminds me, well, my family's obviously a lot different. But it kind of reminds me of what it must have been like for our parents who had tons of kids around. Those moments when you're like, "oh man, too many kids."

Parents in particular responded positively to the models of family discipline the show provides:

I get a kick out of the way that the Cosbys discipline their children. . . . It's always done with humor.

One thing I like about the show is that the parents are always seen as the ultimate authority and that their role is not questioned. . . . The kids still see the parents as the ultimate authority within the family structure, which the majority of shows today don't do any longer.

The result of such bonding and identification is to grant the Huxtables a privileged place in viewers' lives in terms of how viewers saw themselves. Many viewers remarked that the Huxtables reminded them of their own families so that watching the show is like holding up a mirror to a pleasant time gone by. We are watching our own past with more than a hint of nostalgia.

He's what I think a father should be; and a mother. . . . They both are there for their kids. That's what it portrays to me. . . . I don't think of them as black. . . . They're just people and they are nice and they treat their children good and they seem to get through all the situations pretty well; and I like the wisecracks, which reminds me of my own very much.

I enjoy it just as much [now as before] because my kids grew at the same time so I could relate to a lot of the things going on as the kids got older.

This was a recurring theme: the Huxtables were like friends whom we had seen grow up and go through different stages. The audience and the family had taken the same journey:

[The show] has progressed the way the family progresses anyway.

I've been watching it for years and I know all the kids' names and everything. I've been watching it for so long. I've watched them go from small to where they are in college now.

The strength of the familial reflections is so strong that, although viewers were aware that family relationships were idealized representations, even white viewers identified with the Huxtables:

My sister once said that our family reminded her of the Cosby family . . . because my husband, he acts a little bit like Cosby a lot.

You can just identify with this family, even if they're a different race.

**“THE COSBY SHOW’S BLACK,
AND THAT FITS”**

Does this form of close identification between white viewers and the Huxtables mean that race has ceased to be a factor in the appeal of the show? Are the Huxtables, for white viewers, so like “us” that they are seen as white? On one level, this is undoubtedly so. We should be careful, however, not to misinterpret this response. For white respondents to see the Huxtables as “just like white people” (as most of them did) requires *first* distinguishing them as black *before* assimilating them into their own (white) cultural milieu. Consequently, in what appears to be an embrace of a liberal, nonracist consciousness, the fact that the Huxtables are black is seen by many as a good thing. These are some of the most enthusiastic comments on this point:

But it makes it more interesting to me because he’s black and it’s so good, it adds to the show.

It wouldn’t be as fun [if the Huxtables were white]. . . . They wouldn’t be into those kind of things, like when they bought this picture at one time. . . . They wouldn’t get into that type of thing so much.

It’s like a little bit of America, black American history.

I feel they bring in a lot of black culture to the show.

I love it that it’s black. And I love it because it’s black because it shows a fun side of that.

We are so wonderfully different and that’s so beautifully different . . . their cultures are different, they’re fabulous. No one wants to be the same as everybody else, you know.

I’d say I’m pretty aware of it [black culture]. It seems like they’re always digging into black culture somewhere along the lines of the show . . . the music. . . . They all seem to know the old jazz community. Once, one of the kids was doing a project for school, I think it was on the marches, the Civil Rights marches, and so, I think it was Theo, anyway, over the course of the show, all the grandparents came over for dinner and they all talked about what it was like to be there. . . . It seems like every show, or a lot of shows, they touch on some aspect of black heritage, so you’re a little aware of it.

The other side of the coin is they’re willing to try to remind you—and I think that’s fine—that this is a black family. . . . Through the

speech patterns, through the guests, through enjoyment of black culture. They’ve talked about black culture.

Although a majority of white viewers in our study tended to be less effusive, it was clear that the Huxtables’ race, for many white viewers, was a positive thing. Certainly, these viewers were aware that they were watching a black family, but they seemed to be grateful that this was not something the show repeatedly stressed. The reminders, as befits the rest of the show’s style, were gentle. One viewer contrasted *The Cosby Show* with other black sitcoms that she felt discriminated against whites. In other sitcoms, she suggested:

Well, they [whites] are not even hardly included in the show . . . so it’s like the black community staying among itself rather than showing an integrated, you know, like you see certain shows on Cosby where they go to a literary meeting or something and there’s a mix of whites and blacks, it’s nice, seemingly, effortlessly, so it tends to remove that while keeping a black culture they obviously have.

It is an effortless blackness. A “nice” blackness } Unlike the not-so-nice kinds of blackness exhibited on other shows:

I mean it’s not like a jive show, like Good Times. I don’t think it’s aimed at, I think those other shows are more jive, more soul shows, say as far as the way the characters are with making you aware that they are more separate from. . . . Where Cosby is more of American down the line thing, which makes everybody feel accepted and being a part of watching it.

It is important to note that this notion of “being American” does not make the Huxtables white—it extends the notion of American to include black families like the Huxtables. As a female respondent put it:

It fits them—like the Golden Girls, they’re white and that fits—Cosby’s show’s black and that fits.

Through this complex mixture of what is talked about and what is not, the writers and actors behind *The Cosby Show* have accomplished an exceedingly difficult task: they have made the difference of race a matter of harmony rather than division, even if only for half an hour a week.

It wouldn’t be different if they were white, which is good because you’re able to relate to them as people regardless of their color. Which I think he succeeds on in great measure that way, and eventually that’s

what we want to be able to do with all people. Just think of them as people, not as Asians, not as blacks, not as whites.

That's what the show brings across to me, that black people are just like us . . . having a regular family, the same problems just like us, having to go to work, even if you might not want to every once in a while, you know, so that's how, maybe one way they bring across that blacks are, have the same problems, likes, dislikes, that we might or might not have.

It's not an issue for me, watching the show, black or white; it all is the same in that show anyway. . . . They're just like any other family.

Many other white viewers described to us how they sometimes "forgot" that the Huxtables were black. We do not think that this is some disingenuous attempt by the respondents to appear tolerant and pluralistic. Racial difference, on *The Cosby Show*, really did not seem important to them. That white Americans living in a society still significantly divided along racial lines can view an explicitly black family as "just people" who have the same problems, dreams, and aspirations as themselves is a significant and progressive development in our popular culture. We shall deal with some of the negative aspects of this phenomenon in Chapter 6.

BLACK VIEWERS AND POPULARITY: "THANK YOU, DR. COSBY, FOR GIVING US BACK OURSELVES"

Although there are many similarities between the responses of black and white audiences (the celebration of the everydayness, the desire for family), one discourse clearly distinguishes them. The vast majority of black respondents discussed the show in a context almost entirely absent from white interviewees' comments: among black viewers, there was widespread concern about TV racial stereotyping. We will examine this in greater depth in Chapter 7, but we wish to stress that the issue of the popularity of *The Cosby Show* for black audiences has to be continually set against this backdrop. For black respondents, this was a TV program that, after years of stereotyping, showed black people as they really were. After decades in which the images of black life had been distorted by white writers and directors, *The Cosby Show* reflected a world that black Americans recognized as their own. Interviewees would no doubt endorse jazz singer Lena Horne's gratitude when she thanked Bill Cosby "for giving us back ourselves."

We will not quote black respondents at length on the themes that white audiences identified with, but we do wish to briefly demonstrate that those themes existed in the responses of the black audience. Like white respondents, black viewers found it difficult to distinguish between Bill Cosby and Cliff Huxtable, although this point revolved less around a discussion of his comic abilities and more on him as someone viewers knew well. Comparing Bill Cosby's wife to the fictional Clair Huxtable, this middle class respondent commented:

It seems that this series really reflects his life where in real life Camille, as he said, is the backbone. And I think I kind of see that in there with Clair, and he kind of comes in there. I think he's the softer touch. I think the kids can con him a lot quicker than they can ever con Clair.

The boundary between Bill Cosby and Cliff Huxtable seems even more blurred for black audiences than for white audiences. As a black male respondent put it:

He portrays a good father, yeah, and he portrays a good father not only on this program but it follows him off the set and on the set. . . . He always has time for the children. If they got a problem, he's always there.

Blacks also shared with whites the focus on everyday activities and concern for the family as being important in their enjoyment of the show:

The Cosby Show does not necessarily resolve itself. It's like daily life or life that day or whatever. It doesn't have to end and have this big triumph or whatever at the ending. It just, you know, when you go to bed at night, whatever happens that day is over and you go on to the next day, but not with some big climax at the end of each night; and that's the same way The Cosby Show is.

The family gets up, they go to school, they go to work, they come in, they have dinner together and they have the good times together, they have the bad times together, you know; and the father doesn't take any exception, you know; he treats the children they way they are supposed to be, you know? Cosby is always portraying that. . . . It's just like sitting with a family being with me when I watch the show.

This stress on the family does nevertheless appear to mean something quite specific to black viewers. The context within which black audiences locate family themes gives those themes a special significance. Specifically,

this context is the discussion around the disintegration of black family life in the United States (see Chapter 4). Although white viewers (with no particular stake in the debates about the black family) saw the Huxtables as a black *family*, black viewers (with a vital stake in those debates) saw a *black family*. In contrast to the prevalent image, and indeed reality, of black families without fathers, *The Cosby Show* affirms that there is another side to the picture. A female working class respondent identified this as the context within which she found the show a source of pleasure:

It's a real objective story line, you know, how a black family lives and how they see things. I think that way they are trying to describe that black families are just as normal as white families. They have a functioning house, normal, just like white families.

“WHEN I LOOK AT THEM, I LOOK AT US”

One of our main goals is to demonstrate how people derive meaning from television, not just in terms of a single program but also in terms of how the messages of television interact with discourses in other contexts. The meaning of a show is different for different audiences. Our ability to understand the significance of what audience members say depends on how well we can identify the ways in which disparate discourses interact with each other.

The level of identification of black viewers with the Huxtables is very high, and although identification occurs similarly in the white responses, its intensity for black viewers puts it on a different plane. For black respondents, the show mirrored images with which they could deeply identify. Unlike white respondents, black respondents saw themselves as personally implicated in the images they were talking about. Respondents repeatedly made statements about how they saw themselves, their fathers and mothers, their brothers and sisters, and situations from their own history in the show.

Furthermore, these statements were made with an understanding that this had not happened before on television. The pleasure of black respondents and their level of emotional bonding with the Huxtables reveal not just the creative ability of the show's writers but also the frustration that black Americans had felt with past portrayals of blacks. As a female respondent put it: “I know some of the prior black programs *I haven't found myself in*. Now like *The Jeffersons*, there's not a scene there that I can identify with.”

The groups that we might expect to have identified most closely with the Huxtable family are upper middle class blacks, who really were like

the Huxtables, and so they did. As this daughter of an upper middle class black family put it:

They dress nice. They have nice clothes. And when I look at them I look at us. Because we're not poor. We don't live in a bad community in a ghetto somewhere. We live in a nice neighborhood like they do. I go to a nice school. We have nice things. So I look at them I say that is a black family because it's like us. . . . But the three of us, we have a nice family. We, it's not like we agree all the time. Or fighting. We don't do that. So in a way we are like them.

The strength of identification did not necessarily depend upon a viewer's class position. The sense of new discovery, of finally finding a world that they recognized (moreover a world that was a considerable source of pride and pleasure) was a constant feature of the black interviewees' responses.

I like Clair. I do see a lot of me in her in terms of the position that she plays and some of the situations that happen in terms of the children. . . . It's just some of the things . . . just like . . . like they saw me someplace and wrote the script, you know, and then put it on television.

I love this because this is more me. And I relate to it better and I think it's. . . . It also lets my kids and my grandkids know, hey, this is what it can be if you want to. I think it will always be that way with me.

That's what I was, the way she [Clair] gave the message to her son, that's the way that I always did with Brian and my children and grandchildren. You know, it's always the right message.

I like a lot of things in her that remind me of myself. The one that . . . when she . . . the kid decided she didn't want to go to college. And she said, “I want my seventy thousand two hundred forty-nine dollars and two cents. And I want it now.” I've felt all the money I paid for my son I'd say it comes to about that. . . . I like a lot of things she does. I like him too. He's a likable guy. I see a lot of my husband in him too.

Black viewers continually referred to the characters of Cliff and Clair as being exactly like their parents. There is such a sense of familiarity that one female respondent felt she did not have to think when watching the show, that everything was so real that it was like living in it:

I can see some of my father in him because he's got this restraint. It says, "I'm not going to get angry." . . . Those types of things, those are real situations I can hear my parents, I can hear my father, I can hear people that I've grown up with, doing the same thing. Or thinking the same things, maybe not saying it. . . . There's something when it's extremely real, you know, some of the stuff is actually in real life versus imitating it. . . . I don't like to think when I watch that show, and I really don't have to think. It's really all right there.

The same respondent also talked about her feelings toward Clair revealing that this "hearing" of people is not some idealized representation of the past nor a longing for a golden time gone by:

I don't like to talk about Clair. I have mixed feelings about Clair. There's a tone in her voice. . . . It's an air about her sometimes that just gets in my way and I don't know what it is. . . . It's an attitude. . . . There are times when she gets that pitch in her voice that just drives me crazy. It really does because my mother had that same way. . . . I hear it in Clair and it irritates me because it used to irritate me with my mother. It's real, I guess, because people are like that, but it irritates me.

Many other viewers also talked about seeing and hearing their parents in the characters of Cliff and Clair.

My daddy can do stuff like that. He's not a joking person, but he can certainly let you know where you are, like Cliff. . . . My dad. He's like that, he's not a doctor or anything like that but the same kind of thing. . . . He's always right there in the middle whatever goes on in the family.

When Vanessa stayed out too late with her boyfriend and her mother goes—Vanessa was yelling downstairs to her boyfriend—her mother goes, "Now the next time I tell you to be quiet, I want you to do it." She was stomping up the stairs. Reminded me just of Mommy. She was stomping up those stairs. She said, "Now when I tell you to do something, you do it. You understand me?" I swear that was my mother.

But you kids have gone through that. I mean what did you say that . . . I'll always remember that first show when Bill Cosby . . . you kids kept saying, "Daddy, you write his lines?" You know your father is quick to tell you, "I brought you into this world. I will take you out."

Notice that in this next comment, a daughter in a family group who is speaking of the connection between the show and her family makes them virtually interchangeable:

They [Cliff and Clair] remind me of these two [parents]. Like on The Cosby Show when they get mad with each other over simple stuff and he tries to coax her back in. They remind me of these two. They're a trip these two.

One respondent even talked of how she "knew" Cliff, as if she was discussing a good friend:

I think he's very . . . a lot like things I've seen in my husband too. And that was before I knew Cliff Huxtable. And it just . . . it makes him laugh at it sometimes because sometimes my kids will say, "Come here, Mom. This is you," or "That's Dad, that's Dad."

The same types of comments were made about brothers and sisters and about specific situations the show depicted. This deep identification reinforces the link between viewers and the Huxtables. As one female respondent put it: "We're like the Cosby family."

"WHAT KIND OF QUESTION IS THAT FOR BLACK FOLK?"

It should be clear that the often told joke of *The Cosby Show* being like an Oreo cookie (black on the outside, white in the middle) would not be appreciated by our black respondents. Although there were some interesting tensions (which we examine later) regarding the Huxtables' "racial status," they were always resolved by respondents in favor of black. Overwhelmingly, the Huxtables were seen by black viewers as "really black." Although this was also the case for white respondents, they arrived at this judgment in a different way. No white viewers thought it strange to be asked how aware they were that the Huxtables are black. In contrast, though many black viewers silently granted the legitimacy of the question, some could not even comprehend it. This reaction came from an upper middle class female respondent:

How aware? How aware? . . . Just look at them and you can see that they are black. You're not talking to white folks now. What kind of question is that for black folk?

When asked what made the show "black," white respondents pointed to things such as the artwork on the wall, the music in the house, and the political issues that the show raised. (The famous episode involving

the march on Washington was often mentioned.) Even Hispanic respondents based their answers to this question on things such as the lack of white actors on the show, the music, the art, the politics. In short the Huxtables are black for whites and Hispanics because of the visible manifestations of black culture. They are what an outsider would see as indicators of a different culture.

Although black respondents also mentioned these visible signs of race as important, for them the most important indicators were those that an insider to the culture would recognize as defining that group: the language, the mannerisms, the "tone" and "feeling" of black life. The late English cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1961: 48) identified something that he called a "structure of feeling" that exists in every culture, the recognition of which is based upon experiencing it rather than learning about it secondhand. The responses of black audience members suggest that *The Cosby Show* has been able to capture this structure of feeling.

Often black respondents would contrast *The Cosby Show* with a white show to demonstrate its blackness:

I think those [white sitcoms] are unreal situations, and if the Huxtables were white, they would have to be along those lines of the Family Ties type thing versus the Huxtables. . . . The mannerisms and the conversations and the phrases that Bill uses are something that I think are more typical in the black family.

If you take the two shows [Cosby and Family Ties] and, you know, put 'em side by side and give them the same scripts, I don't think they could come across as what happens in the black script and then the same thing would be the same in the white script. . . . There's just something about the way blacks do things, say things, react to things that whites would do in a different way. . . . Or sometimes it's the relationship between the father and the son. And sometimes they hit hands. And I know that whites do that now, but it seems to flow so easy when the blacks do it than when you see two white folk doing it.

The centrality of language, not simply what is said but the way in which it is said, also emerged as a defining feature of the show's "blackness":

If it was a white family, I don't think I would look at it as closely, you know. It's just, you know, sometimes you can hear like Clair with a little accent to her voice; you know, like an accent that only black people would understand, you know. Just like there's slang that white people understand, there's slang that black people understand. I think that sometimes when they use that kind of language in the show

. . . I mean it's not slang but just like when they have the, you know, how they dance to the jazz and everything.

They do inject some things that is typical of us. They haven't lost their identity. . . . They will inject some remark or phrase that only we use.

One reason is that we talk differently. I can close my eyes and tell it is a black show. They still use in the show street language, they are comfortable at home. . . . Clair is a lawyer, you never see her use legal jargon, or whatever; she talks just like a black woman. I was raised by a black man and woman and this is how they talked, so when I close my eyes I can totally tell the difference. Also we have a tone to our language and it comes from our history. It is a singing type, very melodic type of talk, or conversation that is just natural for our people. So if you are watching an all-white show, you will not hear that; you would hear the standard English. You will not hear the melodic sound of the voice as you can when the Huxtables speak.

At other moments the comments focused on behaviors and relationships that black respondents recognized as unique to black culture:

I also think it said something to us about relationships between black males. See, white folks don't think that black males love each other. They don't think we love each other. They don't know that there are guys who hug and kiss as black males say "Hey man, how you doing." . . . I mean guys who are like family to you. Yeah, white folks need to see that.

I accept them as black. . . . There are times when they do certain expressions, certain behaviors that . . . that cause you at a conscious level to acknowledge that they are a black family. . . . Most time when I'm watching, I'm just watching. . . . I know it's a black people's situation or family situation but I don't think of it.

A number of respondents also mentioned the manner of discipline that the Huxtable parents adopt as characteristically black:

I just know it's a black family, that's all. . . . For instance when she's chastising a child, you very seldom see a white person chastising a child like that. . . . But I mean blacks have been chastising their children like that ever since. . . .

It is, in sum, the "whole environment" of the Huxtable household that makes it black:

I look around and I look at the art work in their house, I listen to the slang, the black English that is used in the show, which is extremely important. I mean those are things that I happen to look at; it's the whole environment of the show which makes it black.

LOOKING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

Thus far, it appears that *The Cosby Show* has succeeded spectacularly in both of its objectives. Through new forms of representation of black people, the show seems to be breaking down racist attitudes and opinions among white viewers. At the same time, this is not achieved by presenting an implausible picture of black life. Black audiences are attracted to it precisely because television is offering for the first time a picture of black life that they see as real.

We should caution the reader, however, against premature optimism. Our interviews also revealed *The Cosby Show* to be fostering other attitudes and perceptions that may lessen and even reverse the direction of the show's progressive movement. We believe, in fact, that *The Cosby Show* also has a profoundly negative influence on racial equality in American society. The roots of this problem lie not just with the show, but with the images of class that it reinforces. This argument has serious consequences for the whole debate about stereotyping on television, and the remainder of this book is therefore devoted to it.

4

Black Experience: Images, Illusions, and Social Class

GLORIA (to Edith):

"You've never told us how you feel about black people?"

EDITH BUNKER:

"Well, you sure gotta hand it to 'em. I mean, two years ago they were nothing but servants and janitors. Now they're teachers and doctors and lawyers. They've sure come a long way on TV."

—dialogue from TV sit-com *All in the Family*

The Cosby Show is part of a more general shift in the representation of black people on television in the United States. Spurred by the demands for "positive images" of minorities, the TV networks have been increasingly inclined to incorporate African Americans into the succession of cozy middle class households that parade across our TV screens.

Although a number of commentators have remarked upon this televisual trend toward black upward mobility, the extent of the change has not as yet been quantified. This is partly because measuring social class on television is extremely difficult: TV characters do not come handily classified in terms of income, occupation, and education. The social class of a character is often something we can only surmise on the basis of their general occupation or lifestyle, an inevitably imprecise procedure that makes any systematic content analysis tricky.