The Future of Television

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The television industry has endured many changes throughout the decades, including the ways in which people access shows. One thing that has remained consistent, however, is the roles of Black actors and actresses. In recent years, there have been efforts to deviate from the stagnant portrayals of people of color on screen, especially of African Americans. Some have argued that not enough reform has occurred. Television executives may choose to rely on the stereotypical roles of the token Black friend, the tragic mulatto, the aggressive Black man, the Black woman with an attitude, etc. because, in their eyes, those are the castings that attract viewers. People are more likely to watch a show with characters they feel are relatable to those they may have encountered in real life, and the ultimate goal of mass media industries holistically, aside from satisfying audiences, is to make money.

The typecasting, representing a person or their role as a stereotype, in the television industry, can be seen in a variety of shows and impact those of all age groups (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 2017). Studies have shown that young children are particularly impressionable, and their beliefs about certain races can be heavily influenced by how they see them portrayed on television. If the executives of this industry continue to follow the same formulas, then they could potentially “reinforce the image of white superiority and Black inferiority,” which has been the socially accepted norm for years (Stable and Jones, 1985). Television shows with considerably white casts also tended to average lower ratings than more diverse shows, which were popular among all racial groups (Levins, 2018). A few shows have tried to alleviate these effects by focusing on predominantly Black casts and placing them in situations that uplift the race or educate viewers on issues impacting Black communities.

One show that is exceptional at encouraging open-dialogue about real topics of concern is Freeform’s *Grown-ish,* a spinoff of ABC’s *Black-ish,* that follows Zoey Johnson’s collegiate journey with her friends and their experiences being young, POC, and educated. While Zoey and her friends evoke conversations about the class system, cultural appropriation, and mental health, among other topics, some characters in other series and films have yet to evolve. There have been rallying cries to diversify both television shows and movies, and minoritized groups have had enough with playing “stock characters including maids, thugs, and sidekicks with no lives of their own” (Nittle, 2019).

Another example of a show that was a step in the right direction would be Shonda Rhimes’ *Scandal,* which highlights the success of Olivia Pope, her fight against injustices, and her role in politics on Capitol Hill. Audiences watch how the depiction of the leading Black woman is as powerful, influential, and a force to be reckoned with. Olivia is not typecast as just another angry Black woman; she is portrayed as a strong independent Black woman who takes charge and handles a lot of illegal and otherwise problematic situations for high profile clients (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 2017). Still, though, *Scandal* does not fail to acknowledge that despite Olivia’s education, talents, and professional position, as a Black woman, she will always have to be “twice as good” as her white counterparts to “get half of what they have” (Rhimes, 2013).

In contrast to the progress and conversations seen in *Grown-ish* and *Scandal,* many Black actors and actresses are still playing stereotypical characters. These roles can be seen throughout shows such as *The Bold Type* with Kat Edison, who comes from a multiracial background and struggles to identify herself as Black (the tragic mulatto)*.* Also, Alex Crawford, who plays the token Black best friend with a troubled dating history, and Oliver Grayson, who is the typical Black LQBTQ man with interest in fashion. These commonalities can also be seen in *Grey’s Anatomy* with Dr. Miranda Bailey, who is, at times, regarded as the typical Black woman with an attitude. She was even nicknamed “The Nazi” in earlier seasons because she was strict and had high expectations for the new interns. Dr. Bailey is also immensely skilled and has proven that she is a more than capable leader but somehow always has a superior or must demonstrate her capabilities. Then there is Dr. Richard Webber, portrayed as an unfaithful partner, incapable because of his age, suffers from addiction, and had a mystery baby with a mistress. There are also the characters of Dr. Jackson Avery and Dr. Maggie Pierce, each with their own backstories and traumas but still following the mold in appearance and struggle.

There have been claims by some within the industry, namely James Baldwin in 1976, that “no black actor has ever lived up to his or her potential on-screen” (Bastién, 2017). Baldwin also argued that there has not been an equal opportunity for African Americans to pursue and be cast in atypical roles (Bastién, 2017). While the focus of critics has been primarily on actors and actresses, there are still disparities in representation across the industry, including directors, producers, writers, and creatives (Bastién, 2017).

The underrepresentation across both television and film industries is why campaigns like #OscarsSoWhite have emerged. Despite evidence that “diverse content yields box office success and high ratings,” the same stereotypes have been portrayed on screens for generations, and the same white men have been in control of who gets to direct, produce, write, and create (Levin, 2018). The current and marginalized generation of television and film industry professionals are demanding that changes be made regarding diversity and inclusion, and it is up to the television executives of today to listen to what the masses are saying and create a new norm. If business continues as it has for years, then one can predict that people will take more drastic actions than campaigns, possibly boycotting certain directors and producers or creating their own blacklist.

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