Minorities And Film Essay, Research Paper

Alfredo Rolon

Prof. Lawton

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Minorities and the Film Industry

It’s September, the kids are back in school, and it’s time for another new season of television. Another round of must see Felicity, Friends, and Frasier, with a side of ER and some Nash Bridges for dessert. Loads and loads of Caucasian males and females making us laugh, and cry. What you do not see are Black, Hispanic, or other minorities making us laugh, and cry. In this day and age, where everyone gets a fair shot at doing what they really love, the same can not be said for minorities in the film industry. More and more minorities are being turn away in favor of Caucasian actors. It’s not only actors that are feeling the pinch, its also writers, directors, producers, and network execs.

This past fall season, of the 26 new fall programs, none had a minority cast in the lead. A recent report by a San Francisco advocacy group found 80 percent of all primetime characters are white, 13 percent are black, and 3 percent are from all other minority groups.(The Christian Science Monitor). I don’t know about you but these numbers do not sit right with me. Attempts by the NAACP to fight this problem have been successful. In an agreement, which began January 6, the NAACP agreed with networks such as ABC and NBC, to hire minorities, to purchase more from minority businesses, to cast minorities in leads and other roles, and to ensure that diversity is brought about at other levels. However helpful this may be, minorities hope that such moves do not lead to token roles, with minorities chosen for their skin color, not their talent. “The second you start legislating a fix with quota systems, you open the door to people grabbing someone of the right race as a seat filler.” (Christian Science Monitor.) Says Samantha Corbin, a writer on The Practice. You might ask yourself “Why can’t we go back to the good old 70’s, when everyone loved Sanford and Son and The Jeffersons. Or the 80’s, when Bill Cosby ruled supreme and little Arnold made us cry laughing on Different Strokes.”. You might also be wondering when a minority would be moving in next door to the cast of Friends. The answers could lie in the industry’s most popular excuses.

The first excuse is economics. The business of TV is ruled by a simple declaration: Get the audience the advertisers want. The consequence is that major networks forgo the mass audience for a niche of young, urban, white people. Hence, the network schedule will reflect that. The networks are not exactly rewarded for promoting diversity. Take these examples from Entertainment Weekly:

1.NBC, the only network to make a profit last year, also boasts the whitest programming.

2.The WB’s Felicity draws similar numbers of 18- to 49- year-olds as the net’s two highest- rated black series, The Steve Harvey Show and The Jamie Foxx Show. But last season, Felicity commanded about $80,000 per 30 second commercial while The Steve Harvey Show and The Jamie Foxx Show each drew less than $40,000 for an equivalent spot.

3.The WB lost 20 percent of its black 18- to 49-year-old viewers last season yet will earn record ad revenue this fall.

The facts do not lie and it’s a wonder why none of the ad execs EW interviewed would go on record. Because the position they are defending is borderline racist: White viewers are worth more than black viewers, they won’t talk about it. And the studios share a similarly narrow view: Networks generate less ad money from “black” shows, so they pay less to the studio. Plus potential revenue from reruns and international sales of black series are smaller.

Second excuse is the plethora of networks today. Back in the old days there were only three broadly programmed networks. That all changed in the late 80’s with the launch of Fox, a network that found early success targeting minorities with shows like “In Living Color” and “Martin”. WB and UPN followed in ’95, allowing NBC, CBS, and ABC to edge away from the genre. But once these networks grew up, they also moved away from the genre. “The launching of new networks has become the black man’s burden.”, “When a new network starts, they go after the starving audience. Once they find success, the [black] shows are used and discarded.”(Entertainment Weekly).

The third and final excuse is the shows themselves. The problem today, according to the creator of The Jeffersons, Norman Lear, is that we are no longer making universal series with black characters. The black audience has its own set of stars and viewers. They have become used to seeing programs that have not only black faces but also have cultural references, things specifically for them. When they do not see that in a program, they do not think that it is for them. And the opposite is true. But the one true excuse and fear that networks have is a simple one, they fear bad ratings. With bad ratings come fewer viewers, and with fewer viewers is less money.

Actors and actresses are not the only ones to feel the pinch of discrimination. Behind the cameras and glitz and glamour, there are the people that run the whole show. They are the network producers and executives. “This business is extremely fair-unless you happen to be Asian, black, Hispanic, gay, or a woman.”. The person behind this quote is an executive at a major entertainment company, and one of the few minorities in a position of power in the entertainment business. It is important to keep the people in power diverse because they are the ones who make all of the decisions. If they were kept diverse, then some problems would not arise. Case in point: On an episode of Will and Grace on NBC, the original script called for a Salvadorian maid to be referred to as a “tamale”, which is considered as a slur to Hispanics. The term was later dubbed over as “honey”, before the broadcast, but Latino groups quickly condemned the usage. And the consensus among the minority community was that if there were more minorities executives, the whole situation would have been avoided. At the six broadcast networks, there are about 80 people in programming positions of vice president or above. Only twelve are minorities. At the WB, of the 11 upper programming level jobs, there are no minorities. “The decision makers are people who live in Bel Air, Malibu, and Brentwood.”, says Paris Barclay, who is the co executive producer on the show “City of Angels”, “They are just not sensitive to the fact that America looks different from the America that they are living in.”. At Columbia studios Chris Lee was the highest-ranking minority, and he was the only one. Except for Time-Warner’s Richard Parsons and Barry Meyer, there are no minorities at the top of the film industry. And there are practically none at the next tier either.

Minorities have come a long way in the last hundred years. From the slaves being freed after the Civil War, to the preaching of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, and all other great minority leaders and people who have paved the way for us. All of their work has paid of cause look where we are now. Now it is time to take over the entertainment industry at all facets. Just like the great leaders paved the way for freedom and equality, we will do the same. We will pave a new road in the entertainment industry, for all of the up and comers, so that there dreams an come true.

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