Six Hours Of Television Essay, Research Paper

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In looking at modern television programming there are hundreds of shows to choose from. Picking six hours of television to analyze from the prospective of an anthropologist is by no means easy. It is easy however, to talk about what our nation looks like to others who have never been here. Everyone is gorgeous, lives happily, and overcomes all problems, but more on that later. Four hours of the programming I chose is perhaps the most popular programming this year, consistently topping the Nielsen ratings. For the remaining two hours of programming I decided to look at two police drama shows, one that was brand new this season and one not brand new, but still going strong.

For the two hours of police dramas, I looked at programs with different angles. NYPD BLUE is the story of police detectives, and HIGH INCIDENT was a new show that looked at the view of policing from the ?beat.? HIGH INCIDENT represented one of the first t.v. shows to come from the SKG works of Steven Spielberg. However, just like Spielberg?s previous AMAZING STORIES, HIGH INCIDENT has already ceased to air. This could still change though, with the next season. Of the remaining four hours, three are on television every Thursday night, and include the tremendously popular FRIENDS, the SINGLE GUY, the hits SEINFELD and CAROLINE IN THE CITY, and the most popular show this year, ER. For the remaining hour I choose to look at THE TONIGHT SHOW, with Jay Leno. Between these shows there are many similarities and many differences. All of these shows can be directly compared with each other, having some of the same qualities. Looking at these shows in the perspective of an anthropologist some disquieting trends emerge. I will present the information as if an outsider, from another nation, were watching American shows, and believed what he/she was seeing to be true of what goes on in America.

Perhaps more realistic than the other shows, NYPD BLUE, and HIGH INCIDENT represent the closest what life is really like. To a foreigner seeing these shows, they would probably believe that America is a blood bath of crime and ill will towards other people. While this isn?t true the whole nation over, there are many cities like those portrayed in these two shows. Like the other shows I will discuss, these two have casts made up of predominately Caucasian males and females. Other nationalities, such as Asian, Afro-American, and Latino are sprinkled in just enough to make sure the shows are politically correct. To an outsider this would show that white males dominate society and life in America. While this is certainly true in some respects, it is unfair to portray it as such on television. Television influences the minds of too many people to show one class or people dominating over another, even when it isn?t obvious to everyone.

NBC?s Thursday night line up begins with the block-buster show FRIENDS, and ends with the number one show, ER. In between are sandwiched more shows that have been hits. Every Thursday begins with two hours of comedy. First on the list is FRIENDS. To an outsider FRIENDS shows the perfect male dominates female role of our society. The girls are ditsy, the blond especially so. Of the three guy friends, only one seems to not have all his brains. Two of the three guys have steady, secure jobs. For the girls it?s three steady, but perhaps unsecure jobs, and poor paying. The character Rachel works at a coffee shop and Phoebe drives a cab, not exactly something to build careers on. The guys make more money, even the character Joey, who?s job as an actor isn?t steady. Of course each girl is drop-dead gorgeous. To those watching in other countries, America is chalk full of pretty women waiting for a man to come sweep them off their feet. The next show, SINGLE GUY, has a slightly different message. America is also full of very happy married couples. The Single Guy himself is on a mission of marriage. That?s what the entire show is based on. So far an outsider comes to America, is gorgeous if you?re a woman, and a hunk if you?re a guy, has lots of friends, and is searching for a soul mate. Not quite America, but if you?re watching t.v. it is. Moving on there is SEINFELD. The characters in this show again have many friends. The twist to SEINFELD is that there all a little off the wall. A new angle, come to America, and still have lots of friends if you?re not completely sane. Again the show is composed mostly of Caucasian males and females, with even fewer minority appearances than NYPD BLUE. The last show of the two hour comedy stretch is CAROLINE IN THE CITY. Here there is a difference, but only a little. This time the women have power over the guys. But, we still have a Caucasian male/female cast. Not a total transformation, but it?s a start.

Okay, so now an outsider wants to come to America. After watching two hours of comedy and police drama shows he/she can make several conclusions about what America has to offer, and what he/she will find when stepping onto American soil. The cities of America are boiling with violence and aggression. There is hope though. It?s very easy to make lots of friends, a few of whom are the off the wall type. After making friends one should get married and then it depends on what gender you are. If you?re a guy you have a well paying, steady, secure job. If you?re a woman, more than likely you work in a job that pays much less than your husband?s. If you want to be an independent woman it?s possible, but harder to attain. One of the above mentioned six shows has a woman in a position higher than a man. That still leaves the number one show to deal with, and don?t forget the late night talk show.

ER, the number one show in the nation, and probably the most diverse of these six hours of television. What does ER show to an outsider. Well, for starters the men still dominate the women. There are more men doctor?s, and they seem to have more decision making power. Minorities are represented here, but for the most part they still hold lesser positions. There only nurses and physician?s assistant?s, instead of doctor?s or surgeons. There is however, the character doctor Benton, who is a surgeon, and is Afro-American. This program also shows some of the violence that an outsider can count on when coming to America. The biggest myth that ER shows is the level of treatment an outsider can expect to receive in any Emergency Department. While it is true that one can walk into any ER and receive prompt care for their health problem, about one-third the cases represented on the show are not treated in most Emergency Department?s in the nation. Knowing someone who works in an ER, I know this to be true. So now an outsider could come to America and expect to have anything wrong with them fixed at there local ER. Now after the seriousness of ER an outsider would need to see the lighter side of America. Enter Jay Leno.

The TONIGHT SHOW has been around for more than 30 years. If any show was to represent America this is it. Again the same old trend emerges, America is dominated by white males. The other late night talk shows are hosted by David Letterman, Tom Snyder, Conan O?Brian, and Greg Keener. It doesn?t take a nerd to figure it out. The difference between these guys and the actors/actresses from the other shows, is that they have more power, and what they say impact?s people more. David Letterman likes to say that he is the most powerful man in broadcasting. What applies to Jay Leno and his show applies to all the late night shows. An outsider watches Jay Leno, or any late night talk show, and believes that America is an easy going place, full of good-natured, humorous people. Bob Dole and Bill Clinton are good only for jokes, so why listen when they say something important? Someone who has lived in America for most, or all of their life understands what Bill Clinton and Bob Dole represents, and the jokes are just for fun. For an outsider Jay Leno is the guy to listen to, and Bill Clinton and Bob Dole are only good for jokes. The result is that watching a late night show could throw an outsider into a quandary, is America full of violence, good friends, or people who go around with little respect for authority figures? The debate is endless.

An anthropologist comes to America and watches six hours of t.v. and then goes back home and makes a report. An outsider watches six hours of t.v. before coming here to find out what really goes on in America. They would expect America to be full of beautiful men and women who are either married and happy, or looking for a mate and happy. They have lots of friends, and some of them are off the wall, the better to balance life. Men dominate women, and Caucasians dominate everyone else. A woman who wants to be independent needs to work hard, and even then it doesn?t happen a lot. Men have high-paying, secure and steady jobs. Women make less, have to usually do more of the grunt work (waitressing, etc.), and aren?t guaranteed a career. If you have a health problem, visit your local ER, and they?ll fix it in no time, no matter how serious that problem is. Lastly, life wouldn?t be complete without making fun of Bob Dole or Bill Clinton, who could be brother for all any outsider knows. Television is a powerful medium, and it needs to be used with care. As long as there are people who want to come to America they will watch American shows and conclude that America really is like FRIENDS, or ER, or NYPD BLUE. The sum of these shows does not equal what America really is. Added up, these six hours of television barely scratch the surface.

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