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| ***JUMP CUT*A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA** |
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| http://www.ejumpcut.org/spacer.gif | White racism and *The Cosby Show* by Mike Budd and Clay Steinmanfrom *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 5-12copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006 For seven years, THE COSBY SHOW easily won its time slot on U.S. television.[1] It was the most-watched program in the country for four years running, 1985-86 through 1988-89, dropping to second place in 1989-90. Indeed, when THE COSBY SHOW led the ratings there were nights when more than half the homes watching television in the United States were in its audience. But in October 1990, COSBY began to falter, even as the NBC network was paying the show's producers a license fee of more than $2.5 million a week. COSBY was faced with the return of its repressed, THE SIMPSONS, a sitcom cartoon about a working-class family with a nasty-comic ingredient COSBY would never include.In its first night of direct competition, THE SIMPSONS nailed COSBY to a tie with 29 percent of all the viewers in the United States. It was a triumph indeed, since its network — Fox — was available only to 90 percent of those with access to NBC and COSBY. With THE SIMPSONS continuing to peel off children and younger males, COSBY dropped to fifth in the ratings for 1990-91. Its slide continued in 1991-92, while weekly payments from NBC fell to $2 million. Although the show remained profitable, Bill Cosby, its star and guiding force, decided to stop production, preferring to appear in 1992-93 in a syndicated version of YOU BET YOUR LIFE, the old Groucho Marx show. Still, COSBY will likely survive in repeats on television for at least another decade. By then, the show will have attracted two billion dollars or more in commercial support.Profitable as it has been for broadcasters and for Cosby and his partners, the show may prove to be one of the last great mass-audience entertainers. As the commercial networks lose more viewers to cable, videocassettes, and video games, they pitch increasingly specialized demographics. THE SIMPSONS, for example, has a younger audience, more desirable per capita to advertisers, which it attracts with an edge that the ratings suggest alienates people on the far side of middle age. THE COSBY SHOW seeks to alienate no one. "I want to put a show on the air that people feel good about," Cosby says (Gold 45).Still, considering that nearly all its performers are African American and that racism[2] still befouls life in the United States, the mission of THE COSBY SHOW was difficult and its financial success remarkable. It had to represent race in a way that enabled audience members to feel good enough about themselves, sometimes for different and contradictory reasons, that they reliably returned every week, ready to attend to the ads of the corporations that paid hundreds of thousands of dollars a minute for access. By the time the show finished its first season on NBC in 1985, it deftly had won admission into millions of segregated European American homes.Cosby's popularity and skill was surely crucial to its success, but significant too was a critical aspect of his persona-he never raged or despaired. No doubt for many the show's goodwill carried with it some acceptance for African Americans, a GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER? for the Reagan years. Yet as several critics have noted, the price paid by the makers of TFIE COSBY SHOW for its jumbo audience was clear: silence on racism. "To have confronted the audience" about racism "would have been commercial suicide," says Justin Lewis, who has studied viewer responses to the program (164). An active supporter of progressive politics, Cosby acknowledges that COSSY did not mention racism for fear of alienating white viewers (Graham). "I agree with critics who say it doesn't do enough," he says. "But the people who're viewing it are having a ball with it" (Christon 45). Yet in what seems both cause and effect of cultural productions such as THE COSBY SHOW, polls show that most U.S. whites "no longer feel blacks are discriminated against in the schools, the job market and the courts" (Brownstein Ml).Four decades and more of struggle for civil rights have accomplished a tenuous change in public manners: Explicitly racist remarks are generally unacceptable socially. Yet the waning of blatant racism has in turn contributed to the absence in the media of evidence of continuing prejudice — privately articulated racism and the institutionalized oppression African Americans live with every day. Rarely acknowledged as integral to the social order, racism surfaces mostly as an object lesson from the past, or as exceptional disorder such as the blatant system of white supremacy in South Africa.[3] With so many in the audience evidently hostile to public racism and yet unsympathetic to critiques of more subtle and pervasive discrimination, it makes good business sense to discourage mention of contemporary racism, pro or con. This became clear in 1990 when CBS suspended commentator Andy Rooney from his job on 60 MINUTES after Rooney was accused of making racist comments off the air, comments he denied.[4] Such actions declare racism intolerable, even as racism threatens to return to the legitimacy of everyday conversation following the political reaction of the 1980s. For now, this absence enables whites to treat claims of discrimination by blacks as the special pleading of the undeserving. In defense of bigotry, European Americans can become empiricist to the bone.As co-creator and executive producer of the show, Cosby insisted that it never highlight racial conflict. He says if it had done so even once, every white viewer would have felt "this was set up to make you feel like you're the villain" (Graham). The success of THE COSBY SHOW with mass audiences of whites in the United States (and South Africa!) seems to have been dependent upon its refusal to include racism among its representations. Accordingly, to whatever extent the program constituted a gain in the control at least one African American had over black images on television, it remained bound by the racism its backers feared in its potential audience and by a commercial system governed by such fears.Yet even in reruns, there is a formidable argument that THE COSBY SHOW does deal with racism in vital ways. Michael Real, John D. H. Downing, and others contend that the show recoded race and, says Downing, "may operate as a reinstatement of black dignity and culture in a racist society where television culture has generally failed to communicate these realities, and has often flatly negated them" (67). For example, the "class position of the Huxtable family is likely to convey a positive message about black dignity" (68) — especially since the level of consumption and occupation represented on the show would easily put the Huxtable family income in the nation's top 1 percent. Many African American viewers seem to enjoy the show because, like members of any group, they take pleasure in seeing favorable representations of themselves on television (Gates 1; Jackson 96). While the show's compromises hardly please everyone, for large numbers of both blacks and whites, then, COSBY's image of painless racial harmony seems to have utopian appeal (Gray, "American Dream," 383).For many white viewers, however, this "positive message" may fortify racism at least as much as it dilutes it. As economic conditions worsen for most blacks in the United States even more than for most whites, more prosperous Americans no doubt fmd it comforting to imagine the Huxtables as viable role-models for the poor. Who wants responsibility for others' suffering? More than a few of our Anglo students and coworkers have told us they consider the show vital to U.S. politics because it provides constructive role models for blacks. For them, THE COSBY SHOW seems to confirm the belief that racial inequality in the United States remains a function of the inadequate aspirations of its victims.[5]More surely, the prevalence of the role-model discourse is a measure of THE COSBY SHOW's power as mystification: Cosby and his costar, Phylicia Rashad, are models of success in show business comedy, not, as are their characters, in medicine or law. Thinking otherwise misses the show's status as representation. The evident popularity of this discourse about the show-that the details of its fiction are *evidence* about the world-is symptomatic of its success as a realist text, one that ruthlessly disallows the presence of any references or forms that might break audience identification with its idealized world (Budd and Steinman). As Henry Louis Gates Jr. says, "There is very little connection between the social status of black Americans and the fabricated images of black people that Americans consume each day" (1).Yet European Americans seem all too willing to take THE COSBY SHOW and its wealthy characters as one sign among many that racism has declined. A March 1988 NEWSWEEK poll found 80 percent of whites seeing no need for affirmative action policies to redress racial discrimination, and in May 1991 the magazine found only 35 percent believing that Congress should do anything new at all to help blacks. Perhaps that is why, as Gates says, critics of the show fear that "it suggests that blacks are solely responsible for their social conditions, with no acknowledgment of the severely constricted life opportunities that most black people face."[6] Referring to the "minuscule integration of blacks into the upper middle class," Gates concludes that at this time "blacks are doing much better on TV than they are in real life" (40). This is of course true of nearly all groups represented on commercial television. The more affluent the fictional space of the show, the better showroom it makes for the ads.Yet given the public stakes, such plush spaces seem especially pernicious to the extent that they feature those with least access to them off the screen. As Herman Gray puts it, on television, "persistent struggles against domination are displaced and translated into celebrations of black middle class visibility and achievement" ("American Dream" 378). No wonder the show has made so many white TV viewers feel so good.This feeling makes up a key element of one of what Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott have called "reading formations." These are varying "grids of intelligibility through which different groups of readers read and interpret a text" (60). Viewers embittered by white racism will tend to see the show differently than those who imagine racism as unimportant or in decline. Black and white and other viewers cheered by what they see as COSBY's favorable representation of African Americans will tend to have one range of responses. Most white voters in Louisiana will tend to have another — in the early 1990s they supported David Duke, a former Nazi and Ku Klux Klan leader, for governor and U.S. senator. Gender positions might well structure response; some research suggests that white women may tend to be less disposed to racist actions and thoughts than white men ("Sex and Racism"). Class and personal experience also could influence how the show is seen. Individual viewers will oscillate between and through reading formations during an episode.Gates is right when he says that THE COSBY SHOW has been "remarkably successful at introducing most Americans to traditional black cultural values, customs and norms." Yet, as Gates says, the program's popularity might have something to do with the perception that its characters "have finally become, in most respects, just like white people" (40; also see Gray, "Black Male," 238). Lewis's findings indicate that many whites claim to "forget" that the COSBY performers are black when they watch the show (173). "They're upper middle-class, not black," said one (177). Lewis found that African-American viewers find whites' denial of the show's ethnicity "faintly ludicrous," in part because they see its marks of black culture vividly (194-195). Significantly, whites who claim "colorblind" viewings tend also not to see any need for affirmative action, which whites who value the show's African American ethnicity tend to support. Reading formations contain such contradictions as celebration versus denial of difference, are often constituted by them.Intersecting race, discourses of parenting, education, and family also organize reading formations for THE COSBY SHOW. Reportedly, an early plan called for Cosby to play a postal worker, a more typical role for a middle-aged black man in Reagan's United States. But by making both fictional parents professionals and the family distinctively upper middle-class, Cosby and his collaborators have brought into play a whole set of concerns and anxieties of the real upper-middle class, that most desirable of target audiences. (While most of the audience for COSBY remains middle- and working-class, the show favors more affluent professionals in its themes and appeals.) Committed to stressful, time- and energy-consuming careers yet also often to their children, such affluent parents are frequently anxious and unsure about their parenting skills. At least as commercial media and self-help books tend to represent the situation, what counts is not just the time parents spend with their kids, or its quality, but the problem of discipline and authority. Committed to modern, flexible, non-authoritarian parenting, they are often vaguely unhappy with its results. Too often their children seem disrespectful, uncaring, spoiled.Such problems result from longterm historical changes in the family. For decades, social critics have maintained that other institutions, including schools, service agencies, and especially commercial culture itself, have taken over many socializing functions previously performed by parents. Especially in the more educated and affluent classes, a relatively egalitarian family has emerged, bolstered by progressive valuation of the individuality and creativity of each child. While these particular idealizations of individuality emerge historically in market society, they can foster rebellion as well as self-absorption. Such values become adjuncts to the economy, however, when assimilated into a pervasive consumer culture, where individuality and creativity are more and more expressed only in conformist terms, through the production and consumption of commodities. In particular, paternal authority, the traditional center of the family, suffers when children and teenagers respond more to peer groups, advertising, and the media than to adults at home.Into this situation drops Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable, the perfect TV dad. He's perfect because he shows parents how to have a touch that is firm but light, how to discipline with humor, as he disguises parental control, even manipulation, with silly faces and childlike actions. There is an inescapable element of education for parents and children, of therapy for dysfunctional families, in THE COSBY SHOW. Much more than any other program, it deploys and activates educational discourses as guides that connect with distinctively middle and upper-middle class reading formations. Proud of his education, Cosby listed himself as William H. Cosby, Jr., Ed.D. in the credits. He discusses the value of education extensively in interviews, and the program is filled with such references (Taylor 160-164). Indeed, Cosby has acknowledged that for a time the show perhaps became a bit too educational: "We were sort of tripling up on the reinforcing of certain moral aspects in trying to teach values" (Carter, B1).Most important, though, COSBY is in part a sitcom version of those popular how-to-parent books, just as Cosby's own best-selling books are light comic versions of the same model. Within the narrow conventions of commercial television, the show tries to educate its adult audience to little tricks of parenting and to educate its younger viewers to agree with and respect their parents. To secure an upper middle-class audience, the show appeals to that audience's values of education and therapy, in doing so offering an attractive model for working-class families as well (Press).But there is another dimension to the discourse of education and parenting here. It's not just their own families that members of COSBY's audience, always overwhelmingly white, are concerned about. It's also, and separately, black families. Since the 1960s, a consistent voice of conventional wisdom, taken more or less seriously by many educated people, has maintained that poverty and crime among African Americans are caused by problems in the African American family. Argued most famously in the so-called Moynihan report, thoroughly attacked and refuted often since, this view is held so insistently by so many who should know better that perhaps it appeals to some need to believe. Never mind racism and structural unemployment, focusing on problems of the black family stops the analysis before it can implicate the white majority.It's *their* problem, not our racism. It was, after all, an avowedly anti-racist liberal, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, now the Democratic senator from New York, who introduced to public discourse the notion of "pathology" regarding female-headed African American families (Downing 49-50). The theory remains profoundly patriarchal, and anti-woman, because it assumes that to be a "family," mothers and their children need men (Moynihan). For the last twenty-five years, the theory has mostly functioned to blame the victims, charging black males with being too weak to assume their proper place. In its terms, its definitions of mature social roles, the theory rearticulates black masculinity as a state of failure. But in doing so, as Downing says, it ignores the force of racism and structural unemployment in the construction of African American life.With political reaction, a superficial concern about the black family rose in the 1970s and 1980s. The single black mother on welfare and the irresponsible, immature black father were selected and magnified as mythical figures of public concern, symbolic condensations of the white majority's disavowal of its own racism. And Bill Cosby was the right pitchman at the right time. He became the model dad not only for whites but also for what many whites (and some blacks) thought that blacks needed. Motivating Cosby's audience is not only the wish to improve or repair their own families but also the wish not to be thought of as racist, or even responsible for others' racism. Praise for the show as "colorblind" is also flattery for its audience; to like the show is to prove oneself above prejudice.Nevertheless, Cosby's patriarchal role on the show can be seen as an attempt to remediate white stereotypes of absent African American fathers as well as an attempt to model dominant ideals for blacks. It certainly cuts against the "message of 'Black male criminality'" as a "constant refrain" (Strickland 52). But in doing so, COSBY reproduces patriarchal discourse. Although the show takes on issues of gender, it does so gently. Cosby's character inevitably joins in any critique of sexism articulated in the show's story, validating both the critique and the father's own ultimate authority. In Downing's words, it is "patriarchy with a human face" (60; also see Taylor 161-l62).This is exemplified by one of COSBY'S opening credit sequences, as Ellen Seiter has incisively shown: performers playing wife and children (who are given roughly equal stature) celebrate Cosby as they dance around him, literalizing the show's phallocentrism (32-39). In the episode we looked at, the opening scene following the first group of commercials has Cosby and Rashad, who plays the family lawyer-mother-wife, making fun of others' sexism, exchanging sex role barbs, and speaking normal sitcom banter with other cast members. Then Rashad's character walks out toward the set's side door, saying "It's time for me to prepare dinner now," as if there were no connection between the earlier discussion of sexism and the person who routinely does the housework.[9] As Andrea Press has observed, the show's scripts minimize the conflicts of working mothers (80).Curiously, the discussion of sexism had revolved around the remark Rashad says an opposing lawyer made to her in court: "What do you know about anything? You should be home taking care of your children." The remark's structure reproduces the politics of the show. "What do you know about anything?" could be racist as well as sexist, but for many viewers the second sentence might well close down the possibility of such a reading. The permitted mild critique of sexism displaces the forbidden critique of racism. Given the necessity for tension even in a sitcom, the references to hostile sexism may be dramatically necessary. They fill the gap created by the omission of racism in the stories, racism one might expect in a show about an African American family, no matter how affluent, attractive, or brightFor the show, as Real and Downing say, is also unwilling to take on what might provide a different source of dramatic tension-class conflict. As Downing argues, THE COSBY SHOW "may celebrate the virtues of upper-middle-class existence as the most desirable way of life to which the vast mass of citizens can reasonably aspire" (67). Yet it does so at the cost of ignoring, for example, the disastrous effects of gentrification on the poor, which residences like the Huxtable family's would presumably intensify (69), to say nothing of the violence and fear of urban life. This celebration has become crucial to Cosby's persona in his middle age. Few actors are as visible on television, considering how often the show is broadcast in syndication, how many products advertisers pay Cosby to smile at, and how frequently the ads appear. Whatever his own politics, as Edwin Barton suggested to us, Cosby has become the Dr. Feelgood of the American way.In many ways Bill Cosby was an appropriate figure to bring together the elements that made the show the most successful comedy program in TV history. For most U.S. viewers, Cosby was probably best known before THE COSBY SHOW as a salesman for General Foods, Ford, Texas Instruments, Coke, and E.F. Hutton. The length of this list is only one evidence of Cosby's value as pitchman. Selling products on TV is still often regarded as a sign of declining celebrity status, of cashing in your chips on the way down, and Cosby's move from pitchman to series star seems unusual. This may indicate that the commercial imperative of network TV is eroding residual distinctions between stars and salespeople. As Mark Crispin Miller has pointed out, "Cosby himself ascribes his huge following to his appearances in the ads: 'I think my popularity came from doing solid 30-second commercials. They can cause people to love you and see more of you than in a full 30-minute show'" (207).Cosby's credibility rating, measured by marketers' Q -scale, has often topped all others' in recent years. Could it be that his credibility was actually increased through his appearances in ads? If so, it could mark a significant change in the relation of programs and commercials. As Raymond Williams argued, differences between the two are deceptive; they are faces of the same culture (70). Cosby's career could indicate an attenuation of these residual differences, a convergence in the seemingly divergent and heterogeneous fragments that compose the "flow" of commercial television (Williams; also see Browne, and Budd, Craig, and Steinman).Of course, Cosby was never just a pitchman. His credibility is also based on long exposure in movies and comedy records, in previous TV series (especially I SPY in the l960s), as a standup comic, and as a talk show guest. In marketing terms, his career has been strongly *synergistic*: These appearances all function as ads for each other; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. His work in commercials has been seamlessly integrated into this product, indeed became by the early 1980s its most important element. How often do you see stars of popular current series also appearing on ads? Even more disconcerting: How often do you see them selling *during their shows*?Yet there is Cosby hawking Jell-O during THE COSBY SHOW, mugging and smirking for the kids in the ad just as he does for the Huxtable kids right before and after, charming them and us and everyone in sight. Pushing back the frontiers of commodification, the Cosby phenomenon suggests possibilities. Could Coke and Jell-O be integrated into the little problems and quick solutions of Huxtable life? As Ella Taylor puts it, "THE COSBY SHOW offers the same pleasures as a television commercial-a parade of gleaming commodities and expensive designer clothing unabashedly enjoyed by successful professional families" (160). Where can we buy one of those fancy sweaters Cosby's always wearing?As the dominant star of this dominant series of the 1980s, Cosby may be a leader in a larger trend in commercial television. The synergy of his program and ad appearances brings closer than ever the two halves of TV's dialectic, of its flow. The commercial imperative gradually destroys the autonomy of program and ad as discrete cultural forms, and it instrumentalizes them as converging parts of a larger purpose, a means to profit. As yet, the convergence retains limits: If programs (the free lunch) and ads (the hidden price) were to become too much alike, and their boundaries too indistinct, the dialectic between the two would collapse, and audiences would lose their necessary credulity. This critical mass of show and commercial generates the magical heat of capital, produces the nihilistic energy of advanced capitalism itself from the destruction of its cultural material as separate entities. Perhaps the synergy of television, of consumer culture itself, depends on a long slow assimilation of other forms and traditions and purposes to those of selling and consuming, a process rationalized and administered by the visible hand of marketing management.Within this context, that the show idealizes affluence and fails to mention race or class conflict, and that its critique of sexism is so mild, make sense. After all, its purpose in life as far as its sponsors and distributors are concerned is to attract viewers for sale in bundles to advertisers. A look at the four ads between the show's credits and its opening scene in the episode we looked at provides the evidence:1. FTD Easter Baskets.
2. Country Crock Cheese Products.
3. McDonald's Salads.
4. K-Mart's No-Nonsense Panty Hose.

Most viewers of THE COSBY SHOW are women (Downing 71n), and all four of the ads seem aimed squarely at women as consumers (not at women as feminists — the Country Crock ad, for example, centers on a woman serving food to a man). With the possible exception of 1), all four aim at poor to middle-class women, who likely make up much if not most of the audience, given their number in the population at large. Three of the four ads are narrated by males with voices trained to connote authority, an authority that for some viewers may flow from and into the patriarchal form and connotations of the show. None of the ads is narrated by a woman. In no ad does a woman directly address the audience. All of the ads sell women products to make others happy or to enhance their appearance for others to see. Crucially, like COSBY, all four ads are upbeat. Their world has no place for grating racism, class conflict, or serious questioning of patriarchal sex roles.\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*Culture crisscrosses the internal structure of the commercial TV business. This combination circumscribes the show when it is produced, when it is distributed, and when it is consumed (Davis; Gray, "Black Male"). The blandness of television suffuses nearly everything on the air save unavoidable bursts of bad news. It has been guaranteed by public policy, which licenses most VHF stations to corporations whose interests are explicitly commercial. And, under Reagan-Bush, this public policy has gutted much of what little public-interest regulation (the fairness doctrine, serious limitations on the commercialization of programming for children) once existed to serve noncommercial values. Although the founding Communications Act of 1934 says broadcasting is supposed to serve the "public interest, convenience, and necessity," the stations in practice have little obligation to do so. And in fact they do not, unless "public interest" is defined as "what sells."In this environment, no matter the personal politics of anyone connected with the program, as a product of the final phase of mass-audience television programming, THE COSBY SHOW could be accepted, made, and distributed only as long as it has remained, as Real puts it, "reformist conservative" (120). This was especially true during the Reagan years. No mass-audience text/product can ever win unanimous consent, yet during this period COSBY perhaps reached the limit-point of intertextual identity with the culture of its audience. On the show, in the ads, in the minds of the pro-Reagan majority at home, while it was Morning in America there was nary a problem that couldn't be solved by accentuating the positive.In the early 1990s, changes in the television industry as well as changing politics already yield new forms, such as Fox's IN LIVING COLOR, a cabaret-style program with a predominantly African American cast. Its sexually charged (if heterosexist) sense of humor undoubtedly offends the same older, more conservative viewers Fox has eschewed with THE SIMPSONS and other shows. Indeed, as the mass audience disperses and the networks search for new groups of viewers to market to advertisers, African Americans (for years undercounted or ignored) are becoming an increasingly important demographic group.Perhaps because so many are too poor to afford more expensive alternatives, African Americans make up 20 percent of the networks' prime-time audience, though they are only 12 percent of the population. By one count African American households watch an avenge of nearly 70 hours a week of television, 48 percent more than others in the United States. And black households tend to have more females and more young people than U.S. households generally — demographic groups most advertisers like because they do more than their share of household shopping (Michaelson 78). Any network show with a solid African American viewership has a commercial head start.So more blacks than ever had secondary roles in dramatic series on the 1991-92 U.S. television schedule, though their number was still much less than it would have been if casting had ignored ethnicity. Ten of the fifty-two weekly comedy series this fall starred black performers (Du Brow, "Networks," Fl). But none of the dramas at this writing has confronted ordinary contemporary racism (several are set in the past), and all the comedies retain COSBY's most important constraint. Whatever their appeal to black audiences, they must offer whites lots of laughs. The opening episodes of two of the shows (TRUE COLORS and ROC) included gags that insulted the ideas of Malcolm X (e.g., joking that his followers would like "white devil's food cake"), making COSBY's avoidance of racial issues in comparison seem honorable. Comedy or drama, black audience or not, these shows still need to please substantial groups of whites to survive.*There has never been a successful television drama that centered on African American family life*, no THE WALTONS or LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE, let alone DALLAS or DYNASTY, FALCON CREST, or KNOTS LANDING. According to Rick Du Brow, who writes about the television industry for the *Los Angeles Times*, "You can almost count on the fingers of one hand the number of black family drama series."[10] This, he says, is due to network executives' "unspoken belief that white viewers don't want to watch a series about black reality" ("TV's Shame" F1). Du Brow blames racism in network thinking and hiring practices, and he argues that new attention to African American viewers by the A.C. Nielsen ratings firm and other surveys could bring about change. Yet he may be underestimating the culture of racism.In ETHNIC NOTIONS, his telling history of racist representations, Marlon Riggs points out that the flourishing of the Abolitionist movement was accompanied by a jump in white attendance at minstrel shows. Such shows signified white power and black subservience, precisely when that power began openly to be questioned. COSBY succeeds in part because whites can count on it for an entertaining encounter with African Americans who will neither make them "feel the villain" nor entirely abandon the gestures and movements that give familiar pleasure to many whites (Lewis, 183, 180). In that sense, the show fulfills a long-running strain of European American desire. Humor bound by rules of reassurance helps "preserve the existing system of power relations" (Dubin 131). Similarly, whatever his skill as a dramatic actor, Bill Cosby evidently cannot be the star of a dramatic show that would have anywhere near the success of COSBY. Even FRANK'S PLACE, an artful, not especially confrontational "dramedy" of 1987 that featured African Americans in ways Gray argues were less assimilationist, could not attract more than a quarter of the viewing audience ("Recodings"). That tens of millions of people chose to watch the show was not enough. To profit, CBS needed more of an audience to sell to advertisers. Of course, the inability of FRANK'S PLACE to become a hit could have been due to its adventurous narrative and visual style, its refusal of a laugh track, or scheduling, or other factors having nothing to do with race (see White 83-86). Still, says Gray, the commercial failure of the show "reinforced the limited terms within which the general American television audience can exploit the interiors of black social and cultural life" (Gray, "Recodings," 128).Eddie Murphy's comedies may be big box-office hits, but what films do well with African Americans as heroic leads, layered with the characteristic sexual glow of European American stars? In this sense, we should see THE COSBY SHOW, like most any thriving U.S. mass-audience entertainment with an African American cast, as a register of the enduring force of Jim Crow. Humor helps keep Cosby from arousing the stereotypical sexual fears that African American men in some contexts still seem to evoke in whites. In the middle of THE COSBY SHOW's successful run, George Bush's 1988 campaign commercial starring Willie Horton showed the enduring, evocative power of a key term in racist mythology — the black rapist, whose animalistic sexuality threatens white women. That Cosby could succeed in playing an obstetrician, many of whose patients presumably would be white, suggests how effectively the show's humor displaces this potential sexual threat. Cosby knows audiences will pay him for their amusement. "As long as you have the joke," he says, "you know you have the security that people will laugh" (Christon 47).Even conservatives in the United States acknowledge that the legal gains African Americans made in the 1960s and 1970s have not been matched by a general rise in their standard of living. White power and prejudice in the United States have proven so dynamic that the elimination of legal barriers to upward social mobility for African Americans has not in itself been able to create genuinely equal opportunity. This encourages even the most racist whites to abandon public and official racism — the last twenty years have shown they have nothing to lose by this — and to seize the initiative by denying responsibility for inequality and blaming the victims instead. As Robert T. Carter has argued, "Ignoring race as an important variable may in itself be racist" ("Sex and Racism").Illogically, and no doubt against the wishes of its makers, THE COSBY SHOW has become evidence for the bigoted that the major barriers to African American success are within the African American community itself. They are implicitly supported by African American Republicans like Clarence Thomas and Tony Brown, who argue that the issues are moral character, personal values, and "self-help" rather than racism and its effects, in a system that affords the already-privileged with more help than they need (Benjamin).At the same time, appropriating the old critique of racism, bigoted whites now argue that more profound measures to enhance racial equality (affirmative action, the setting aside of some public works for minority  businesses) are racist themselves. For David Duke, the Klansman who nearly became a U.S. senator in 1990, "Affirmative action is racism…That's the kind of philosophy Nazi Germany used…If it is morally wrong to discriminate against a black person — and all of us would endorse that principle — then certainly it's got to be morally wrong to discriminate against a white person" (Ridgeway 21).Mean and perverse as it is, such born-again egalitarianism is heard more and more from the right and center. Social scientists call it "modern racism," as opposed to traditional, segregationist racism. Polls suggest that support for integration in principle is at an all-time high ("Crisis" 30). The new racism has three major components: emotional hostility toward African Americans who seem "too demanding"; resistance to the political arguments of African Americans for expanded government intervention; and conviction that racism is dead in the United States (See Entman; McConahay; and Sears — there is some disagreement about the term and its definition[11]). Surely in practice racists are both modern and traditional, with the older attitudes more prevalent in private. THE COSBY SHOW does take on segregationist racism, and no doubt it rubs some traditional racists the wrong way (Lewis 178-179). Yet its commercial success and political failure is that it does not confront modern racism, and could even confirm or legitimate it. It may temper emotional hostility toward African Americans, but only toward those who smile on cue and act properly assimilationist and middle-class. It reliably does not raise political demands and it does not argue for the persistence of racism. In this framework, the remark of whites that the show provides good role models for blacks signifies its unwitting complicity with modem racism.Robert Entman has analyzed a similar trend in local television news programs in Chicago. Superficially, representations of African Americans on the news might seem contradictory: The increasing presence of black newspeople and bureaucrats clashes with the unfavorable figuring of black criminals and of politicians arguing for African American interests, Yet, as Entman points out, blacks he observed in authoritative roles spoke the language of middle-class whites and "did not talk in angry tones" (341). While surveys show blacks more than whites tend to see such issues as crime and discrimination as inseparable, black journalists covered the news according to the same frames as their white colleagues who see the issues as discrete (341, 344n). Contradictions are resolved in the realm of reinforcement and pleasure: Modem racists may feel good about themselves for tolerating blacks who (to keep their jobs must) make no issue of their ethnicity; meanwhile, these racists can despise blacks who, in "high proportion" in television news, appear "angry or demanding" (341).As racism has changed, so must its critique. Modem racism's denial of its own existence inoculates it against empirical challenge. Consequently, racist discourses must now be disinterred in contemporary texts and practices that pride themselves on being "colorblind"; analyzing absence becomes more crucial than ever. Week after week (in syndication, day after day, hour after hour), an African American man appears in tens of millions of homes as an attractive choice for everywoman's obstetrician (Downing 62). Yet simultaneously absent from view are the preventable ways the United States lets its African American infants die, at double the rate of whites (Scott). For infants who grow into adulthood, the carnage of neglect multiplies. African American men under 45 are ten times more likely to die of hypertension than those of European descent (Strickland 112). "I don't think either of the races could take it," says Cosby, "if we began to lay it out and tell the truth" (Graham).NOTES1. Thanks to members of the Society for Cinema Studies and to colleagues at California State University, Bakersfield, and Florida Atlantic University who helpfully commented on earlier versions of this paper, to Kim Flachmann and Michael Flachmann for helping to sharpen the argument; and to Lynn Appleton, Reza Azarmsa, Tom Banks, Robert Entman, Lynn Garrett, Kenneth Goings, Dan Hahn, Linda Hazelwood, Elizabeth Jackson, Carlos Nelson, Diana Saco, Deborah Whitworth, Forrest Wood, and especially Edwin Barton for their contributions.2. Adapting Joel Kovel's definition: "the tendency of a society to degrade and do violence to people" based on ancestral origin (xii).3. Exemplary of the way commercial media report racism was the favorable, extensive coverage given to Nelson Mandela's 1990 anti-apartheid tour compared to the lack of coverage normally devoted to ordinary racism in the United States. This coverage, like most mainstream news accounts of South Africa, helped ratify the developing convention that reporting on explicit racists no longer requires balance and fairness, or even civility. For example, on Feb. 13, 1990, a journalist on National Public Radio's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED asked a South African opposed to majority rule if he feared that a "black majority would treat whites as badly as you have treated them." Usually, the politics of mainstream journalism can be discerned from the list of those whose comments require no balance; rarely do they appear so explicitly in reporters' questions. That they did here signals the major change in racism's semiotic terrain discussed below.4. Rooney also wrote a homophobic letter to *The Advocate*, a national gay weekly. It is unclear to what extent CBS was reacting to that as well. In any case, the suspension was lifted after viewer complaints, allowing CBS to appear concerned about racism without losing a star. For an account of the Rooney affair, see Hentoff. 5. See Gans for a critique of "culture of poverty" theory. "I wish," he says, "that social scientists would decrease their study of the victims of poverty and devote more research to its causes — the economic, political, and other processes by which America has developed by far the highest rate of poverty in the 'first world' of highly developed nations."6. A look at race and higher education, often promoted on the show as a route to success, bears this out African Americans are disproportionately absent from the nation's colleges; a disproportionate number who do attend fail to graduate (by 1986, only 9.9 percent of 1980 high school seniors who were African American had received a bachelor's degree, compared to 26.1 percent of non-Latino whites) (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sept. 5, 1990, 13), According to a 1990 report (Harrison), the relative few who do make it through four years of college are half as likely as white college graduates to earn more than $36,000 a year (13.1 percent versus 26.1 percent). For more on racism and education, see Kozol. 7. THE COSBY SHOW is hardly unique in guaranteeing audiences against offense from unwanted social claims. In the 1980s, *Newsweek* and *Time* both routinely reported the political agenda of such groups as the National Urban League in Reaganite terms comforting to centrist and conservative whites, for example representing affirmative action as reverse discrimination in disguise (Daniel and Allen). 8. Supporting Vidmar and Rokeach's account of selective perception of ALL IN THE FAMILY, Venise T. Berry's interviews with viewers indicate that African American women watching THE COSBY SHOW tend to see the Rashad character winning the weekly battle of the sexes. Younger African American men, Betty has found, tend to see the Cosby character failing to meet their expectations of how men should behave with women. 9. Apparently, this is typical of the show. According to Lewis, 'It is Claire's [played by Rashad] job, not Cliff's [Cosby's role] to make the dinner (Cliff's…attempts in the kitchen…are sometimes comically inept)." Characteristically, this scenario makes possible a multiple appeal, allowing women to take "more pleasure in the show's feminist moments" while seeing to it that men are not threatened by anti-sexist humor — men for whom it would be "unsettling…if Cliff played Claire's domestic role" (168-171). 10. The 1990-91 television season included a new dramatic series on ABC starring James Earl Jones, GABRIEL'S FIRE, which referred to racism and to corruption among political elites. Jones and Madge Sinclair, also in the cast, won Emmy awards for theft acting. The show did poorly in the ratings, so for 1991-92 ABC, a "new 'lighthearted' concept" in mind (King), switched the show's setting from inner-city Chicago to Los Angeles jettisoned all cast members except Jones and Sinclair, added a European American costar (Richard Crenna), and transformed it into PROS & CONS, a buddy-buddy detective comedy. Moved into the "8 p.m. Thursday graveyard" (Aulena 290) against THE COSBY SHOW and THE SIMPSONS, the new version did not survive the season. 11. Conservatives have argued that "modern racism" is a specious epithet used to discredit honest, unbigoted opposition to the proposals of liberal civil rights groups (See, e.g., Roth). WORKS CITEDAuletta, Ken. *Three Blind Mice: How the TV Networks Lost Their Way*. New York: Random House, 1991. Benjamin, Playthell. "GOP Goes the Weasel." *Village Voice* 20 Aug. 1991: 41-43. Bennett, Tony, and Janet Woollacott. *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*. New York: Methuen, 1987.Bevy, Venise T. "Televised Images of Black Male Teens and Father Figures: The Perceptions of Low-Income Black Youth." Speech Communication Association. Chicago. 3 Nov. 1990.Browne, Nick. 'The Political Economy of the Television (Super) Text" *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9 (1984): 175-182.Brownstein, Ronald. 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