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Herman Gray. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. $53.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-2250-4; $27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-2251-1.

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A Decline in Viewership

In *Watching Race*, sociologist Herman Gray investigates Black representations in American culture–especially television–during the decade of the 1980's and finds this period "rich with struggles, debates, and transformations in race relations, electronic media, cultural politics and economic life" (p. 2). It is his contention that cultural politics are about power and cannot be studied apart from issues of inequality in American society. While some readers and historians may be put off by the introduction's turgid academic prose, those who make it to the second chapter are provided with an astute commentary on the complexities of African-American representation in the media.

Gray begins his discussion with an examination of how the Reagan administration's conservative policy makers used the association of Blacks with welfare queens, drug dealers, criminals, school dropouts, teenage pregnancy, and single-mother households to justify an assault upon the liberal welfare establishment. This discourse maintained that the underclass' immorality and irresponsibility were due to a lack of individual initiative encouraged by the welfare state. The institution of a market system would abolish this dependency. Nor was this conservative discourse ostensibly racist, as its proponents could always point to the standards of individual Black achievement exemplified in television's *The Cosby Show.* Nevertheless, Gray argues that the cultural media battleground was also an arena in which African-American voices articulated a rejoinder to the Reagan construct. The dialogue within this community incorporated a diverse spectrum of opinion, taking into account issues of gender, class, and sexuality. The opportunity for Blacks to develop this counter hegemonic response was a product of structural transformations within the television industry.

With the rise of cable competition and the Fox network, the three major television networks were experiencing a decline in viewership. In search of new markets, the channels turned to African-Americans, who–according to studies cited by Gray–watch television at rates higher than the rest of the population. The cultural representation of Blacks on network television has resulted–in what Gray identifies–as three major categories. He describes older shows such as *Julia*, and *Room 222* as assimilationist programs in which individual Black characters are integrated into a White world. Titles such as *Family Matters*, *Amen*, *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *What's Happenin'*, and *Sanford & Son* are classified as pluralist or separate-but-equal discourses. In these programs, predominantly Black casts demonstrate that African-American families have the same basic problems as Whites. While critical of its failure to address issues of economic inequality, Gray perceives *The Cosby Show* as a transitional program to themes of diversity with "the show's use of Blackness and African American culture as a kind of emblematic code of difference" (p. 89).

To support his argument–that diverse themes, analyzing and celebrating the Black community's social and cultural traditions are more apparent on network television–Gray devotes detailed treatment to *A Different World* (a spin-off from *The Cosby Show* focusing on Black college life), *Frank's Place* (a professor inherits a restaurant in New Orleans), *Roc* (a working-class family deals with challenges like drug dealers), and *In Living Color* (the popular Fox parody of inner-city life). However, the limitations on cultural representations are evident in the network cancellations of *Frank's Place* and *Roc.* And Gray has reservations regarding whether the satire of *In Living Color* tends to reinforce White stereotypes and trivialize issues of poverty. Gray writes, "In Living Color's sketches about the Black poor more often than not seem simply to chump out, leaving the Black poor exposed and positioned as television objects of middle-class amusement and fascination" (p. 144).

Yet, Gray refuses to leave his readers and the African-American community with a pessimistic conclusion. He

acknowledges that the hegemonies political order seeks to celebrate individuality and incorporate notions of Blackness without disturbing the existing system. But Gray holds out hope for young Blacks, who, through fashion, music, hair styles, and dance, engage in a daily discourse with the commercial forces of America. Speaking of youth's efforts at cultural representation in the marketplace, Gray concludes, "That the dominant apparatus of representation (and circulation) has responded with attempts at incorporation, surveillance, marginalization and control tell us something about the power and potency of these expressions" (p. 161).

Gray's prose is not always accessible, but the reader willing to spend some time with this short volume will find the experience rewarding. Cinema historians may legitimately bemoan the lack of discussion on Black film representation before the 1980s, but for any reader concerned with contemporary cultural constructs of race and Blackness, Herman Gray's *Watching Race* will provide controversial and insightful material for contemplation.

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