

Shelly, SUT and JUSTIN LEWIS. an lighter racism,
THE COSBY SHOW, ADVANCES and THE MYSTERY OF
THE ARMY (can DREAM). (SAN FRANCISCO: WESTVIEW PRESS, 1992)

Introducing The Cosby Show

Neither *The Cosby Show* nor its star, Bill Cosby, need much introduction. By the early 1980s, Bill Cosby—stand-up comedian, actor (most remembered for his costar role in the 1960s *I Spy* TV series), voice behind *Fat Albert*, and star of TV commercials—had established a modest and respectable place in the history of North American popular culture. It was, however, *The Cosby Show* that allowed Cosby to move from celebrity to superstardom. Whether one measures success in terms of wealth, fame, popularity, or respect, Bill Cosby is now undoubtedly among the most successful entertainers in the United States.

When it began in 1984, *The Cosby Show* did not look like a surefire hit. Its all-black cast offered viewers a gentle comedy without gimmicks, zany situations, or intriguing plot lines. Yet *The Cosby Show* has become the most successful TV show in recent history, the pinnacle of Cosby's long career. It topped the annual ratings lists year after year in the second half of the 1980s, and, although it has been displaced from the number one spot in the 1990s, it retains an enduring place in the world of prime-time television.

For those who have managed to avoid seeing it, *The Cosby Show* is a half-hour situation comedy about an upper middle class black family, the Huxtables. Cliff Huxtable (played by Bill Cosby) is a gynecologist and obstetrician, and his wife, Clair, is a lawyer. They have four daughters and a son; as the series has grown older, they have acquired in-laws and grandchildren. The Huxtables' attractive New York brownstone home is the setting for an endless series of comic domestic dramas. There is little in this description to distinguish this TV fiction from many others: we are used to a TV world populated by attractive professionals and their

good-looking offspring. What makes the show unusual is its popularity, its critical acclaim, and the fact that all its leading characters are black.

These distinctive achievements and features have made *The Cosby Show* the subject of much speculation. At the heart of much of the discussion lies an apparent contradiction. The United States is a country that is still emerging from a deeply racist history, a society in which many white people have treated (and continue to treat) black people with contempt, suspicion, and a profoundly ignorant sense of superiority. Yet the most popular U.S. TV show, among black and white people alike, is not only about a black family but a family portrayed without any of the demeaning stereotypical images of black people common in mainstream popular culture. Commentators have been provoked to try to resolve this apparent paradox and, in so doing, to ask themselves about the show's social significance.

The most prevalent critical reaction, particularly during the first few years of the show, was to applaud Bill Cosby's creation as not only a witty and thoughtful sitcom but also an enlightened step forward in race relations. After decades of degrading media images of black people in other shows, the Huxtable family presented black characters that black and white audiences could relate to. In this sense, the show was conceived in contrast to the stereotypical shows that preceded it. Psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, an adviser to *The Cosby Show*, is highly critical of the black sitcoms of the 1970s—shows like *The Jeffersons*, *Sanford and Son*, and *Good Times*, which are, argues Poussaint, "full of jivin', jammmin', streetwise style stuff that is the worst kind of stereotyping" (quoted in Hartsough, 1989).

The Cosby Show, however, portrays comedic black characters with dignity and humanity. On a TV celebration of African-American comedy (*A Laugh, a Tear*), actor Tim Reid praised the show as "a breath of fresh air," showing, at last, "the reality of what was good about our neighborhoods . . . a reality of what was good about our neighborhoods. . . . Here was a show that not only overcame traditional stereotypes but, in so doing, was both funny and incredibly popular. The celebratory tone of many reviews contained genuine hopes for what such a cultural intervention might achieve in dispelling racial prejudice in the United States.

The history of critical response to popular culture often follows a similar pattern: elaborate praise becomes an increasingly difficult burden, and critics' euphoria is almost invariably followed by cynical backlash. *The Cosby Show*, for good or ill, is no exception to this rule. Critics have begun to accuse the show of presenting a misleadingly cozy picture, a sugar candy world unfettered by racism, crime, and economic deprivation. Some have argued that the Huxtables' charmed life is so alien to the

experience of most black people that they are no longer "black" at all but, as Henry Louis Gates (1989: 40) puts it, "in most respects, just like white people."

Gates's argument is not simply about whether *The Cosby Show* is "realistic"; he is also concerned about the show's effect on its enormous viewing audience. The crux of his case is that these "positive images" can actually be counterproductive because they reinforce the myth of the American dream, a just world where anyone can make it and racial barriers no longer exist:

As long as *all* blacks were represented in demeaning or peripheral roles, it was possible to believe that American racism was, as it were, indiscriminate. The social vision of "Cosby," however, reflecting the miniscule integration of blacks into the upper middle class, reassuringly throws the blame for black poverty back onto the impoverished (Gates, 1989: 40).

At the risk of simplifying critical opinion, most analyses of *The Cosby Show* fit broadly into one of two views: the show is seen either as socially progressive or as an apology for a racist system that disadvantages most black people. Both views carry with them assumptions about media effects. The debate, therefore, concerns the nature of the show's social effect and raises questions that we hope to resolve in the following chapters about the meaning of the show for black and white audiences. But first it is useful to dwell a little longer on the issues that have earned the show both praise and condemnation.

COSBY: THE CASE FOR

If we are to do battle over the nature of what gets shown on prime-time television in the United States, we should be well versed in the art of the possible. Any attempt to change the form of content of mainstream television will come up against two powerful bastions of conservatism: the profit-oriented predilections of network and advertising executives, and the expectations and tastes of well-conditioned TV audiences. We can exhaust ourselves creating innovative programming ideas, but if the networks, advertisers, or viewers don't respond, then we are wasting our time.

~~*The Cosby Show's* focus on a black family and departure from accepted racial stereotypes did not make the series an obvious candidate for prime time. ABC turned the series proposal down. Without Bill Cosby's track record (including, significantly, his ability to sell products on TV commercials), the series would probably never have made it onto the air. To attack the show because it panders to the needs of a mainstream white~~

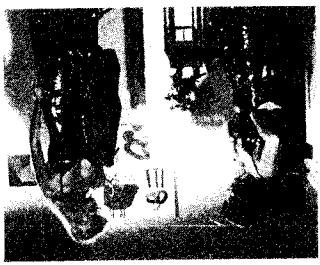
Reitermund, Matthew. Totally Awesome 80s
 (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1994)

The Ultimate 80s TV Show

Dynasty (1981-1989). Harder than music or movies, it is almost impossible to narrow down the field to one archetypal 80s TV show, but *Dynasty* wins out, if not for sheer balls, then for its mirroring of all the most obvious elements of the 80s: glitz (thanks to Nolan Miller's eye-popping gowns), superficiality (thanks to Aaron Spelling's production), greed (thanks to "Blake Carrington"), the concept of the comeback (Joan Collins returns), and even AIDS (the real-life melodrama that unfolded after one episode in which guest star Rock Hudson passionately kissed Linda Evans without disclosing that he was dying of AIDS—she survived).

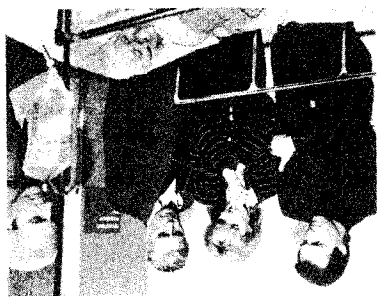


One of the most popular *Playboy* covers of the 80s featured a woman pushing 50—Joan Collins took it all off as a statement against age discrimination.



One reason "Alexis" and "Kryste" hated each other—they showed up in one episode wearing the same dress!

The melodrama followed the lives of riches "the Carringtons," and their kin "the Colbys." "Blake" (John Forsythe) was the patriarch, silver haired and strong, "Kryste" (Linda Evans) his loving, helmet-haired wife, and "Alexis" (Joan Collins) his amoral ex-wife. Other characters of note were "Blake"'s daughter, "Fallon" (Pamela Sue Martin, then Emma Samms) and his



"Dex" (Michael Nader) soothes "Kryste" (Linda Evans) and "Blake" (John Forsythe) during little "Krystina"'s (Jessica Player) heart transplant crisis (1987).

Eighty quintessentially 80s TV Shows

1. *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992). Not every black family is headed up by an obstetrician and a lawyer, lives in an upper-class home, and exists in a continual state of familial bliss, but surely some do. This flash-back to classic, wholesome sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver* went a long way toward making up for un-iversally "urban" portrayals of



Even "Clair Huxtable" (Phylicia Rashad) seems to think daddy's girl "Rudy" (Keshia Knight Pulliam) is too cute for her own good on *The Cosby Show*.

Dynasty was basically a glibby knock-off of the much more popular *Dallas*, but though it lasted only eight seasons as compared with *Dallas*'s twelve, it burned brightly. One of the most popular *Playboy* covers of the 80s featured a woman pushing 50—Joan Collins took it all off as a statement against age discrimination. The melodrama followed the lives of riches "the Carringtons," and their kin "the Colbys." "Blake" (John Forsythe) was the patriarch, silver haired and strong, "Kryste" (Linda Evans) his loving, helmet-haired wife, and "Alexis" (Joan Collins) his amoral ex-wife. Other characters of note were "Blake"'s daughter, "Fallon" (Pamela Sue Martin, then Emma Samms) and his



Anatomy of a slugfest: Linda Evans and Joan Collins engage in the most undignified female brawl in TV history (1982). Unless the one where they skirmished in the pond was worse...?

"Maddie" owned and operated the Blue Moon Detective Agency, a tax write-off that developed into her *vision d'etre* after she lost her fortune. "Addison" was her cohort and her employee. Wild theme episodes included a claymation special, an anachronistic restaging of *The Taming of the Shrew* (complete with iambic pentameter), and a black-and-white 40s fantasy sequence inspired by Orson Welles. Gooly, rhyme-crazed receptionist "Agnes Dipesto" (Allyce Beasley) added the manic ditz factor, and the show's hard-boiled mysteries took a back seat to the biggest question since "Who Shot J.R.?" "When will 'Dave' and 'Maddie' do it?"

3. Dallas (1979-1991). The most watched single episode in television history (until the finale of *M*A*S*H* just over two years later) was the solution to the question on everyone's lips during the summer hiatus of 1981: "Who shot J.R.?" (It was "Kristin," played by Mary Crosby.)

"J. R. Ewing" (Larry Hagman) was the amoral CEO of a Dallas dynasty HQ'd at the South Fork Ranch, a man with more enemies than this long-running potboiler had revolving characters. The *Dallas* core, aside from "J.R.," were "Sue Ellen Ewing" (Linda Gray), "J.R.'s emotionally distraught wife; "Miss Ellie" (Barbara Bel Geddes), his long-suffering mother; "Jock" (Jim Davis), his gruff daddy; "Bobby" (Patrick Duffy), his competitive brother; "Pamela" (Victoria Principal), "Bobby's hussy wife; "Chiff Barnes" (Ken Kercheval), "Pamela's brother; "J.R.'s niece "Lucy" (Charlene Tilton), Little Miss Goody Two-shoes; and ranch foreman "Ray Krebbs" (Steve Kanaly).

Other characters were played, over the years, by Christopher Atkins, Priscilla Presley, Priscilla Pointer, Jennilee Harrison, Andrew

"Amnesia cases are our special today/Finding the real you is our forte."
—"Miss Dipesto," *Moonlighting*

"We owe [Bill Cosby] our thanks, not only for the laughter and enjoyment, but also for demonstrating the educational potential of prime-time television, for caring about and contributing to our children's moral development, and for showing us how our families can thrive with harmony and love."
—Coretta Scott King on *The Cosby Show*

A thinly veiled chronicle of star Bill Cosby's own family, *The Cosby Show* capitalized on his wry, authoritarian delivery and the familiar pitfalls of family life. "Heathcliff and Phyllis Luxtable" (Cosby and Phylicia Rashad, respectively) were still carrying on a mad love affair twenty years after their wedding might, son "Theo" (Malcolm-Jamal Warner) was the lovable dope, and daughter "Denise" (Lisa Bonet) was the fashion-obsessed, snooty Val "Rudy" (Keshia Knight Pulliam) was the cute baby of the family, "Vanessa" (Tempestt Bledsoe) the cranky middle child ("Jan Brady" city), and college-age daughter "Sondra" (Sabrina LeBeauf) came on board a couple of months after the series debuted. The cast was frequently joined by various grandparents, relatives, and the occasional legend (such as Lena Horne, just passing through).

Fun for the whole family, though any family watching *The Cosby Show* was likely to suffer from a serious inferiority complex. This show was so good (until Raven Symone joined the cast once "Rudy" got too old to be cute), it was hard to blame Cosby for the unmatchable and yet quite successful spin-off, *A Different World* (1987-1993).

2. Moonlighting (1985-1989). The most creative TV series of the 80s, with a nonstop array of monologues to the audience, in-jokes, double and triple entendres, and the racy, sexually charged banter of its stars, uptight former model "Maddie Hayes" (Cybill "I always knew I was good" Shepherd) and hip, smug private dick "David Addison" (Bruce Willis).

TV star Bruce Willis moonlighted as a singer and movie action hero. His first record was a horrid remake of *The Staple Singers' "Respect Yourself."* His record company was banking on recognition of Willis as "Addison" from *Moonlighting*, which they accentuated by getting him to do the "Addison" smirk on the record sleeve. It hit the Top 10.



"I don't know what people will remember me for in the end, but I hope one thing is as a good wife."
—Victoria Principal, good wife to plastic surgeon Dr. Harry Glassman, 1988