

The White Multi-Racial Vision

Watching “Scrubs” from a Post-Colonial Perspective

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To:

Stockholm University
Department of Journalism,
Media and Communication
Mediatized Intersections
Merja Ellefson

By:

Jan Michael Gerwin
Körsbärsvägen 4C/0545
11423 Stockholm
jage1354@student.su.se

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When dealing with media effects such as framing or cultivation, media studies point first of all at television as the dominant medium. Its dominance results from the impact that visual images have – their convincing explicitness. Feminism, post-colonial studies as well as gay studies have therefore made a great effort to examine, how topics such as gender, race and sexuality have been represented in visual media, as the question of representation is not only a question of the authenticity of television programmes, but even more a question of how reality is conceived through television. “In a visual culture (...) social groups must be visibly recognisable and representable, since this is a major currency of communication and power” (Dyer, 1997, 44). Using the example of the American TV sitcom “Scrubs” by Bill Lawrence, I want to develop some thoughts about the representation of the “Other” in American prime-time television focussing on the representation of race and to a minor degree on the representation of gender. Instead of taking a concrete media text as material of examination, I want to refer to the sitcom “Scrubs” as a whole with emphasis on the characters and their relations.

The topic of race and its representation has been well discussed in the reflections on sitcoms and their stereotyped-based humour. The genre contains “all black” as well as “all white” programmes. “The Bill Cosby Show” or “The Prince of Bel Air” are examples of programmes that show the life of African-Americans in a completely black surrounding in a typified and sometimes stereotyped (cf. Mastro & Tropp, 2004) way. Programmes such as “Home Improvement” or “Friends” that illustrate white, middle class characters only contradict the former examples. “Scrubs” however can be described as an interracial TV programme starring four main characters of same age, two of them white, one African-American and one Latina. The ABC series reflects on their lives, careers and relationships as employees in the fictive *Sacred Heart Hospital* in Los Angeles. Even though the sitcom does not aim to deal with race questions on first rank, it stresses the issue from time to time in a – on first sight – progressive manner: It features for instance interracial couples as well as very close interracial friendships.

The perspective of the sitcom however is obviously white, since the story is told through the eyes of “J.D.”, a white man, who starts with his best friend from college the African-American “Turk” as an intern in the hospital. There, they become friends with the white female intern “Elliot” and the Latina nurse “Carla”. The white main characters J.D. and Elliot soon feel attracted to each other, while Turk and Carla become already in the second episode a couple. Even though this couple can be considered as “interracial”, they

are the only non-white characters among the main crew, which implies a distinction between “white” and the “Other”. Moreover, their difference in skin colour compared to the “normal” white colour that the narrator of the story J.D. wears is addressed in several episodes. In the eight episode of the first season for instance, Turk is asked to contribute to a commercial for the hospital addressed to black communities with the slogan “Our MD’s have mad skills!”. This example shows the ambiguity in how the issue of race is addressed in the sitcom. In the episode, the idea comes from the white hospital’s chief of medicine “Bob Kelso” and is an ironic reference to the white imagination of African-American culture. The invisible, hegemonic position of the whites is parodied with a stereotypical pattern. Still, “race” is only applied to non-whites.

Speaking of stereotypes it is striking that they especially apply to the non-white characters. Even though that does not say anything about the fact, if they are received as charismatic or not – in fact, the white main character J.D. is the most neurotic and weird of all of them - , it clearly shapes the form of the “We” and the “Others” describing the white “We” as “individuated, multifarious” (Dyer, 1997, 12). Especially Carla fulfils a very narrow Latina stereotype: She is emotional, motherly and addicted to her family. Moreover, she is the only one among the main characters who is a nurse and not doctor, which is – coming from the Dominican Republic – a stereotype itself. The fixation of her “Otherness” becomes even more striking when taking into account that the few Spanish words she uses when speaking to her mother are in the Spanish dubbed version translated into Italian. Her status as an immigrant is rigid. The producers however are aware of this stereotype and it is addressed several times by Carla’s boyfriend Turk, who regularly mistakes her to be a Puerto Rican resulting in the musical scene in the sixth episode of the sixth season, where she performs the song “For the last time, I’m Dominican”.

The issue of gender is rarely addressed in the storyline, but can be discussed in the hospital’s hierarchy. Even though women are represented equally in numbers, they are crucially dominated. “Visibility is no guarantor of legitimacy” (Shugart, 2007, 116). The senior doctors are all male; Elliot is the female trying to succeed among them. Even though her skills as a doctor are outstanding, it is mentioned several times that her medical ambition is due to the fact that all her male family members have become successful doctors. This implies that she is not only acting against the male dominance in the hospital, but as well against her own nature. But again, this stereotypical

connotation is foiled by the character of Jordan, the hospital's head of directors, a strong, determined and to a certain kind intimidating woman.

Concluding, one can state that the programme does good work in addressing and discussing issues of race and gender. Stereotypical patterns towards "the Other" are indeed applied, but at the same time exposed and parodied. This ambiguity provides space for a discussion about predominance and prejudice. It shows moreover, how a perfect multiracial culture could look like – in the eyes of the white supremacy. And this is to blame: The programme draws a society where the "Others" are not judged by their race or gender, but are sincerely integrated into the white and male world order. Of course are there for instance African-American characters in the sitcom, but an African-American voice is missing. The obvious white position, from which the story is told, represents the non-white characters. Referring to Spivak, Maggio states that the absence of the actual voice of the subaltern, essentialises the "Others" and reinforces the "menace of empire" – here the Whites (Maggio, 2007, 420). While doing so, "Scrubs" does not reflect on "Whiteness" at all. In contrast to the "Non-Whiteness", it is confined as the normal state of being (more in Dyer, 1997, 2f). As well as the programme argues against racism and exclusion, it fixates the existing power relation, where everybody can become what he wants, if he just follows the white lead culture. From a post-colonial perspective, the sitcom has one failure: It is told through the eyes of J.D. instead of Turks.

Sources

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