

An Opposing View...

The Cosby Show did not validate the belief in the American dream. | **By Richard G. Carter**

Bill Cosby and I are contemporaries in age, race and political persuasion — and even share a demonstrated love for vintage movies. I love Cosby as a creative artist. I loved his stand-up comedy. I loved him in movies such as 1974's "Uptown Saturday Night." I loved him in television's hokey *I Spy* in the 1960s. I even loved his Jello commercials.

In my weekly column in the New York *Amsterdam News* — the nation's largest black newspaper — I was pleased to defend his controversial comments at the 50th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education in May 2004. I supported his subsequent, headline-making thoughts on the black family and I wrote objectively about his highly publicized sexual misconduct allegations in early 2005.

All that said, it is fair to say that I am now — and always have been — pro-Bill Cosby, which is important for readers to understand. I respect his integrity and his philanthropy with black colleges. But this isn't about that. Not by a long shot.

This is about *The Cosby Show*, which appeared on NBC for eight years in the

1980s and '90s. And it's about what I consider misleading comments about the program by Mary Ann Watson in her cover story in the Spring/Summer 2005 issue of *Television Quarterly*.

Frankly speaking, I was never a fan of *The Cosby Show*, which, I feel, did not accurately portray black life in America. As a black man who has been around the block a few times, I feel the program painted a false, even rosy picture of how most of us live — especially in the minds of many solace-seeking, guilt-ridden whites. And, as usual, I put my money where my mouth is.

I stated my reasons in a *Television Quarterly* cover story of my own in 1988. I characterized the show as "TV's black comfort zone for whites." I also took down the show that same year, during my days as an Op-Ed Page columnist with the *New York Daily News* — buttressed by street interviews of black and white viewers. And I heavily criticized the show's unrealities in a freelance piece for the Bergen (N.J.) *Record* and as a staff columnist with *The Milwaukee Journal*.

Here are three of the many negative opinions I gleaned on the streets of New York City for my *Daily News* column

during the heyday of *The Cosby Show* in January 1988:

Black woman: “Why kid ourselves? Cosby’s TV thing has always been out of touch with the black experience. I don’t live like that. No one I know lives like that except for a few white friends. I mean, they never talk about black problems on *The Cosby Show*.”

Black man: “Bill Cosby is God’s gift to the white man in these troubled times. Whites know if they watch his program, ain’t nobody gonna demand nothing from them.”

White man: “I love escapist TV like that lightweight show of his.”

In the years since, very few of my black friends, acquaintances and professional colleagues have had much positive to say about *The Cosby Show*. Like me, most feel other black programs on network TV such as *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons* and *Good Times* were much closer to what it was all about. Not only that, they are considered more realistic, more entertaining — and far more humorous.

Although everyone knows time plays tricks on our memories, it amazes me that anyone — especially black people or right-thinking whites — can still believe in the sanctity of *The Cosby Show*. Thus, I was disappointed to read Ms. Watson’s thoughts about the program in her piece on the new Black Family Channel. Here’s how she began it:

“Twenty years ago, American families of all races looked forward to watching *The Cosby Show* together each week. Much of its appeal, beside the laughs, was that it validated the belief in the American Dream. Claire and Cliff Huxtable, a lawyer and a doctor, were happily upper-middle class and they

got there the old-fashioned way — hard work and higher education. Their five kids never heard the end of it and were never allowed to take the easy way out. That was the key to the comedy throughout the series’ eight-year run.”

I had to read this three times to digest it. And I still couldn’t believe what I was reading. I thought America long ago had outgrown the peaches-and-cream approach to black life that oozed from *The Cosby Show*. But here it was again. And I found myself saying aloud to myself, “You’ve got to be kidding, Ms. Watson.”

My reasons coincide with those of many others with whom I have spoken, and continue to speak, over the years. And they are easy for middle-class, mainstream, hard-working, authentic, average black people to understand. The program was out of touch.

First and foremost, it was elitist. And it would not be a stretch to perceive the Huxtables as rich rather than upper-middle class. In the context of today’s news, it reminds me of public views of a handful of Black Republicans — a species I cannot abide. They can’t see the forest for the trees. You could watch the show week-in and week-out and, except for their skin color, never get the idea that you were watching black people.

In short, *The Cosby Show* was *Ozzie and Harriet* in white face. In many ways, it was a stylish, modern minstrel show out to reassure white America that blacks were no longer a threat to them. And I can clearly recall a 1987 newspaper column by the conservative William F. Buckley Jr. in which he said *The Cosby Show* proves that racial

discrimination is not increasing in America. “A nation simply does not idolize members of a race that nation despises,” Buckley blubbered. Ugh!

Perhaps more to the point, *The Cosby Show* was not black enough. I don’t care how many African artifacts they had on display. Black on the outside doesn’t mean black on the inside — something white America had no interest hearing about. Clearly missing was a middle-class view of black life. To many of us, the day-to-day activities of upper-middle class blacks — or even rich blacks — is a turn-off.

Back in the 1970s — at the height of the movies’ kick-ass Blaxploitation era which I loved — an oft-heard question in films such as “Cotton Comes to Harlem” was: “Is that black enough for you?” Clearly, the answer is easy when discussing *The Cosby Show*. It’s a resounding “no.” Here’s why:

White viewers saw Cosby as a non-threatening, lovable, colorless pitchman for Jello. To appease them, the program rarely delved into gut-level issues of concern to everyday blacks. Discussion of anti-black job discrimination, drug abuse, black teenage pregnancy, interracial dating and marriage, one-parent families, growing anti-white attitudes, the Nation of Islam and the Minister Louis Farrakhan, the Million Man March and countless other issues important to many of us, were nowhere to be found.

While it is fine to portray a successful, two-parent black family, it is wholly misleading to portray it as perfect — as was the case on *The Cosby Show*. There was the perfect doctor father and the perfect lawyer mother and perfect teen-

age children who love school, almost always were successful and free of real conflict. With their parents, siblings, teachers or friends.

But perfect just ain’t the way it is in real life black America. Real life is real tough. In point of fact, this made-for-TV family was as phony as a \$3 bill.

Thus, I feel *The Cosby Show* actually may have been harmful to the image of the life and times of “regular” black folks in this country. By “regular,” I mean those who don’t put on airs, socialize with their less fortunate black brothers and sisters and care what happens to them — something sorely missing among the characters on the program.

This is not to say *The Cosby Show* was not well-acted in keeping with its Pollyanna intent. Indeed, all of the performers — Cosby, Phylicia Rashad, Malcolm Jamal-Warner, Lisa Bonet, et al., were fine in what they did. It’s simply that what they did rang so very, very hollow. It was not the real world for the majority of the nation’s black citizens.

What’s sad is that the great Bill Cosby had a great forum from which to be great. Unfortunately, his plain-vanilla show was not — at least not from a black perspective. But it played great with millions of whites, who were happy to see happy, financially secure blacks who never rocked the racial boat. It made them happy and they loved it!

I find myself much more in tune with Cosby’s public persona in the years since *The Cosby Show* departed the prime time, network schedule. Of course, this brought him into mortal combat with many in the nation’s black community. Some characterize his outspoken stance regarding the black family and black youth today as I characterized his

highly rated TV show: “Elitist.”

One is black scholar Michael Eric Dyson, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author of “Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has The Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?” Said Dyson, in the wake of Cosby’s highly publicized criticisms of the black family in May 2004: “He’s ill-informed. I’m not mad at him, but he needs some empirical data so that he knows what he’s talking about...”

In 2005, Dyson took Cosby to task on several occasions on cable-TV talk shows, and last summer publicly dissed him at the prestigious Harlem Book Fair on C-SPAN. For my part, however, I think Cosby is correct in this situation and wholeheartedly agree with him

Among his stinging remarks that grabbed headlines from coast-to-coast, Cosby said that unless the values of America’s poor blacks improve, there always will be too many poor blacks

among us. He said the black community is not properly dealing with illiteracy, crime and violence, and skewered the obscene lyrics of some rap music and the failure of young blacks to speak proper English while “standing on the corner.”

Bravo, I say. As a father of four and grandfather of six, I fail to see where he spoke anything but the truth. As a matter of fact, he probably didn’t go far enough. For example, how can anyone who rides New York City subways disagree? Every other word you hear from young, attention-seeking blacks is “nigger.” And I mean girls as well as boys.

Finally, while *The Cosby Show* definitely was not my cup of tea, the new Bill Cosby is. Like me — and unlike many others — Cosby puts his money where his mouth is. These days, you gotta love him. Go on with your bad self, Cos.

Richard G. Carter, a New York freelance writer, was a columnist and editorial writer with the *New York Daily News*. He has appeared on “Larry King Live” and “The Phil Donahue Show” and co-hosted “Showdown” on CNBC with the late Morton Downey Jr. He was Vice President-Public Affairs with Group W Cable and in 1986 received the Marquette University By-Line Award for distinguished achievement in journalism.

Dr. Watson replies:

Whether or not The Cosby Show offered an accurate depiction of black families in the 1980s — and whether it did more harm than good by leading white viewers to the conclusion that the societal playing field had been leveled — has been a spirited debate since the show’s debut. Richard Carter has been an especially insightful critic of the series. His arguments about the show being “out of touch” are absolutely sound and have contributed important context to the national conversation on race. My comment that The Cosby Show “validated the belief in the American Dream” was meant as a description of the show’s premise, not an embrace of its truth. That the significance of the series continues to have emotional resonance after two decades underscores the potency of TV’s “social scripts” — and the importance of a forum such as Television Quarterly to discuss them.