



The Cosby Show

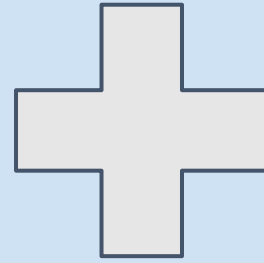
1984-1992

What was *The Cosby Show* about?

- The show centered on an upper-middle class black family living in Brooklyn, NY.
 - The family was headed by a doctor (Heathcliff) and lawyer (Claire) and their five children.
 - They were living the American Dream on TV, starring a black family.
- *The Cosby Show* dominated TV in the '80s & topped the ratings for five straight years.



Sitcom Families



- Think about how families are typically shown on TV.
 - What does a “family” look like?
 - Today’s sitcom families are more diverse than they were in the 1950s-1970s.

Sitcom Families

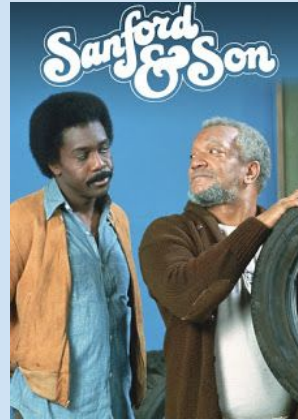
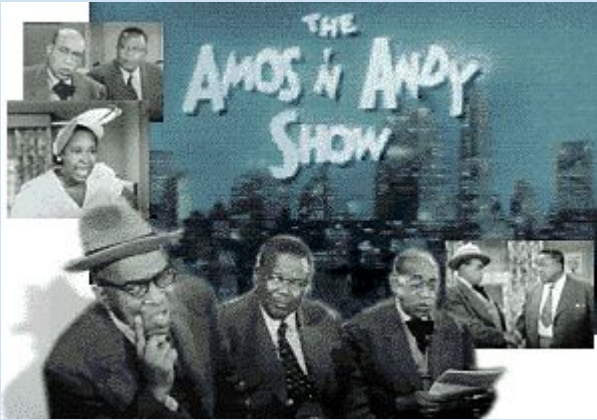
1950s: *Leave it to Beaver*



1960s: *Bewitched*



African-Americans on TV before *The Cosby Show*



• Themes:

- There were few African-Americans on TV before the 1970s
- The few roles that existed were stereotypical (black actors cast in roles created & written by white writers and producers)
 - “In the early days, roles [for black people] on the whole were limited to gangsters, pimps, drug dealers, some kind of servitude, or buffoons” says Tim Cogshell, a film critic.

The problem of depiction



- How people are shown on TV matters because people learn things about people/the world from what they see on TV.
- When it came to race on TV, white, middle-class Americans didn't know enough about black society to know if a black character on TV was unrealistic or offensive.

African-Americans on TV in the 1950s & 1960s



Amos & Andy (1950s)

Amos 'n' Andy was based on a popular radio show in the 1920s & '30s.

It was one of the first shows to have a mostly black cast.

Criticism: It set the stage for tv's stereotypes of black Americans (sassy talk, just out of the cotton fields, struggling in the big city.)



Good Times (1974-1979)



- Show centered on the Evans family, a working class family who lived in a Chicago housing project. The storylines dealt with the humor & difficulties of living in a city.
 - The parents, Florida & James, struggled to provide for their family as best they could.
 - 3 kids: J.J. (an aspiring painter), Michael (a political crusader and troublemaker) and Thelma (the voice of reason)
- Progress: healthy, happy black, 2 parent family
- Criticism: working class, living in the projects, “jive talking”



Remember
Lionel from
*All in the
Family?*

Here's what
happens when
"Lionel Moves
into the
Neighborhood"

The Jeffersons (1975-1985)

- In 1975, the Jeffersons got their own spinoff from "All in the Family."
- PLOT: George & Louise Jefferson (a laundromat entrepreneur), move from the Bunker's working-class neighborhood in Queens into a ritzy high-rise building on the Upper East Side.
 - The humor came from the family's adjustment to its newfound wealth.





Progress: black family who moves up in social class, better parts for black actors (get to play a wealthier family)

Criticism: George (father) acts like a stereotype (clown/buffoon), much of the humor in the show came from them being a fish out of water and new to being rich.

Well we're movin' on up
(Movin' on up)
To the east side
(Come on, movin' on up)
To a deluxe apartment in the sky
Movin' on up
(Movin' on up)
To the east side
(Come on, movin' on up)
We finally got a piece
Of the pie

Fish don't fry in the kitchen
Beans don't burn on the grill
Took a whole lotta tryin'
Just to get up that hill

Now we're up in the big leagues
Gettin' our turn at bat
As long as we live
It's you and me, baby
There ain't nothin' wrong with that

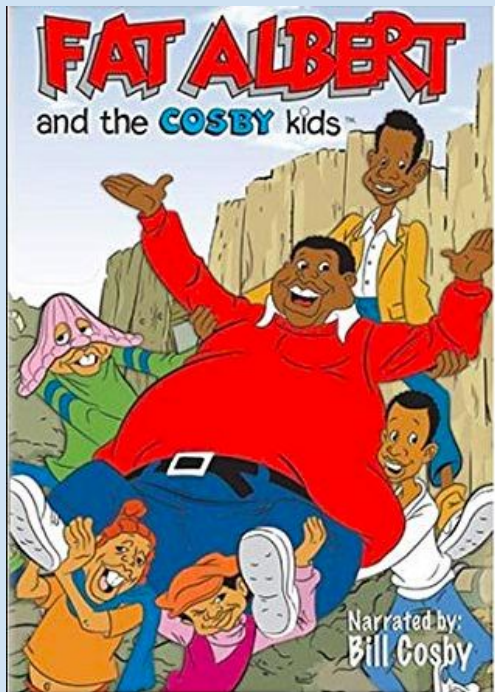
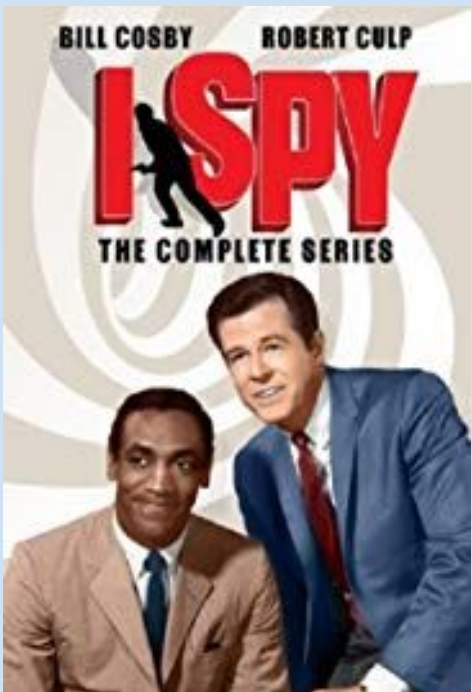


- Although roles for blacks on TV increased in the 1970s, there were still NOT a lot of TV shows for black audiences.
 - Of the 1,135 hours of TV broadcast monthly in 1969, only 1 hour (on PBS) was meant for black audiences!
- WHY? TV networks thought...
 1. white audiences wouldn't watch characters who were different from them
 2. the black audience wasn't big enough to make a show just for them.

What set *The Cosby Show* apart from shows before it?

Instead of focusing on the black working class, it was about a black upper-middle class family (at a time when the black middle class was growing in numbers.)





The Cosby Show - Origins

- Cosby had previously starred in the late 1960s hit *I Spy* and was a creator/star in the '70s children's show *Fat Albert*. He was also involved in a string of less successful shows.
- Cosby got the attention of NBC's network head after a hilarious stand-up act on *The Tonight Show* about child-raising.

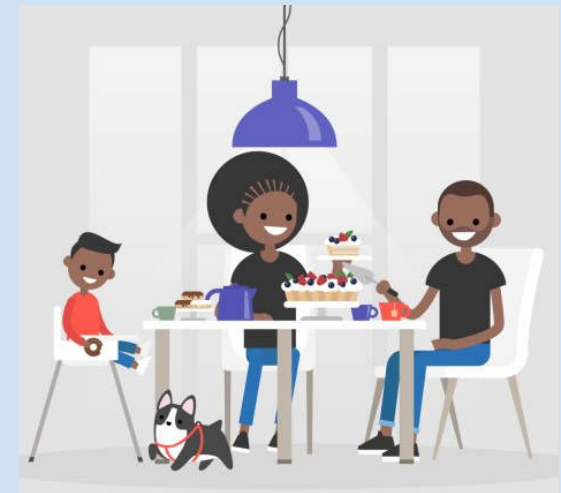


Cosby's goals for the show

1. Wanted to focus on the theme of family life (relatable regardless of one's race)
 - Episodes gave moral instructions for life dished up with some tough love.
2. Wanted to make a show about a middle class black family who was not totally defined by their skin color.
 - Some episodes had nothing to do with race, while others revolved around jazz, or black art, or remembering the March on Washington.
 - "Bill depicted the Huxtables as an American family that happened to be black, rather than as an African-American family," he said. "For Bill, family was more important than race."



Cosby worked with a Harvard psychiatrist whose specialty was minority children to read scripts to make sure they reflected genuine child psychology and family dynamics.



#1 Theo Gets An Earring



#2 The March on Washington



The Cosby Show

(pilot episode)



Made with
VideoShow

What was important about *The Cosby Show*?

- Although the show was a comedy, Cosby used the show to talk about serious issues like teen pregnancy & learning disabilities.
- The image of a stable black upper-middle class family was praised for breaking racial stereotypes.
 - "Black audiences greeted *The Cosby Show* with a certain amount of euphoria" says a professor of African & African-American Studies at Duke. "It was a regular opportunity to see black life portrayed in a 'responsible' manner."
- *Cosby* made an effort to incorporate characters in non-stereotypical roles (i.e., Asian characters as friends and neighbors, not just Chinese food delivery people or dry cleaners or cooks.)



Critics of The Cosby Show



- The show was criticized by some for being unrealistic & allowing white audiences to think that racism and poverty no longer affected black Americans.

- **TIMING:**

- The Reagan administration cut billions of dollars in services to the working poor, education, health & human services and more broadly to cities. This disproportionately impacted racial minorities and those living in urban centers like NYC.
- Cities like New York City were bankrupt, eroding after decades of neglect, all while gang violence was on the rise and the crack epidemic was raging.

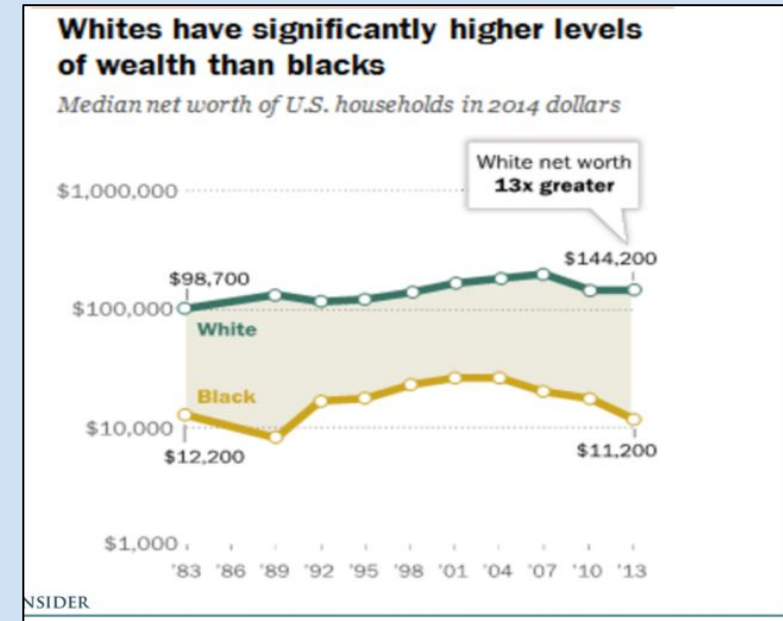


Fig. 1: Income inequality by race



Fig. 2: City playground littered in trash

The Cosby Show
brownstone
in Brooklyn
Heights &
interior of
their living
room



VS



Lower East Side, NYC, 1980

What came next



- *The Cosby Show's* success paved the way for a variety of black shows & casts on TV.
- In the '80s and '90s, black TV exploded, as networks fought to create positive programs for an engaged demographic.
 - *A Different World* – a spin-off of *The Cosby Show* followed focused on a fictitious historically black college, along with *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* starring Will Smith, *Martin* with Martin Lawrence and *Living Single* with Queen Latifah.

Influence & Legacy of *The Cosby Show*

- Cosby believed that his show had a lasting effect on America's racial views.
- An essay in the *New York Times* in 2008 argued that the Huxtables' influence made it possible for people to imagine Barack Obama as president.
 - On election night Mr. Rove, the former Bush strategist, said on Fox News: "We've had an African-American first family for many years in different forms. When *The Cosby Show* was on, that was America's family. It wasn't a black family. It was America's family."



What do you do with the fact that Bill Cosby's credibility & legacy has since been tarnished by sexual assault convictions/jail time? Does that change the importance of *The Cosby Show*?

