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The Cosby Show, Family Themes, and the Ascent of White Situation Comedies Abroad in the Late 1980s

Beginning in the mid-1980s, changes in both domestic and international media industries led to increased international sales revenues for U.S. programming of all genres. These increases were particularly noticeable in the formerly resistant markets of Western Europe, which had tended to view U.S. programs as overly commercial and ill-suited to their public service broadcasting environments. With the introduction of commercial television in Europe and growing demands for European public service broadcasters to demonstrate their popularity with a broad cross section of the national audience, numerous channels began programming U.S. imports in unconventional ways that led to revisions in the dominant industry lore about the kinds of programs that transfer well across national borders.

The impact of these political-economic changes on conventional industry lore and the institutional labors of U.S. exports abroad was profound, both for U.S. television in general and for African American television in particular. Rather suddenly, buyers from specialty channels, commercial channels, and reorganized public broadcasters revised their images of their potential audiences and the kinds of programming techniques that could hold their attention. Buyers were more willing to experiment with imported programs than they might have been only a few years earlier due to the comparative cheapness of program imports and uncertainty about how to attract this newly imagined audience.

Such moments of significant political, economic, and regulatory change in the world's media systems reshape prevalent industry lore because of the uncertainty they produce for both buyers and sellers. They permit—require, really—industry executives at home and abroad to search out new ways of imagining foreign and transnational audiences and their potential connections to imported programming. As part of this search, long-ignored cultural alliances, new historical developments, submerged transnational discourses, historical similarities, and informal cultural flows get activated and, potentially, filter up into conventional industry lore.

In the case of U.S. situation comedies, dominant perceptions about their

exportability began to change in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While most program merchants remained skeptical about the genre's overall appeal, they began to realize that certain types of sitcoms, especially family-oriented domestic sitcoms, could appeal to both niche and general audiences abroad under some conditions.

The Cosby Show (1984–1992) was central to revising industry lore about sitcoms. A certifiable hit in its domestic market, *The Cosby Show* attracted more viewers and made more money than any series in television history, netting over $1 billion in domestic syndication sales and close to $1 billion in ad revenues for NBC during its eight years in prime time. Internationally the series was almost as popular in many markets, consistently topping the ratings in such diverse places as the Philippines, Lebanon, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Australia, the Caribbean, and South Africa. Across Europe the series became the top American import and beat out previous international favorites like *Dallas* (1978–1991), *Dynasty* (1981–1989), and *The A-Team* (1983–1987) in terms of popularity and total number of markets where the series aired.

Drawing on the insights of the previous chapter, it seems reasonable to argue that the explanations for the popularity of *The Cosby Show* abroad are probably at least as numerous as the number of territories that imported the show. Extant viewers' comments from around the world exhibit voyeurism and fascination with black bodies in Sweden; appreciation of the dignity of Bill Cosby's character—as compared with conventional, satirical portrayals of black men in popular culture—among black South Africans; identification with family size, communication patterns, and the ability to retain one's cultural identity in the face of white, Western pressures in Lebanon; and dislike for the series' portrayals of masculinity, feminism, and youth culture in Barbados (Havens, 2000).

Despite the range of viewer responses to the series, however, a coherent industry lore grew up around the series among American, European, and some non-Western executives, identifying "universal family themes" as *The Cosby Show*'s primary appeal abroad. In this chapter I examine how technological, industrial, representational, and discursive forces worked together to produce this industry lore. While the previous chapter explored how *programmers* worked with local and transnational political trends, discourses, and political-economic developments to produce radical television schedules in apartheid South Africa, this chapter zeroes in on the global television *merchants*—buyers and sellers of African American television—and how this distinct, transnational interpretive community developed a coherent lore about the audience appeal of one of the most successful global television programs of all time.

The Changing Economics of Global Television Trade in the 1980s

While the economics of television broadcasting both at home and abroad had encouraged international program trade from the late 1950s through the early 1970s, as nations around the world added television broadcasting capabilities that relied heavily on imports to round out their schedules, television syndication since that time had been largely a domestic affair. Certainly, program trade existed in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, but U.S. syndicators made far more money from domestic syndication to local broadcasters and independent stations than they did from international trade (Havens, 2006).

Since 1970, U.S. networks had been legally barred from owning or profiting from the programs that they aired during prime time. Consequently, Hollywood studios and independent producers created most of the prime-time programming in the 1980s, including *The Cosby Show*. The networks licensed the rights to broadcast prime-time programs from the producers, generally for two prime-time runs per season, after which the rights to sell programs into syndication reverted to the producer. These syndication rights included international sales, and the ratio of profits from international and domestic sales differed significantly by genre. As we saw in chapter 1, for instance, the miniseries *Roots* earned more than half of its revenues overseas, in contrast to the situation comedies we examined in the previous chapter, which earned perhaps 10 percent of their revenues abroad.

For a number of reasons, the market for global television trade and the balance between domestic and international revenues changed dramatically in the mid-1980s. Domestically, one of the most significant changes was the 1984 Cable Act, which paved the way for several competing cable channels to challenge the traditional terrestrial broadcasters—ABC, CBS, and NBC—and led to steady declines in network audience ratings. By 1985 Nielsen Media reported that prime-time viewership had fallen below 50 percent of the total potential audience, a decline of about 20 percent from ten years earlier. Along with audience ratings, network advertising revenues fell and program production costs grew, as the networks spent lavishly on signature programs in an effort to stand out from their cable competitors. Decreased advertising revenues prompted the networks to lower the license fees that they paid to program producers, while increased production costs forced producers to seek greater syndication revenues from abroad to cover the difference (Barns, 1981; Boyer, 1986; Richter, 1986).

Meanwhile, governments abroad relaxed restrictions on commercial broadcasting and cable television, thereby expanding the number of international buyers for U.S. programming. Between 1984 and 1997 the number

of cable and satellite channels in Europe grew from 10 to more than 250 ("Europe's 'Other,'" 1997, 57). Most of these startup channels depended heavily on imported programming to build audiences and fill out their broadcast schedules. In Europe in 1992, for instance, 75 percent of new channels used imported programming for at least half of their schedules ("Transformation Scene," 1992, 40).

This wave of deregulation and privatization started in Western Europe but quickly spread to many parts of the globe, aided by the rise of neoconservative governments in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, India, and other nations, who shared a disdain for the concept of public service broadcasting and preferred to place broadcasting in commercial hands (Herman and McChesney, 1997, 156–58). Between 1984 and 1989, U.S. syndicators' foreign revenues nearly quadrupled from $500 million to $1.7 billion (Havens, 2006). In fact, one of the main reasons the U.S. networks sought to decrease their license fees at the time was the understanding that syndicators in the mid-eighties could recoup production costs from these international sources.

The Selling of *The Cosby Show*

The Cosby Show was produced by the boutique production firm Carsey-Werner and syndicated domestically and internationally by Viacom, which at the time was a small television distributor, not the global behemoth that it is today. Along with macro-level political-economic changes at home and abroad that prepared the ground for a revision of industry lore about sitcoms, micro-level business practices at Viacom also contributed to the ascension of *The Cosby Show* as the most popular U.S. export of the late 1980s. The fact that *The Cosby Show* became a prime vehicle for revising prevalent industry lore shaped that lore in specific ways. That is, the perception that universal family values facilitated the series' export would have been impossible to sustain if, for instance, the Fox sitcom *Married . . . with Children* (1987–1997), often referred to as "not *The Cosby Show*," had become the most popular U.S. export. A close examination of Viacom's international marketing strategies reflects the company's slow-but-sure recognition that, against conventional industry wisdom at the time, sitcoms could achieve popularity on the international markets.

Viacom was created in the wake of rule changes by the FCC that made it illegal for the networks to have a financial stake in the prime-time programming they aired. In response to these new rules, CBS spun off its syndication wing into a separate company, Viacom. By the mid-1980s, however, Viacom's

library of 1970s CBS hits such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–1977) was aging, and the company was on the lookout for new programming. Before it found *The Cosby Show*, its previous efforts had netted only such forgettable shows as *Dear Detective* (1979) and *The Lazarus Syndrome* (1979), though the company also held the rights to some B movies and *Perry Mason* specials. Therefore, when Carsey-Werner ran into trouble financing *The Cosby Show*'s high budgets, Viacom agreed to pump in extra funds in return for the right to distribute the show worldwide (Richter, 1985).

Observers estimate that *The Cosby Show* never earned more than $100 million in international revenues.[1] While this figure pales in comparison with the more than $1 billion the series brought in from domestic syndication, it still represents wide international appeal, given that international buyers paid significantly less than their domestic counterparts for the rights to air the series. In addition, although *The Cosby Show* quickly soared to the number one spot in the United States, Viacom was unable to recoup most of its investment until 1987, when enough episodes had been produced for domestic syndication.[2] For three years, then, international sales offered the only revenues from the series other than NBC's license fee while the company awaited domestic syndication profits (Flanigan, 1987; Lippman, 1992; Richter, 1985).[3]

The Cosby Show far outperformed any of its domestic competitors in international sales. *Family Ties* (1982–1989), for instance, which occasionally challenged *The Cosby Show* for the top-rated position in the U.S. market and was sold internationally by Paramount Pictures, performed well only in Europe and Australia. *The Cosby Show*, by contrast, appealed to audiences in these predominantly white markets as well as in nonwhite markets in the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, and East Asia. The similarities between these two sitcoms are striking and begin to give us a glimpse into the importance of race in explaining their differential success. Paramount Pictures was just as interested as Viacom at the time in establishing a presence as a successful international distributor. The quality of the writing and acting in *Family Ties* rivaled that of *The Cosby Show*, and many remember the series as *The Cosby Show*'s "white obverse" (Taylor, 1989, 163). Each series offered a comparable vision of the American Dream, in which material comfort allowed family members to escape the drudgery of daily work and concentrate instead on personal and familial well-being. In fact, the racial difference between the Huxtables and the Keatons is perhaps the only salient difference between these two sitcoms that can account for their very different export patterns.

The details of Viacom's international distribution strategy for *The Cosby Show* are difficult to reconstruct. In all likelihood, the strategy was mostly

opportunistic and haphazard, rather than carefully planned, due to low expectations for the series in international markets (see fig. 3.1).

Most of the international sales in 1984 and 1985 were to either Scandinavian or non-European general entertainment television networks. These European markets were still dominated by one or two public broadcast networks that paid low license fees for imported programs. In Denmark and the Netherlands the state broadcasters reported that *The Cosby Show* was the top-rated import in 1986. In South Africa, where the show consistently ranked number one, the SABC began airing the show in 1985 on the newly introduced TV4, which targeted a multiracial audience. The monopoly socialist television network in Poland reported that the show was popular in the fall of 1986. State-run channels in Israel and Lebanon likewise reported in 1988 that the series had been an unqualified success for more than a year (Fuller, 1992; Hall et al., 1986; Mufson, 1986; Raschka, 1988; "What's Hot," 1986). Obviously, the institutional labors to which these varied broadcasters put *The Cosby Show* differed greatly and can be reconstructed only through the kind of close analysis of the political, cultural, and broadcasting environments that we undertook in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, these details suggest that interest in *The Cosby Show* in small markets mostly came from established broadcasters who used them to attract undifferentiated audiences.

Because these early sales took place in markets that paid small license fees, it was easy for Viacom's executives to either ignore the show's popularity in these territories or write it off as little more than a curiosity. Slowly, however, the growing success of *The Cosby Show* in international markets began to sink in at Viacom, particularly as a handful of larger European territories started broadcasting the show. In these increasingly lucrative and competitive territories, the show performed best in newly commercializing markets at small television stations. The show flopped in Belgium in 1985, where it was carried on the state broadcast system prior to the introduction of commercial television. In Italy, which had had pervasive, if illegal, private television since the mid-1970s, the show performed well on the private station Canale 5 from 1985 onward. France's M6, a theme channel dedicated to popular entertainment, began programming the show in 1988, soon after private television broadcasting became legal, and continued with good ratings for at least six years. In the United Kingdom, meanwhile, the series began airing in 1985 on Channel 4, a commercial broadcaster aimed at affluent viewers. While the series achieved only a "cult following" of between two and three million viewers per episode, it was one of the top-rated shows on Channel 4 and received high Appreciation Scores, which measure viewers' levels of

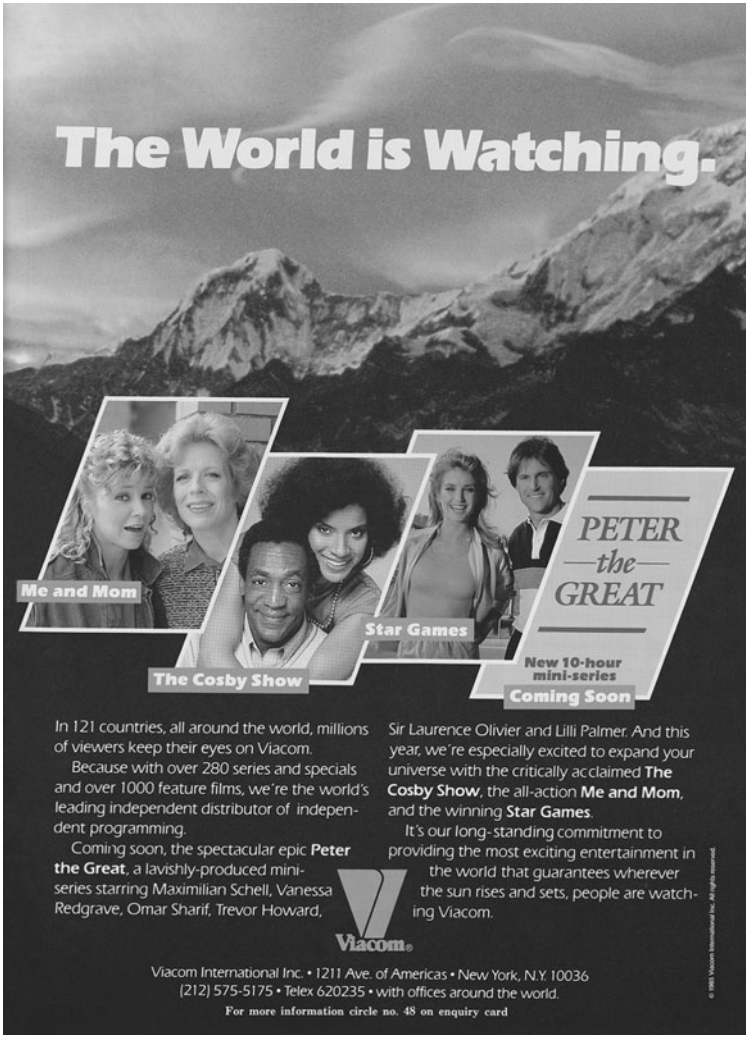

Figure 3.1. We can see Viacom's low expectations of *The Cosby Show*'s international syndication potential reflected in the way it advertised its programming in *TV World*, one of the main international television trade journals at the time. In 1984 and 1985 the company's slogan, "The World Turns to Viacom for Great Drama," was repeated in several advertisements for drama programming, especially the miniseries *Peter the Great* (1986). The first mention of *The Cosby Show* came in a February 1985 advertisement promoting four series—*Me and Mom* (1985), *Star Games* (1985), *Peter the Great*, and *The Cosby Show*—in which mention of *The Cosby Show* is buried at the end of the second paragraph of copy (Viacom, 1985a). Obviously, Viacom did not view the show as a lucrative international commodity at the time.

enjoyment. Finally, in Germany, the public broadcaster ZDF began broadcasting the series in 1987, but it did not develop much of a following until it moved to the commercial broadcaster Prosieben in 1989 ("Belgian Parliament," 1986; Buxton, 1985; Fuller, 1992; Henry, 1986; "La Cinq," 1989).

In each of these examples, programmers used *The Cosby Show* as a cheap way to attract an audience that was interested in popular commercial programming, but otherwise largely undifferentiated in terms of gender, class, income, and other demographic variables. Moreover, the distribution patterns within and beyond Europe demonstrate that buyers looked to the performance of the series at similar channels in other markets in their region when purchasing the series. Thus, for instance, buyers from state-run broadcasters in the Middle East or public broadcasters in Europe could look to one another to gauge the show's potential performance when making buying decisions, demonstrating the transnationalization of industry lore and perceptions of how African American imports can help accomplish institutional goals.

Viacom's growing awareness of *The Cosby Show*'s European popularity, combined with the promise of new, private channels across the continent that would require cheap American imports to fill out their broadcast schedules, led the company to take a more aggressive approach to promoting the show (see fig. 3.2). By 1986 Viacom reported sales of *The Cosby Show* in more than sixty countries. However, international sales revenues remained tiny in comparison with domestic sales, even in the largest foreign markets, in part because many of the channels that bought the show had comparatively small audiences. The United Kingdom's Channel 4 reportedly paid between £10,000 and £15,000 per episode ($16,000–$23,000 in 1990 dollars), while France's M6 paid between 20,000 and 30,000 French francs per episode ($3,000–$4,500 in 1990 dollars). Domestic sales, meanwhile, amounted to more than $4 million per episode (Henry, 1986; "La Cinq," 1989; Viacom, 1986).

Viacom held low expectations for the international marketability of *The Cosby Show* because of its status as a situation comedy and the impression at the time among global program merchants that sitcoms sold poorly abroad, as we saw in the previous chapter. While this impression did not extend to everyone involved in program trade, it was widespread enough to shape Viacom's marketing strategies. Given the international performance of other top-rated U.S. television series in the recent past, particularly the impressive success of *Dynasty* and *Dallas*, we can only conclude that the modest expectations for *The Cosby Show* abroad stemmed from negative attitudes toward the sitcom genre in general.

Regardless of the challenges of selling sitcoms internationally, however,

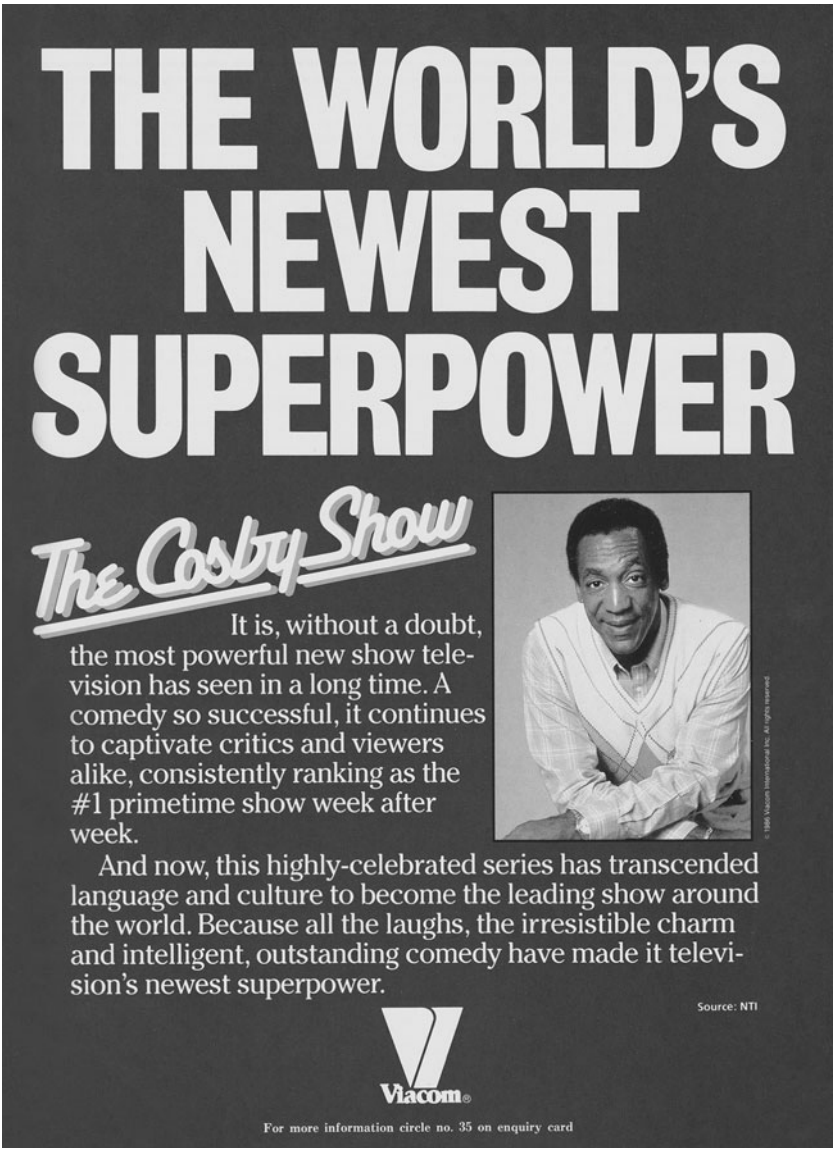

Figure 3.2. In February 1986 Viacom thought it financially worthwhile to take out a full-page ad for the show in *TV World* announcing that the domestically renowned series was available for international distribution. By November 1986, we find a full-page ad announcing that *The Cosby Show* is "The World's Newest Superpower," and claiming that the show "has transcended language and culture." Although the show had overcome non-European languages and cultures before this ad was published, sales to Western European markets provided the catalyst for Viacom's revised international marketing strategy and somewhat hyperbolic claims.

the genre had become increasingly popular in domestic syndication in the mid-1980s. In the United States, sitcoms attract desirable young demographics, are easy for television stations to schedule because they last only thirty minutes, and retain more of their audience in reruns than any other genre. Furthermore, sitcoms are generally the cheapest fictional genre to produce because they have traditionally been shot in-studio, usually with a stationary, three-camera setup that requires few changes in production equipment from episode to episode. *The Cosby Show* was an exception to this rule, with per-episode production costs topping $500,000 in 1985 due to costs associated with shooting in the Bronx rather than Los Angeles—a price tag that rivaled the costs of more expensive dramatic genres (Boyer, 1986) and contributed to Viacom's efforts to recoup its costs overseas. Despite this anomaly, however, most of the sitcoms that followed in the wake of *The Cosby Show*'s popularity remained comparatively cheap to produce. Therefore, U.S. distributors found their libraries stocked with sitcoms in need of international buyers (Heuton, 1990).

By the mid-1990s negative attitudes about the international marketability of sitcoms had been revised. As one commentator wrote in 1998, "the old paradigm against the international appeal of sitcoms has changed. It's not that sitcoms don't work, it's that some kinds of sitcoms don't work" (Spring, 1998, 6). A number of similar reports appeared in several trade journals around this time, virtually all of which credited *The Cosby Show* with a pivotal role in changing the industry lore.

The Cosby Show's Worldwide Appeal

The changes in the television industries across the globe outlined above help explain why *The Cosby Show* might have appealed to the raft of upstart channels that began in the mid-1980s. In addition, Viacom's efforts to promote the series as a universal success undoubtedly shaped buyers' decisions. Ultimately, however, the explanation for the popularity of *The Cosby Show* abroad lay with viewers who, despite differences of region, nationality, race and ethnicity, class, and so forth found value in the series. These viewers exhibited a wide variety of reasons for enjoying the series, and their comments give us insights into the kinds of diasporic sensibilities that exported African American television culture can harness (Fuller, 1992). Furthermore, the diversity of these comments, as compared with the uniformity of industry explanations, which we examine below, demonstrates how program merchants operate as cultural mediators who interpret and process complex audience trends in manageable and institutionally useful ways.

Although no comprehensive research into international viewers' reasons for watching *The Cosby Show* took place at the time, several newspaper articles did report viewers' attitudes in various parts of the world. A scholarly article about the show's reception in the Caribbean and a book that includes some written comments alongside statistical reports on viewers' satisfaction levels also give us glimpses into the kinds of pleasures that viewers got from watching the show (Flanigan, 1987; Fuller, 1992; Henry, 1986; Mufson, 1986; Payne, 1994; Raschka, 1988). In addition, a review of some of the main textual features of the series can help us understand why it might have become popular abroad.

Unlike most shows before it, *The Cosby Show* presented a picture of a comfortably well off, upper-class African American family that faced few problems from the world outside its living room walls. The heads of household in the series were Heathcliff Huxtable (Cliff), an obstetrician played by Bill Cosby, and Clair, an attorney played by Phylicia (Allen) Rashad. For the majority of the series' run, four Huxtable children rounded out the cast: Denise, the eldest, played by Lisa Bonet; Theo, the only son, played by Malcolm-Jamal Warner; and younger daughters Vanessa, played by Tempestt Bledsoe, and Rudy, played by Keshia Knight Pulliam.

Based on discussions with numerous black and white American focus groups from across the socioeconomic spectrum, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis (1992) in *Enlightened Racism* argue that the show struck a politically conservative chord by failing to portray the economic and social hardships that so often constitute part of what it means to be black in the United States. The authors criticize the show for ignoring these thorny issues and leaving white viewers with the impression that African Americans no longer faced economic barriers in American society, at the same time that it flattered African American viewers by avoiding traditional buffoon characters. Whatever the reader may think of these arguments, the fact that *The Cosby Show* avoided most overt references to American economic hardships may have made the show more accessible to international viewers, who might have found such allusions unfamiliar and confusing.

When political discourse did surface on *The Cosby Show*, it mostly involved issues with long histories and international currency, such as civil rights, antiapartheid, and education movements. In one famous episode, for instance, the family watched a rebroadcast of Martin Luther King Jr.'s illustrious "I Have a Dream" speech. Huxtable son Theo displayed an antiapartheid poster on his bedroom door in the first several seasons. And the importance of education for personal and racial uplift, especially the role of historically black colleges and universities in educating African Americans, became a

recurring theme in the series. Due to the long history of these political issues and their international visibility, international viewers would have found them much easier to understand than the kinds of flash-in-the-pan political issues that dominated series such as *Murphy Brown* (1988–1998) and *West Wing* (1999–2006).

The Huxtable family's economic status was also reflected in the allusions that the show made to high-class African American culture, rather than the hip-hop references that would come to fill many later African American sitcoms. Episodes of the show often featured jazz, blues, and R&B music. Work by African American painters, many with black figures and scenes, decorated the living room walls. As Herman Gray (1995) points out, the series made accessible to viewers an African American upper-class lifestyle that had been around for centuries but had rarely gotten noticed by popular culture. In fact, the main cultural work of the show was this effort to uncouple portrayals of African Americans from their prior connections with poverty and popular youth culture. In this way, the series was able to achieve a comparatively dignified depiction of African Americans, shorn of conventional reliance on black stereotypes, inner-city settings, and youth culture. Moreover, as Gray points out, as a result of the use of African American high culture, it was impossible to treat the characters' race as "an object of derision and fascination" (81). Much like their African American counterparts, nonwhite viewers abroad appreciated and enjoyed the fact that the show portrayed nonwhites with dignity rather than derision.

Despite the show's break with conventional popular images of African Americans, it nevertheless retained a good deal of physical humor, which has been prevalent in African American culture since the days of slavery (Watkins, 1994; White and White, 1998). For instance, in one episode, all of the family members perform a lip-synch pantomime of Ray Charles and the Raylettes' "Night Time Is the Right Time," to the delight of the Huxtable grandparents. Much of the humor derives from Bill Cosby's exaggerated facial expressions and reaction shots. In international markets *The Cosby Show*'s physical forms of comedy may have retained their humor because they were not based in verbal expressions, which often lose their subtlety and effect in translation.

Finally, *The Cosby Show* tried to include something for every viewer in order to gather the entire family in front of the set at a time when cable channels were focused on fragmenting the family into demographic niches. Episodes frequently featured multiple storylines that highlighted family life, the romance between Cliff and Clair, the travails of teenage life with Denise and later Theo and Vanessa, and childhood with Rudy and later Olivia. Thus,

viewers from a wide range of circumstances could find characters and storylines that intersected with their own lives and interests. This diversity of character portrayals extended beyond the borders of the United States as well, as we frequently witnessed international characters and plots. Theo's math teacher Mrs. Westlake, for instance, was Portuguese. In the final episode we discovered that Denise has moved to Singapore. As John Downing (1988) has written, these "aspects of international culture are part of the Huxtables' taken-for-granted world" (62). As such, we might expect the show to appeal more to international viewers than a series focused solely on a single slice of American life.

Black viewers from around the world responded well to the show's unique depiction of black dignity, as expressed in the show's humor and the trope of African American high culture. Consider these comments from black viewers around the world:

> I like this show because it depicts black people in a positive way. I think [Cosby] is good. It's good to see that black people can be professionals.
>
> —United States (Jhally and Lewis, 1992, 121)

> Black people in this show are not isolated, no fun is made of Blackness, and the characters are shown leading wholesome normal lives.
>
> —Barbados (Payne, 1994, 235)

> The show makes me proud of being Black.
>
> —South Africa (Fuller, 1992, 111)

Obviously, in order to feel the racial pride that these viewers expressed, they needed to share a belief that blacks had been historically ridiculed in white popular culture and that *The Cosby Show* was breaking with those traditions. In fact, these comments offer a good reminder that the international circulation of culture has been happening for centuries and is not a new feature of the electronic media age. Furthermore, the ridicule of blacks—and nonwhites in general—has been a part of that trade since the sixteenth century (Nederveen Pieterse, 1992). Apparently, this fact did not escape the attention of black fans of *The Cosby Show* around the world. As we shall see in the final chapters of this book, current African American television flows exhibit a high degree of ridicule and satire as well, though the politics of those forms of satire are more ambivalent than earlier forms.

Black viewers also derived solace from the show's depiction of well-to-do African Americans. A black South African viewer, for instance, explained,

> *The Cosby Show* . . . is saying, "Come on you White guys [in South Africa], the Blacks are not so bad as you make them out to be. Look at us, we are having a good life and normal problems here in America. Give those guys down there a chance. Let's change for the better and live together, not apart." (Fuller, 1992, 114)

For this viewer, the show imagined a world free of racial violence, economic hardship, and political disenfranchisement. As Downing (1988) has noted regarding domestic viewership, the setting of the show "is not simply a matter of blanking out the ugly realities of continuing oppression, but also offers some sense of resolution to the grinding realities of racial tension and mistrust in the United States" (70). It would seem the show offered similar solace to black viewers abroad.

Perhaps more surprisingly, other nonwhite viewers also expressed feelings of pride and hope watching *The Cosby Show*. Some Lebanese viewers thought that the Huxtables "came across as successful and smart, without having sold out to white culture." Another Lebanese viewer commented that "American blacks are a little like us. They have big families" (Raschka, 1988). Obviously the first statement demonstrates that these viewers considered the maintenance of one's cultural identity a respectable goal, and the dignified portrayals of black high culture in the series signaled for them the family's refusal to "sell out." Furthermore, we see again the show's ability to create an idyllic world for these viewers, where cultural integrity and material plenty can go hand in hand. This representation is starkly different from the integrated situation comedies of the early 1980s, which we explored in the previous chapter, which minimized or erased racialized cultural integrity. In fact, this comment reflects the recognition among Lebanese fans that material success for nonwhites worldwide was a dangerous proposition that had the potential to destroy local cultures. Certainly we see evidence in both comments that the presence of African American actors and the ways blackness was linked with high culture and material success played an important role in these viewers' enjoyment of the show.

For some white viewers abroad, the race of the characters was also a part of *The Cosby Show*'s appeal. A Swedish journalist wrote, "the fact that [the Huxtables] are Black also plays into [her enjoyment of the show]. They are so much more attractive than White people" (Fuller, 1992, 107). While this comment is complimentary, it also reflects hundreds of years of libidinal preoccupation with black culture among whites. Black culture has long aroused fear and rebuke in white society, at the same time that whites have been intrigued by the perceived energy, sexuality, and naturalness of black culture.

Most writers agree that this perception of black culture has more to do with what is repressed in white culture than what is actually present in black culture, and the fascination typically works to exacerbate differences and stereotype blacks as primitive (Lott, 1993; Nederveen Pieterse, 1992).

In a similar vein, a white South African viewer commented, "You'd be surprised what [Cosby] has meant to the Afrikaner. The Afrikaner doesn't mix with Black men. The television brings the Black man's quality right into his living room" (Mufson, 1986). Again, while this viewer commented positively about blacks, he still demonstrated a desire to experience black "difference" vicariously in the form of a nonthreatening sitcom. At least for some white viewers, the fact that *The Cosby Show* featured black actors was integral to their enjoyment of the show because it gave them a glimpse into the lifestyle of a group that has historically been defined as fundamentally different from them.

Not all viewers abroad considered race an important feature of *The Cosby Show*. For example, two very different reactions illustrate that, for some, the national origins of the show trumped the show's racial content. First, a proapartheid viewer in South Africa claimed,

> The greatest divide between Black and White in this country is not the color of one's skin but the First- and Third-World values and attitudes displayed by the different race groups. . . . Therefore, we do not see *The Cosby Show* as being about Black people, but we see it as a very entertaining sitcom displaying beliefs and values we can associate with. (Fuller, 1992, 14)

For this viewer *The Cosby Show* was primarily a Western show that extolled American values, and the race of the characters was of lesser importance. Likewise, several Bahamian viewers disliked the show because of its Americanness. "The North American influence coming from the show I believe to be detrimental on the whole," said one viewer. "Especially the norms of the children's behavior and their fashions I believe have a negative effect on [Bahamian] youth" (Payne, 1994, 243). Each of these comments is perhaps somewhat surprising and becomes comprehensible only when we realize that the show was simultaneously black and American. Consequently, the potential cultural connections and disconnections between viewers and the show were multiple and complexly interwoven.

As the foregoing overview of international audience responses to *The Cosby Show* demonstrates, foreign viewers found a variety of pleasures in the series. The upper-middle-class domestic setting offered admirable values for

some and idyllic goals for others, while emptying the series of controversial and parochial political issues. This setting also provided the series with a transnational cosmopolitanism that international viewers could identify with. The dignified portrayals of blackness, especially the series' allusions to African American high culture and the absence of traditional stereotypes, appealed to nonwhite viewers worldwide, who share a history of stereotyping and ridicule at the hands of white Europeans. At the same time, some white viewers around the world found the portrayal of a slice of black life different enough to be titillating, yet similar enough to be comforting.

Perhaps the most masterful thing about the series was its ability to please so many viewers in such different ways, without alienating others. Of course, not every viewer enjoyed the series, but even the comments from those who disliked it are useful in helping us understand what kinds of messages international viewers saw in the show. While we have no way to determine how widespread any of these attitudes were at the time of the series' international broadcasts, or whether other kinds of responses were more common, the similarities of some of these responses from different parts of the world is striking. To what degree, then, did international television executives recognize these dimensions of the show's popularity abroad, and how did the show's performance influence industry lore regarding the sitcom in general and African American sitcoms in particular?

Program Merchants, *The Cosby Show*, and Universal Family Themes

By 1996 Jim McNamara at MCA (Music Corporation of America) estimated that the major Hollywood studios found international buyers for about 70 percent of their sitcoms, up from only 5 percent in the early 1980s. McNamara wasn't alone in his assessment. Lisa Gregorian, former vice president of marketing and research for Warner Brothers International Television, commented, "I think, in general, comedies have a much more significant place on the international (broadcaster's) schedules than they once did ten years ago" (Huff, 1996). Tony Lynn, a former executive vice president of international television at MGM/UA, also agreed that "American comedies [became] accepted in international broadcast during the eighties" (Mahler, 1990).

The primary change in industry lore that *The Cosby Show* helped usher in was a belief that family-based sitcoms could be successful internationally. While other series, including *Full House* (1987–1995), *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990–1996), *Family Matters* (1989–1998), and *The Golden Girls* (1985–1992), also contributed to the rethinking of the genre, *The Cosby Show* was the

earliest and most successful example of the trend (Curtis, 1997; Huff, 1996; Spring, 1998; Tobin, 1990).

Virtually every European and American television merchant seems to agree that *The Cosby Show*'s "universal" family themes allowed the show to overcome cultural barriers of nation, race, and language. Consider, for instance, these strikingly similar explanations for the success of the series from executives from around the world:

> The Cosby Show was a universal hit. It was conveying universal values of family and generosity. One might think that this guy was typically American, but he was not thought of as such around the world.
>
> —Arthur Dela, former chair of Paris-based Arathos, owner of satellite systems in Eastern and Central Europe (Mahler, 1990)

> The Cosby Show . . . is such a universal experience of a man trying to raise children. . . . These are like universal issues of family.
>
> —Vice president of international television at a major Hollywood distributor (interview with the author, 1999)

> [The] Cosby [Show] is universal. . . . It's not just purely a black comedy with black actors. It's a comedy that reaches out to all cultures and generations because the problems they face are general problems that everyone faces every single day.
>
> —Jeff Ford, controller of acquisitions at U.K. Channel 5 (interview with the author, 1999)

> [The] Cosby [Show] . . . is universal, I mean, it has nothing to do with America. Things that happen in every household, it happens in Cosby as well.
>
> —Frank Mulder, director of program acquisitions and sales, NOS (Dutch Public Broadcasting) (interview with the author, 1999)

While these comments may be accurate, international audience research is underdeveloped in many territories, and even the most advanced ratings data do not tell us why viewers watch a particular series, but only that they watch. Furthermore, as we saw above, the investigations that have been conducted into why viewers around the world enjoyed the show almost uniformly identified racial and national identities as important.

One striking element of executives' comments about *The Cosby Show* is how similar they are to many white American viewers' observations that the Huxtable family didn't come across as black (Jhally and Lewis, 1992, 36–48). Two factors explain these observations: first, as discussed here, the show did not depict African American culture in the same way as its predecessors, but through allusions to African American high culture. Consequently, the typical association between blackness and poverty was severed, and program executives, much like middle-class white viewers, interpreted the lack of the latter as the absence of the former. Second, because the show extolled strong middle-class values in an upper-middle-class setting, many middle-class white viewers and television executives could easily identify, demonstrating again the degree to which such executives function as an interpretive community. For example, several executives referred to the show as either "white" or "not black":

> The black sitcoms we've been involved in have been the Cosbys. And that's not a black sitcom.
>
> —Herb Lazarus, president, Carsey-Werner International (interview with the author, 1999)

> The reason [for the success of] shows like . . . *Cosby* . . . is the fact that a lot of them are very white.
>
> —Director of international research at a major Hollywood distributor (interview with the author, 1999)

> The black sitcom works best if it's, let's say, as white as possible, which is surely the case with *The Cosby Show*.
>
> —European television buyer (interview with the author, 1999)

By calling the series "white," these executives deny the presence and importance of African American elements in the show, at the same time that they implicitly suggest that truly "black" shows lack the appropriate focus on family themes and settings that sitcoms need in order to succeed in international trade. Perhaps most importantly, this category of familial experience is implicitly associated with being white.

The logic whereby industry executives erased the racially specific dimensions of *The Cosby Show* and its worldwide appeal helped smooth the export of white American sitcoms. First, program merchants misinterpreted the show's depiction of an upper-middle-class African American lifestyle as a depiction of white American norms. Second, because most African Ameri-

can series that followed in the wake of *The Cosby Show* targeted teenagers and young adults, few of them were considered appropriate for international markets. By contrast, the international syndication revenues of white American sitcoms, which continued predominantly to address middle-class family settings and issues, benefited from *The Cosby Show*'s international popularity and the industry lore about universal family themes that developed to explain its success.

Why did television professionals discount race when discussing the reasons behind the series' global success? While this is a complex question, the political economy of the television industries in the 1980s, which itself arose from centuries of Western capitalist expansion and exploitation (Miller et al., 2005), provides at least part of the answer. At the time, the two main industry organizations for American television and film exports—the Motion Picture Export Association and the American Film Marketing Association—reported that more than 60 percent of international TV sales revenues came from European sales. Also among the "elite eight" nations that accounted for nearly three-quarters of U.S. audiovisual exports were the predominantly white nations of Canada and Australia.

A second, related reason that television professionals ignored the importance of blackness in their interpretations of *The Cosby Show*'s success had to do with the fact that they imagined the global viewer as white and middle-class. Consequently, it is not surprising that these executives would revert to a fairly conventional understanding of the appeal of culture beyond its nation of origin, the concept of universal values. Roland Barthes (1972) has suggested that this concept papers over the real, fundamental differences that historical injustices and exploitation have wrought among human societies:

> Any classic humanism postulates that in scratching the history of men a little, the relativity of their institutions or the superficial diversity of their skins . . . one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature. Progressive humanism, on the contrary, must always remember to reverse the terms of this very old imposture, constantly to scour nature . . . and at last to establish Nature itself as historical. (100)

Undoubtedly the idea that "family values" are "the same everywhere" stems from the kind of classical humanist assumptions that Barthes writes about. In addition, the process of universalizing human experience is one of the founding discursive operations of whiteness. As Fiske (1996) explains, "whiteness contains a limited but varied set of normalizing positions from which that which is nonwhite can be made into the abnormal; by such means, whiteness

constitutes itself as a universal set of norms by which to make sense of the world" (42). The industry lore about the universal themes that inhere in globally popular television programs, then, is not merely a passive observation; it is, rather, a discourse rooted in and perpetuating the history of white Western domination of the rest of the world's cultures. Of course, in the case of the industry lore surrounding *The Cosby Show*, this power was not deployed primarily for political purposes, but because the ability to universalize white worldviews served the institutional needs of American distributors and European commercial and public service broadcasters. Consequently, a consistent use of *The Cosby Show* developed in the most lucrative international markets and shaped wider industry lore about sitcoms in a way that led to increased budgets for U.S. family sitcoms, which were predominantly white.

The Cosby Show's Continuing Influence in Global Television

The Cosby Show helped establish the belief among international television executives that some American sitcoms focused on middle-class family issues can overcome worldwide cultural differences and become successful. Even more impressive is the fact that the show seemed to accomplish this feat without a great deal of promotion on the part of its distributor, Viacom, which instead considered the series' international sales prospects to be marginal due to prevalent attitudes at the time about sitcoms. Published audience comments suggest that, much as in the domestic market, *The Cosby Show*'s abilities to bring together different segments of the audience by refusing to alienate anyone were central to its appeal abroad. This capacity allowed the show to draw viewers from various national, racial, religious, and economic backgrounds as few television shows ever had.

What truly made *The Cosby Show* a global hit, however, was the combination of its capacity to speak to a broad cross section of viewers worldwide and its ability to serve the economic needs of quickly internationalizing domestic and foreign television industries during the 1980s and 1990s. The rapid expansion of channels and buyers around the world created a sudden spike in demand for programming from the global markets, which American distributors were well poised to capitalize on. Professional events, international trade journals, and executive training courses all provided new opportunities for programmers and distributors from around the world to come together and evolve similar kinds of programming solutions to similar kinds of problems. For instance, *The Cosby Show* was the solution to drawing in good-sized, general family audiences on a budget. Moreover, since many of the upstart channels were commercial ventures, they conceptualized

their domestic audiences along demographic lines standardized by the global advertising industry, leading programmers everywhere to think about the similarities and differences between domestic viewing groups in similar ways. In contrast to the programming of integrated American situation comedies in South Africa earlier in the decade, where Bop-TV's articulation of disaffected white and black viewing segments drew from local political and cultural developments, most programmers of *The Cosby Show* abroad worked from a conceptualization of their audience that came from the advertising industry.

Not only was *The Cosby Show* key in revising prevailing attitudes toward the sitcom genre among international television professionals at a time when sitcoms were becoming more numerous in the domestic market, it also gave rise to the now common practice of figuring international sales revenues into domestic production budgets for sitcoms from the outset. Today television executives must consider a sitcom's international sales potential before they are willing to sink a great deal of money into a project.

Although *The Cosby Show* revolutionized the financing and thinking of international television distribution, more profound insights about the global circulation of television programming went unnoticed by executives, specifically the fact that the national and racial origins of the characters were central to international viewers' enjoyment of the series. According to one veteran international distributor at a Hollywood studio, nearly ten years after *The Cosby Show*'s worldwide success, "I think there is a general sense [in the industry] that if [a show] is too tied to the African American experience, then it won't work internationally" (interview with the author, 1999).

African American sitcoms after *The Cosby Show* often targeted cross-racial teenage and young adult audiences, typically by tapping into their shared interests in rap music and African American pop stars. Sitcoms such as *Living Single* (1993–1998), starring Queen Latifah, *The Sinbad Show* (1993–1994) and *Martin* (1992–1997), featuring African American comedians, *Moesha*, starring the pop star Brandy, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, starring the crossover rap star Will Smith, may have shared some of the trappings of middle-class domestic sitcoms, but they were primarily seen as niche programs with little or no appeal abroad. However, much like *Roots* and *The Cosby Show*, some of these programs would also become international hits despite conventional industry wisdom to the contrary. In contrast to these earlier phenomena, however, the textual potentialities and institutional labors of this newer batch of sitcoms made it more difficult for industry insiders to ignore the importance of African American culture in explaining their international appeal.

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