<u>**Media Pandering: The Good, the Bad, and the... Inclusive?**</u>
"Rethinking the Politics of Representation"
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While politics of representation have been useful in opening up conversations about diversity in American media and challenging media producers to rethink longstanding assumptions not only about what audiences want to see but also about who audiences are, I suggest that they have outlived their usefulness as the chief analytic tool for evaluating media inclusivity. Conversations both critical and popular seem to have largely stalled on questions related to affirmative representation: are marginalized identity groups being represented, and are they being represented well?

Theorization of what it means to be "represented well" has largely proceeded negatively, through analyzing exploitative, inaccurate, or inadequate representational instances and strategies. This critical work has gone a long way toward articulating the issues with contemporary media's treatment of race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status; it now occupies a central place within mainstream conversations about TV and film.

However, while negative theorization has done an excellent job of outlining the problem, it has been less effective at offering a way forward. Clearly, it is not the job of critics or audiences to provide media producers with the representational strategies that will fix diversity issues without pandering, if indeed a strategy can correct it. However, our collective inability to move beyond the issue of affirmative representation has, I argue, had two specific, negative developments on the media landscape: 1) a critical blindness to the racism/sexism/etc. that is structurally encoded in media that is otherwise diverse and 2) superficial, uninspired responses by media producers that are, essentially, pandering.

Regarding 1), often a film/show that is exceptional in its representation of one marginalized identity group does so at the expense of another. This has been the case for a number of high profile shows and recent films. *Mad Max: Fury Road* was claimed as a feminist triumph, and yet the increased representation of (white) women and anti-patriarchal themes did nothing to undermine cinematic codes rooted in racism and colonialism.

More recently, *Suicide Squad* boasted an incredibly diverse cast, which was, arguably, responsible for the diversity of its audience. Nevertheless, the film has been roundly denounced for its egregious, violent treatment of women and people of color. This was Samuel Chambers' point when, writing about *The L Word*, he noted that it is possible to have a show about lesbians without actually challenging structures of heteronormativity. Representation of marginalized identity groups alone is not enough to challenge the formal and narrative conventions that uphold and normalize the cultural marginalization of those same groups.

Regarding 2), the recent phenomenon of "genderswapped" film franchises is perhaps the easiest and timeliest target. Beginning with the controversial Ghostbusters reboot, "genderswapping" seems to be Hollywood's newest strategy for both recycling profitable film properties and targeting "new" audiences; currently planned genderswapped reboots include *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, Ocean's Eleven, Splash,* and *The Rocketeer*.

This is not an altogether negative development in media culture, but neither is it an essentially progressive one. As a summer blockbuster film, Ghostbusters is perfectly entertaining, but any critique or even self-awareness of the original film's power structures --various forms of gendered exploitation and outright rape as plotline--is nonexistent. What's worse, a significant amount of the film's comedic punch is a result of the racist stereotyping and tokenism of Leslie Jones' character Patty.

I do not think there is an easy solution to the problem of diversity and media pandering. In fact, my argument is that these issues need to be handled with more commitment and analytic complexity than they are currently being given by both critical and mainstream culture. While I do assert that there are significant limitations to a politics of representation, I am uncomfortable suggesting that we abandon them altogether. I do, however, suggest that approaches to media analysis (and media creation) proceed from norm-critical position rather than one rooted in a desire/need for affirmative representation.

What would constitute a norm-critical approach? Firstly, there needs to be a greater understanding of media history and the ways in which certain groups have been represented both on screen and within industry. A historical approach will challenge instances of increased representation that nevertheless continue to uphold problematic narrative structures and visual codes. Secondly, if "genderswapped" and "racebent" properties are to be anything more than pandering, they must be undertaken with the same kind of critical attention and artistic vision that is given to films and shows that, unconcerned with diversity, continue to win awards and critical accolades by restaging common narratives of the development of white, straight, male heroes.

Dedication to diversity critique has resulted in unprecedented gains in affirmative representation, but it is time to put that dedication behind historical analysis and qualitative critique that goes beyond counting the different kinds of bodies on screen. As marginalized identity groups have become a more vocal force in criticizing the homogeneity of mainstream media, they have also become more visible--and therefore more targetable--as a market demographic for media producers interested in maximizing their audience impact and, by extension, their profit. We must remain vigilant about those media products that seem to satisfy our desires to see ourselves on screen, as media pandering will continue to play to that desire without any substantive change in their attitude toward us as fringe audiences.