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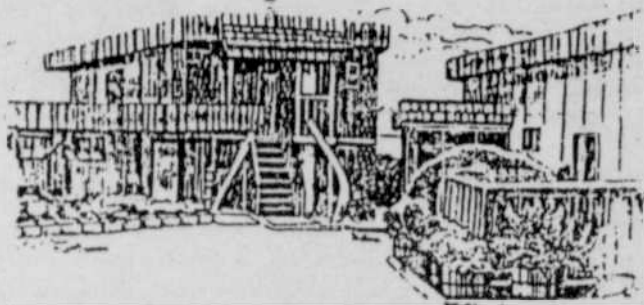
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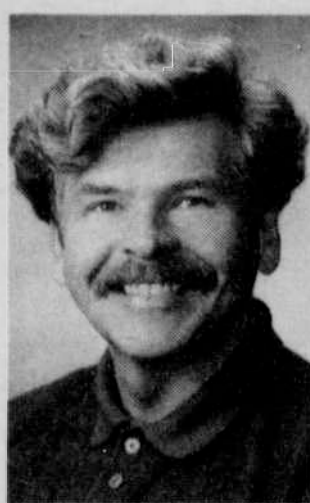
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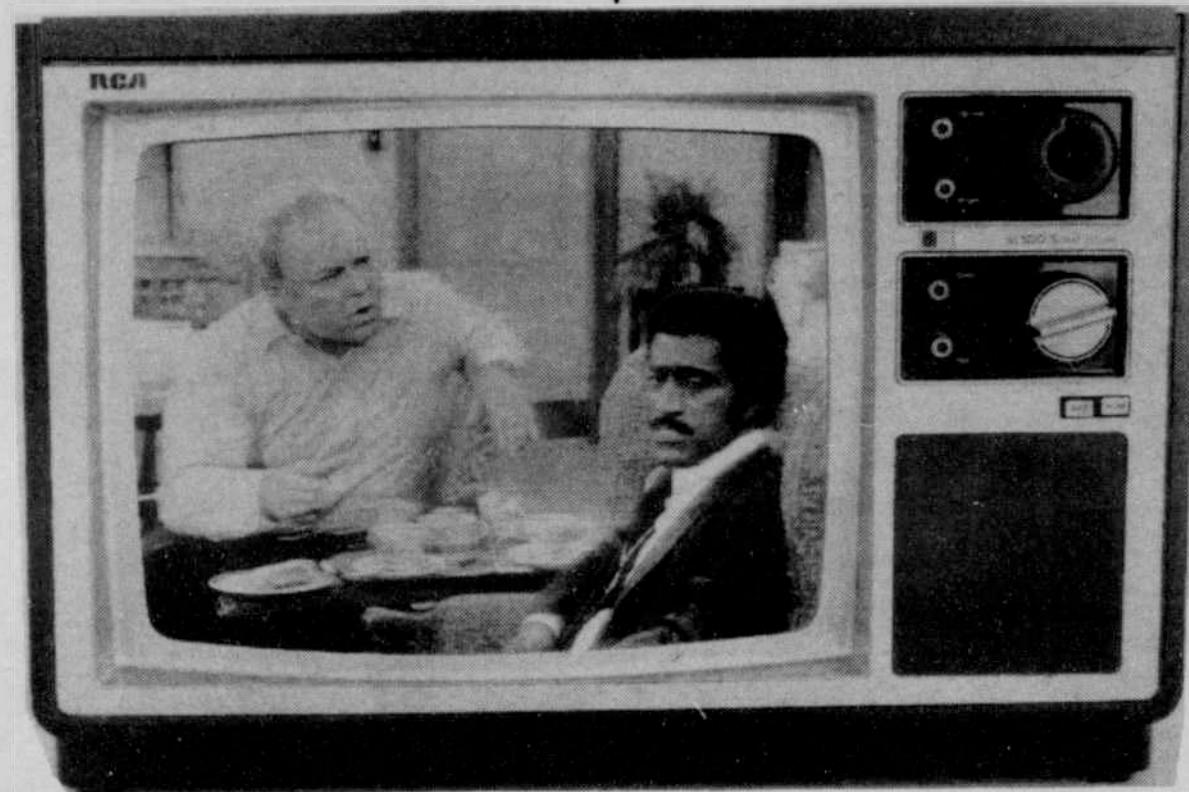
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Selling the dream

A critical examination of African-Americans on television



Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor) and Sammy Davis Jr. (himself) in a scene from *All in the Family*

by Renée LaChance

Marlon Riggs is the Emmy Award-winning filmmaker who created *Tongues Untied* and *Ethnic Notions*. Last year at this time, his film *Tongues Untied* was part of a public broadcasting series called Point of View (POV). Oregon Public Broadcasting refused to show Riggs' film because of its "homosexual content." This year, OPB has the opportunity to make partial amends to Riggs by airing *Color Adjustment*, which is kicking off the fifth season of POV, Monday, June 15.

Color Adjustment explores television's vital role in selling the American Dream, and brilliantly illuminates the interplay between America's racial consciousness and the dominant medium of modern times—television. It traces the parallel development of the Civil Rights movement and broadcast television, and the influence they had on each other, over a period of 40 years.

Riggs allows viewers to revisit some of television's most popular shows, among them *The Nat King Cole Show*, *I Spy*, *Julia*, *Good Times*, *Roots* and *The Cosby Show*. Riggs weaves carefully chosen excerpts from the programs with nostalgic, insightful, disturbing and revealing observations from creators, writers, producers, actors and cultural critics.

Television emerged after World War II and by 1955, 67 percent of homes in the US had televisions. Nightly viewing became a family ritual. The family itself became the centerpiece of entertainment programming.

Excluded from the American dream, black people on television were reduced to sources of comic relief, and for the most part, played minor roles. Two programs allowed blacks in leading roles, *Amos 'n Andy* which stereotyped African-Americans as vaudeville buffoons and *Beulah* who was the "cheerful" domestic. In contrast, during this period, European-American culture was always shown as good and wholesome.

In 1957, just as the civil rights movement was stirring in the South, Nat King Cole began to host his own series. Finally, a show that presented positive role models for African-Americans, and one that network executives would allow since it did not threaten white middle class family values. Bob Henry, the show's producer and director says, "He was the kind of guy that you could welcome into your home, he was just a gentleman." After just one season, the show was can-

celled because sponsors refused to underwrite the show for fear of alienating Southern consumers.

By 1963, 90 percent of US homes possessed a television set. The Civil Rights movement was under attack and the battles were being fought in front of the nations television cameras. Dramatic footage of non-violent freedom marches and sit-ins projected powerful images of African-Americans fiercely engaged in a struggle for basic human rights. Meanwhile, programs on television continued to promote the comfortable fiction that everything was all right, that the United States was one big happy white family.

Primetime television's first attempt to provide a 'positive' image of African-Americans in a dramatic role came in 1968, over 20 years after the advent of television. In *Julia*, Diahann Carroll became the first black woman to star in her own series in a 'prestige' role. But *Julia*, a widowed nurse living in an integrated environment, was viewed by some critics as a colorless 'sellout.'

Bill Cosby's portrait of the debonaire Alexander Scott in *I Spy*, a Rhodes scholar, furthered the image of black people as fully assimilable. Says cultural critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "People who could move into your neighborhood and not disturb you at all."

Though the turmoil of the 60s forced some changes in the television landscape, new myths replaced the old. With Norman Lear's *All in the Family*, for example, "the TV family, as in real life, became a political battleground," narrates Ruby Dee.

It wasn't until 1977 that television broke away from representing African-Americans primarily in situation comedies and light-hearted adventure series. The 12-hour dramatic mini-series, *Roots*, exposed white America to the black experience in a non-comedic way. Says Ruby Dee, "Primetime had selectively reframed American history, transforming a national disgrace into an epic triumph of the family and the American Dream."

In 1984 black Americans could finally point to a "successful" black primetime family with the premiere of *The Cosby Show*. Its relentlessly wholesome, upbeat themes and its implicit suggestion that the Civil Rights movement had resolved racial inequities in America reaffirmed the "American Dream" and hardcore middle class values. Cultural critic Patricia Turner says, "Anything that digresses from that norm will probably not be granted tenure on primetime television."

James Baldwin sums up the role that television has played in perpetuating the stereotypes of African-Americans, "The country's image of the Negro, which hasn't very much to do with the Negro, has never failed to reflect with a kind of frightening accuracy the state of mind of the country."