

Kara Ussery

December 12, 2018

Dr. Pratt-Russell

Critical Theory

Fiske and *That 70's Show*

In his essay "Television Culture", John Fiske argues that shows that are broadcast are "replete with potential meanings" that attempts to "focus this meaningfulness into a more singular preferred meaning that performs the work of the dominant ideology" (1274). When this theory is taken and applied to the pilot episode of the popular sitcom *That 70's Show*, it becomes clear that the entire episode could be dissected to reveal almost every existing power structure in society. The show focuses on a fairly well off group of teenagers (class), facing off against their parents in an attempt for more freedom (age), and learning where they fit in amongst their peers and in their world. The episode has instances where racial stereotypes are enforced and instances where homosexual men are perceived as inherently feminine. However, perhaps the most obvious social structure that is enforced is that of the patriarchy. Four female characters are introduced- Mrs. Pinciotti, Kitty, Jackie, and Donna. By looking closely at how these characters are portrayed through dialogue, costuming, and action, the way that television programs influence and uphold dominant social standards becomes evident.

Mrs. Pinciotti is Donna's mother, and she is seen for the first time from a camera angle meant to portray Eric (the young, white, male protagonist)'s point of view. In this scene, she is depicted as fashion obsessed and unintelligent, and as such, her costume bears both her midriff and her breasts. In fact, the camera pans down and focuses on them, before turning back to

face Mr. Pinciotti, forcing Mrs. Pinciotti to the side of the shot. Her face is never in clear focus, and she remains a caricature of a “trophy wife”. Kitty is Eric's mother, and in stark contrast to Mrs. Pinciotti, is depicted almost completely as a homemaker. Her on screen introduction is her taking food out of the oven and serving it to party guests. She is dressed conservatively, with little makeup, and looks substantially older than Mrs. Pinciotti. Kitty, throughout the episode, is a trope of a different kind of wife that a male might fantasize- completely subservient. When Red, her husband, talks about giving Eric their old car, she claims that she doesn't want to take the bus because she would be harassed. However, she is so concerned about being any “trouble” to Red or Eric that she almost insists on walking to work so as not to inconvenience them. During this conversation, it can also be noted that when speaking to Eric about responsibility involving a car, Red speaks about gas prices and maintenance (technical terms) while Kitty worries about the car getting messy, sexual relationships her son might be involved in, and “donuts”, which is perceived by the men as ridiculous. The way the adult women are seen in the episode is summed up neatly when the kids imagine their parents talking: the men converse about the topic, and the women talk about the kitchen colors, their dialogue literally reduced to “Blah, blah, blah. Yak, yak, yak.”

Jackie and Donna represent the younger generation of women, but the dichotomy remains the same. Jackie is seen as unintelligent. As such, none of the teenagers want to be around her- other than Michael, who is clearly only interested in her sexually. In order to offset this, she is portrayed as stereotypically feminine, only shown in skirts and demanding to go to the restroom in pairs. She seems to have no interests outside of pursuing a relationship with Michael, which becomes evident in the car when she believes he is interested in her. She tells

him that he doesn't need "music", "concerts", or "friends"- he only needs her. This is clearly not true for him (Michael is shown talking with his friends and enjoying things outside of heterosexual pursuit), but it isn't difficult to believe that it is how she feels about him. One can assume that Jackie would grow up to be a Mrs. Pinciotti- like adult. Donna, again, is a contrast. She is seen as "cool", and "one of the guys"- more intelligent than Jackie. To show this, she is costumed in mostly jeans and t-shirts, with little to no makeup. The only time that Donna is portrayed as more "feminine" is when she goes to the concert and decides to kiss Eric- thus increasing her value as an object of the male gaze. Despite being portrayed as the more intelligent of the two girls, her dialogue is outstandingly lacking. She begins the episode with a line about her father's hair, and goes on to mostly discuss Eric and make quippy sex jokes. Again, the audience is left without a real sense of Donna as a person outside of how she relates to the males in the show: if "Donna Pinciotti" is typed into a Google search, the description that comes up is "Eric's love interest", as though she exists as a female character only so that the male lead can use her for development. This indicates that the audience can expect her to eventually mature into a woman like Kitty.

Fiske points out that "the only way that we can perceive and make sense of reality is by the codes of our culture... [but] there is no... objective way of perceiving and making sense of it" (1276). As popularly consumed media made by people who live in a society with conventions, television slips easily and comfortably into upholding social norms. However, as Fiske says, "the ability to articulate one's experience is a necessary prerequisite for developing the will to change it" (1284). It is only through realization of tropes and conscious decisions to break them that television will ever be able to effect change: by seeing stereotypes broken in mass media,

viewers experience a new “normal”, and those in oppressed groups will be able to recognize and relate to images of themselves in a more powerful role.

Works Cited

Fiske, John. "Television Culture." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004, pp.

"Pilot." *That 70's Show*, season 1, episode 1, CBS. 23 Aug. 1998. *Netflix*.