



Michael L. Wayne

Moral Ambiguity, Colourblind Ideology, and the Racist Other in Prime Time Cable Drama

For the majority of its history, from Newton Minow's "vast wasteland," to the anti-TV activist groups who believed the medium to be a public health concern akin to illegal drug use, television has been labeled a low cultural form. As television entered the post-network era in the late 1990s, this began to change. Today, some critics assert that the cultural significance of televised serial drama has surpassed that of Hollywood films (see Epstein, O'Hehir, Polone, Wolcott). Such assertions are supported by the increasing cultural legitimacy (see Newman and Levine) associated with prime time cable shows like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Mad Men* (2007-), and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), which "advance a particular moral view of the universe and operate in the Dickensian tradition of morality tales and social critiques dressed in the guise of realism" (Kuo and Wu n. pag.). Nonetheless, by failing to account for the distinct economic realities of broadcast networks, advertiser-supported as well as subscriber-supported cable channels, these broad comparisons fail to address the ways in which differing contexts of production are reflected on a textual level (Lotz 87).

This essay explores the correlation of such distinctions by examining the degree to which prime time dramas, produced by subscriber-supported and advertiser-supported cable networks, challenge the racial ideologies of white Americans. Following the civil rights movement and its backlash, the dominant racial ideology in America has become "colourblind" through assertions of essential sameness between racial and ethnic groups despite unequal social locations and distinctive histories (see Frankenberg). As a consequence, racial inequality is explained as "the outcome of nonracial dynamics" by whites that rationalize minorities' status as "the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations" (Bonilla-Silva 2). In the context of this colourblind

ideology, racism becomes othered. Furthermore, as Nancy DiTomaso notes, whites frequently "attribute the problems of racial inequality to 'those racists' (often defined in terms of prejudiced people who are still holding on to hostility toward blacks and other nonwhites) . . . They do not see themselves as racist or prejudiced people" (7). Yet, as I argue below, the HBO dramas *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* challenge this ideology with depictions of morally ambiguous main characters that display overt racial prejudice. In contrast, the FX dramas *The Shield* (2002-2008), *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-), and *Justified* (2010-) support colourblind racial ideology by positioning morally ambiguous characters as superior to and victorious over racist others.

Racist White Characters on HBO

Until recently, morally complicated characters were the exception on American television, as producers attempted to attract large audiences with the least objectionable programming. With some notable exceptions including "Hawkeye" Pierce (Alan Alda) on *M.A.S.H.* (1972-1983) and Andy Sipowicz (Dennis Franz) on *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005), prime time scripted content was largely comprised of likeable and idealistic personalities. In his analysis of network era conventions, Todd Gitlin observes that the main characters in dramatic television programs are typically heroes who "confront forces that are convincingly wicked" (256) in the context of episodic narratives with happy endings that allow "the irreconcilable to be reconciled" (260). Yet with the onset of cable technology and the emergence of new networks and niche channels, the economics of the television industry have altered the ways in which content becomes socially relevant.

In contrast to the economics of the network era, in which advertisers were reliant upon large audiences, producers have now begun to move away from the least objectionable programming model by producing niche-driven content. It was not until the post-network era that the subscriber-supported channel HBO introduced audiences to Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), “a character at the center of the story whose goals you did not relate to, whom a decent person would, by and large, not cheer for” (Poniewozik n. pag.). In years since, both subscriber and

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advertiser-supported cable dramas have similarly featured morally ambiguous protagonists, often described as anti-heroes (see Bennett). This includes *Breaking Bad*’s Walter White (Bryan Cranston), *Mad Men*’s Don Draper (Jon Hamm), *Boardwalk Empire*’s Nucky Thompson (Steve Buscemi), and *Damages*’ Patty Hewes. Despite this diffusion of moral ambiguity, the moral standing of white characters in subscriber-based cable texts are further complicated by their overt racial prejudice.

In the macho Italian-American mobster world of David Chase’s *The Sopranos*, the assumed hypersexuality of African-American characters is a recurring source of anxiety. When meeting his daughter’s half African-American, half-Jewish boyfriend, Noah (Patrick Tully), Tony makes no attempt to conceal his bigotry. During the exchange Tony tells the young man, “So we do understand each other? You’re a *ditsoon*? A charcoal briquette? A *mulignan*?” When Noah asks Tony what his problem is, Tony responds:

I think you know what my problem is. You see your little friend up there? She didn’t do you any favors bringing you into this house. Now I dunno what the fuck she was thinkin’. We’ll get to that later. See, I got business associates who are black and they don’t want my son with their daughters and I don’t want their sons with mine. (“Proshai, Livushka”)

In this instance, and throughout the series, Tony remains unrepentant about his overt racism. According to Dana Polan, to avoid the risk of alienating viewers, shows such as *The Sopranos* rely on racist behaviours and actions to establish a relationship with its urban, educated audiences as the show “plays into stereotypes to play on them” (121).



Similarly, with *The Wire*, David Simon provides a realistic depiction of inner city life which includes the brutalization of young African-American men at the hands of white police officers. In the show’s second episode, Polish-American detective Roland “Prez” Pryzbylewski (Jim True-Frost) visits a drug-infested Baltimore housing project where he drunkenly pistol-whips a young African-American man without serious provocation (“The Detail”). The episode ends with Prez’s superior receiving a phone call informing him that the young man has lost his eye. However, in the third season, the one-time perpetrator of racial injustice becomes a victim of a police department that is all too eager to appear politically correct. During a nighttime operation, Prez accidentally shoots an African-American police officer after mistakenly identifying him as a suspect (“Slapstick”). Once the potentially racially motivated incident is leaked to the press, Prez is forced into early retirement. In this moment, the audience comes to empathize with Prez as another victim of the malfunctioning bureaucratic machine. Nonetheless, this character is never absolved and his moral ambiguity hangs over much of the fourth season, colouring the audience’s understanding of his new career as a math teacher at an inner city middle school. According to Paul Klein,

the series does not engage in the sleight of hand whereby generalized injustices are resolved through the salvation of the individual, or in which moral certainty is offered as a viable solution to the otherwise complex realities of contemporary social problems. (179)

It is through such realism and moral complexity that *The Wire* challenges its audience.

For both Tony in *The Sopranos* and Prez in *The Wire*, the characters’ moral standings along with the audience’s feelings towards them become complicated through their problematic relationships with African-American characters. In the context of colourblind ideology, identifying

with such characters forces viewers to confront overt prejudice, thereby calling “attention to the political, economic, [and] status privileges that whites enjoy” while simultaneously “raising questions that might undermine the legitimacy of the stratification system” (DiTomaso 6). The same cannot be said about FX dramas such as *The Shield*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Justified*, in which conflicts between colour-blind white characters and racist others serve as a narrative device.

Race and Moral Ambiguity on FX

Although the increasing cultural significance of post-network television is most frequently identified with subscriber-supported cable networks, FX’s *The Shield* was the first show created for advertiser-supported cable to “be likened to HBO hits like *The Sopranos* and distinguished from broadcast programs in industrial and critical discourse,” and thus, “helped initiate a key transition in convergence-era television, one that allowed legitimated programming to come not just from exclusive world of premium cable, but also to exist in advertiser-support spaces” (Newman and Levine 33). Created by Shawn Ryan and set within the multicultural communities of contemporary Los Angeles, the show follows Vic Mackey (Michael Chiklis), a loyal, family-oriented protagonist who murders a fellow police officer in the pilot episode. Over the course of *The Shield*’s seven seasons, the narrative is primarily driven by the conflict between Mackey and his second-in-command, Shane Vendrell (Walton Goggins). One exchange between Mackey and Vendrell usefully illustrates the narrative deployment of

the latter as racist other. At the beginning of the fourth season, Mackey and Vendrell are discussing the recent birth of Vendrell’s son Jackson (“The Cure”). After hearing the boy’s name, Mackey, with a grin on his face, unthinkingly asks, “As in Michael?” After a brief pause, Vendrell looks up from his son and replies, “As in Stonewall,” which immediately wipes the grin from Mackey’s face and the scene ends with an uneasy air hanging between them. As this veneration of confederate history implies and as his choice of “Dixie” as a ring-tone later confirms (“Postpartum”), Vendrell represents ideology associated with the pre-civil rights movement. As a consequence, Vendrell’s moral standing is less ambiguous than Mackey’s despite the fact that each character engages in nearly identical behavior. For example, although both characters violate the taboo of murdering fellow police officers, only Mackey’s murder of Terry Crowley (Reed Diamond) is presented as a justifiable response to the situation at hand. In contrast, Vendrell’s murder of fellow Strike Team member Curtis Lemansky (Kenny Johnson) at the conclusion of the fifth season, appears impulsive and fundamentally unnecessary (“Postpartum”). Subsequently, Vendrell’s guilt exacerbates the audience’s antipathy towards him as he descends into the reckless underworld of drug addiction while creating a slew of additional crises. *The Shield* ultimately

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provides audiences with an unambiguous narrative resolution in the series finale when Vendrell murders his pregnant wife and young son, before shooting himself in the head as his former coworkers storm the house ('Family Meeting'). On a textual level, the juxtaposition of colourblind Mackey and Vendrell as racist other serves two functions. First, it provides a realistic (as compared to more traditional crime dramas) depiction of contemporary America by acknowledging the existence of overt prejudice. Second, by identifying with Mackey, the audience is allowed to conceptualize his triumph over Vendrell as a rejection of an anachronistic, marginalized racial ideology, thereby supporting the colourblind belief that systemic inequality can be resolved through individual action.

In *Sons of Anarchy*, Kurt Sutter's Shakespearean family drama set within the context of an all-white outlaw motorcycle club, the show's central conflict between the young Jax Teller (Charlie Hunnam) and the usurper Clay Morrow (Ron Perlman) similarly relies on the juxtaposition of colourblind ideology and the racist other. During the show's second season, for example, Jax repeatedly asserts that the justification for the club's conflict with their Latino rivals, the Mayans, is economic rather than racial ("Albification"). In contrast, Clay sets in motion a plan to frame an African-American street gang, the One-Niners, for the murder of a club member thought to be a snitch in order to reignite racial conflict, and draw attention away from himself. In the fourth season, colourblind ideology is again on display when Jax convinces a military commando, who works for a Mexican cartel, to spare the lives of several One-Niners, proclaiming, "[w]e have to work with other people. We have to build relationships. You do this—no one will trust us" ("Kiss"). Indeed, his ascendancy to the rank of club president at the conclusion of the fourth season could, like the conclusion of *The Shield*, be read as a rejection of overt prejudice ("To Be, Act 2").

Although there are some significant differences, Graham Yost's modern western *Justified*, inspired by the fiction of Elmore Leonard, includes similar dynamics between the main character and racist others. Set in contemporary Ken-

tucky, the series begins with Deputy U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens (Timothy Olyphant) being reassigned to his home state as punishment for conspicuously shooting a drug dealer in Miami. Working from the Marshal's office in Lexington, Raylan has frequent opportunities to travel to rural Harlan County, where he must confront the backwoods culture he left behind. For example, in the pilot episode, a Marshal investigation into the bombing of an African-American church ends with the protagonist shooting the leader of the neo-Nazi gang responsible for the attack. In subsequent episodes, similar opportunities arise as Raylan



pursues a seemingly endless stream of local criminals sporting the confederate flag. Raylan never commits cold-blooded murder, so his moral standing is arguably less ambiguous than Mackey and Teller's. Nevertheless, *Justified* is predicated upon the embodiment of colourblindness, successfully opposing an urban, multicultural form of law and order against the wishes of a resistant local populace of racist others. Here, as in *The Shield* and *Sons of Anarchy*, the racialized morality tale is the same. The heroes in these FX dramas are morally ambiguous white men, conveniently placed into conflict with racists yearning for the return of segregation.

Conclusion

In response to claims that television has qualitatively improved in recent years, Newman and Levine argue the medium's elevated status in the post-network era is indicative of a bifurcation where "new is elevated over old, active over passive, class over mass, masculine over feminine" (5). As a result, prime time cable dramas like those produced by HBO and FX are celebrated because of their association with the active viewing experiences of elite post-network audiences while prime time network dramas like *CSI* and *Desperate Housewives* are devalued because of their association with the passive viewing experiences of network era mass audiences. In particular, the use of "terms such as 'original,' 'edgy,' 'complex,' and 'sophisticated'" in the dis-

courses surrounding legitimated cable texts allows them to be “seen as more engaging, addressing a committed and passionate viewer” (Newman and Levine 81). This analysis, however, indicates that some prime time cable dramas are more ideologically challenging than others.

Although *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *The Shield*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Justified* position their hyper-masculine anti-heroes in relation to the dominant colourblind racial ideologies of contemporary America, the use of the racist other as a narrative device creates the opportunity for FX viewers to have a more passive viewing experience than HBO viewers, who must actively confront racist behavior and then reconcile this with their feelings of attachment to the characters. As such, the advertiser-supported dramas discussed above provide white audiences with the opportunity to “attribute the problems of race to ‘those racists’ and exclude themselves from that category” and continue to “think of racial issues as something that is about others but not about them” (DiTomaso 8). In contrast, it seems these particular subscriber-supported cable dramas are more able to challenge the status quo associated with colourblind ideologies. This interpretation bolsters arguments that note the slogan “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO” goes beyond marketing and “acknowledges the very different industrial practices and capabilities of subscription networks relative to those of advertiser-supported broadcast and basic cable” (Lotz 86). Therefore, even if the existence of culturally legitimated content relies on the same imbalanced binaries associated with the medium’s historical degradation, the relationships such content forges with audiences nonetheless vary with the context of production.

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