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100 Madison Avenues

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I AM furious Black. Over the last year, in Harlem alone, over 100 teen-agers died from overdoses of drugs. I also learned with horror that roughly four fifths of a major American city's white population recently voted for a white candidate whose underworld connections are thought to be extensive, rather than see an honorable Black man attain that office. Thor Heyerdahl reports that during his Egyptian-style crossing of the Atlantic, he encountered on the ocean the filth and garbage of what we are told is an advanced civilization. Tens of thousands of dollars are being paid individual American farmers not to produce surpluses that would feed starving people in America and the rest of the world. The summer riots are in gear, with promises that the nation's campuses will throw up more violence in the fall. After their second trip into space, a couple of astronauts have reported detecting a progressive deterioration, due to pollution, of the earth's atmosphere. Oh, hell, the list is endless.

America is obviously sliding into an abyss of tragedy at an accelerating speed. The supreme tragedy is that she may not go into the abyss alone, but will probably take half, if not the whole, world with her. The paranoia and other mental illnesses of this society continue unabated and unattended. It seems it all started with the "discovery" of the first Indian "sniper" in America, almost 500 years ago, and comes down to the present fiasco involving hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese "snipers" in Southeast Asia.

In these grotesque circumstances, the rational response would be to throw all of society's energies and resources into crash programs in an attempt to sharply turn this whole thing around. Instead, rational men do little more than watch with disbelief. And how does television, the most powerful medium of communication ever devised by man, react to all this? "Truth or Consequences," "Peyton Place," "Leave It to Beaver," and endless ball games. In other words, business as usual in one of history's most irrational societies.

As an Afro-American film and TV producer, I, for one, haven't time to be either entertained or entertaining. And I won't take advantage of this opportunity to be "nice" and "positive" and talk about "progress now taking place...", which might make us feel good, while the woods are burning. Maybe television can't solve all the world's problems, but I think it could, at the very least, give it a good college try. For a start, why not invert the ratio of monies spent on educational, as opposed to entertainment television? Who knows, a couple of billion dollars, instead of the present few million spent for public service programming just might give America a fighting chance. This is a fast turnaround, but this is the kind of thing that is necessary to help avoid the crash.

I'm not at all suggesting that all existing program formats be abandoned for plodding documentaries. Some of the old formats could lend themselves just as easily to relevant programming as they do to irrelevant programming. Surely, it's not beyond American ingenuity to place relevant themes and subject matter in "Bewitched," "That Girl," et al. The point is that programming should be built around priorities that foster civilization rather than the fast buck; that foster life rather than death.

But criticism of the one-eyed monster has appeared on these pages before. The question now is what constructive suggestions can a Black producer offer the irrelevant frightened media establishment, that has been too frightened to speak the truth, and was certainly irrelevant long before the Vice President ever raised his voice.

From a Black producer's point of view, it's just plain silly to discuss programming for America without taking into account the social, historical realities that surround our society today. If, and it seems more and more likely, the racists of America carry out their sick, misguided plans of repression, or attempt to halt the progress of the Afro-American community, the United States will accelerate the process of discrediting itself in the world community. Unlike South Africa, which enjoys the protective umbrella thrown up over her by the United States and Britain to ward off world pressures, the United States herself has no such protector.

As revulsion to American racism spreads into all sectors of America's international relations, all our upright conservatives, ultraconservatives, reactionaries, and just plain silent majority types will be crying in their suburban beers over America's loss of trade and influence in world affairs. Some of them, perhaps a little more thoughtful than our Governor friend in Alabama and his more subtle allies across the country, are already learning that repression and military power alone cannot positively influence the feelings of large masses of the earth's peoples. On the contrary, such repression is the midwife of militancy. The second lesson they are to learn is that racism is equally subversive and counterproductive in terms of America's other short-term and long-term interests. They will learn that they will have destroyed America's capacity to communicate with the rest of the world, which is overwhelmingly nonwhite, and one hundred

Madison Avenues will not be able to help her. Only through nonwhite America will this country be able to communicate with the world.

In other words, contrary to their deepest yearnings, white racists all the way from uptight Southern Governors to phony Northern “liberals” will have played no small part in helping Black and other non-white people in America into the very leadership roles they covet for themselves. Actually, it doesn't matter whether they oppose or support Black aspirations. We are a dynamic people who will thrive one way or another. Interestingly, the emergence of the Afro-Americans as a leader group in American society will probably not come as a result of any military-style revolution, but largely by the default of a mentally sick predatory white culture.

Black and other minority people have suffered more, are more sensitive to social problems and injustices. Our leadership of America will come just as easily and naturally as has our leadership in American music. We know more about pollution, dope, abuses of power, not to mention white disregard for law and order. Consequently, we and other minorities in America are truly sensitized to the moral, spiritual, political, social and economic problems which would concern the leadership of a country. Our sensitivity not only develops from our recent history, but from our ancient history which, despite present scholastic hypocrisy, goes back over ten thousand years. And despite the cold winter winds of slavery and oppression that have blown across our race, we still have not lost our faith in humanity and ourselves.

As Count Volney, a high official in Napoleon's government, wrote of the Africans at the beginning of the 19th century: “There a people, now forgotten, discovered, while others were yet barbarians, the elements of the arts and sciences. A race of men, now rejected from society for their sable skin and frizzled hair, founded on the study of the laws of nature those civil and religious systems which still govern the universe.” Because we brought them science and culture in centuries long past, the ancient Egyptians referred to us as the “blameless Ethiopians.” We were blameless because to them we had a high degree of awareness of what real civilization was all about, and did not abuse the immense power we held in their country. What has all this to do with the thinking of Black producers? Everything. Besides the immediate problems of community control of television, the Black pride and productivity of Black and other minority producers, as well as white American youth, must develop programming which prepares the minority community for assuming the responsibilities of leadership a sick society is forcing upon them. As Black producers, our task will be to encourage mental health among the Black, Brown, and Red people, to help still adaptable white people to be healthy, so that the transition from rule by racial paranoia to rule by racial harmony can be as painless as possible. Thus, the wide circle of history will appear to close in on itself though rising to a new plane of human consciousness.

Just as our music has set the pace of American music, at home and abroad, our contribution to American film and TV will be of a similar order. Just as Black people are giving America a “soul” of its own, as well as excellence in sports, and innovations in language, so, too, will we contribute to America in the field of television. Like it or not, we will play the Greeks to America's Rome, the Ethiopians to America's Egypt. Let's face it, virtually all the older white producers and programmers have been either ineffectual, derelict or even hostile in regard to nurturing film and television productions which help to reconstruct our society and itself destructive attitudes. Even today, most white producers and directors still indulge in racist casting, white writers still turn in racist scripts, and most white directors neurotically call for

Aryan typecasting. As an ex-actor, I know only too well from where I speak. Black producers must re-define Blacks to Blacks and Blacks to whites. We must re-define whites to whites, and not in the sick way some white producers have defined Blacks to Blacks.

In years to come, the Afro-American producer will concern himself with an ever-widening range of issues that will spring from the material, social, and spiritual climate of America. Having encouraged the cultural, psychological, political, and economic development of the Black community, we will also concern ourselves with methods by which an obstinate, ethnocentric white society can be more sensitized to the social and physical world in which it lives.

For example: There's been a lot of talk about violence in our society today. This violence has not come about in a vacuum. It is the end result of the intolerable frustrations Black people have experienced during the long winter of arrogance and insensitivity in which we have lived. Violence comes when white youths become aware of the self-destructive nature of this arrogance and insensitivity. It comes when the establishment itself becomes so alienated from the rest of society that its alienation begins to dwarf all other alienations within the society. Opposing groups, be they Black, and white, youth and police, doves and hawks, radicals and establishment, militant and reactionary, seek through the primitive agency of violence to transmit information and thus influence each other's behavior.

Instead of these confrontations occurring in the four dimensions of hard physical reality, the violent energies could conceivably be channeled through the electronic circuit that serves a two-dimensional television screen. What we have here is "psychodramatic and sociodramatic encounter television." By putting members of each group before a set of television cameras, and geographically removing them from each other, we introduce a safety factor. Under these "sanitized" conditions, it would be possible for such groups to go after each other hammer and tongs, no holds barred! They can call each other all kinds of dirty names without the danger of actually doing physical violence to each other.

The theatrical, not to mention the mental health dividends that would accrue from such encounters on television would be incalculable. The paradox is that while these groups might not meet in private to discuss their grievances without violence, they would meet on television because it offers precisely the public that they wish to influence. Obviously, there are those who would use the opportunity for strictly propaganda purposes, but the logic and the techniques of psychodramatic encounter are such that these purposes would be quickly eroded and what would be left would be men and women communicating.

The case for "encounter television" can be made easily by the following analogy: When two people, particularly if they are hostile to each other are brought together for a psychodramatic encounter, there is great distrust, more so when they are dependent upon each other, as in the case of man and wife. What is needed is the willingness of both to encounter each other psychologically.

America is caught in the grip of myriad neurotic and psychotic trends. Call these trends racism, sexism, chauvinism, militarism, sadism, what you will. The fact remains that it is virtually impossible to develop the necessary number of psychiatrists, psychologists, analysts therapists, and the like to cope with America's emotionally disturbed population. The concept of television

group encounter, patterned after the inter-personal encounters which take place at such organizations as the Moreno Institute, headed by Dr. J. L. Moreno, the pioneer of psychodrama, offer a stop gap mechanism to arrest the deteriorating social diseases which are presently eating away at American society. Using the techniques of 20th century communications, we are now in a position to put the rednecks of Alabama in a direct encounter with the Black militants of Harlem, either on public or closed-circuit television. This is but one way to help America achieve mental health. Spending money on escapist crash programs in outer space will not solve the problem. Of course, the big question is, can this kind of programming surface from the present flood of video trivia, or will it have to wait upon the courage of some forward-thinking programmer in 1994?

In short, the search for candor, for honesty, and truth—rather than hypocrisy and self-delusion—must become a basic component of television programming. On such a foundation, other kinds of programming can easily be built. On such a foundation the Black producer of today and tomorrow will most likely build his programming. For him, the mass media will be an agency for improving mass mental health and social reform, will be a catharsis, a means of purifying the emotional and spiritual life of this country. In other words, for the Black producer, television will be just another word for jazz. And jazz for the Afro-American has been a means of liberating the human spirit.

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