*Modern Family*: The Modern Predicament

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It’s no secret that there has been an onset of increased racial and sexual diversity in modern media. While it’s difficult to pinpoint when exactly the trend began, phenomena such as the reinterpreting of *Little Orphan Annie* as black, racially-mixed couples in Cheerios commercials, openly homosexual couples in children’s’ media (particularly *Clarence* or *Star vs. The Forces of Evil*) and the first appearance of a black Storm trooper in a recent Disney *Star Wars* trailer make it clear that Hollywood’s latest obsession seems to revolve around giving conventional characters less conventional traits. Just how trivial these traits are depends upon viewer interpretation; whereas one viewer might not particularly care what race or sexuality a character happens to be, another viewer might condone the ‘progressive’ decision. Perhaps the most bombastic example of this trend occurs in the ABC sitcom *Modern* *Family*, who (as its name implies) provides the viewer with what it believes to be a sincere interpretation of American civilization circa-2014. The show has won numerous awards and has made its network an exceptional amount of money, achieving a syndication deal and receiving praise for its portrayal of unconventional families. While its monetary success can’t be doubted, a question remains: is it really as good as everyone claims?

The idea of what makes a show ‘good’ is subjective. Therefore, judging *Modern Family* should rely not on how much praise or criticism it receives but rather how well it seems to achieve its goals. But what goals are these? Contrary to the focus of the show’s numerous critics, the conception of *Modern Family* had little to do with portraying a highly diverse cast; rather, it was the product of writers Christopher Lloyd and Steven Levitan regaling stories of their family and considering how they would be portrayed in a sitcom. It was only after the pair toyed with the concept of an eccentric Dutch documentary director seeking to “capture the essence of modern America” that the show began to tool itself toward exposing and encapsulating western phenomena. The director concept was scrapped, but the true goal of *Modern Family* became clear: a funny, clever sitcom that sought to not only entertain but provide audiences with fair representations of otherwise ignored or marginalized members of the western world.

*Modern Family* has a wide array of cast members, falling into three tidy family units that interact with each other over the course of many episodes. Phil and Claire Dunphy represent the closest thing the show has to a traditional nuclear family, comprised of a heterosexual couple, two daughters and a son. Jay and Gloria Pritchett are also heterosexual, but possess a noticeable disparity in age, belong to two separate races and care for a young teen that has no blood relation to Jay. Finally, we have Mitchell Pritchett and Cameron Tucker; an openly-homosexual couple who are neither side characters nor owe their entire existence to jokes at the expense of their sexuality. Despite the dizzyingly large and sometimes confusing amount of central characters, *Modern Family* alternates focus between the three households while pursuing a standard A plot, B plot and occasional C plot, all taking place in the same region of Los Angeles. Additionally, the show’s presentation isn’t anything traditional family sitcoms. Whereas more ordinary fare asks the viewer to focus on and empathize with the closely-knit antics of its one titular family, the goings-on of *Modern Family* feels more like a gallery of individual inciting incidents amid the setting, only coming together toward the end of an episode. In this regard, the show has more in common with *Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and *30 Rock* than *The Cosby Show* or *King of Queens*. It also borrows a ‘shaky camera’ style and direct-to-camera interviews courtesy of countless reality shows, likely to make its trio of modern families seem more true to life.

In spite of these efforts, *Modern Family* proved difficult to invest much interest in. While it is true that it doesn’t outwardly resemble a family sitcom, the ulterior style of writing nonetheless exposes its mundane sitcom roots. The script itself is trite and forgettable, often presenting jokes, quips or scenarios that I forgot about less than an hour after watching. The entire cast seems to come from the same textbook guide every ‘modern’ Hollywood sitcom has religiously abided by for the past decade, comprised entirely of single-minded goofballs who stumble under the weight of their hubris or glaring flaws of character until it’s time for the episode to be over. The husbands are unapologetically-dumb, the wives are gratingly competent and the children serve as little more than one-dimensional supplements to their adult counterparts. Even the ground-breaking homosexual couple followed this formula, presenting one level-headed member and another bombastic, dramatic one. The great irony of *Modern Family* is that in spite of the various awards or acknowledgments it has received for trying something new, the show at its core isn’t very different from other sitcoms released within the past decade. There is no experimentation with writing, no experimentation with formula, no experimentation with presentation (as I said earlier: every technique you find here has been done as early as *30 Rock*) and no reason to celebrate *Modern Family* for any reason other than the fact that it doesn’t focus on a solitary ethnicity, sexuality or family. And even then, I’m not convinced that’s a valid reason to celebrate.

In Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*, he describes a philosophical concept known as *amour-propre*. This is the idea that through the creation of advanced society, a form of ‘self-love’ arose which the individual bases on the opinions of others. Unlike *amour de soi*, which is an appreciation for one’s self without considering the esteem of others, *amour-propre* is an unhealthy form of self-love that is subject to corruption at the hands of others. There seems to be a great amount of *amour-propre* in modern Hollywood, with *Modern Family* being just one of many symptoms of the ensuing plague. In spite of the show’s utterly ordinary formula, the presence of a gay couple (and, for bonus points, a mixed-race couple) has propelled it to a lofty pedestal among other shows of its kind. Critics seem far more eager to praise *Modern Family* for what it features rather than what it actually contains, further contributing to western society’s strange obsession with ‘including everyone’ in the vast lens of mass media. It isn’t entirely clear to me why this is so prominent an effort. Is Hollywood sifting through the population, trying to find an untapped demographic? Is there an ulterior group at work, trying to instill specific values or ideas into our society? Do Hollywood production companies have a genuine, altruistic desire to validate every single race, sexuality, creed, gender or human detail in existence?

There probably isn’t a single answer, and unfortunately I don’t have access to any of them. However, I do know this: diversity for diversity’s sake is a fruitless endeavor. While I’m not opposed to providing equal representation to those who don’t fall under my particular demographic, the idea that it has to be forced is something that I find shameful and unbecoming of the entertainment industry. I sincerely doubt I would have any problems with *Modern Family* if it wasn’t put on display by self-aggrandizing Hollywood hegemonies as a great sitcom of our time, primarily because I would have ignored it. Yet that’s the real problem Hollywood seems to have: by pushing this agenda-laden vehicle and treating the concept of diversity as both an egalitarian badge and a shield from criticism, they are alienating viewers like me who are simply trying to find well-written content. The mutual admiration societies in Hollywood seem content with handing hollow awards to each other, bowing to acclaim from their peers and seemingly nobody else.

As a result, I can’t consider *Modern Family* a good show in any regard. It not only fails to introduce any innovations with its presentation or script, but also seems to pursue a ‘progressive’ ideal that simply can’t be obtained. If *Modern Family* wants to demonstrate an inclusive, honest interpretation of present day life, why is it totally deprived of prominent black characters? Where are the bisexual characters? What about characters of differing religions, such as Buddhism or Sikhism? Or characters who live in a less-affluent side of Los Angeles? What about female characters who actually work for a living rather than relying on their husbands? The core fault in *Modern Family* becomes evident when one considers just how impossible it would be to provide equal representation to every kind of person living in America. With this predicament in mind, one begs the question: how did writers Christopher Lloyd and Steven Levitan choose which ‘kind’ of character to showcase in their main cast? Was it completely random? Did they have to categorize races, religions and sexualities on a chart and decide which ones were ‘more preferable’ for the show? If so, what was the criterion for this? Or instead, did they simply forget about all the other types of people in the country during the pitching process? I’m not so pessimistic as to assume that the show is little more than a propaganda piece, but I also don’t believe in the ‘progressive’ fad *Modern Family* contributes to. All I know for sure is that it makes me yearn for the days of *I Love Lucy*, when a minority character like Ricky Ricardo was present on the show not to fulfill some sort of diversity quota but to instead act as a substantial piece of an ambitious endeavor.