

Stereotypes & Representation

Ryan L. Moule

Stereotype comes from Greek 'stereo = solid', a printer's term for the solid blocks of type which could be used to represent something which would otherwise need considerable work with individual pieces of type to show fine detail. Just as electronic publishing has replaced 'solid' print, so this concept of stereotyping may now need to be rethought.¹

The term 'REPRESENTATION' emphasises that the many media images which we are offered are not transparent, natural or 'real'

PRESENTATIONS of the world, but rather that they are constructed, 'REPRESENTATIONS'. This Re-Presentation of images, events, stories, (such as the 'black thief' or 'hysterical woman') over and over again, can lead to a blanket (mis)understanding of certain sections of society. Repetitively focusing on certain social groups, and not others, can lead to the marginalisation or exclusion of others as they become unfamiliar and thus threatening. To understand the Stereotype we need to study the relationship between REPRESENTATIONS and IDENTITIES. Social Identities, common to media, are often based on; Gender, Class, Race, Nationalities, Able-bodiedness, or Age. Stereotypes are usually negative and about oppressed or powerless groups.

Two conflicting approaches to understanding **Identities** can be explored;

1. **Essentialist** : The Essentialist approach believes that Identity is innate and therefore possible to find / locate (an extreme example would be

Fascism which believes that they are innately superior. Essentialism inevitably gives rise to stereotyping.

2. **Anti-essentialist** : The opposite position would be to assume that Identity is constructed by / in society; that we are shaped by convention and societies expectations, but that we can choose to speak from multiple position; it is possible to be a 'Mother' and a 'Professional career woman' – one identity does not limit you in the way an essentialist viewpoint would.²

Stereotypes are based on **Differences**, in two ways;

Firstly, 'All typifications are *simplifications* since they select common features and exclude difference'.³ The stereotype isolates 'typical' characteristics of a particular group and places them at the centre of representation, disregarding individual qualities within the social group. Stereotypes also insist on 'absolute difference', ignoring that there may be a 'spectrum' of those 'typical' characteristics (such as levels of masculinity and femininity or racial differentiation).⁴

"Stereotyped" means "reduced to a few essentials, fixed in Nature by a few simplified characteristics".⁵

Such 'essential' features are then indicated as being the *cause* of their social position (such as blondes being dumb). Such a notion becomes a justification for the oppression of certain groups. Stereotypes are reinforced by the belief that they contain 'a grain of truth'. This then reinforces that notion that all members of that social group or identifiable category will live up to the

stereotype. The repetition in the media of these characters then solidifies the stereotype and it becomes a kind of eternal truth.

Secondly; Social groups are identified in relation to how 'different' they are from the supposed norm (western, white, upper-middle class, educated, professionally employed, young/middle-aged, heterosexual male). Qualities determined as different become 'marked' differences.

Derrida has shown how an identity's constitution is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles – man/woman, etc. What is peculiar to the second term is thus reduced to the function of an accident as opposed to the essentiality of the first. It is the same with the black-white relationship, in which white, of course, is equivalent to 'human being'. 'Woman' and 'black' are thus 'marks' (i.e. marked terms) in contrast to the unmarked terms of 'man' and 'white'.⁶

For Jacques Derrida, one pole of the binary relationship is always dominant, we should really write; WHITE/black, MAN/woman, MASCULINE/feminine, and UPPER CLASS/lower class.⁷ 'Otherness' is constructed when we take the 'norms' of ones own culture and compare it to others. When we classify people according to their difference, we exclude them from our social group creating an US/THEM relationship. Of course the establishment of normalcy (and 'Normal' is considered 'Natural') is done by the ruling classes/groups – those that control the imagery/media – to their own world view, this is why it is a crucial issue as to who controls the ability to represent who.

If we study the representation of men and women in the media, we see that each are portrayed as the opposite of the other⁸;

Within Media representation the central role (or Hero) is usually a White Western Professional Man (consider James Bond or Indiana Jones), other characters within the film are all defined in relation to Him; wife, lover, mother, son or daughter, enemy, best-friend, colleagues, etc. The Western white man becomes the 'Centre of Meaning' within representation. Being a Man is considered the norm and anything else is considered to be different and is defined as such (e.g. in sport you have the '100 meters race' and the 'Woman's 100 meters' or the 'Olympics' and the 'Para-Olympics').

Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned within society (e.g. teacher, Welsh, teenager, feminist, heterosexual, left-wing). Our identification of our 'Self' is always defined in relation to our identification of the 'Other' (our understanding of what it is to be a Man, is based on our understanding of what it is to be a Woman – e.g. "as a Man I cannot give birth". Also, the term 'Able-bodied' only makes sense if we consider the possibility of being 'Disabled'). This structure of 'Self' and 'Other' is played out problematically in the Media.

As viewers, we identify with the hero / main character on screen (it is the characters of James Bond or Luke Skywalker that children play at being, not Blofeld or Darth Vader). The Self is nearly always identified with the White Man;

<u>Man</u>	<u>Woman</u>
Cultural	Natural
Active	Passive
Dominant	Dominated
Powerful	Powerless
Authority	No Authority
Individual	Related to others
'Self'	'Other'
Independent	Dependent
Work context	Family context
High status	Low status (Job)
Resistant	Submissive
Resolute	Indecisive
Rational	Emotional

<u>Self</u>	<u>Other</u>
White	Black
Good Guy	Bad Guy
Hero	Enemy
West	East
Cowboy	Red Indian
Coloniser	Colonised

Clever	Stupid
Moral	Cunning
Able-bodied	Disabled
Beautiful	Ugly
Right	Wrong
Good	Evil

Although there are forms of film and TV which are challenging these polarised definitions (e.g. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in which the main characters are women who continuously defeat and save the male characters), the vast majority still perpetuate the mythic role of the Western Males justified triumph over the Other.

When previously under-represented groups do become more visible, they suffer what may be called the 'Burden of Representation'.⁹ When Black, Asian or Women characters (for example) do appear, they are often read as 'standing in for' or 'representing the whole community' – a real burden for those trying to construct new visible images. 'These positive images sometimes produced characterisations of strict parents, near-noble teachers and so on – clearly a narrowing of the range of representation compared to the roles available to white characters. As a result, some members of such groups felt that being represented in various and ordinary, even 'negative' ways would be a positive step'. Consider black characters in *Eastenders*, some involved in petty crime, some parents struggling with families, some in

love, some businessmen or doctors'. A range of roles and identities are represented. This by some has been argued as a kind of advance.¹⁰

¹ Branston, Gill and Stafford, Roy *The Media Students Book – 3rd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2003). p. 91.

² Hall, Stuart *Representation – Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997). p. 249.

³ Perkins, Tessa 'Rethinking Stereotypes' in O'Sullivan and Jewkes (eds.) *The Media Studies Reader* (London: Arnold, 1997). p. 76.

⁴ Branston, Gill and Stafford, Roy *The Media Students Book – 3rd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2003). p. 93.

⁵ , Stuart *Representation – Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. (London: Sage, 1997). p. 249.

⁶ Laclau, Ernesto *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990). p. 33. Quoted in Hall, Stuart 'Who Needs Identity?' in Hall, Stuart and du Gay, Paul (eds.) *Questions of Identity* (London: Sage, 1996). p. 5.

⁷ Hall, Stuart *Representation – Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997). p. 235.

⁸ Van Zoonen, Liesbet 'Gender, Representation and the Media' in Downing, J. Mohammadi, A. and Sreberny- Mohammadi, A. (eds.) *Questioning the Media – A Critical Introduction* (London: Sage, 1995). p. 320.

⁹ Branston, Gill and Stafford, Roy *The Media Students Book – 3rd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2003). p. 100.

¹⁰ Branston, Gill and Stafford, Roy *The Media Students Book – 3rd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2003). p. 101.