

# “The Role of Stereotypes”

by Richard Dyer

in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham: *Media Studies: A Reader*, 2nd Edition, Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

*To cite this source in-text, you should use paragraph numbers instead of page numbers. The works cited entry will be the same as any similar works-cited entry, except you may omit the page numbers in the original source. If you note any typos, please let me know after class, as this is a scanned and computer-recognized document.*

---

The word 'stereotype' is today almost always a term of abuse. This stems from the wholly justified objections of various groups -- in recent years, blacks, women and gays, in particular -- to the ways in which they find themselves stereotyped in the mass media and in everyday speech. Yet when Walter Lippmann coined the term, he did not intend it to have a wholly and necessarily pejorative connotation. Taking a certain ironic distance on his subject, Lippmann none the less lays out very clearly both the absolute necessity for, and the usefulness of, stereotypes, as well as their limitations and ideological implications:

A pattern of stereotypes is nor neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a short cut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy. (1956: 96)

We can begin to understand something of how stereotypes work by following up the ideas raised by Lippmann -- in particular his stress on stereotypes as (i) an ordering process, (ii) a 'short cut', (iii) referring to 'the world', and (iv) expressing 'our' values and beliefs. The rest of this essay is structured around these topics, concluded with some tentative remarks on the relevance of what has gone before [in Dyer, 1993] to the representation of alcoholism. Throughout, I move between the more sociological concern of Lippmann (how stereotypes function in social thought) and the specific aesthetic concerns (how stereotypes function in fictions) that must also be introduced into any consideration of media representations. The position behind all these considerations is that it is not stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation, that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interests they serve.

## AN ORDERING PROCESS

Stereotypes as a form of 'ordering' the mass of complex and inchoate data that we receive from the world are only a particular form -- to do with the representation and categorization of persons[1] -- of the wider process by which any human society, and individuals within it, make sense of that society through generalities, patternings and 'typifications'. Unless one believes that

there is some definitively 'true' order in the world which is transparently revealed to human beings and unproblematically expressed in their culture -- a belief that the variety of orders proposed by different societies, as analysed by: anthropology and history, makes difficult to sustain -- this activity of ordering, including the use of stereotypes, has to be acknowledged as a necessary, indeed inescapable, part of the way societies make sense of themselves, and hence actually make and reproduce themselves. (The fact that all such orderings are by definition, partial and limited does not mean that they are untrue -- partial knowledge is not false knowledge, it is simply not absolute knowledge.)

There are, however, two problems about stereotypes within this perspective. Firstly, the need to order 'the great blooming, buzzing confusion reality' is liable to be accompanied by a belief in the absoluteness and certainty of any particular order, a refusal to recognize its limitations and partiality, its relativity and changeability, and a corresponding incapacity to deal with the fact and experience of blooming and buzzing.

Secondly, as the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, amongst others, on the 'social construction of reality' stresses, not only is any given society's ordering of reality an historical product but it is also necessarily implicated in the power relations in that society -- as Berger and Luckmann put it, 'he who has the bigger stick has the better chance of imposing his definitions of reality' (1967: 127). I shall return below to these two problems of Lippmann's formulation -- order (stereotypes) perceived as absolute and rigid, order (stereotypes) as grounded in social power.

## A SHORT CUT

Lippmann's notion of stereotypes as a short cut points to the manner which stereotypes are a very simple, striking, easily-grasped form of representation but none the less capable of condensing a great deal of complex information and a host of connotations. As T. E. Perkins notes in her key article 'Rethinking Stereotypes', the often-observed 'simplicity' of stereotypes is deceptive:

to refer 'correctly' to someone as a 'dumb blonde', and to understand what is meant by that, implies a great deal more than hair colour and intelligence. It refers immediately to her sex, which refers to her status in society, her relationship to men, her inability to behave or think rationally, and so on. In short, it implies knowledge of a complex social structure. (1979: 139)

The same point emerges from Arnold S. Linsky's analysis (1970-1) of the representation of the alcoholic in popular magazines between 1900 and 1966, where changing depictions of alcoholics are shown to express complex and contradictory social theories not merely of alcoholism but of free will and determinism.

## REFERENCE

Lippmann refers to stereotypes as a projection on to the 'world'. Although he is concerned primarily to distinguish stereotypes from modes of representation whose principal concern is not the world, it is important for us to do so, especially as our focus is representations in media/fictions, which are aesthetic as well as social constructs. In this perspective, stereotypes are a particular subcategory of a broader category of fictional characters, the type. Whereas

stereotypes are essentially defined, as in Lippmann, by their social function, types, at this level of generality, are primarily defined by their aesthetic function, namely, as a mode of characterization in fiction. The type is any character constructed through the use of a few immediately recognizable and defining traits, which do not change or 'develop' through the course of the narrative and which point to general, recurrent features of the human world (whether these features are conceptualized as universal and eternal, the 'archetype', or historically and culturally specific, 'social types' and 'stereotypes' -- a distinction discussed below).[2] The opposite of the type is the novelistic character, defined by a multiplicity of traits that are only gradually revealed to us through the course of the narrative, a narrative which is hinged on the growth or development of the character and is thus centred upon the latter in her (or his) unique individuality, rather than pointing outwards to a world.

In our society, it is the novelistic character that is privileged over the type, for the obvious reason that our society privileges -- at any rate, at the level of social rhetoric - the individual over the collective or the mass. For this reason, the majority of fictions that address themselves to general social issues tend nevertheless to end up telling the story of a particular individual, hence returning social issues to purely personal and psychological ones. Once we address ourselves to the representation and definition of social categories -- e.g. alcoholics -- we have to consider what is at stake in one mode of characterization rather than another. Where do we want the emphasis of the representation to lie -- on the psychological (alcoholism as a personal problem), on the social (alcoholism as all aspect of society) or in some articulation of the two? The choice or advocacy of a more novelistic or a more typical representation implicitly expresses one or other of these emphases.

## THE EXPRESSION OF VALUES

It is Lippmann's reference to our tradition, and indeed his use of 'our' and 'we' throughout the passage quoted, that takes us into the most important, and most problematic, issue in stereotyping. For we have to ask, who exactly are the 'we' and 'us' invoked by Lippmann? -- is it necessarily you and me? The effectiveness of stereotypes resides in the way they invoke a consensus. Stereotypes proclaim, 'This is what everyone -- you, me and us -- thinks members of such-and-such a social group are like', as if these concepts of these social groups were spontaneously arrived at by all members of society independently and in isolation. The stereotype is taken to express a general agreement about a social group, as if that agreement arose before, and independently of, the stereotype. Yet for the most part it is from stereotypes that we get our ideas about social groups. The consensus invoked by stereotypes is more apparent than real; rather, stereotypes express particular definitions of reality, with concomitant evaluations, which in turn relate to the disposition of power within society. Who proposes the stereotype, who has the power to enforce it, is the crux of the matter -- whose tradition is Lippmann's 'our tradition'?

Here Orrin E. Klapp's distinction between stereotypes and social types is helpful. In his book *Heroes, Villains and Fools* (1962) Klapp defines social types as representations of those who 'belong' to society. They are the kinds of people that one expects, and is led to expect, to find in one's society, whereas stereotypes are those who do not belong, who are outside of one's society. In Klapp, this distinction is principally geographic -- i.e. social types of Americans, stereotypes

of non-Americans. We can, however, rework his distinction in terms of the types produced by different social groups according to their sense of who belongs and who doesn't, who is 'in' and who is not. Who does or does not belong to a given society as a whole is then a function of the relative power of groups in that society to define themselves as central and the rest as 'other', peripheral or outcast.

In fictions, social types and stereotypes can be recognized as distinct by the different ways in which they can be used. Although constructed iconographically similarly to the way stereotypes are constructed (i.e. a few verbal and visual traits are used to signal the character), social types can be used in a much more open and flexible way than can stereotypes. This is most clearly seen in relation to plot. Social types can figure in almost any kind of plot and can have a wide range of roles in that plot (e.g. as hero, as villain, as helper, as light relief, etc.), whereas stereotypes always carry within their very representation an implicit narrative. Jo Spence has argued in the context of the representation them an implicit narrative pattern:

visual representations which may appear to deal with diverse ideas but which are all aimed at women tend to act as part of an implicit narrative. This has a 'beginning' and a 'middle' (birth, childhood, marriage, family life) but there is only minimal representations of its 'end', of growing old and dying. (1980: 29-45)

In an article dealing with the stereotyping of gays in films, I tried to show how the use of images of lesbians in a group of French films, no matter what kind of film or of what 'artistic quality', always involved an identical plot function (1977: 33-5). Similarly, we surely only have to be told that we are going to see a film about an alcoholic to know that it will be a tale either of sordid decline or of inspiring redemption. (This suggests a particularly interesting potential use of stereotypes, in which the character is constructed, at the level of dress, performance, etc., as a stereotype but is deliberately given a narrative function that is not implicit in the stereotype, thus throwing into question the assumptions signaled by the stereotypical iconography.)

The social type/stereotype distinction is essentially one of degree. It is after all very hard to draw a line between those who are just within and those definitely beyond the pale. This is partly because different social categories overlap -- e.g. men 'belong', blacks do not, but what of black men? It is also because some of the categories that the social type/stereotype distinction keeps apart cannot logically be kept apart in this way. The obvious examples here are men and women, and it is this that causes T. E. Perkins to reject the distinction (1979: 140-1). As applied to men and women, the social type/stereotype distinction implies that men have no direct experience of women and that there could be a society composed entirely of men: both of these are virtually impossible. Yet it seems to me that what the distinction points to, as applied to women and men, is a tendency of patriarchal thought<sup>[3]</sup> to attempt to maintain the impossible, by insisting on the 'otherness' of women and men (or rather the 'otherness' of women, men being in patriarchy the human norm to which women are 'other') in the face of their necessary collaboration in history and society. (The distinction does also refer in part to a real separation in social arrangements, i.e. the fact of male and female 'preserves': the pub, the beauty salon, the study, the kitchen. etc.) What the distinction also maintains is the *absolute* difference between men and women, in the face of their actual relative similarity.

This is the most important function of the stereotype: to maintain sharp boundary definitions. to define clearly where the pale ends and thus who is clearly within and who clearly beyond it. Stereotypes do not only, in concert with social types, map out the boundaries of acceptable and legitimate behaviour, they also insist on boundaries exactly at those points where in reality there are none. Nowhere is this more clear than with stereotypes dealing with social categories that are invisible and/or fluid. Such categories are *invisible*, because you cannot tell just from looking at a person that she or he belongs to the category in question. Unless the person chooses to dress or act in a clearly and culturally defined manner (e.g. the working-class man's cloth cap, the male homosexual's limp wrist) or unless one has a trained eye (as those dealing with alcoholics have?), it is impossible to place the person before one, whereas many social groups -- women and men, different races, young and old -- are visibly different, and this difference can be eradicated only by disguise. Social categories can be *fluid*, in the sense that it is not possible in reality to draw a line between them and adjacent categories. We make a fuss about -- and produce stereotypes about -- the difference between women and men, yet biologically this is negligible compared to their similarity. Again, we are led to treat heterosexuality and homosexuality as sharply opposed categories of persons when in reality both heterosexual and homosexual responses and behaviour are to some extent experienced by everybody in their life. Alcohol use is clearly in this category -- it is notoriously difficult to draw the line between harm-free and harmful drinking. But stereotypes can.

The role of stereotypes is to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm and separate what is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit.

In the widest sense, these functions of rendering visible and firm can be connected to Lippmann's insistence on stereotypes as ordering concepts, and to the tendency towards rigidity that may be implied by this. All societies need to have relatively stable boundaries and categories, but this stability can be achieved within a context that recognizes the relativity and uncertainty of concepts. Such a stability is, however, achieved only in a situation of real, as opposed to imposed, consensus. The degree of rigidity and shrillness of a stereotype indicates the degree to which it is an enforced representation that points to a reality whose invisibility and/or fluidity threatens the received; definitions of society promoted by those with the biggest sticks. (E.g. if women are not so very different from men. why are they subordinated?; if alcoholism is not so easily distinguished from social drinking, can we be so comfortable in our acceptance of the latter and condemnation of the former?)

[...]

## NOTES

1. I confine myself here to the discussion of stereotypes as a form of representing persons, although the word itself (especially in adjectival form) is also used to refer to ideas, behaviour, settings, etc.
2. It is important to stress the role of conceptualization in the distinction between, on the one hand, archetypes, and, on the other, social and stereotypes, since what may be

attributed to a type as a universal and eternal trait, hence making it archetypal, may only be a historically and culturally specific trait misunderstood as a universal and eternal trait -- it is, after all, the tendency of dominant value systems in societies to pass their values off as universally and eternally valid.

3. By patriarchy I mean the thought system that legitimates the power of men and the subordination of women in society; I do not mean that it is necessarily and simply how all men think of women, although it is an overwhelming determinant on that.

#### REFERENCES

1. Berger, Peter and Luckmann, Thomas (1967) *The Social Construction of Reality*, London: Allen Lane/Penguin Press.
2. Dyer, Richard (1977) 'Stereotyping', in Richard Dyer (ed.) *Gays and Film*, London: British Film Institute.
3. Klapp, Orrin E. (1962) *Heroes, Villains and Fools*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
4. Linsky, Arnold S. (1970-1) 'Theories of Behaviour and the Image of the Alcoholic in Popular Magazines 1900-1960', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 34: 573-81.
5. Lippmann, Walter (1956) *Public Opinion*, New York: Macmillan. (First published 1922.)
6. Perkins, T. E. (1979) 'Rethinking Stereotypes', in Michele Barrett, Philip Corrigan, Annette Kuhn and Janet Wolff (eds) *Ideology and Cultural Production*, London: Croom Helm, 135-59.
7. Spence, Jo (1980) 'What Do People Do All Day? Class and Gender in Images of Women', *Screen Education* 29.