Representation
APPROACHING REPRESENTATION

Representation is concerned with the way that people, ideas and events are presented to us through media texts. It is a process of construction, actively constructing meanings about the world and re-presenting them.

In our investigation of both widely circulated media texts and other alternative representations it will be useful to ask the questions posed by Richard Dyer when considering representation in popular television:

- What sense of the world is the media text making?
- What does it claim is typical of the world and what deviant?
- Who is really speaking? For whom?
- What does it represent to us and why?

Try and work with both sets of media codes
  × technical (camera, editing, sound)
  × and cultural (dress, setting, body, props)

The key concept of Representation is a way of studying stereotyping and bias and a way of investigating who is represented (age, gender, class, region, ethnicity, sexuality) and how they are represented (technical and cultural codes). It is concerned with the way that people, ideas and events are presented to us through media texts in a process of construction which actively constructs meanings about the world and re-presents them.

REPRESENTATION

Media re-present social groups such as gender, race, class groups, occupational groups. No media representation can be 'neutral'. Representations are shaped by genre, audience, institutional context, dominant ideologies in society.

The process of mediation [representing the 'real' world on film or television or in a newspaper or magazine] involves a process which means representations always carry meanings and values [choice of shot or camera angle; use of mise-en-scene, costumes, setting lighting; use of sound and dialogue, role in the narrative...]

Some critics, like Stuart Price, would argue that representations reinforce dominant ideologies in society:

‘If gender differences are socially constructed, and society itself is based on unequal relations of power, then we can see why many writers argue that mainstream representations will be biased against subordinate groups. Dominant ideology is supposedly used to keep the downtrodden in their place... Ideologies of gender promote sexist representations of women... ideologies make equalities and subordination appear natural.’

Other critics would argue that representations in the media can challenge and subvert dominant ideologies in society.
ANALYSING REPRESENTATIONS

Who are the representations aimed at? Are they aspirational images for the audience?

Who is creating the representation [institutional context, director/auteur] and why?

What is the institutional / production context and what constraints does this involve [budget, studio/production company, genre]

Are there genre restraints on the representation – eg women must appear differently in horror and musicals.

How are representations affected by social/historic context [key events, contemporary social values, changes in society, ideological context]

REPRESENTATION and STEREOTYPES

When we talk about people being stereotyped by the media we mean that an assumption has been made that people are the same as each other, rather than different.

- Stereotypical images come complete with value-judgements and a personal opinion.
- Stereotyped images / language are used by society and the media as a kind of cultural short cut.
- Stereotyping is an invitation to accept a general and limited picture of a group.
- When employing stereotypes, mainstream media producers assume that the audiences' attitudes and values are those of the mainstream.
- Stereotyping is part of the naturalisation of what are commonly held attitudes and values.

’Stereotypes are not one-dimensional distortions of reality. In order to gain credibility and widespread cultural currency, they usually contain an element of truth... The most powerful stereotypes tend to be rooted in a degree of reality which is then naturalised rather than questioned in order to pass judgement about the inevitability of such a situation or behaviour... The danger is little attention is paid to the function of the stereotype within the narrative. Is the audience invited to denigrate, laugh at the character.’ B. Dutton,
STEREOTYPES

The idea of stereotypes was defined by Walter Lippman in 1922 - in ‘A Matter of Images’. Richard Dyer described four functions of Lippman’s definition, which are:

an ordering process;
...stereotypes serve to order our reality in an easy-to-understand form, and are an essential part of making sense of the world and society. The fact that stereotypes offer an incomplete view of the world does not necessarily make them false; there is anyway no such thing as a complete view of the world. Having stereotypical knowledge may be better than having no knowledge at all.

a short ‘cut’;
Because they are simplifications stereotypes act as ‘short cuts’ to meaning. We can characterise New York in a dozen words which will be sufficient for most purposes... the words 'macho man' are a short cut to a more complex set of assumptions that reflect society's values.

a way of referring to the world
They are social constructs and as such are a type of re-presentation. Stereotypes are most often used by individuals about people, or peoples, they do not know. It follows, then that they must have received this information from others, especially the media. Stereotypes serve to naturalise the power relations in society; they have a hegemonic function, so the fact that women are often stereotypes as subservient to men legitimises their inferior position.

Stereotypes are not true or false but reflect a particular set of ideological values.

an expression of 'our' values and beliefs.
Much of the power of stereotypes exists because they appear to have the status of consensus. What stereotypes represent, however, are not the beliefs based upon reality but ideas which reflect the distribution of power in society - stereotypes are not an expression of value but of ideology.

Stereotypes

The concept of stereotype, as a kind or 'blinkered' mental attitude, is a notion imported into media study from psychology. Stereotypes frequently attempt to validate certain roles and behaviour. Far from being necessarily negative (though many are) they often present us with positive models of behaviour to emulate. The 'housewife' stereotype, common in TV programmes, films, magazines, news stories, and especially favoured by advertisers, is a role women are invited to copy and men to reinforce. But both stereotypes and labels reflect power relations in the wider society and both exist as powerful forces in the real world as well as being reinforced through the media.

The psychological view of the stereotype
The early interest of psychologists in stereotypes formed part of a broader concern with the origins of attitudes. They were interested in how attitudes changed and why some seemed more resistant to change than others. The stereotype was seen as an exceptional type of attitude - one that was particularly difficult to change. Thus the study of stereotype was closely linked to the notion of prejudice.

Prejudice implies an attitude that pre-judges reality and that is based not on experience but on some firmly fixed belief or dogma. The stereotype became a simple, negative and inaccurate image; it was seen as a rigid and unchanging attitude that was locked within the individual. Stereotypes were characteristically seen as expressions of hostility towards particular minority groups such as 'blacks' or 'Jews'. Stereotyped views were thought to be held by individuals who had little direct and personal experience of such groups.

The sociological view of stereotypes
Sociologists ask, who benefits from the stereotyping of certain groups? Ideas and beliefs that are 'useful' in this way to those who hold them are what sociologists call ideologies — 'convenient' ideas that benefit some groups at the expense of others.
The four parts of a media stereotype

With any group of people, there will obviously be an enormous number of things that can be used in a stereotype, but because stereotyping is a form of simplification, normally the most obvious things are used. These are:

1. **Appearance** - this can include, physical appearance and clothing as well as the sound of the voice, e.g. "all teachers wear dreadful old clothes"

2. **Behaviour** - typical things that people in this group might do. "Grannies like to knit"

3. The third feature of media stereotyping is peculiar to the media: the **stereotype is constructed in ways that fit the particular medium**. - This is more difficult to understand but it is crucial for you to look for it. If you watch a film such as *Hannibal* or *Se7en* and then look at the tabloid coverage of Fred West or Myra Hindley, you are seeing the same stereotype (the typical Serial Killer) being used, but there are obviously big differences which will depend on the specifics of the media used:
   - The film will use close ups of the killer's leering face, soundtrack music and reaction shots of terrified victims to create their version of the stereotype.
   - The newspaper will use emotive headlines, blurred pictures of victims and police mug-shots of the killer along with shocking text and interviews with survivors.
   - In each case a text will create a stereotype which an audience will find familiar, but will do it in very different ways.

4. There will always be a **comparison whether real or imaginary with "normal" behaviour.**

The features of a stereotype are always those which seem somehow different from everyday behaviour. In fact you could almost start any stereotyped description by saying: "this group are different because they......."

**Stereotypes and Genres.**

Obviously, in the Media, there is an even greater need to use stereotypes in whatever medium, as there are always such limited time constraints. The worst offenders, and the mediums that offer the best opportunity for fair representation, are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Average Length</th>
<th>Typical Features.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV Advert</td>
<td>30secs</td>
<td>Short narrative and quick idea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>Scanned read of 1 minute</td>
<td>Sensationalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitcom</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Characters cannot change much, nor can situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazine</td>
<td>Scanned read of 1-2 minutes</td>
<td>Mix of eye catching and informed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td>1 hour 45 minutes.</td>
<td>Needs to establish set of characters and narrative direction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Read fairly carefully -- 5 minutes.</td>
<td>More in depth analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap</td>
<td>Ongoing 30 min episodes.</td>
<td>Often characters change v slowly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama Serial</td>
<td>Perhaps 3 – 8, 45 min episodes.</td>
<td>Room for substantial change over a more leisurely time scale</td>
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RETHINKING STEREOTYPES  (Tessa Perkins)

Tessa Perkins (1979) argues that stereotypes, although simple in form, are in fact compressed and shorthand ways of referring to quite complex social relationships. She states that:

1. Stereotypes are always erroneous in content;
2. They are about groups with whom we have little or no social contact; by implication, therefore, they are not held about one's own group;
3. They are about minority (or oppressed) groups;
4. They are simple;
5. They are ridged and do not change;
6. They are often based on a degree of historical and social truth.

Thus the 'dumb blonde' stereotype portrayed in many films refers to the subordinate position of women in western societies and in that sense is quite accurate. Women typically do find themselves in roles that are seen as less intellectually demanding. Women are often defined in terms of their physical attractiveness to men. But, as Richard Dyer (1977) argues, the stereotype goes further to suggest that such differences are inborn — they imply 'natural' differences between the sexes. It suggests, or reinforces, the view that women's social position is caused by differences in their aptitude and ability. In doing so it conceals the possibility that such differences may be the effect of their inferior position in a male dominated society.

Gaye Tuchman.

Summarizing television content analyses over a twenty-year period Tuchman shows that images of men outnumber those of women by two to one. If a working person is portrayed it is almost always a male image and those working women that are depicted are shown to be incompetent and inferior to male workers:

'men are doctors, women, nurses; men are lawyers, women secretaries; men work in corporations, women tend boutiques' (Tuchman 1981).

Two thirds of the images of women shown on the screen are of women who have been, are, or are about to be, married. But the typical male image is of a single person.

These findings are rather crude measures of sex stereotyping in the media. They cannot catch the subtler points or the range of stereotypes of gender. There is not, for instance, one single stereotype of women but many: the 'mother-in-law', the 'secretary', the 'call-girl', etc.

Another danger of such content analyses is that they encourage an approach which views images and stereotypes as divorced from their wider social, political, and ideological contexts. Tuchman's own discussion of stereotypes in women's magazines shows that stereotypes are not static, they respond to changes in the actual position of women in society. Thus, in response to the growing women's movement and the increase in female employment, American women's magazines directed at working-class women displayed a more optimistic attitude towards the possibility of combining work and family responsibilities than did their predecessors, although a dominant ideology of femininity prevailed.
Some Representation Terms

Dominant: the main way a group are seen in society.

Alternative: a different way to show a group, either by the group itself or by the maker of the image.

Redundant: when a group is shown often enough, in the same way, the image no longer has any power.

Absent: When a group is not really shown in society.

Entropic: When there is a really challenging or v. different, or controversial image of a group.

Major REPRESENTATION theories to consider:

Political Economy: Classic Marxist thought

The Marxist thought as we have already seen considers the owners of media companies to be highly influential in society in generating ideas and maintaining the status quo. How do they do this? There has been a trend toward concentration of media companies in capitalist society placing power in the hands of the few. For example, 90% of the music industry is controlled by just five companies and one of those, Sony, is also a Major player in the movie industry. Across all media industries there are a small number of companies that control the majority of the global market. There are several factors to consider when this idea is taken on board:

- **Majors can control the development of independent media enterprises that might challenge their dominance.** (Why not buy the independent and incorporate their products into the mainstream, reducing the risk of alternative voices being heard).
- **Majors concentrate on the largest markets** for their cultural products.
- **Majors avoid investment risks.** (So may not back subversive or challenging products)
- **There is a tendency to neglect smaller/poorer sectors of the potential audience (minority groups).**
- **Ultimately as consumers we have less choice** as the media is provided by few.
- **Media coverage and products as such become bias and reinforce the status quo.**

Considering these points we must then ask how much individual control an individual or small number of shareholders can exert upon the media environment. We can cite numerous examples of music bands clashing with major record companies over the control that they were exerting upon their recordings, or major studios changing a film after it has been submitted by a director as it did not fit the intended audience.

**Hegemonic Marxist theory**

The hegemonic approach argues that media industries operate within a structure that produces and reinforces the dominant ideology via a consensual 'world view'. Rather than the owners having direct control, they have established an order within which to produce values and ideas that appear to be 'natural'. This world view is produced predominantly by white, middle class, middle aged, heterosexual men. These are the people who write the television shows, report the news, direct the cameras or commission others to do this work. It is their ideas and values that infiltrate media texts and insure that 'other' voices do not get heard.
Pluralism

Pluralists do not really engage in the ownership debate because they consider the consumer/audience to be more important. They accept that there is concentration of ownership and that this brings with it inevitable bias and distortion in media products. However this is irrelevant as the most significant factor is the ability of the audience to consume the media for their own gratifications and needs. In this way, the audience is active in the meaning process and thus dilutes the debate about audiences being manipulated into the acceptance of dominant ideology. The audience is selective in its consumption of the media, so therefore becomes discriminating and interpretative of the media messages.

Postmodernism

Postmodernists argue that developments in technology and improved access to technology have resulted in empowerment for consumers and the decentralisation of dominant powers. They argue that there is a proliferation of media products available that are not all controlled by the Major conglomerates and as such there has been a dissemination of power and ideas. Minority groups and alternative voices now have the opportunity to make themselves heard and challenge the dominant ideology and status quo. Postmodernist thought also argue that messages and ideas produced by major media companies are interpreted differently by varying audiences and as such can have no fixed meaning in today’s media saturated society.
Think of Blogs!

It is important to note that the Major companies also have access to new technological innovations and are therefore attempting to control and manipulate the flow of ideas through these new media. For example the joining of traditional and new media conglomerates in the shape of AOL-Time Warner which is a marriage aimed at controlling all aspects of media production and distribution. These major conglomerates also own what are known as Major Independents e.g. New Line. These are what we believe to be independent companies but have actually been consumed by the major conglomerate so we have to question how ‘independent’ the independent companies are now and how free they are to distribute products with alternative ideas to those of their parent company. The powers of cross-media promotion and production available to conglomerates such as AOL-Time Warner encourage us to consider the extent to which they are able to control and manipulate market forces across the media industry and thus ‘drown’ out alternative and minority voices.
Control of race representation through the popular press.

The professional's view

Harold Evans (1978), then the editor of The Times, commented that the picture "was the result of perceptive picture editing as well as resourceful photography." The uncropped version, he continued, "all registered trees and houses and background which added nothing to the news and, if left in, would have taken publication space from the main focus of attention. There is plenty of detail as well as drama in what remains and at the size and shape reproduced it took every reader by the eyeball."

Look at the effect the anchorage and cropping has on an image. Are there any images in the papers today that you could manipulate in a similar way??

This picture is too ambiguous for the Tabloid front covers. Why do you think it needed to be changed to satisfy the dominant ideological position??