

Stereotype

A vignette from Typecasting: On the Arts & Sciences of Human Inequality

Stereotypes are the habitual mental molds with which we confront a big, complex, often transient world, in order to make it comprehensible. While the current meaning of stereotyping usually refers to the unthinking tendency to reduce individuals and cultures into one-dimensional, often slanderous, visual clichés, this practice has deep historical roots and is linked to rise of the modern world. [Illustration; WWI poster of the Gorilla and the Blonde]

Defining people according to simplistic categories, of course, dates back to antiquity. In myth, ritual and drama, and in the ways that history was recounted, characters often appeared as easily identifiable types, embodiments of good and evil, virtue and trickery, innocence and cunning. [Insert illustration of Tarot card] In the contemporary world, however, where cultural meanings transcend customary borders, and where the standardization of images and information is commonplace, the problem of stereotyping has become particularly acute.

Within recent history, the role of the media, and their capacity to spawn mass impressions instantaneously, has been a pivotal factor in the dissemination of stereotypes. In fact, the link between media and stereotype is found in the origin of the word itself. Coined in 1794 by the French printer, Fermin Didot, “stereotype” was the name he gave to a novel printing process by which papier mâché molds were made from full pages of handset type. Like cookie cutters, these molds were then used to produce duplicate

plates, cast in metal, permitting newspapers and books to be printed on several presses at the same time without the need to set individual pieces of type into forms for each printing press. [Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th Edition, Volume 14, 1975, pp. 1054-1055; Warren Chappell, *A Short History of the Printed Word*. Boston, 1970]

Yet even among printers, the contemporary implications of stereotyping were furtively in attendance. As far back as Gutenberg's development of movable type printing, in the mid-fifteenth century, the hard metal hand-cut die, or "punch," from which multiple pieces of type could be cloned, was referred to as the *patrix*, derived from the Latin for father, *pater*. The progenitor of type, then, was assigned a masculine role by a printing profession that was exclusively male. Stamped by the *patrix*, the molds that were used to mass-produce the pieces of type that bore their "father's" image, was called the *matrix*, from *mater* or mother. With Didot's innovation, handset type became the *patrix*, the molds they shaped became the *matrix*. Here in the early jargon of printers, gender was used to communicate a hierarchy of importance in the evolution from original to copy. Issues of power, and assumptions of social inequality, then, were linked to the term *stereotype* from its inception. [F-151, p. 125-126]

The invention of stereotype technology multiplied the variety of printed materials that could be produced, hastened the mass production of print and the growth of a mass readership. More than ever before, unprecedented numbers of people could now consume the same ideas and information simultaneously. Borrowing its prefix from the Greek *stereos*—meaning solid, hard or fixed—by the 1820s the term *stereotype* was beginning to

evolve into a metaphor, a common shorthand for “the idea of unchangeability, of monotonous regularity and formalisation.” [Gordon, F-103, p. 3]

It was the renowned American journalist Walter Lippmann, however, who introduced the term stereotype into the social, cultural and psychological vocabulary of contemporary life. The term had been used before, but never in quite the same way.

In *Public Opinion*, his classic 1922 study of “public mind” and the forces that shape popular consciousness, Lippmann presented “stereotypes” as axiomatic elements of human perception. In the modern world, he argued, their utility was essential. The complexity of modern existence, and the global reach of contemporary society, made it impossible for people to make sense of the world on the basis of first-hand knowledge.

[T]he real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it. To traverse the world men must have maps of the world.

Stereotypes, he contended, were those maps. Together they formed a “repertory of fixed impressions” that “we carry about in our heads,” rigid mental templates which frame individual experience in an increasingly anonymous world.

For Lippmann, the stereotypes did not emanate from the individual. Instead, they were an inexorable byproduct of the surrounding culture, a perceptual reflex that imposed itself between people’s eyes and the world they believed they were seeing.

For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.

Through this fateful “mechanism,” he maintained, “heroes are incarnated, devils are made.

Lippmann’s discovery was, without question, a reflection of its time. Prior to the modern era, most people had acquired their assumptions about the world from intimate surroundings, from a familiar and provincial sphere of experience. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the disorienting impersonality of urban industrial life was emerging as a widespread lament. Within the cacophony of this brave new world, the “screech, blare and color” of the modern media left a conspicuous imprint on the popular imagination. Mass circulation newspapers and magazines, photography, and vivid advertising billboards were ubiquitous, battling for public attention. An increasingly voyeuristic, physically disconnected dialog between people and the world-at-large was becoming the norm. The Age of Spectatorship was arriving.

By the turn of the century, movies were emerging as the quintessential modern medium. With flickering light, they were revealing an unprecedented capacity to speak, in silence, to the human psyche. The moving picture, wrote Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg in 1916, “has furnished art with a means which far transcends the power of any theater stage.” Movies, he observed, “can act as our imagination acts. ... The photoplay obeys the laws of the mind rather than those of the outer world.” [F-003, pp 37, 41] Cecil B. DeMille, a prime mover of Hollywood filmmaking, concurred, when he spoke of “the motion picture’s ability to photograph thought.” [F-034, p. 144] Mirroring the un-

conscious workings of mental life, the eloquence of film was capable of evoking a deep emotional response while bypassing the filter of critical reason.

This idea was not lost on Walter Lippmann. Underlying his reveries on stereotype was a profound appreciation for the power of Hollywood film.

In the whole experience of the race there has been no aid to visualization comparable to the cinema. ...[Movies] seem utterly real. They come, we imagine, directly to us without human meddling, and they are the most effortless food for the mind conceivable. Any description in words, or even any inert picture, requires an effort of memory before a picture exists in the mind. But on the screen the whole process of observing, describing, reporting, and then imagining, has been accomplished for you. Without more trouble than is needed to stay awake the result which your imagination is always aiming at is reeled off on the screen. [F-001, pp. 60-61]

Within this medium, the stereotyping process and the elaboration of formulas for making audiences identify with certain characters, and project their deepest anxieties onto others, was being refined and standardized as never before. Unlike theatrical directors, who relied on the talents of trained actors, early moviemakers often selected “character actors” on the basis of pure physical appearance, scouring the streets for easily identifiable social types. Münsterberg was among the first to describe the process.

If the photoplay needs a brutal boxer in a mining camp, the producer will not...try to transform a clean, neat, professional actor into a vulgar brute, but he will sift the Bowery until he has found some creature who looks as if he came from that mining camp and who has at least the prize fighter’s cauliflower ear... If he needs the fat bartender with his smug smile, or the humble Jewish peddler, or the Italian organ grinder, he does not rely on wigs and paint; he finds them all ready-made on the East Side. [F-003, p. 50]

By 1922, Hollywood typecasting had become a well-honed practice in American popular culture and, for Lippmann, Hollywood was a living laboratory, a paradigm

within which the influence of simple images on public opinion could be analyzed and understood. “In popular representations,” he explained, “the handles for identification are almost always marked. You know who the hero is at once. No work promises to be easily popular where the marking is not definite and the choice clear.” [check source]

For Lippmann the example being set by the film industry offered a window through which more generalized processes of perception were illuminated. In “The Great Society,” as he labeled his contemporary world, stereotypes were the prevailing tools by which a media-driven culture explained, and made digestible, complicated and confusing social realities. Amid the chaos of the modern, nuance was an unaffordable luxury.

Educated by the teachings of psychoanalysis, Lippmann understood stereotype as something that resided, primarily, in the unconscious mind, apart from rational thought. This, he disclosed, was the secret of its power.

Its hallmark is that it precedes the use of reason; is a form of perception, imposes a certain character on the data of our senses, before the data reach the intelligence. ...There is nothing so obdurate to education or criticism as the stereotype. It stamps itself upon evidence in the very act of securing the evidence. [F-001, pp. 64-65]

These stereotypes provided people with narratives, stories that encouraged them, without reflection, to see certain things, certain people, in pre-determined ways, regardless of countervailing evidence.

We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And these preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception. They mark out certain objects as familiar or strange, emphasizing the difference, so that the slightly familiar is seen as very familiar, and the somewhat strange is sharply alien. [F-001, p. 59]

To Lippmann, the “pictures in our heads,” indelibly inscribed, were an intractable part of a person’s identity, they embodied “the core of our personal tradition.” Stereotypes offered a habitual picture of reality, a line of defense against actual or perceived threats, protecting “our position in society.”

They are an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world. ...They may not be a complete picture...but they are picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members. We know the way around. There we find the charm of the familiar, the normal, the dependable; its grooves and shapes are where we are accustomed to find them. ...It fits as snugly as an old shoe.

When the “charm of the familiar” was imperiled, Lippmann noted, people will go to extremes to preserve and defend their version of things as they are. “No wonder,” he wrote, “that any disturbance of the stereotypes seems like an attack on the foundations of the universe. It is an attack upon the foundations of our universe, and, where big things are at stake, we do not readily admit that there is any difference between our universe and the universe.” [F-001, pp. 60-61]

With both hindsight and clairvoyance, Lippmann had identified and named one of the most potent features of modernity. To be sure, the impulse to distinguish between the familiar and the alien is an ancient human trait. Modernity, however, had pumped up the volume. In a rapidly changing world, where firsthand experience was losing ground as a source of useful information, the media system was replacing customary networks, and rendering stereotypes into easily consumable, industrially generated substitutes for intimate knowledge. More and more, heroes would be celebrated, beauty would be vener-

ated, enemies would be hunted down, wars would be fought on the basis of such fragile, if marketable, preconceptions.

Writing in the aftermath of the First World War, Lippmann situated the rise of stereotyping within “The Great Society,” a world where global connections had become increasingly visible, and localism seemed a remnant of an outmoded past. Yet stereotypes, as Lippmann defined them, were part and parcel of changes that had been altering the rhythms of existence, in many parts of the world, for centuries. “The Great Society” did not spring up overnight. It was the offspring of developments that had begun to take place, initially in Europe and then throughout the world, with the rise of merchant capitalism in the latter years of the Middle Ages.