

Essay 3: Media Analysis

English 101
Instructor Stephanie Flint
Spring 2015

Media plays a very major role in our day-to-day lives, for better or for worse. In fact, we would be very hard-pressed to live completely media-free on any given day. But to what extent do we think critically about the images and messages that constantly confront us? To what extent does media influence the way we see the world? By looking critically at media through different critical lenses, we can expand our awareness of the world in which we live.

In this essay, I want you to **analyze a piece of media of your choosing, through the lens of stereotypes.**

I then want you to **make an argument about this piece of media based on your analysis.**

In a 3-5 page paper, take an image, advertisement, or movie and break it apart to find a deeper meaning, using Heilbroner's essay "Don't Let Stereotypes Warp Your Judgments" to help you along. **You must use Heilbroner's essay as a source**, integrating references and in-text citations from Heilbroner's essay into your own.

Do not spend more than one paragraph summarizing the show/movie. With a print ad or webpage, the real description should be sprinkled throughout the various paragraphs that are analyzing different aspects of the advertisement/page.

Things to keep in mind when reviewing a movie or TV show: cinematography, dialogue, lighting, music, story, genre, and audience expectations (try to draw some conclusions about the audience), product placement or instances where they are trying to get the audience to buy or buy into a certain thing or idea

Things to keep in mind when reviewing a print ad: who is in the ad (is it anyone famous?), color, space, mood, design, product being sold, models used (race, gender, class of those models), use of text, and where the ad is found. Also, try to boil down the advertisement's argument to its most extreme message.

If you wish to analyze a piece of media outside of TV, movies, and print ads, you must get your topic approved by me before starting your paper.

Your paper must include:

- An identifiable thesis that clearly states your argument based on your analysis
- Thoughtful analysis of your chosen piece of media
- An effective integration of Heilbroner's "Don't Let Stereotypes Warp Your Judgment" into your essay
- A bibliography
- Specific examples backing up your claims from the piece of media as well as from Heilbroner's essay
- A creative title
- A **minimum** of 3 pages in MLA format

Full, printed draft due in class for Peer Review: Tuesday, March 24
Final draft due on Turnitin.com: Thursday, March 26 (by the start of class)

Don't Let Stereotypes Warp Your Judgments

by Robert L. Heilbroner

Robert L. Heilbroner is a recognized authority on economic history and thought. Formerly a professor at the New School for Social Research in New York City, he is a prolific writer and popular lecturer. He is well known for his essays in The New Yorker and for over twenty books, including The Worldly Philosophers (1954), whose revised editions are still widely used in economics classes. Other recent books include The Crisis in Modern Economic Thought (1996) and The Economic Transformation of America (1998). This essay, published in Reader's Digest, uses multiple strategies to expose a social problem, explain its causes and effects, and offer some practical suggestions for change.

① Is a girl called Gloria apt to be better-looking than one called Bertha?

② Are criminals more likely to be dark than blond? Can you tell a good deal about someone's personality from hearing his voice briefly over the phone? Can a person's nationality be pretty accurately guessed from his photograph? Does the fact that someone wears glasses imply that he is intelligent?

③ The answer to all these questions is obviously, "No." Yet, from all the evidence at hand, most of us believe these things. Ask any college boy if he'd rather take his chances with a Gloria or a Bertha, or ask a college girl if she'd rather blind-date a Richard or a Cuthbert. In fact, you don't have to ask: college students in questionnaires have revealed that names conjure up the same images in their minds as they do in yours—and for as little reason.

④ Look into the favorite suspects of persons who report "suspicious characters" and you will find a large percentage of them to be "swarthy" or "dark and foreign-looking"—despite the testimony of criminologists that criminals do not tend to be dark, foreign or "wild-eyed." Delve into the main asset of a telephone stock swindler and you will find it to be a marvelously confidence-inspiring telephone "personality." And whereas we all think we know what an Italian or a Swede looks like, it is the sad fact that when a group of Nebraska students sought to match faces and nationalities of 15 European countries, they were scored wrong in 93 percent of their identifications. Finally, for all the fact that horn-rimmed glasses have now become the standard television sign of an "intellectual," optometrists know that the main thing that distinguishes people with glasses is just bad eyes.

⑤ Stereotypes are a kind of gossip about the world, a gossip that makes us prejudge people before we ever lay eyes on them. Hence it is not surprising that stereotypes have something to do with the dark world of prejudice. Explore most prejudices (note that the word means prejudgment) and you will find a cruel stereotype at the core of each one.

⑥ For it is the extraordinary fact that once we have typecast the world, we tend to see people in terms of our standardized pictures. In another demonstration of the power of stereotypes to affect our vision, a number of Columbia and Barnard students were shown 30 photographs of pretty but unidentified girls, and asked to rate each in terms of "general liking," "intelligence," "beauty"

and so on. Two months later, the same group were shown the same photographs, this time with fictitious Irish, Italian, Jewish and "American" names attached to the pictures. Right away the ratings changed. Faces which were now seen as representing a national group went down in looks and still farther down in likability, while the "American" girls suddenly looked decidedly prettier and nicer.

7 Why is it that we stereotype the world in such irrational and harmful fashion? In part, we begin to type-cast people in our childhood years. Early in life, as every parent whose child has watched a TV Western knows, we learn to spot the Good Guys from the Bad Guys. Some years ago, a social psychologist showed very clearly how powerful these stereotypes of childhood vision are. He secretly asked the most popular youngsters in an elementary school to make errors in their morning gym exercises. Afterwards, he asked the class if anyone had noticed any mistakes during gym period. Oh, yes, said the children. But it was the unpopular members of the class—the "bad guys"—they remembered as being out of step.

8 We not only grow up with standardized pictures forming inside of us, but as grown-ups we are constantly having them thrust upon us. Some of them, like the half-joking, half-serious stereotypes of mothers-in-law, or country yokels, or psychiatrists, are dinned into us by the stock jokes we hear and repeat. In fact, without such stereotypes, there would be a lot fewer jokes. Still other stereotypes are perpetuated by the advertisements we read, the movies we see, the books we read. And finally, we tend to stereotype because it helps us make sense out of a highly confusing world, a world which William James* once described as "one great, blooming, buzzing confusion." It is a curious fact that if we don't know what we're looking at, we are often quite literally unable to see what we're looking at. People who recover their sight after a lifetime of blindness actually cannot at first tell a triangle from a square. A visitor to a factory sees only noisy chaos where the superintendent sees a perfectly synchronized flow of work. As Walter Lippmann has said, "For the most part we do not first see, and then define; we define first, and then we see."

9 Stereotypes are one way in which we "define" the world in order to see it. They classify the infinite variety of human beings into a convenient handful of "types" towards whom we learn to act in stereotyped fashion. Life would be a wearing process if we had to start from scratch with each and every human contact. Stereotypes economize on our mental effort by covering up the blooming, buzzing confusion with big recognizable cutouts. They save us the "trouble" of finding out what the world is like—they give it its accustomed look.

10 Thus the trouble is that stereotypes make us mentally lazy. As S. I. Hayakawa, the authority on semantics, has written: "The danger of stereotypes lies not in their existence, but in the fact that they become for all people some of the time, and for some people all the time, substitutes for observation." Worse yet, stereotypes get in the way of our judgment, even when we do observe the world. Someone who has formed rigid preconceptions of all Latins as "excitable," or all teenagers as "wild," doesn't alter his point of view when he meets a calm and deliberate Genoese,* or a serious-minded high school student. He brushes them aside as "exceptions that prove the rule." And, of course, if he meets someone true to type, he stands triumphantly vindicated. "They're all like that," he proclaims, having encountered an excited Latin, an ill-behaved adolescent.

Hence, quite aside from the injustice which stereotypes do to others, they impoverish ourselves. A person who lumps the world into simple categories, who type-casts all labor leaders as "racketeers," all businessmen as "reactionaries," all Harvard men as "snobs," and all Frenchmen as "sexy," is in danger of becoming a stereotype himself. He loses his capacity to be himself—which is to say, to see the world in his own absolutely unique, inimitable and independent fashion. Instead, he votes for the man who fits his standardized picture of what a candidate "should" look like or sound like, buys the goods that someone in his "situation" in life "should" own, lives the life that others define for him. The mark of the stereotype person is that he never surprises us, that we do indeed have him "typed." And no one fits this straitjacket so perfectly as someone whose opinions about other people are fixed and inflexible.

Impoverishing as they are, stereotypes are not easy to get rid of. The world we type-cast may be no better than a Grade B movie, but at least we know what to expect of our stock characters. When we let them act for themselves in the strangely unpredictable way that people do act, who knows but that many of our fondest convictions will be proved wrong? Nor do we suddenly drop our standardized pictures for a blinding vision of the Truth. Sharp swings of ideas about people often just substitute one stereotype for another. The true process of change is a slow one that adds bits and pieces of reality to the pictures in our heads, until gradually they take on some of the blurriness of life itself. Little by little, we learn not that Jews and Negroes and Catholics and Puerto Ricans are "just like everybody else"—for that, too, is a stereotype—but that each and every one of them is unique, special, different and individual. Often we do not even know that we have let a stereotype lapse until we hear someone saying, "all so-and-so's are like such-and-such," and we hear ourselves saying, "Well—maybe."

Can we speed the process along? Of course we can. First, we can become aware of the standardized pictures in our heads, in other peoples' heads, in the world around us. Second, we can become suspicious of all judgments that we allow exceptions to "prove." There is no more chastening thought than that in the vast intellectual adventure of science, it takes but one tiny exception to topple a whole edifice of ideas.

Third, we can learn to be chary of generalizations about people. As F. Scott Fitzgerald* once wrote: "Begin with an individual, and before you know it you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find you have created—nothing."

Most of the time, when we type-cast the world, we are not in fact generalizing about people at all. We are only revealing the embarrassing facts about the pictures that hang in the gallery of stereotypes in our own heads.

Source:

<http://www.englisharticles.info/2010/06/12/don%e2%80%99t-let-stereotypes-warp-your-judgments/>