

# Handout: How representation works

**Representation;** Representations are *generalisations* about categories, and they identify why events, ideas or people belong in these categories. They invite audiences to understand them and agree with them in certain preferred ways. As an example, alcohol ads always involve people having fun at parties. Media tell us that's the reality of alcohol and human behaviour.

**Stereotypes:** A stereotype is an oversimplified, clichéd image, repeated so many times that it seems to have established a pattern. It is a highly judgmental type of representation.

One well-known female stereotype is the dumb blonde,

**Essentialising:** In simple terms, essentialism is a generalization stating that certain properties possessed by a group (e.g. people, things, ideas) are universal, and not dependent on context. For example, the essentialist statement 'all human beings are mortal'.

## Analysing representations.

There are many useful ways to analyse *representations*. During the evaluation keep the following in mind:

**Codes and conventions.** Representations can be understood by analysing the technical and symbolic codes that are used to communicate. For instance, the representation of women in the 'girl power' phenomenon of the early 2000s can be analysed by looking at the symbolic codes of costume and also the technical codes of shot angle and shot size.

**Discourses.** Understanding the discourse that a representation is part of can help explain how it works. For instance, it is easier to analyse representations of race or religion if you understand the discourse of such political issues as immigration or the 'war on terror'.

**Framing.** A representation can be framed within a certain viewpoint or it can be shown only within a certain context. For example, in Australian commercial television poverty is usually framed as an individual problem or perhaps just 'bad luck'.

**Narrative analysis.** Often a person or an event can be packaged as belonging to a certain kind of familiar story or pattern. In this way, for instance, whole nations can be represented as 'bad guys' or 'good guys' because it fits the pattern of many Hollywood movies.

**Production.** Just who is employed to produce media, affects the nature of the representations. In the 1950s and 1960s it was rare to find women working in the media industries except as secretaries. Naturally, if nearly all the representations of women were produced by men, there would be an unbalanced view. Similarly, it was not until the early 1990s that even small numbers of African Americans were employed as writers in the American television and film industries. The composition of the workforce affects the representation.

**Reception.** Audience interpretation is variable. Audiences do not automatically accept a representation or even view it in the way the producer might hope. That was just as true in 1950 as it is today. It is very difficult for a modern audience to really understand how audiences in the past interpreted the media of the time. Watching a TV show from mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the twenty-first century can never be the same as watching it in 1950.

**Economic power.** When a group gains sufficient spending power to convince advertisers to target it, media representations often change to suit. For instance, the African-American market in the United States is strong enough to have encouraged more television and film producers to portray the lives of African Americans and depict them as three-dimensional characters.

**Media landscape.** A representation cannot be understood by itself, but must be analysed as part of a whole system. In television, for instance, the representation of people and ideas happens within a programming system of genres, narratives, codes and conventions. The representation of women may be affected by a single image of the type of woman shown or by the reduced number of women as central characters across the whole schedule or it can be affected by the small number of female voices used in advertising voice-overs.

**Social/historical context.** Whatever is happening in society can affect representations. Members of society live their lives in response to the value systems and ways of thinking around them. This equally affects those who work in the media.

*Representations are a product of their social and cultural environment. If you don't share their social environment, you are most likely not being Represented well, or at all.*