limited number of traits. Stereotypes are usually perceived as negative constructs; they serve to speed communication and reinforce shared values. Stereotypes are ideological concepts, for they are deeply rooted in social beliefs. T.E. Perkins (1979, p.141) notes that the resilience and power of a stereotype ‘result from a combination of three factors: its simplicity; its immediate recognisability (which makes its communicative role very important); and its implicit reference to an assumed consensus about some attribute or complex social relationships.’ A person described in the British media as a ‘fundamentalist’ (of whatever kind) is unlikely to be presented as praiseworthy or as similar to the people likely to be the majority of that outlet’s audience. This simple process of naming will have conveyed, with considerable efficiency, the point about the person’s supposed extremism and resistance to rational argument.

Reading 2.1 Activity

Now read the following extract from Richard Dyer, ‘Stars as types’ (Reading 2.1). As you read, consider the following questions and make notes:

- What does Dyer suggest we bear in mind when using the concept of social types?
- How much of the description of the pin-up he provides from Hess remains applicable today?
- Try to identify two social types that are exemplified by current celebrities.

Reading 2.1

Richard Dyer, ‘Stars as types’

Despite the extravagant lifestyle of the stars, elements such as the rags-to-riches motif and romance as an enactment of the problems of heterosexual monogamy suggest that what is important about the stars, especially in their particularity, is their typicality or representativeness. Stars, in other words, relate to the social types of a society.

The notion of social type

The notion of a type – or rather social type – has been developed by O.E. Klapp [...] In Heroes, Villains and Fools, Klapp defines a social type as ‘a collective norm of role behaviour formed and used by the group: an idealised concept of how people are expected to be or to act’ (p.11).
It is a shared, recognisable, easily-grasped image of how people are in society (with collective approval or disapproval built into it).

On the basis of this Klapp proceeds to provide a typology of the prevalent social types in America, and he frequently provides stars’ names to illustrate the different social types. Thus under ‘heroes of social acceptability’, he lists Will Rogers, [...] and Perry Como, and under ‘snobs’ he lists Grace Kelly, Elizabeth Taylor, Ingrid Bergman, [...] Katharine Hepburn, Garbo and Davis. (A star may of course be listed under several different, even contradictory categories, reflecting both the ambiguity of their image and the differences in audience attitudes – thus Monroe for instance is used as an example of ‘love queen’ and ‘simpleton’ [...] The star both fulfils/incarnates the type and, by virtue of her/his idiosyncrasies, individuates it. (Critics committed to individualism as a philosophy or tenet of common sense tend to speak of the star’s individuation of a type as ‘transcendence’.)

There are problems with Klapp’s work. Firstly, he does not explore the sources of social types, seeing them simply as ‘collective representations’. He sees social types as positive and useful, as opposed to stereotypes, which are wrong and harmful because they deal with people ‘outside of one’s cultural world’ – yet he never examines just who is within and without the ‘cultural world’. That is, he never examines the possibility that the cultural world articulated by social types may represent the hegemony of one section of society over another. Yet it is clear from his typology that if you are not white, middle class, heterosexual and male you are not going to fit ‘the cultural world’ too well – women only fit uneasily, whilst blacks, gays and even the working class hardly fit at all. [...] Secondly, one does rather wonder where his categories come from, how he arrived at them. There is no discussion of methodology in his writings.

Nevertheless, despite all this, one can I think use Klapp’s typology as a description of prevalent social types, providing one conceptualises this ideologically (i.e. he is describing the type system subscribed to by the dominant groups in society) and of course allows for modifications and additions since he wrote.

Three prevalent social types as defined by Klapp are the Good Joe, the Tough Guy, and the Pin-up.

[...]

The pin-up

As already mentioned, Klapp’s typology is noticeably short on women. He points out that, because ‘It is still a man’s world when it comes to handing out the medals’ (p.97), there are particularly few women hero types, resulting in the dilemma of modern woman’s ‘loss
of identity’ (p.98). (He does not get very far in asking why this should be so – but he did observe it at a time when few other writers were doing so.) It is interesting to note that when he does propose a predominantly female type, it is one that exists primarily in media representation – the pin-up. (He could perhaps have used the term ‘glamour girl’.)

Although he does include some men in his list of synonyms of the pin-up, the emphasis is on women:

> Such a model of bodily perfection need be neither a great lover nor a social lion. Photogenic perfection is enough. It may be surprising to say that a pin-up need not be unusual even in looks (many people have complained of the monotony of American cheesecake and Hollywood beauty). Fashion, cosmetology and hair styling actually increase the resemblance of pin-up types.

Klapp, p.39

One might say, with heroes like that, who needs villains and fools?

As a social model, the pin-up promotes surface appearance and depersonalisation, woman as sexual spectacle and sex object.

The pin-up is an important part of the way a star’s image is built up, but we should not confuse this with the pin-up as a social type. All the stars we are concentrating on in this study, men as well as women, have had pin-up photographs taken and used, but of these only Monroe and Fonda were ‘pin-ups’. They conformed, in their pin-up photos, to the conventions described by Thomas B. Hess in ‘Pin-up and Icon’:

> By the 1940s, the pin-up image was defined with canonical strictness. First of all, there was the ‘pin-up girl’ herself. She had to be the healthy, American, cheerleader type – button-nosed, wide-eyed, long-legged, ample hips and breasts, and above all with the open, friendly smile that discloses perfect, even, white teeth. Then there is her costume and pose. These must be inviting but not seducing; affectionate but not passionate, revealing by suggestion while concealing in fact. ... The body is evident beneath the costume, but not its details – the bulges of nipples or the mons veneris are scrupulously hidden. There is a dialectical pressure at work, between the voyeuristic public which wants to see more and more, and that same public which, in its social function, supports codes and laws that ban any such revelations.

[...]

Hess, 1972, p.227

[...]
Alternative or subversive types

Most types discussed by Klapp, and indeed most stars discussed as social types, are seen as representing dominant values in society, by affirming what those values are in the ‘hero’ types (including those values that are relatively appropriate to men and women) and by denouncing other values in the villain and fool types. Klapp argues, however, that there may also be other types that express discontent with or rejection of dominant values. These types will also be grounded in a normative world-view [that is, from within an implicit value system], but as an alternative to the dominant one.

References


Reading source


‘Stars as types’ was first published in 1979 (and the Klapp work Dyer discusses comes from 1962) and deals only with film stars, but is readily extended to other kinds of celebrity even now, as long as we take the cautious approach Dyer recommends. Dyer recognises that social types are ideological and speak primarily of dominant systems of beliefs. He suggests they can also represent alternative value systems (negotiated or oppositional), and he proposes two alternative types: the rebel (he instances James Dean while we could probably list a number of rap artists); and the independent woman. As an example of the latter he mentions Jane Fonda, but social change consequent on feminism has rendered both the example and the category far less useful. The pin-up, even if most of the details have changed, remains with us. This will be discussed further in Section 3.

We have seen, in this section, how texts can be analysed by paying close attention to their content and the implications of it, and how looking at a number of related texts enables us to discuss representations.