4 Stereotyping as a signifying practice

Before we pursue this argument, however, we need to reflect further on how this racialized regime of representation actually works. Essentially, this involves examining more deeply the set of representational practices known as stereotyping. So far, we have considered the essentializing, reductionist and naturalizing effects of stereotyping. Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature. Here, we examine four further aspects: (a) the construction of 'otherness' and exclusion; (b) stereotyping and power; (c) the role of fantasy; and (d) fetishism.

Stereotyping as a signifying practice is central to the representation of racial difference. But what is a stereotype? How does it actually work? In his essay on 'Stereotyping', Richard Dyer (1977) makes an important distinction between typing and stereotyping. He argues that, without the use of types, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of the world. We understand the world by referring individual objects, people or events in our heads to the general classificatory schemes into which — according to our culture — they fit. Thus we 'decode' a flat object on legs on which we place things as a 'table'. We may never have seen that kind of 'table' before, but we have a general concept or category of 'table' in our heads, into which we 'fit' the particular objects we perceive or encounter. In other words, we understand 'the particular' in terms of its 'type'. We deploy what Alfred Schutz called typifications. In this sense, 'typing' is essential to the production of meaning (an argument we made earlier in Chapter 1).

Richard Dyer argues that we are always 'making sense' of things in terms of some wider categories. Thus, for example, we come to 'know' something about a person by thinking of the roles which he or she performs: is he/she a parent, a child, a worker, a lover, boss, or an old age pensioner? We assign him/her to the membership of different groups, according to class, gender, age group, nationality, 'race', linguistic group, sexual preference and so on. We order him/her in terms of personality type - is he/she a happy, serious, depressed, scatter-brained, over-active kind of person? Our picture of who the person 'is' is built up out of the information we accumulate from positioning him/her within these different orders of typification. In broad terms, then, 'a type is any simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characterization in which a few traits are foregrounded and change or "development" is kept to a minimum' (Dyer, 1977, p. 28).
What, then, is the difference between a type and a stereotype”? Stereotypes get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them: without change or development to eternity. This is the process we described earlier. So the first point is - stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’.

Secondly, stereotyping deploys a strategy of ‘splitting’. It divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable. It then excludes or expels everything which does not fit, which is different. Dyer argues that ‘a system of social- and stereo-types refers to what is, as it were, within and beyond the pale of normalcy [i.e. behaviour which is accepted as ‘normal’ in any culture]. Types are instances which indicate those who live by the rules of society (social types) and those who the rules are designed to exclude (stereotypes). For this reason, stereotypes are also more rigid than social types. ... [Boundaries ... must be clearly delineated and so stereotypes, one of the mechanisms of boundary maintenance, are characteristically fixed, clear-cut, unalterable] (ibid., p. 29). So, another feature of stereotyping is its practice of ‘closure’ and exclusion. It symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong.

Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’, the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’, the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable’, what ‘belongs’ and what does not or is ‘Other’, between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, Us and Them. It facilitates the ‘binding’ or bonding together of all of Us who are ‘normal’ into one ‘imagined community’; and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them - ‘the Others’ - who are in some way different - ‘beyond the pale’. Mary Douglas (1966), for example, argued that whatever is ‘out of place’ is considered as polluted, dangerous, taboo. Negative feelings cluster around it. It must be symbolically excluded if the ‘purity’ of the culture is to be restored. The feminist theorist, Julia Kristeva, calls such expelled or excluded groups, 'abjected' (from the Latin meaning, literally, 'thrown out') (Kristeva, 1982).

The third point is that stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power. Power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group. One aspect of this power, according to Dyer, is ethnocentrism — ‘the application of the norms of one’s own culture to that of others’ (Brown, 1965, p. 183). Again, remember Derrida’s argument that, between binary oppositions like Us/Them, ‘we are not dealing with ... peaceful coexistence ... but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs ... the other or has the upper hand" (1972, p. 41).
In short, stereotyping is what Foucault called a 'power/knowledge' sort of game. It classifies people according to a norm and constructs the excluded as 'other'. Interestingly, it is also what Gramsci would have called an aspect of the struggle for hegemony. As Dyer observes, The establishment of normalcy (i.e. what is accepted as 'normal') through social- and stereo-types is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups ... to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world view, value system, sensibility and ideology. So right is this world view for the ruling groups that they make it appear (as it does appear to them) as 'natural' and 'inevitable' - and for everyone - and, in so far as they succeed, they establish their hegemony' (Dyer, 1977, p. 30). Hegemony is a form of power based on leadership by a group in many fields of activity at once, so that its ascendancy commands widespread consent and appears natural and inevitable.

### 4.1 Representation, difference and power

Within stereotyping, then, we have established a connection between representation, difference and power. However, we need to probe the nature of this power more fully. We often think of power in terms of direct physical coercion or constraint. However, we have also spoken, for example, of power in representation; power to mark, assign and classify; of symbolic power; of ritualized expulsion. Power, it seems, has to be understood here, not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way - within a certain 'regime of representation'. It includes the exercise of symbolic power through representational practices. Stereotyping is a key element in this exercise of symbolic violence.

In his study of how Europe constructed a stereotypical image of the Orient, Edward Said (1978) argues that, far from simply reflecting what the countries of the Near East were actually like, 'Orientalism' was the discourse 'by which European culture was able to manage - and even produce - the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period'. Within the framework of western hegemony over the Orient, he says, there emerged a new object of knowledge - 'a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personalities, national or religious character' (pp. 7-8). This form of power is closely connected with knowledge, or with the practices of what Foucault called 'power/knowledge'.
ACTIVITY 10

For an example of Orientalism in visual representation, look at the reproduction of a very popular painting, *The Babylonian Marriage Market* by Edwin Long (Figure 4.22). Not only does the image produce a certain way of knowing the Orient - as 'the mysterious, exotic and eroticized Orient'; but also, the women who are being 'sold' into marriage are arranged, right to left, in ascending order of 'whiteness'. The final figure approximates most closely to the western ideal, the norm; her clear complexion accentuated by the light reflected on her face from a mirror.

Said's discussion of Orientalism closely parallels Foucault's power/knowledge argument: a *discourse* produces, through different practices of *representation* (scholarship, exhibition, literature, painting, etc.), a form of *racialized knowledge of the Other* (Orientalism) deeply implicated in the operations of *power* (imperialism).

Interestingly, however, Said goes on to define 'power' in ways which emphasize the similarities between Foucault and Gramsci's idea of *hegemony*.

In any society not totalitarian, then, certain cultural forms predominate over others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as *hegemony*, an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West. It is hegemony, or rather the result
of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism its durability and its strength ... Orientalism is never far from ... the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent thinker ... may have had different views on the matter.

(Said, 1978, p. 7)

You should also recall here our earlier discussion in Chapter 1, about introducing power into questions of representation. Power, we recognized there, always operates in conditions of unequal relations. Gramsci, of course, would have stressed 'between classes', whereas Foucault always refused to identify any specific subject or subject-group as the source of power, which, he said, operates at a local, tactical level. These are important differences between these two theorists of power.

However, there are also some important similarities. For Gramsci, as for Foucault, power also involves knowledge, representation, ideas, cultural leadership and authority, as well as economic constraint and physical coercion. Both would have agreed that power cannot be captured by thinking exclusively in terms of force or coercion: power also seduces, solicits, induces, wins consent. It cannot be thought of in terms of one group having a monopoly of power, simply radiating power downwards on a subordinate group by an exercise of simple domination from above. It includes the dominant and the dominated within its circuits. As Homi Bhabha has remarked, apropos Said, 'it is difficult to conceive ... subjectification as a placing within Orientalist or colonial discourse for the dominated subject without the dominant being strategically placed within it too' (Bhabha, 1986a, p. 158). Power not only constrains and prevents: it is also productive. It produces new discourses, new kinds of knowledge (i.e. Orientalism), new objects of knowledge (the Orient), it shapes new practices (colonization) and institutions (colonial government). It operates at a micro-level — Foucault's 'micro-physics of power' - as well as in terms of wider strategies. And, for both theorists, power is to be found everywhere. As Foucault insists, power circulates.

The circularity of power is especially important in the context of representation. The argument is that everyone — the powerful and the powerless - is caught up, though not on equal terms, in power's circulation. No one - neither its apparent victims nor its agents - can stand wholly outside its field of operation (think, here, of the Paul Robeson example).
4.2 Power and fantasy

A good example of this 'circularity' of power relates to how black masculinity is represented within a racialized regime of representation. Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien (1994) argue that the representation of black masculinity 'has been forged in and through the histories of slavery, colonialism and imperialism'.

As sociologists like Robert Staples (1982) have argued, a central strand of the 'racial' power exercised by the white male slave master was the denial of certain masculine attributes to black male slaves, such as authority, familial responsibility and the ownership of property. Through such collective, historical experiences black men have adopted certain patriarchal values such as physical strength, sexual prowess and being in control as a means of survival against the repressive and violent system of subordination to which they have been subjected.

The incorporation of a code of 'macho' behaviour is thus intelligible as a means of recuperating some degree of power over the condition of powerlessness and dependency in relation to the white master subject. ... The prevailing stereotype (in contemporary Britain) projects an image of black male youth as 'mugger' or 'rioter' ... But this regime of representation is reproduced and maintained in hegemony because black men have had to resort to 'toughness' as a defensive response to the prior aggression and violence that characterizes the way black communities are policed ... This cycle between reality and representation makes the ideological fictions of racism empirically 'true' — or rather, there is a struggle over the definition, understanding and construction of meanings around black masculinity within the dominant regime of truth.

(Mercer and Julien, 1994, pp. 137-8)

During slavery, the white slave master often exercised his authority over the black male slave, by depriving him of all the attributes of responsibility, paternal and familial authority, treating him as a child. This 'infantilization' of difference is a common representational strategy for both men and women. (Women athletes are still widely referred to as 'girls'. And it is only recently that many Southern US whites have ceased referring to grown black men as 'Boy!', while the practice still lingers in South Africa.) Infantilization can also be understood as a way of symbolically 'castrating' the black man (i.e. depriving him of his 'masculinity'); and, as we have seen, whites often fantasized about the excessive sexual appetites and prowess of black men — as they did about the lascivious, over-sexed character of black women — which they both feared and secretly envied. Alleged rape was the principal 'justification' advanced for the lynching of black men in the Southern states until the Civil Rights Movement (Jordan, 1968). As Mercer observes, The primal fantasy of the big black penis projects the fear of a threat not only to white womanhood, but to civilization itself, as the anxiety of miscegenation, eugenic pollution and racial degeneration is acted out through white male
rituals of racial aggression - the historical lynching of black men in the United States routinely involved the literal castration of the Other's "strange fruit" (1994a, p. 185).

The outcomes were often violent. Yet the example also brings out the circularity of power and the ambivalence — the double-sided nature — of representation and stereotyping. For, as Staples, Mercer and Julien remind us, black men sometimes responded to this infantilization by adopting a sort of caricature-in-reverse of the hyper-masculinity and super-sexuality with which they had been stereotyped. Treated as 'childish', some blacks in reaction adopted a 'macho', aggressive—masculine style. But this only served to confirm the fantasy amongst whites of their ungovernable and excessive sexual nature (see Wallace, 1979). Thus, 'victims' can be trapped by the stereotype, unconsciously confirming it by the very terms in which they try to oppose and resist it.

This may seem paradoxical. But it does have its own 'logic'. This logic depends on representation working at two different levels at the same time: a conscious and overt level, and an unconscious or suppressed level. The former often serves as a displaced 'cover' for the latter. The conscious attitude amongst whites - that 'Blacks are not proper men, they are just simple children' — may be a 'cover', or a cover-up, for a deeper, more troubling fantasy - that 'Blacks are really super-men, better endowed than whites, and sexually insatiable'. It would be improper and 'racist' to express the latter sentiment openly; but the fantasy is present, and secretly subscribed to by many, all the same. Thus when blacks act 'macho', they seem to challenge the stereotype (that they are only children) — but in the process, they confirm the fantasy which lies behind or is the 'deep structure' of the stereotype (that they are aggressive, over-sexed and over-endowed). The problem is that blacks are trapped by the binary structure of the stereotype, which is split between two extreme opposites - and are obliged to shuttle endlessly between them, sometimes being represented as both of them at the same time. Thus blacks are both 'childlike' and 'oversexed', just as black youth are 'Sambo simpletons' and/or 'wily, dangerous savages'; and older men both 'barbarians' and/or 'noble savages' — Uncle Toms.

The important point is that stereotypes refer as much to what is imagined in fantasy as to what is perceived as 'real'. And, what is visually produced, by the practices of representation, is only half the story. The other half - the deeper meaning - lies in what is not being said, but is being fantasized, what is implied but cannot be shown.