

Representation Questions for classroom discussions

- 1) The video contends that stereotypes (e.g. of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, belief, ability, or age) negatively impact the groups of people being represented. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 2) Can you think of an example of a stereotypical image in media that has caused harm? What about an example where no harm has been caused? What's the difference between these two examples?
- 3) How might artists, advertisers, journalists, educators or politicians balance freedom of expression and ethical representation?
- 4) To what degree is it necessary for an artist, actor, filmmaker, advertiser or journalist to have the lived experience of the group of people he/she is representing? How could lived experience impact representation?
- 5) Do you watch any shows that include a portrayal of a stereotype for comedic effect? Do you think this portrayal is offensive? Does it make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?
- 6) How do you distinguish between visual, written, or musical representations that are offensive and those that are humorous, effective, dramatic, etc.?
- 7) Do you think intentionally offensive artistic works serve a productive purpose? If so, can you think of an example?
- 8) If a group of people is offended by an artistic work, do the intentions of the artist matter? Why or why not?

Case Study: The *Miss Saigon* Controversy

In 1990, theatre producer Cameron Mackintosh brought the musical *Miss Saigon* to Broadway following a highly successful run in London. Based on the opera *Madame Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon* takes place during the Vietnam War and focuses on a romance between an American soldier and a Vietnamese orphan named Kim. In the musical, Kim is forced to work at 'Dreamland,' a seedy bar owned by the half-French, half-Vietnamese character 'the Engineer.' The production was highly anticipated, generating millions of dollars in ticket sales before it had even opened.

Controversy erupted, however, when producers revealed that Jonathan Pryce, a white British actor, would reprise his role as the Eurasian 'Engineer.' Asian American actor B.D. Wong argued that by casting a white actor in a role written for an Asian actor, the production supported the practice of "yellow-face." Similar to "blackface" minstrel shows of the 19th and 20th centuries, "yellow-face" productions cast non-Asians in roles written for Asians, often relying on physical and cultural stereotypes to make broad comments about identity. Wong asked his union, Actors' Equity Association, to "force Cameron Mackintosh and future producers to cast their productions with racial authenticity."

Actors' Equity Association initially agreed and refused to let Pryce perform: "Equity believes the casting of Mr. Pryce as a Eurasian to be especially insensitive and an affront to the Asian community." Moreover, many argued that the casting of Pryce further limited already scarce professional opportunities for Asian American actors.

Frank Rich of *The New York Times* disagreed, sharply criticizing the union for prioritizing politics over talent: "A producer's job is to present the best show he can, and Mr. Pryce's performance is both the artistic crux of this musical and the best antidote to its more bloated excesses. It's hard to imagine another actor, white or Asian, topping the originator of this quirky role. Why open on Broadway with second best, regardless of race or creed?" The casting director, Vincent G. Liff, also defended his actions on the same grounds: "I can say with the greatest assurance that if there were an Asian actor of 45-50 years, with classical stage background and an international stature and reputation, we would have certainly sniffed him out by now."

Actors' Equity ultimately reversed their decision and Pryce performed the role of 'the Engineer' on Broadway to great acclaim. Nonetheless, the production remained controversial during its successful Broadway run. For many, it is seen as one of the most famous examples of contemporary "yellow-face" performance.

Resources:

Jonathan Pryce, 'Miss Saigon' and Equity's Decision

<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/10/theater/jonathan-pryce-miss-saigon-and-equity-s-decision.html>

David Henry Hwang: Racial casting has evolved – and so have my opinions

<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/may/12/david-henry-hwang-miss-saigon-yellow-face-racial-casting>

Cameron Mackintosh: 'I have been successful beyond anyone's wildest dreams'

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/10842020/Cameron-Mackintosh-I-have-been-successful-beyond-anyones-wildest-dreams.html>

Lee, Esther Kim. 2006. *A History of Asian American Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why did Wong critique the production? What harms does “yellow-face” performance cause? To whom?
- 2) What harm is Frank Rich arguing will be caused by not allowing Pryce to perform? How does Rich justify his argument?
- 3) While the practice of “blackface” performance is widely agreed to be ethically prohibited, there continue to be multiple examples of white actors representing Asians in theatre and film. Why do you think this continues to occur?
- 4) Is it more problematic for a white actor to portray a person of color than for an actor of color to perform a role written for a white person. Why or why not?
- 5) How does the history of racial and ethnic discrimination in the United States factor into this debate?
- 6) In what ways does scarcity of opportunities and representations affect perceptions of minority groups?
- 7) How can producers and casting directors appropriately represent characters on stage and screen? Should artists and producers purposefully be more inclusive or should they cast regardless of race?

Case Study: Covering Female Athletes

See below for a link to a case study from The Texas Program in Sports & Media that examines the controversy over the *Sports Illustrated* cover photo of U.S. Olympic skier Lindsey Vonn, which some commentators argued was focused more on Vonn's physical appearance than her athletic abilities. The Vonn case highlights different perspectives on the coverage of female athletes in popular media and the representation of female athletes in sports journalism. The full case study, additional resources, and discussion questions can be accessed through the link below, which will open a new tab at The Texas Program in Sports & Media website.

Link:

<http://moody.utexas.edu/sites/communication.utexas.edu/files/attachments/tpsm/cs%20Covering%20Female%20Athletes.pdf>

Additional Resources

Stereotypes and media representations of different groups sometimes stem from the appropriation of different cultures; watch our video *Appropriation & Attribution*, which explores the ethics of cultural appropriation and the use of imagery and creative works by different artists and producers.

A representation that is offensive to one person may not be offensive to another person. Watch our video *Fundamental Moral Unit* for a better understanding of how different peoples' ideological frameworks may affect their judgments or perspectives.

Framing an image or situation from one perspective can produce an entirely different representation of that image or situation than if framed from another perspective. Watch our video *Framing* to consider how the framing or reframing of images in the media can produce very different forms of representation.

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Karp, Ivan, Christine Mullen Kramer, and Steven D. Lavine (Editors). 1992. *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

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Lang, Berel. 2000. *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lester, Paul Martin, and Susan Dente Ross (Editors). 2003. *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

McDonnell, Bill. 2005. "The Politics of Historiography—Towards an Ethics of Representation." *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 10 (2): 127-138.

Transcript of Narration

Written and Narrated by Deni Elliott

Media producers have the power to reach a mass audience. Now, along with this power to influence comes the responsibility to be conscious and careful of how they represent individuals and groups in the society in which we live.

Music, film, art, theater, journalism and advertising hold up mirrors to individuals and communities. These mirrors can be cracked or distorted, and even the very best mirror only shows a sliver of reality. Mirrors can reflect stereotypes and mistaken beliefs that are held by media producers or by dominant society itself. It's not unreasonable for individuals to want truthful representation.

For example, the film, *The Hurt Locker*, received nine academy award nominations, winning six Oscars. Yet, this story of a journalist embedded in an army unit in Iraq drew strong criticism from some war veterans. According to critics who had been fighting in Iraq at the time, the movie showed a soldier getting blown up in a scene that would have called for robotic bomb detonation in real life, and according to another, "no soldier would go down an alley in Iraq by himself in 2004 at night."

And yet authentic representation is difficult. The acclaimed film, *Silver Linings Playbook*, received criticism for its overly positive presentation of mental illness. Perhaps the producers were trying to reduce the stigma associated with mental disabilities. But critics argued that portraying bipolar disorder as a personality quirk encouraged viewers not to take the disorder seriously.

Any individual or group can be presented unfairly, but those most likely to be negatively represented are members of groups who have a history of discrimination. When viewing media or when producing material for a public audience, here are four important questions to keep in mind:

One: is the perspective presented that of dominant society or is it the perspective of the people within the group? Perspective matters. A media report might use common phrasing to describe someone as quote confined to a wheelchair, but most wheelchair users would see it differently. Wheelchairs, for many of the people who use them, are symbols of mobility, not confinement. So, saying that a person uses a wheelchair is more empowering than saying that she is confined to one.

Two: which descriptors are needed to help your audience understand your story subject, and which needlessly perpetuate stereotypes? Any descriptor should be analyzed for relevance. Religion or race may be relevant to an individual's criminal act. But usually it's not. Based on demographics, for example, most robberies in the United States are committed by people who were raised in a Christian tradition. But it doesn't follow that Christians are likely to rob people and the same is true about the lack of relevance of most terrorists' religions.

Three: does the representation impede the group's progress toward equality within dominant society? The film, *Argo*, won best picture in 2012, but was critiqued for the decision to cast a white actor as Latino Tony Mendez. Many critics argued that *Argo* followed a long tradition of white actors playing Latino characters in film, such as Al Pacino in *Scarface*, thus denying Latino actors professional opportunities.

The last question to consider is who is not captured in the media mirror? Lack of inclusion in media presentation makes it easy to dismiss members of a group in real life. But, if viewers and media producers become sensitive to people whom the camera ignores, media presentations will expand to include a greater diversity of perspectives.

Most people strongly believe that artists and journalists must have freedom of expression, but we also value respecting the beliefs, customs and cultures of others. One person's artistic freedom may result in a play or film or book that perpetuates a negative stereotype.

But unfair representation is more often the result of ignorance than the intent to cause harm. By keeping the four questions raised here in mind, we can start a dialogue that helps everyone understand the issues, with the potential of reducing moral disagreement. In this way, we can promote authentic and inclusive representation, and better understand the producer's message when prejudice is purposefully depicted.