

The Science of Stereotyping: An Interview with Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen

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Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen have been researching the origins of stereotyping for almost a decade. Their new book, *Typecasting: On the Arts and Sciences of Human Inequality* traces the use of this tool of social scientists and racists throughout modern society. Comprised of a series of encyclopedic essays addressing the influence of science, pop culture and history, the book reveals the blueprints for how racial and ethnic perception and misperception has been perpetrated in various cultures. In this interview, the duo Ewen discuss how the global media in general, and even designers, continue the practice of stereotyping—knowingly or not.

Heller: Why when we discuss stereotyping is it used as a pejorative? Isn't there anything positive about defining and generalizing the distinctions of humankind?

Ewen: The variety of humankind is something to celebrate. As Stephen Jay Gould and other leading biologists have argued, there are no ideal types in nature, but only variety. Each group is defined by diversity within the group. In stereotyping, however, distinctions are used in ways that divide people against one another. Stereotypes reduce people to simplistic “types” and invite us to make invidious comparisons between “us” and “them,” “civilization” and “savagery,” “good” and “evil,” “superior” and “inferior,” and so on.

People think of stereotyping in a pejorative way because many of what we call “stereotypes” portray particular groups of people in one-dimensional and degrading ways, robbing them of their humanity. Stereotypical images themselves have no consequence unless they play a role in the ways people see the world and live their lives. Many people think of stereotyping as a negative partly because stereotyping has played such a conspicuous role in reinforcing patterns of social inequality.

Heller: But are all stereotypes negative?

Ewen: Actually, not all stereotypes are negative. We know this from the media, where both heroes and villains are most often stereotyped to make them easily identifiable. In politics, they are often employed to communicate honesty, nobility or heroism, even where none may exist. When George Bush's handlers chose Mount Rushmore as the site where the president would announce the "War on Terror" in the summer of 2002, they placed photographers in a position where pictures Bush would necessarily include Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt in the background. Through visual means, Bush's image team was relying on well-worn stereotypes of leadership to encircle the president and his message with an aura of greatness. In a complex and dangerous world, the allure of the simple is addictive. But the habits of typecasting offer us little wisdom.

Heller: Typecasting ethnic, racial, and social images is as common as the air we breathe. Media has made, as you note in your subtitle, an art and science out of stereotyping. But you also note that this has its roots in printing—indeed the term *stereotype* is derived from letterpress mats. Was there any kind of stereotyping before the advent of the printing press?

Ewen: Defining people according to simplified categories dates back to antiquity, and is probably an intrinsic part of human cultures. Traditional myths, rituals and dramas routinely employed identifiable types, but they usually symbolized different aspects of humanity overall.

The printing press made these distinctions reproducible, and stereotype became a metaphor for mass-produced images and concepts of difference. Printing, it should be added, was a technology that took hold when European countries were becoming global colonial powers and where densely populated cities were on the rise. In this context, simplified categories were increasingly applied to conquered people as an explanation for why they were born to serve or be annihilated. In cities, stereotypes became useful for characterizing strangers, and were most often employed to define different elements among the lower classes. What was once about common human qualities was transformed into a mechanism that denied the idea of common humanity, and served the interests of social injustice. The ability to mass produce ideas of inequality, and market these ideas on a global scale, has made the problem of stereotyping particularly acute.

Heller: You indicate that typecasting derives from the need to create social and caste hierarchies. Why was it so important to have these differences among people?

Ewen: With the rise of democratic ideas, traditional ideas about the God-given differences that justified social hierarchy fell into disfavor. By the late 18th century, the "Divine Right of Kings" or the idea of "Papal Infallibility" were being challenged by the ideas of "natural rights," "popular sovereignty" and human "inequality." While traditional hierarchies fought back, new caste systems arose in the shadow of democracy. These used "scientific" tools as an argument for social difference, as a line of defense designed to maintain social and economic inequities. A scientific stamp of approval now certified dividing humanity into simple, unequal categories according to race, gender and economic status. In the 19th and 20th centuries, this tendency accelerated and many of these simple categories became the basic vocabulary of popular culture.

Heller: You write: “Although feudal power was often held and defended by the sword its was justified by the word.” What are the key words (and images)?

Ewen: In feudalism, the key words were ostensibly the words of God. The idea of original sin became justification for the hard work and suffering of the peasantry, while the nobility (Lords) and clergy were portrayed as standing closer to God, as God’s human representatives on earth. In ecclesiastical interpretations of the Bible, and in church iconography, distinctions between wealth and poverty were routinely portrayed as God’s way. The outlook of ordinary people was unacknowledged. The Bible, itself, was available in the secret code of Latin, and any translation of the Bible into a commonly spoken tongue was punishable by death.

Heller: The science of physiognomy was developed to help classify human types. I remember seeing, around the facade of the Library of Congress, about two-dozen images arranged according to places on the globe showing the physical distinctions of races. Has this celebration of different traits contributed to the sense of inequality that is so present in the world today?

Ewen: It really depends on what those images were designed to convey and the cultural baggage that viewers bring to them. Stereotypes are culturally conditioned reflexes that we carry around in our heads. To a large extent, they shape how we will define other people even before we see them. In the media, and in the theatre of politics and power, stereotypes are routinely employed to stir up public emotions while systematically sidestepping thought. Within each of us, the history of dominant ideas has left indelible marks. Nowhere is this truer than in the stereotypes that form and interfere with our capacity to comprehend the world we live in.

Stereotypes are the footprints of history, culture and power running through our minds. So, the ways these images will be seen depends a lot on the eye, and mind, of the beholder. Depending on when these images were installed in the Library of Congress, the artists’ eyes and minds are also relevant. At the American Museum of Natural History, for example, many of the representations of distinct human types were intended by curators (well into the 1950s) to express ideas that connected distinction to ideas of inequality.

Heller: Science and art are usually distinguished—stereotypically—with one being objective and the other aesthetic truth. How did this come to be? Wasn’t art typically at once objective, idealistic and aesthetic?

Ewen: With the emergence of optical science in Europe, inspired by the 10th century work of the Arab scholar Alhazen, the idea of “Truth” moved from being an unknowable mystery, to something that could be discovered by anyone through careful observation. The eye, particularly when assisted by technical devices (microscope, telescope, camera obscura), became the central tool of knowing. There was no clear distinction between artist and scientist, all were attempting to use optical information to describe and explain the world as it is.

In that sense, Leonardo was not such an exception. Not that he wasn't a great artist, but that his combination of painting, invention and his discourses on optics and other sciences was not uncommon among people who today are defined primarily as artists. Similarly, many men of science were engaged in painting and drawing. During this period scientific truth and aesthetic truth were inseparable.

Heller: What is the role of photography in all this?

Ewen: Photography, probably more than any other development, drove science and art apart from one another. Now that a technical device could be used to reach a precision that no painter could achieve, painters and sculptors moved away from a search for the objective, and started exploring those aspects of visual life that were not so readily seen. Aesthetics became more of a psychological category, while science continued to claim objectivity as its goal.

Heller: In writing about the history of stereotyping, you argue that much of what we know today is based on the development of technology. The printing press is one, but say more about photography? How has this changed the way human beings were perceived?

Ewen: Beyond what's been already said, it should be added that the rise of photography offered a powerful tool for communicating ideas of human difference. In the 19th century, the emerging fields of physical anthropology, criminology, psychology, sociology and a range of other social sciences, routinely relied on supposed photographic evidence to illustrate (with appropriate captions) the look of normalcy and degeneracy. The idea of the inborn "criminal type," for example, was buttressed by photography. The book has numerous of pictures that put meat on the bones of this development.

Heller: It seems as though typecasting is a "western" phenomenon. That it wasn't practiced in non-Christian countries. Hence, the color white has been depicted as pure, whereas brown or black have more negative connotations. You note that from white, other colors are possible, but from brown or black, white cannot be broken down. Is this the basis for white superiority?

Ewen: No. The idea of white superiority was the outcome of the rise of a modern-world system dominated by European colonial powers. It's been said that behind every fortune lies a crime. The idea of white superiority, which led to the notion that all others should be subdued, was one of the crimes that led to Europe as a magnet for the world's wealth.

On the other hand, if you look at the work of Joachim Winckelmann, the founder of Art History and Archeology, or Johann Blumenbach, the founder of racial science, both used arguments about white purity and the lower status of darker colors. Blumenbach saw darkness as a sign of degeneration from the original pristine state of humanity. He believed that the origin of humanity was found in the foothills of the Caucasus (he coined the word Caucasian). As some of these perfectly white people began to migrate from this unspoiled place of birth, he maintained, carboniferous deposits built up under their skins, giving rise to darker and less perfect varieties of mankind.

Heller: I have long collected ethnic and racial stereotypes in popular and advertising art. I've notice that as in all advertising, simplified human traits are used to identify a demographic. But how do these types, when presented to the public, affect perception? Are even benign stereotypes bad?

Ewen: Images in isolation are neither malignant nor benign. Perception is a culturally and historically shaped interaction that takes place between people and the world as they see it. The historical source of the images in question, and the “repertory of fixed impressions” (to quote Walter Lippmann) that people bring to them, will help us to decide whether stereotypes impede or enhance our ability to see ourselves in other people.

Heller: Not all stereotypes are benign. There is often an agenda to enslave or degrade others through stereotypical depiction. Certainly, you make a lot of eugenics—the highly popular pseudo-science (much touted by the Nazis but also the British, Americans and French) that distinguishes between inferior and superior human beings. Eugenics exponents also proposed sterilization and worse of inferiors. Does this negative notion pervade all uses of stereotyping?

Ewen: The inner core of much stereotyping is made up of race hatred mixed with sexual taboo. Denying other people's humanity is often a way of trying to preserve one's own sense of identity, particularly if it is shaped by nationality, ethnicity, race or sexual orientation. The most persistent stereotypes of the past three centuries are those that portray the brutish “other” who is consumed with a desire to run off with “our women.” Racial, ethnic, national and/or sexual belief systems require taboos against all forms of sexuality that might throw that universe into question. In the case of race, for example, the routine crossing of sexual boundaries would, in time, do eradicate the very idea of race. While this might benefit the future of humanity, many people hold dearly to the idea of “otherness” because it serves as the unfortunate cornerstone of their sense of “self.”

Heller: What would you say is the worst use of stereotyping in 20th century history and what have been its long-term effects?

Ewen: There are too many to say. But in all cases, worst uses of stereotype are those that justify murder and genocide. This was the case before the 20th century as well, where labeling others as “savages” or “degenerates” was often a prologue to slaughter. This worst-case scenario continues in the 21st century as well.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).