

Visions of France: The Notion of Culture in American Film

To research the effects of American popular culture on the creation and maintenance of stereotypes of the French

A Senior Honors Thesis in European Studies

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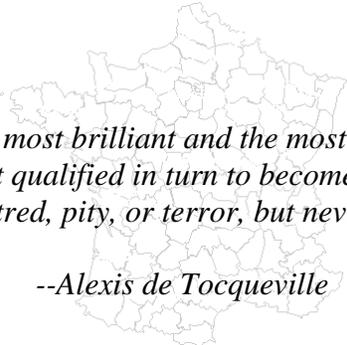
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Abstract

The Americans and the French have several negative views about one another, often expressed in the form of long-held stereotypes about food, dress, hygiene, and other cultural “norms.” Since many of these stereotypes have existed for years, we can begin to wonder from where these views originated and how they continue to thrive after years and generations have passed. Some forms of mass media and popular culture have been blamed for this phenomenon; yet, it has been left unanswered what their specific roles are in this trend. This study explores the ways in which American film and popular culture have contributed to the maintenance and mass-acceptance of stereotypes of the French. In looking at materials mainly from recent years and the late 1950s to 1960s, I examine how aspects such as exoticism, nationalism, and Americanization have contributed to the reinforcement of these negative stereotypes. Finally, I comment on the widespread damage these continued stereotypes could have to Franco-American relations in the 21st century.

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“The French constitute the most brilliant and the most dangerous nation in Europe and the best qualified in turn to become an object of admiration, hatred, pity, or terror, but never indifference.”

--Alexis de Tocqueville



Introduction

We all have used stereotypes to interpret our world and to provide meaning to our lives when factual information was either not provided or was not readily available. First defined in 1922 by Walter Lippmann, the stereotype is “one of the oldest and most frequently employed constructs in the domain of social psychology,” and comes in the form of “inaccurate” mental pictures of who a person is or what a situation entails (Fishman 27-28). Americans often refer to the French as “frogs,” speak about their bad hygiene, insult their intelligence, often without knowing anything about them or about their *true* cultural background. Sometimes we ask people to excuse our French, when we use words that are less than eloquent, but how factual are expressions like these, and how do we find ourselves using them?

Today, stereotypes are so ingrained in our culture that we often do not realize from where they originated or the reasons for which we use them. Researchers in the past have attributed their origins and use to political upheaval, racial tensions, and

general ignorance about the life of the *other*. Recently, there has been more inquiry into the television and media's role in perpetuating these beliefs, for, as new forms of technology enter our homes, we have a greater tendency to believe blindly that which we are told. In addition, with television, film, and, more recently, the internet, views that once took a greater amount of time to circulate can now reach a global audience, almost instantly. However, apart from the way in which they are transported, stereotypes have not changed over time. For this reason, they are dangerous and become more dangerous with each new decade. Views that have less and less basis in truth continue to be accepted as fact, and over time, we can lose touch with reality and be forced to accept information that is both inaccurate and hurtful to our sense of the world.



What is Considered a Stereotype Today?

According to Murphy, “Psychologists have long recognized that we do not enter the perceptual arena empty-handed but, rather, with what is sometimes referred to as “perceptual baggage.” This “baggage” includes our “collection of experiences, needs, and desires as well as more common, culturally shared beliefs” (166). These culturally shared beliefs contribute to the stereotypes that we have and help us to interpret that which occurs around us. However, since this information is often inaccurate and incomplete, at best, we tend to erect an incomplete and distorted world in our minds.

Many social psychologists and students have researched the functions of stereotypes and their universal qualities. The general consensus is that “stereotypes are normally half-truths, at best...which linger on until there is almost nothing of the truth

left in them” (Fleming 3). In this way, stereotypes have received the reputation of being erroneous and distorted. Clarke has identified stereotypes with “mythical group attributes,” and Hayakawa agrees that they are consistent with “widely current misinformation” and with “traditional nonsense” (Fishman 28). Even most laypeople would agree that the word “stereotype” has a bad connotation and that “stereotyping” is seen as something that should be avoided at all costs.

Since stereotypes have received the bad reputation of being misrepresentations of that which occurs, individuals will often attempt to combat degrading stereotypes by including the “positive” stereotypical traits of the group to which they are referring, as well. Through this, we have come to learn that the French are artistic, that they are cultured, and that they have good cheese. However, as Murphy explains, “attempting to cast a particular group in a more favorable light by focusing on the so-called positive elements of a cultural stereotype may do more harm than good by making accessible and lending credence to the overall stereotype” (174-175). In this way, if we, for example, focus on the positive stereotype that the French are romantic, we might also be inclined to remember the other more negative stereotype that they are perverted and obsessed with sex.

As we come to see, through the previous examples, “stereotypes are expressed via a very few signals...” however, “the relative frequency of these signals is so heavily ‘loaded’ that we can easily predict subsequent signals from previous ones” (Fishman 51). Taking France as an example, then, most Americans would certainly think of the Eiffel Tower almost immediately. Thinking of this French “icon” may lead us to think of something else stereotypically French, perhaps an outdoor café. If we allow our minds to

wander, soon we may have erected an entire scenario: a rude waiter passes by, throws a baguette our way, and mutters something under his breath about “stupid American,” while, the whole time, the Eiffel Tower is looming in the distance. Although this scenario is unlikely to happen in real life exactly as we have imagined it, through calling upon a relatively harmless image of the Eiffel Tower, we could later be made to feel animosity towards a culture for no apparent reason other than for what occurs in our imaginations.



The Eiffel Tower: a typical icon of France.

Stereotypical elements become so connected with who we are and what we know that we find them almost impossible to discard. For this reason, if we allow stereotypes to infiltrate who we are and what we believe, we find ourselves ignorant, believing in situations not based in fact, only slightly connected with reality, and terribly damaging to the persons to whom they refer. However, according to some schools of thought, not all stereotypes render their users ignorant. In fact, Fishman asserts that “one of the chief difficulties with this concept [of stereotyping]...is the very fact that there seems to be no uniform definition of what it denotes” (27). Although a large number of people agree that stereotypes are always incorrect portrayals of a person or situation, others have argued that stereotypes cannot only be based in truth, but can also be truths, themselves. For this reason, although “perceptions are by definition subjective...that does not mean that they are necessarily misperceptions” (Heisbourg 18). And since, according to Fishman, “we should no more expect all subjective and uncritical judgements to be wrong than we do all objective and critical judgements to be right,” we are left with the

reality that repetitive and stereotypical does not necessarily equal fallacious (34). It is, of course, true that the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Seine all exist and are important sites in Paris. It is also true that a large part of France's economy depends on the wine industry and on the tourism that the country attracts. However, this is not to say that all French culture revolves around these elements or that every Frenchman knows the secret to making an excellent bottle of champagne. Thus, even stereotypes that are based in truth, as many are, can be quite dangerous, in that they establish a picture in our minds that is half-true or semi-formed and allow us to imagine a culture in a way that it does not truly exist.

Still, stereotypes, whether negative or positive, correct or incorrect, help us to interpret our world, and they provide a way to explain the "who," "what," and "why" of the unknown. Since it is not necessarily convenient or even humanly possible to know everything firsthand, we erect stories to fill in the blanks. Fishman says that stereotypes could be seen as "a necessary evil, a regrettable-but-useful-time-and-effort-saving process which enables humans to deal with their very complex world" (31). However, he also maintains that, although efficient, stereotypes often lack accuracy (31).

With this lack of accuracy comes the possibility for further complications. Since stereotypes are inherently inaccurate in their original forms, after time passes and people modify them (as is usually the case), they are likely to become even more inaccurate. That is, something that was a stereotype yet perhaps still largely based on factual information might, fifty years later, become something only loosely based on fact and something that is more damaging than originally intended. In this way, stereotypes

become historically more and more damaging when we lose touch with their origins and the truth that may once have surrounded them.

The historical evolution of stereotypes provides ample space for a problem to form, mainly because it emphasizes how difficult it can be for a stereotype to be changed or eliminated from someone's mind. If our elders tell us repeatedly that the French are rude, we may be inclined to believe it because it has been repeated enough. As Weber points out, "thus are the same traits repeated from one century to another; or at least, the same judgments and the same impressions. Nor is this surprising. Guidebooks copy earlier guidebooks; travelers read their predecessors and repeat their tales from generation to generation" (174). Much for this reason, researchers have reported a "stability of stereotypic content over time" (Fishman 37). That is, studies have shown that cultural groups have been represented in the same ways, by the same adjectives, for decades, if not centuries.



The Social Uses of Stereotypes

So, if we finally realize the way in which stereotypes work, and realize that many of us are incorrectly classifying people, why can't we do away with the stereotyping process? The simple reason is that it seems nearly impossible to do so. First, it would be more than inconvenient. It would be impossible to experience each new element of life firsthand without relying on any "perceptual baggage," because we cannot be everywhere at one time. In addition, even if we were hypothetically able to construct "true"

representations of that of which a situation or person consisted, we might still get it wrong. As Fishman asserts,

Human beings do not start the judgmental process with the decision that “the next judgment that I will make will be a sloppy, subjective, uncritical one.” Human beings, even when engaged in stereotyping, are probably attempting to be as thoughtful, as intelligent, and as aware of the facts at hand as their total situation will permit. (34)

Thus, even when we believe that we are being fair, when we believe that we have found the key to understanding what a culture embraces, we may still have an incorrect portrayal. We do not stereotype because we are horrible people or because we wish to insult something or someone—at least not always. Rather, we may be trying to make an informed analysis, yet somehow fail in the process.

A final problem to note with stereotypes is what they leave out. Although what stereotypes include about a certain culture, people, or situation is the primary concern, it can also be interesting to examine signifying absences. For example, if we consider vocation and engage in an informed study of France, we will see that apart from café and hotel owners, waiters, and street artists, “France has always had a very large number of hard working and tough peasants, of skillful and capable workmen, of prudent and enterprising



A popular image of France: street artists

businessmen and of highly competent and honest civil servants” (Fleming 9). In leaving this fact out of our stereotyping, though, we can make what is included stand out even more and can be made to forget similarities that we may share with those whom we are stereotyping.

However, although primarily a negative element of social psychology, stereotypes seem to have some important uses. First, they spare us effort. When stereotypes are set in place, we need not spend tedious hours examining and analyzing a situation because “the verdict is known in advance” (Weber 186). In this way, as Lippman explains, without ever meeting a single French individual, I might already have a well-formed idea of what he or she would be like, thus saving myself the time and aggravation of discovering the outcome myself (45). Yet, we can immediately see the negative side to this, in that our “well-formed idea” is likely to be incomplete. Thus, as is usually the case, taking “the easiest way out” does not necessarily guarantee the best results, and “error is added to error in the stereotyping procedure” (Fishman 31).



The Origins of Stereotypes

After having examined the qualities of stereotypes and having considered their uses in daily life, the next logical step is to question their origins. We can guess that for as long as we have existed, there have been stereotypes and most likely, we will not be far from correct. We see someone on the street and guess what she is like based on her dress, her walk, her facial expressions, even the color of her hair. This is a stereotype and makes life easier. In this way, we would not need to take the time to get to know a

person because we would already have a pretty good idea what he or she would be like at first glance. However, according to Weber, the national stereotypes the world lives with today, including our views of France and its people, began to form in the Middle Ages. Weber explains that, by the end of the twelfth century, texts report that the French are “proud, effeminate and carefully adorned like women,” and this stereotype still exists today in a slightly altered form (Weber 169). In considering this, we truly begin to see how younger generations inherit stereotypes from their elders and how these stereotypes can become nearly everlasting.

However, it also seems that other aspects of social interaction may contribute to the preservation of stereotypes. That is, one need not necessarily rely solely on what has been historically believed to know and to embrace the stereotypes with which we live. We can place the blame on a number of elements, including ancient rivalries, unintentional misunderstandings, or old texts. However, as Murphy has concluded, “while some of these stereotypes may be transmitted interpersonally, the consistency and pervasiveness of these and other cultural stereotypes suggest another route of transmission, namely, the mass-media” (167).

This certainly seems plausible. We are bombarded with images of other people’s creations on a daily basis. We cannot turn on our televisions, listen to the radio, or pass a billboard on the street without having information sometimes painfully thrown at us. We are told that four out of five dentists prefer Colgate toothpaste, that certain athletic shoes will make us run faster, jump higher. Advertisers tell us, “Yoplait, c’est si bon.” Is any of this true? Is Yoplait even made in France, or is this simply another instance of trying to brand an American product with a French slogan to make it appear more glamorous?

Regardless of truth, the message reaches our homes and can infect our minds, if we are not careful to examine its veracity. Gerbner tells us that “children are born into homes where a few mass-mediated storytellers reach them on the average more than seven hours a day. Most waking hours, and often dreams, are filled with these mass-produced stories. Giant industries discharge their messages into the mainstream of common consciousness” (120). If these giant industries want us to believe that their yogurt is better because it is associated with the French, many will believe it. If they show us only portrayals of the French being rude, ignorant, or thieves, those of us who are not equipped with the factual information to counteract this stereotype will believe it. We have seen this sort of media intervention recently in the Y2K millennium scare. When mass-media sources broadcasted predictions of a catastrophe, businesses and families, alike, prepared for the worst. Why? Because we believe what the media “authorities” tell us is true. We will believe nearly anything even remotely factual, simply because they tell us that it is so.

The future does not look any more promising, in this respect. Since new forms of technology, such as the internet and satellite television are bringing images to us at an even faster rate than before, this can mean only “deeper penetration and integration of the dominant patterns of images and messages into everyday life” (Gerbner 121). In addition, it almost appears that Hollywood is doing nothing to stop the stereotyping process from occurring; in fact, they seem to blindly endorse the stereotyping of certain groups of people because, in doing this, they create an instant bond with those of us who find these stereotypes telling or, at least, humorous. For instance, since the civil rights movement, we have seen a greater representation of minorities in the mass media,

including advertising, television, and film. Since the feminist movement, women in television and film are no longer the supporting nurse or teacher characters and now have more dynamic roles in story plots. However, producers and directors seem to feel less inclined to protect certain minority and foreign groups including, but certainly not limited to, the French. Surely, we see this type of stereotyping of other groups, besides the French. For instance, the media often casts other racial, ethnic, and sexual groups such as Asians, Germans, and homosexuals, in an unfavorable light, as well. We need only watch a sitcom or a Simpsons episode to realize this. Still, for the purposes of this examination, I will focus primarily on the stereotypes of the French in American film, since they are extremely prevalent and also have not changed a great deal, from decade to decade. In this way, “worldly people who would blush at voicing such ignorance and prejudice about other countries seem blithely content to make an exception of France” (Moreover 87).



How Americans View the French

It seems that everyone you talk to today has views of France and the French, even if they have not yet experienced the country or its people firsthand. If we, as a nation, examine how we feel about France, we undoubtedly call upon stereotypes to help us with this process. France is the place where lovers go to drink good wine, to sit in cafés, and, of course, to visit the Eiffel tower. There, anyone can have fresh baked baguettes every morning and be fashionably sophisticated simply by walking down the Champs-Élysées one spring afternoon. As we learn from Weber, “...for most foreigners Paris represented

France, and for most French all roads, real or figurative, led to Paris” (179). This seems to be the case, as most Americans rarely talk about the atmosphere in France without at least a reference to the “city of love.” Regardless of what may occur in other parts of France, it is usually Parisian life that tourists wish to sample.

On the other side, of course, many Americans have a more negative view of the country and of its people. Many have relied on the stereotype that the French are argumentative and confrontational. The French are cultured, in that pretentious “know-it-all” way. At times they can be “violent, unstable, unreliable, swift to change their fashions and to change with fashion, ready to ruin themselves in sumptuous show and banquets” (Weber 171). They are overtly sexual in all situations. They are fun-loving to the point of irresponsibility, because they embrace being “bon-vivants.” In one particular *Economist* article, “If in Doubt, Bash the French,” we are told that

The French are pretentious; the French are superficial; the French are priggish. They are bad mannered, they waffle and in a squeeze they always behave like pigs, even to each other. Their philosophy is a fad, their wine overrated their novels unreadable and in painting they haven’t done anything since Matisse or Picasso, and he wasn’t even French. (87)

This sentiment may seem extreme, especially to have been published in a recent popular magazine; however, through its use, we can begin to see how no lines are drawn when the stereotyping process concerns specific groups of individuals, like the French. Although the *Economist* is a British magazine, the feelings surrounding the French seem to be the

same as those that many Americans have come to embrace. But are these stereotypes truly representative of what being French entails? We have seen argument that stereotypes can be truths, presented in a slightly altered form, but is this all that there is to the psyche and the lives of the French? Or is it slightly possible that many of us have it all wrong?

Simply put, it is not only possible but also extremely likely. Americans are not the only ones to have stereotypes of this sort. The French, for example, have some misconceptions about what it means to be “American.” “The French consider us badly educated, miserably fed, humorless, puritanical, devoid of social graces, deprived of romance and probably of proper sexual relationships and terrible at bringing up our children” (Pfaff 12A). In addition, many have a view of our country that only includes cowboys, Hollywood richness, and Manhattan excitement. In reality, however, all French people do not base their entire existences on finding the perfect perfume (or the perfect lover), any more than all Americans base theirs on being western cowboys or on becoming movie stars. Simply put, humans, in general, regardless of racial or ethnic background are all guilty of the stereotyping process to some degree. As shown, it can help us to interpret our world, and, for this reason, we all find ourselves relying on it in some way.



The Problems with Stereotypes

Although these stereotypes are undoubtedly inaccurate and even mildly offensive to the people to whom they refer, others may wonder why it is considered a problem that

countries see each other in these stereotypical ways. It might seem like a sort of “anti-issue,” since we all hold stereotypes about various individuals and situations, and since these stereotypes are not likely to be changed easily. By this, I could not simply say, “The French are not argumentative and rude, they simply like to have enthusiastic discussions,” and have you believe it. In the same way, you could not force a Frenchman to believe that Americans are not loud and obnoxious simply by stating the fact, because stereotypes “cannot be dislodged by argument or by a barrage of facts” (Fishman 36). However, it is precisely this durability of stereotypes that makes them so dangerous.

Studies have shown that stereotypes are not easily overcome simply by providing counter-examples. If I first see a movie in which a Frenchman is shown to be the “Don Juan” character, the man who seduces all women and lures them into his bedroom, I am likely to begin to attach this quality to other French people. If this same stereotype is reinforced through other media, or even by word of mouth or by literature, it becomes reinforced in my mind in much the same way. If I am later presented with a counter-image, perhaps of a French character who studies long hours, lives with his mother, and has little time for matters of the heart, I am likely to question this portrayal and deem it false. That is, I would most likely believe the stereotype that is reinforced and widely-believed over a counter-example that is intentionally introduced to combat the other stereotypes. Even more serious is the fact that, even if I meet a group of French people who do not fit into the stereotyped role in which I have placed them, it is probable that my views will not change and that I will see them as “exceptions” to the rules (Harding 259).

Some may discount this fact because they would assume that when presented with both factual and fictional information, the human tendency would be to distinguish the two. In this way, we might also assume that this ability to differentiate would “[immunize] us from any potential effects of fiction” because “fictitious information...should not enter into our calibrations of reality” (Murphy 170). However, studies, including those conducted by Prentice, Gerrig, and Bailis (1997) have shown that people will first accept that which is presented to them as true (even if it is obviously false), and later, “reject those assertions only if they are motivated to and able to evaluate their veracity” (417). Therefore, if I am presented with a story in which an alien visits Earth and abducts a child, I am likely to believe it for the duration of the story and later, reject it because I can understand that it was far-fetched and *only* a story. However, if the media shows me repeated images of the French being argumentative, rude and dirty, and if I have never had the experience of traveling to France or of meeting a French person, I would not have the factual information necessary to combat this fiction. For this reason, I might believe the information to be true, and the stereotype could, thus, be perpetuated and passed on to someone else.

In addition to these stereotypes being difficult to overcome, many may wonder why they are necessary to overcome. But as we will come to see, stereotypes are not as innocent and innocuous as many of us tend to believe. When we stereotype a country, we are stereotyping each individual person living in or connecting himself or herself with that country. In this way, stereotypes become clichés. They are “repetitive, hackneyed phrases,” and serve as “ready-made opinions,” so we are not forced to make our own (Weber 169). Why don’t we make our own? Often we do; however, it is sometimes

simply easier to rely on the opinions of others whom we trust and who have already provided us with these stereotypes. We come to believe that which our predecessors tell us to believe. Consequently, a country's activity (or inactivity), a country's foibles, everything that should be forgotten, is never forgotten. Rather than looking upon the French as individuals like us but with a very different cultural background, many Americans and non-Americans, alike, have begun to see them as either the enemy, the annoyance, or at the very least, the joker, throughout history. Although it is unlikely that this sort of stereotyping is going to lead us straight into war, it could certainly have a lasting impact on foreign relations, as a lack of respect for a culture can often spur disagreements. In addition, even those of us who are not diplomats and who do not consider foreign relations a large part of our lives could be harmed by the fact that stereotypes often make us believe things that are not true and, in this way, force us to become disconnected from reality.

Since we already have seen that we cannot prevent existing stereotypes from magnifying, we can only combat the misinformation in emphasizing and remembering that "little that Hollywood has to offer presents a 'true' picture" (Melloan A27). Hollywood is likely to continue producing films in which the French play only the narrowly defined role of thief, waiter, artist, or lover. We will continue attending movies, and continue telling ourselves that they are "only entertainment" and that we know that they are not real. "Come on," we will say, frustrated, "it's only a movie." However, rather than saying this and dismissing it just as quickly, we must go to lengths to ensure that we *remember* that "films at their very best may offer insights into the human condition, but in the end they are entertainment, nothing more or less" (Melloan A27).

Thus far, researchers have not found a cure for the process of stereotyping. Although many, including Weber have found that “stereotypes are negative,” no one knows exactly how to combat this negativity (Weber 169). We have seen that relying on counter-examples is often ineffective. Humans cannot do away with stereotypes, altogether. To assume that we could is an impossible goal. Still, with continued and emphasized negativity, comes danger, because we can come to hate people that we do not know. We laugh at their misfortunes. We become what we hate, and others will begin to laugh at *us*. Thus, it seems the only way that we can combat stereotypes is on an individual level. We must force ourselves to question that which is presented to us in film, television, writing, and daily conversation. For, in always striving for efficiency and in relying solely on that which others tell us is true, we may continue to be deceived.



Film Conventions in the 1950s-1960s

In looking at the media and at film, specifically, as creators and maintainers of cultural stereotypes, we can begin to see that their impact is not insignificant. For the purposes of this examination, it is interesting to look at film from the 1950s and 1960s and from today for various reasons. As we will see, film went through many drastic changes in the 1950s and 1960s. However, what is most interesting is that, regardless of these changes and innovations, stereotyping remained and flourished and examples of stereotyping were extremely prevalent in film. Although stereotyping undoubtedly continued in the following decades of the 1970s and 1980s, for purposes of effectiveness and of interest, in comparing stereotypes from the 1950s and 1960s to those from today,

we can perhaps gain the most interesting comparison. Today, many of us relish in the fact that we are politically correct and tolerant of all. However, in examining film from the 1990s onward, as we later will do, we come to see that this is not necessarily the case and that many American films often portray the same views of a culture repeatedly, regardless of decade.

Turning, then, to the 1950s, we can begin to see that many important innovations came about in the media starting in this decade. It is first interesting to note that television had just begun to reach mainstream culture, and many families were just starting to feel the effects of a media-centralized home. Although most families still only owned one television, they now had a new pastime, which allowed information to be transmitted to them quicker than it ever had been before.

This invention had a tremendous impact on American film, since people no longer had to leave their homes in order to be entertained. Movie studios went to great lengths to ensure that what people paid to see at theatres would be different from what they could already get for free at home (Collins 12). Studios now began to spend money on historically based films, religious epics, and Westerns, consisting of international casts to draw international audiences to the box office. They began to use novelties and new technologies, such as 3-D graphics and wide-screen format to lure people out of their homes, out of the suburbs, and into the downtown theatres (Collins 12). Although television viewing continued to grow, these techniques seemed to have at least a small effect, as box office figures once again began to climb.

Near the middle of the 1950s, Hollywood began to focus heavily on producing “blockbuster” films. Along with this came the telefilm industry, as production companies

began to rely on television series to finance their growing costs associated with filming on location. Finally, Hollywood was brought to the television screen. MGM, Warner, Fox, and Disney all placed movies on the airways and, in turn, began to see large profits from television syndication (Collins 12).

In 1955, film companies were still focusing their efforts on producing blockbuster pictures to attract moviegoers to the theatres. However, beginning then and continuing through the rest of the 1960s, Hollywood would see a more diversified audience and different media interests than it had seen in prior decades. Although many still looked for the Hollywood hits, “the 1950s and 1960s also saw diversified, segmented movie-going trends, most of them keyed to the immense, emergent “youth market” (Collins 13). Since the “baby-boom” generation was driving the market, producers and directors turned their interests towards producing “teen pics” and “exploitation” films, which would bring kids to the drive-ins. At the same time, “art cinema” and foreign film was experimenting with new and alternative techniques, starting largely on college campuses and moving quickly into mainstream Hollywood.

We can see the effects of this segmented audience by looking at the films that emerged during the late 1950s to 1960s. First there were the Oscar winners, such as *Gigi* (1958), *The Sound of Music* (1965), and *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). However, apart from these widely known favorites, other films like Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) and *Psycho* (1960) and sci-fi films and horror films like *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) were earning equal notoriety. Musicals, such as *Can-Can* (1960), *West Side Story* (1961) and *My Fair Lady* (1964) were still tremendously popular, but lesser known filmmakers and themes were also emerging. Cinema verité, focusing on unknown “actors” and real-life

situations in real time were also becoming popular. Audiences no longer wanted all of the same, all of the time. Rather, new forms of film added to and improved upon older ones, making variety essential during and after the 1960s.

If we examine the historical setting of this decade, the need for variety is easily attributable. The sixties was a time when anything could happen and almost everything did. In one decade, America saw the assassination of three important political figures, a man walk on the moon, and a series of disturbing race riots in which many people died. They watched as the Berlin Wall was constructed in 1961 and saw the beginnings of the Vietnam War. Baby-boomer adolescents preached “peace, love, and harmony,” but others saw this time as a “decade of discontent.” America was filled with a diverse group of people who had diverse needs to be met.

Throughout the chaos and ever-changing temperature of the time, however, Hollywood continued producing films, and people continued to watch them. In turn, everyone who watched, was affected in important ways. People seemed to involve themselves in movies in order to escape that which occurred around them, and stereotypes played a key role in this process.

Stereotyping, as previously discussed, is an inevitable and necessary function in social psychology. Still, aside from the necessary and limited amount of stereotyping upon which we rely, filmmakers can go “overboard” in their portrayals. As Asitier explains, “systematic and insistent blame... is the sign that this criticism has another function than pure analysis – it helps the critic feel good” (300). In this way, while we, in America, were feeling the effects of segregation in schools and fighting the Russians to be the first in space exploration, we could escape these issues for an hour and a half while

we watched a character take on a fake accent and embody all that it was (in popular opinion) to be French.



The French in Film (1957 – 1969)

If we begin to look at how we viewed France and the French in American film during this era, we see several interesting contrasts. Film showed us that France is a place where all Americans long to be; yet, the characters in the films from this era also tended to scoff at, or at least unintentionally make a joke out of, the culture and all that it entails. From film during this era, we can see that everything involved with living grandly occurs in Paris. It is the hub of fashion, of wealth, and of parties, and the beauty of the city's landmarks immediately enchants anyone who goes there. Artists go there to make a living, to wander the streets in little black berets, and to take a stroll down the Champs-Élysées before retiring to their apartments, where they will enjoy a dinner of wine, cheese, and the famous baguette.

However, through these films we also see another side of France, one that is slightly more pessimistic, perhaps, but also a great deal more provocative. We see the wholesale market district where workers lug animal carcasses on their backs and work twelve-hour days. We see prostitutes, dirty Frenchmen, and strange existentialists roaming the streets. In all, we come to know a France that is less likely to be associated with the high life and more likely to be seen as country-wide brothel.

Looking at specific films and genres of films, then, we can begin to see from where these views came and how they are shaped through the making of the movie. With

some exceptions, films relating to France and exhibiting French stereotypes during this period were not blockbuster Hollywood hits. Many were musicals, and many featured the same actors and actresses repeatedly. However, this is not to say that their messages and images did not have an impact on the general public's views of France. As previously discussed, this was a time in which audiences had drastically segregated tastes. Although some people were, for instance, too involved with cinema verité to spend money on these sorts of "unrealistic" portrayals, many others may have been vastly affected, depending on their preferences for film.

In examining our first film, then, we see France as a place where Americans go to work and to see beautiful monuments, but mainly as a place where they flock to



The photographer and Jo share an intimate moment together in Paris.
Copyright Paramount Pictures 1957

experience a pre-defined "Frenchness." *Funny Face*, starring Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire, came to theatres in 1957 and dealt with a small-town woman (Jo) being noticed by a magazine agency and eventually becoming a high-end fashion model. The agency takes her to Paris for an important photo shoot, and from this moment

on, we are bombarded with stereotypical images of

France. First, it is extremely important to note that this film is, essentially, a love story.

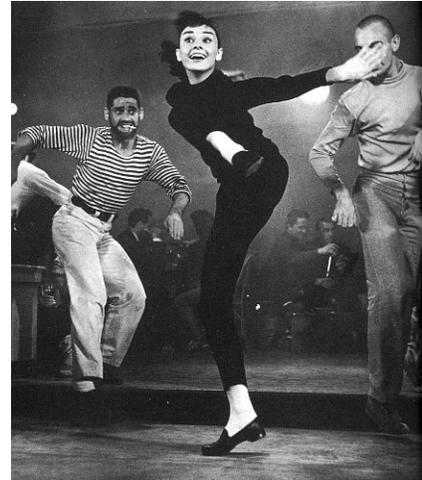
The photographer and the model fall in love, and Paris, being "the city of love," provides the perfect backdrop for this sort of affair. This is a theme that we will come back to repeatedly in examining other movies from both the 1960s and from today, but for now it

is only important to emphasize that, once established as a lover's paradise, Paris cannot escape this fact, and we begin to see it as a city in which love *must* occur.

However, aside from this image, we see other stereotypes of Paris and of the French at work in this film. As Jo, the photographer, and the magazine executive exit the airplane and encounter their first Frenchman, the photographer comments, "They can't understand anyone coming to Paris to work." Although this comment is offhand and not at all important to the plot movement of the story, it serves to give us a particular view of France. In fact, it is perhaps the fact that this comment is not blatant—that it can almost go unnoticed—that makes it so potentially damaging. From it, we may learn that Paris is perhaps not to be associated with work or with the working class and only to be associated with beautiful scenery and the high-life. If we take this one step further, many of us might be forced to question the work ethic of the French or to assume that they are lazy. Since this reference is concealed and not emphasized, it may not be in the forefront of our minds. For this reason, we may not question its validity and might take it as fact, because it is presented in a factual manner.

However, even when material is presented more blatantly, it can still help us to form stereotypes. During the song, *Bonjour Paris!*, the three travelers visit all of the important landmarks of Paris in five minutes. The camera is sure to focus in on each monument, as if it is more important than the actors and actresses in the film. In fact, each is, as it is essential to the movie's plot to establish Paris as a beautiful, high-end place where tourists flock and lovers reunite. We see glimpses of the Louvre, the Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel Tower, and the Seine. The photographer tells us, "I want to step out down the Champs-Élysées, from the Arc de Triomphe to the Petit Palais." Jo, the model,

confesses, “I want to see the den of thinking men—like Jean-Paul Sartre. I must philosophize with all the guys around Montmartre and Montparnasse!” They all exclaim, “When they parlez-vous me then I got to confess that’s for me!” This sort of iconization of landmarks and unconcealed reference to Paris as a city of enthusiasm and wonder can lead us to believe that this is all that exists in the city. Later, in reference to Paris, the



Jo “philosophizes” with the French while she is in Paris.
Copyright Paramount Pictures 1957

photographer concludes that “Living is easy and living is high. All good Americans should come here to die.” Here, we receive the full message of the song. Paris is wonderful, Paris is grand, and most of all, Paris is somewhere Americans should come to relax and to retire.

In the next film we examine, we will see a slightly modified version of this same message. The Oscar winning film of 1958, *Gigi*, dealt with a French girl growing up in Paris and becoming a “proper woman” for a suitor. Her suitor, Gaston, is bored with Paris and all that it entails. He has no one to love and is, essentially, bitter, finding everything in his life to be negative. His uncle, Honoré (played by Maurice Chevalier), is entirely the opposite and enjoys living grandly in Paris. As he tries to explain the wonder of the city to his nephew, we see, once again, an iconization of the country. During the song, *It’s a Bore*, Honoré and Gaston drive around in a car, experiencing the sights that Paris has to offer. They drive under the Eiffel tower, as Honoré exclaims, “Don’t you marvel at the power of the mighty Eiffel tower...” Again, we see a ninety-story tower as

the key asset that the entire country of France has to offer. Later, as Honoré and Gaston exchange song-filled dialogue, we are presented with further “icons” of the country.

Honoré: The rive seine...

Gaston: All it can do is flow.

Honoré: But think of wine.

Gaston: It's either red or white.

Honoré: But think of girls!

Gaston: It's either yes or no. And if it's no or if it's
yes it simply couldn't matter less.

Thus, from this, we come to learn that the beauty of Paris, the importance of the city, comes from the Eiffel tower, the Seine, wine, and girls. However, Honoré is sure to include everything, as he also references “cheese, salad, crêpe suzette,” and “the Mona Lisa's falling grace,” as important and essential qualities of France. Life for Honoré is, as he states, “a gay romantic fling,” and this is facilitated by his location in Paris.

However, Gigi seems to have a slightly alternative view of the city. She does not



A frustrated Gigi
Copyright MGM 1958

understand the Parisians. She is growing tired of refining herself to a man's taste and cannot comprehend why everyone is so intent on being in love— especially everyone in Paris. In her song, *I Don't Understand the Parisians* (which,

incidentally, was later cut from the Broadway musical in favor

of a more “sympathetic” song), Gigi explains her dilemma. She is frustrated. She tells us that, in Paris, love is the only thing on anyone's mind. Exasperated, she reasons, “You'd think it would embarrass every person here in Paris to be thinking every minute of love!”

Although Gigi dislikes Paris' connection with romance, she does nothing to combat the stereotype with this disdain. If anything, she reinforces it; we come to see her as the "odd one out," as the *only* person in Paris not concerned with finding "amour." She tells us that the French are "making love every time they get the chance" and that "there must be more to life." Although there is undoubtedly more to life than the stereotype that Gigi perpetuates, her audience may not believe so after her song. Many may, instead, see her as the exception in a city where everything is as she reports it to be.



Maurice Chevalier in *Gigi*
Copyright MGM 1958

However, more unfortunate is Maurice Chevalier's role in this film. Chevalier was a Frenchman who acted in French, American, and international movies, alike. When he was in American movies, he almost always played the quintessential Frenchman and undoubtedly influenced many Americans' views of France. As Mamoulian tells us, "[Chevalier] was born the year the Eiffel Tower was built, and like it he became the symbol of Paris" (2). In each of his films, we see the same qualities of "Frenchness" exhibited: an overly-exaggerated French accent, a great deal of gesturing, comical facial expressions, and an overall debonair quality that seemed to inhabit his being. "He radiated optimism, good will and above all the *joie de vivre*

that every human being longs for" (Mamoulian 2). In addition, during times when French-American relations were lowest, "He was the best ambassador of good will that France ever had" (Mamoulian 3).

However, Chevalier conformed to the stereotypes that Americans already had about France and helped to perpetuate them further. In *Gigi*, he carries a cane and wears a top hat. He cannot remember the names of the lovers that he has had because there have been so many. He is charming, debonair, and a “lover and collector of beautiful things.” In his mixed French-American speech, he thanks heaven for little girls. Thus, Chevalier has often been criticized for playing a Frenchman in American films. Although Americans may love his character portrayals, they are not necessarily representative of what being French entails. Rather, Chevalier became what Americans desired him to be, and through this, stereotypes were created, maintained and surely worsened, over time.

We can turn now to another of Chevalier’s films, *Can-Can*. This was Chevalier’s last film appearance before his retirement, and although he did not play a large role in it, the stereotypes exhibited in the film are congruent with what we have seen. The musical comedy centers around a can-can dancing revue in Montmartre, in which the women dance and practically sell sex on the dance floor. Shirley MacClaine, playing Simone Pistache, the owner of the dance hall, sings “Never give anything away, away, away that you can sell.” Although this song does not deal directly with prostitution, in a musical like this, the implications of the words are obvious. Because of this, we may be left assuming that, apart from dancing, the French should be known for their brothels, as well.

Through this movie, we also learn that the French are free-spirits and do not like to be told what to do or how to live their lives. Again, Pistache emphasizes another stereotype of the French in her song *Live and Let Live*. She sings, “Since tyranny we overthrew at the fall of the Bastille, if you tell a Frenchman what to do, or if you tell him

what not to do, you will only get one look at you, but the look will be nasty.” The message here is apparent. The French are “nasty,” argumentative, and do not like to be told what to do. However, also interesting here is the historical reference. Much of the reason this stereotype works is that Americans may recognize the story of the Bastille. Most Americans, regardless of if they know anything about French history or not, have heard the story of the French revolution and of the overthrow of the Bastille. Therefore, by placing a perhaps overly-blatant stereotype next to something we know to be factual, the stereotype may be linked with the truth and become more believable. For this reason, many of us may naturally not question the statement and may admit it into our minds as fact.

Apart from these extended stereotypes, the film is filled with other more common ones, such as we might see in other films of both the 1960s and of today. The inclusion of certain French words for no other reason than the fact that they remind us that the story is taking place in France, is one example. Throughout the film, people exclaim “C’est la vie!” and explain that “love, c’est magnifique.” This sort of code-switching allows us to understand that which the actors and actresses are saying, yet also allows us to identify them as being from a place that is foreign to our own. In the song *I Love Paris*, Paris is, again, set as the background for a love story, as if it is the only city in which such a love could occur, and as if the love occurs because the city exists. In addition, we see more references to art in this movie. There is an entire song devoted to the joys of being an artist, and, later, Pistache, trying to convince someone to dance, sings “If Van Gogh and Matisse and Gaugin can, baby, you can can-can too.” In reality, Van Gogh, Matisse, and Gaugin probably never can-caned. However, by saying that they could and by placing

them in the song, we link France with art or at least link the movie with being French, and the stereotypes, already set in place, can thrive.

All of the movies examined up to this point have been musicals. Something that we must understand about the musicals filmed in the 1950s and 1960s is that they were not necessarily written during this time. The adaptation used for the filmed version of *Gigi* was produced on Broadway in 1951. *Can-Can* came to Broadway in 1953, seven years before its filmed version was produced. The same songs appeared in the musicals, as later appeared in their filmed versions, so, rightfully, we cannot count these as having been created in the 1960s. However, since their filmed versions added a great deal of iconization and stereotyping that was not inherent in the original versions, in fairness, we can still study them as a product of the 1960s.

In addition, we can be assured that while these musicals were on Broadway, a certain type of person went to see them. Only those who could afford the tickets and a trip to New York could experience the musical in its fullest form. However, when musicals are made into movies, it is almost as if they are mass-produced. People who before could not experience them now have open access, assuming that they live near a theatre that is playing the film. In this way, stereotypes that already existed in the music, and new ones, which are added through the casting and cinematography, are made public and spread to larger audiences, influencing their thoughts and possibly tainting or modifying their view of France.

However, this is not to say that musicals were the only culprits for maintaining stereotypes in the 1960s. Rather, there was a plethora of other movies that provided examples of who the French were and how they behaved. One example that comes to

mind is the *Pink Panther* series. Produced in 1963, the movie is still watched today and has even been made into a cartoon, to attract younger audiences. In the film series from



Inspector Clouseau, the French detective
Copyright United Artists 1963

the 1960s, Peter Sellers plays Inspector Jacques Clouseau, the clumsy French detective who gets everything wrong and just happens to stumble onto the solution in the process. Although Sellers was a British actor, his role in this film was extremely well known and popularized in America. In the *Pink Panther* films, he has a thickly-accented voice that is obviously not truly French, but

rather an imitation of what he believes to be French-sounding. He is bumbling and clumsy. He walks into things that are in his plain sight. He knocks things over repeatedly, and this, we consider humor. As Douglas tells us,

Humour consists in perceiving something mechanical encrusted on something living” (1950 : 29). It is funny when persons behave as if they were inanimate things. So a person caught in a repetitive routine, such as stammering or dancing after the music has stopped, is funny. (363)

Therefore, when we see Clouseau fall, we laugh and think of him as an idiot, and we quite possibly draw links to other French people through his behavior. In reality, there is no reason why Clouseau’s character would have to be French. He could have just as easily been American. However, with this cultural change, the movie would have been drastically different. Instead, he would have just been “some crazy guy” who fell a lot—mildly humorous, perhaps, but nothing out of the ordinary.

The film also provides other elements that are particularly “French.” Apart from being clumsy and awkward, Clouseau also tries desperately to be a lover. He consistently attempts to be sexy and to seduce his wife, to no avail. Although we can look at this as reversing the stereotype, in that we see that not all Frenchmen are natural-born lovers, we can also see it as an insult, in which we are once again, laughing at the French. In addition, as in most films dealing with France, there is a great deal of iconization. The first view we have of France is, refreshingly, not the Eiffel Tower. However, the first image is of the Seine, another popular icon of the country.

If we look at another film from the same year, we see less iconization but just as much stereotyping at play. *Irma la Douce* centers on a police officer, Nestor Patou; a French prostitute, Irma; and her poodle, Coquette. Although Billy Wilder, the director of this film was not American, this film used mostly American actors and actresses and was a popular American film during the 1960s. The setting is Paris, but this is not the Paris that we have come to know through other movies during this time period. As the narrator is careful to explain from the beginning, this is “the stomach of Paris,” the wholesale market district where life is “smelly but alive.”

Irma works on the rue Casanova, where Nestor meets her.

People walk down the streets in black berets and kiss each

other on the cheeks. This is the other side of France with an entirely different set of stereotypes.

Here, we no longer see the high life that Maurice Chevalier was accustomed to telling us about. Rather, we see the dirt, the working class, and the prostitution. These



Irma la Douce, the French prostitute
Copyright MGM 1963

stereotypes have undoubtedly infiltrated how many Americans see France today. This film shows us the perversion of the French. It is an entire film based upon the theme of prostitution and of selling sex. It is the story of an organized group of pimps and prostitutes and of police and community cover-up. Still, when all else is finished, this is—as most movies dealing with Paris are—a love story. After all, as said in the movie, “This is France, a civilized country. L’amour, toujours l’amour.” It is the perfect film to tell us who the French are and what being French is all about, because it encompasses everything that many of us already think is true. Sure, it is most likely quite erroneous, and it certainly is insulting to the French, but it is entertaining, so we are inclined to watch.



Film Conventions in the 1990s-- Present

Turning to film today, we can see that it is drastically different than it was in the late 1950s and 1960s. Today, we also have innovations shaping our film viewing, but, for the most part, film is already a large part of everyone’s recreational life. Today, you can almost never even turn on your television without seeing some sort of movie on some channel, nor would we want to. We pay extra to cable companies so that we can have more movies, so that at the click of a button on the remote control we can choose between comedy, drama, horror, or otherwise. We no longer have to leave our homes to see wide-screen films, because they are automatically converted to miniaturized wide-screen versions on our televisions. Still, we continue to flock to theatres for the newest film because movie going is entertainment. The process of going out, sitting in a large

dark theatre with an overpriced tub of popcorn and an economy sized drink, and watching twenty minutes of previews before the movie begins, is all part of the theatre's charm.

As Collins has said, "Movies are part of the taken-for-granted of daily life" (1-2).

In addition, the genre of film has changed dramatically. Most of us have our favorite "type" of movie. Whether it is comedy, drama, epic, action, horror, cartoon, historical drama, science fiction, or romantic comedy, we have a wider variety of options than ever before. Of course, we still have the blockbuster hits. Some things never change, and today, with the advent of the digital era, such films are costing more and more to produce. However, with higher production costs comes a higher need for extensive advertising, and so far, those individuals marketing these films have risen to the challenge. Today, you can buy *Star Wars* bed sheets, imitation blue jewels from *Titanic*, and *Rugrats*-shaped macaroni and cheese. In this way, the movies and the popular culture connected with them follow us everywhere and in everything that we do. In turn, we can assume that the stereotyping process follows closely behind.

Another thing affecting our film-viewing today is globalization. The world is becoming increasingly connected, and, although seen as a threat or as a downfall by some, at least in terms of stereotyping, this seems to be positive. Today, people in Africa can watch our film productions shortly after we have seen them. We, as well, have a larger foreign film market than in the past and can watch more films, which include foreign actors and which have foreign directors. Although blockbuster films will always attract larger audiences, today we at least have the *option* to view films from other countries. We no longer have to rely on what someone else's interpretation tells us the French are like, because through French film, we can perhaps catch a glimpse of the

culture ourselves. Although this method is not foolproof, in that it still allows us to form opinions without meeting actual people, and as Heisbourg has said, “a little familiarity can breed ignorance,” it is still a start at understanding, which seems more promising than what we have had in the past (7).

Still, apart from the inclusion of foreign films and the advent of new digital technology, not much has changed in regards to the stereotyping process in American film. That is, the same images presented to us forty years ago, are continuing to flourish today. They are for the most part modified versions of what we saw in the past, because most of us, today, would like to think of ourselves as being politically correct, minority-sensitive, and more open to differences. However, although we believe this to be true, in examining films from today in terms of stereotypes, we find this not to be the case. As Weber said, “the image of the *other* is crucial in defining one’s own identity,” and this much is still true today (171).

Film still relies on blatant film shots of the Eiffel Tower and of the Arc de Triomphe to situate itself in Paris. In most cases, the accents are worse. Directors often do not have French people playing the French, as in the case with Maurice Chevalier; rather, they have Americans doing the job and providing less than stellar attempts at capturing “Frenchness.” In many cases, we still see Paris as a place where we all want to go; however, today, many also have the tendency to see the French as stupid, rude, and violent. Still, the image of France as a lover’s playground has not changed and perhaps never will. It is most likely for this reason that most films from today that have exaggerated stereotypes of the French are romantic comedies. It seems almost

impossible to produce a film set in France or about France that does not involve a love story in some way.



The French in Film (1990— Present)

Today, in many instances of film, American directors will vilify the French. We see French characters cast in the roles of thieves, crooks, liars, or simply violent and rude people who are not in control of their tempers. We see them as “hygiene-deficient,” as being very different from who we are and as living very differently from our “civilized” way of living.

The first film to examine, *Green Card* (1990), is an obvious example of these views. Gérard Depardieu plays Georges Fouret, a waiter in a restaurant. He is violent at times; at one point in the movie, he loses his temper and breaks glass. He is dirty, unshaven, has long hair, and acts as if he knows everything. Brontë, played by Andie MacDowell, on the other hand, is uptight and refined. She is everything that he is not, and at first, his very being annoys her. Yet, they are stuck together to receive a Green Card, so there is nothing either one can do to solve the problem.

Yet, apart from Georges being dirty and violent, we see other more subtle stereotypes introduced in the film. First, in times of real trouble, he is relaxed and calm. He exhibits the perfect actions of a bon-vivant and does not worry himself about the things that he cannot change. Near the beginning of the movie when the two need to get to know one another for a Green Card exam, Georges asks Brontë for a cup of coffee. She is exasperated and screams, “I’m about to go to jail, you’re about to be deported, but

you're worried about the coffee?" And, indeed, he is. Although this may be closer to the French attitude of living than we have seen in other films, it still presents us with a stereotypical view of what the French are like. Of course, because Georges is French and knows *real* coffee, he hates Brontë's decaffeinated version of the drink. He tells her that he will teach her how to make real coffee. At the grocery store, he is a food "expert," choosing only the perfect ingredients, while Brontë looks on.

In addition to being a culinary genius, like we often view the French to be, Georges is also associated with the racier side of his culture. He gestures a lot, as Maurice Chevalier had done in earlier films, and talks in great detail about gypsies and prostitutes. As Americans many of us might expect this of him, because he is French. In addition, since Depardieu is actually a Frenchman, as we have seen with Chevalier, we may accept his stereotypical portrayals to be true. We would not expect people from France to act in ways that are insulting to their culture, so we might take Depardieu's acting more seriously than we would an American's. As Brontë says, Georges is a "silly French oaf," and if he did not act as such, we would probably not associate him with France as much as we do in this film.

The next film to examine, *French Kiss* (1995), provides a very similar view of the French. This is another romantic comedy, and in it Kevin Kline plays Luc, the French thief who tries to seduce Kate, played by Meg Ryan. Before Kate even comes into contact with the French, we already know her opinion of them. From her airplane seat, she says, "I don't like Paris, I don't like the French, and I don't really want to go on this trip." Later, she further qualifies her statement, saying, "the French—they hate us, they smoke, they have a whole relationship to dairy products which I don't understand."

Statements such as these, if we are not equipped to distinguish them from fact, are undoubtedly harmful to our view of France, leading some of us to believe that the French are unrefined, mean, and obsessed with cheese. Although this stereotype is seen in society outside of film, the reinforcement through media surely plays a role in maintaining it.

In looking at the character of Luc in this film, stereotypical references are even more dramatic. Luc has an explosive temper and drives fast. He steals liquor and jewelry, he lost his virginity to a prostitute at age twelve (and talks openly about it), he is argumentative, and he smuggles goods across country lines. He is loud and mean, screaming “J’en ai mare!” and “Merde!” at the flight attendant on the plane. Kate expresses her sentiments for him rather succinctly; “And look at you. You’re just some nicotine-saturated, I’m sorry to say, hygiene-deficient Frenchman!” From this, as Americans, many of us are fulfilled. We can leave the movie feeling as if, yes, we have a complete world-view that conforms to our thoughts that the French are horrible, deplorable creatures. Satisfaction.



Kate and Luc
Copyright Twentieth Century Fox 1995

Still, the film is not over and neither is Luc’s portrayal of the typical Frenchman. For, as well as being deplorable, Luc is also a hopeless romantic. He takes Kate to his family’s vineyard, teaches her how to taste the lavender in wine, and gives her advice on love. The role of Luc can offer many of us dual-gratification in this respect. We can



Copyright Twentieth Century Fox 1995

accept that he is mean and gross and a crook, as long as he does not destroy our image of the city of love.

Always present, as in other films, are the images of French icons. The treatment in this film, though, is particularly interesting.

Although we, as audience members are

bombarded with the images, Kate cannot see them until she is on her way out of the city. She is distracted and misses the Eiffel Tower, she turns her head just as her car is passing the Louvre. It is only on her train ride away from Paris, that she is finally able to see the Eiffel Tower. Still, although Kate cannot see the icons, they still have the same effect on us, as audience members. In fact, in this case, the treatment may even cause us to question the American character. We might think, “How could she miss the most important parts of Paris?” However, this is only conforming to a stereotype we may have previously erected in our own minds.

In contrast, in *Forget Paris*, a movie from the same year, we could not avoid the iconization even if we tried our hardest. In a sense, it occurs like in *Funny Face*. Within five minutes, we see everything: the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, a street artist, the Louvre, the Mona Lisa, the Pont Neuf, a performing musician, someone eating a baguette sandwich, the Thinker, and again and again, the Eiffel Tower. A friend of the main character explains to his wife, “what can you say? It was Paris.” Apart from this one scene, however, the iconization is also interspersed throughout the film. In the opening credits of the film, we see old photographs of lovers in various parts of France.

At a French restaurant, Billy Crystal's character, Mickey, is ignored by his French waiter repeatedly. When it is explained that Ellen, Mickey's love interest, was having problems conceiving a child, another friend exclaims, "That's what she gets for living in France for so long. She was probably all



Ellen and Mickey
Copyright Columbia Pictures 1995

clogged up with cheese!" Later, we once again see Paris as the city of love, as Mickey and Ellen kiss in front of the Eiffel Tower. These specific images may not come across as being particularly damaging. Yet, they are repetitive and reinforce an image of France that, even if true (which is unlikely), is stereotypical and is a cliché.

Still, other images and references in this film are more damaging than others. Often the animosity the French have towards Americanization is addressed. Mickey says, "I know that you people are still angry over Euro-Disney, but please don't take it out on me." Later, he comments on France's political and military mistakes. When his father's coffin is lost, he screams, "If I was Hitler you'd give me my father. You'd give me everything in your whole god-damned country!" Although these sorts of references may satisfy many of our American nationalist tendencies, they can also cause irreparable harm to our views of France. They are particularly dangerous because they prove the fact that we do not only rely on the stereotypes of our predecessors but, rather, create new ones, as well. That is, although views of Paris as being the city of love and of the French as wearing berets and owning poodles existed before World War II, stereotypes about military defeats and Euro-Disney are relatively newer phenomena. If each new generation creates its own stereotypes and keeps those from previous generations intact, our ignorance of what the culture entails will continue to grow.

Still, perhaps the most disturbing trend is the way in which stereotypes are built into children's films today. Without going into great detail, we could list each film produced by Disney, and it would, undoubtedly have either an extended stereotype or a quick joke about being French or about living in France. In the *Little Mermaid*, the crazy French chef marvels in torturing and cooking live crabs. He speaks in a dramatically over-accented voice and does not appear to be the cleanest person in the movie. In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle, growing tired of her little French village, sings, "There must be more than this provincial life." Later, dishes dance and sing about all the wonderful foods there are to eat in France, and the angry, extremely violent mob sings, "Raise the Flag! Sing the song! Here we come. We're fifty strong! And fifty Frenchmen can't be wrong! Let's kill the beast!" *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is even guiltier of stereotyping, providing an entire movie in which French stereotypes are in the forefront of the action.

The examples are everywhere and particularly disquieting since they deal with children. As we have already seen, people will take almost everything that is presented to them as fact, if they do not have a reason to believe it to be false. If adults have difficulties deciphering what is truly French and what is merely a stereotype, we can easily predict that children would have an even more difficult time. Children are not equipped with the knowledge to dispute stereotypes as easily as adults. Research has shown them to be more accepting of differences; yet, when the differences are displayed as faults, they are likely to believe that they are bad.

Turning, then, to the newest children's movie about the French, *Rugrats in Paris: the Movie*, we can begin to see the way in which stereotypes of the French are presented

to a younger audience. First, we should mention the iconization because, as in all movies dealing with the French, it is present here, as well. Before the movie even begins, we see a man in a beret sweeping leaves out of his yard. Of course, because we need to know this movie is set in France, the Eiffel Tower is in the background. Later, we see the Eiffel Tower again, but this time, it is overshadowed by a large amusement park, Euro-ReptarLand, an obvious



The Rugrats pose for a picture in front of the Eiffel Tower.
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replacement for Euro-Disney. As the characters in the film fly past the Eiffel Tower, the Marseillaise national anthem plays in the background. When the family decides to take a ride in a boat on the Seine, they see the Arc de Triomphe and Sacre Coeur. These images are to be expected, as they appear in each film about France in much the same way.

Other icons included in this film are more inventive, yet still stereotypical of what many Americans would expect to find in France. Angelica's mother cannot wait to go shopping in the Paris boutiques, a man in a beret chases a French poodle, the children play with a bidet and discover that it is not an ordinary toilet; "a potty that squirts you back!" Mrs. Pickle admits that she had stereotypes before coming to the country; "When I came to France I had dreams of bouillabaisse, crêpe suzette, chicken cordon bleu." There is, of course, a love story, but apart from the main love story, there is a secondary affair between two dogs, reminiscent of *Lady and the Tramp*. Some of these images are not deplorable. In fact, some of them, although stereotypical, are entertaining and "cute." Still, we cannot deny the fact that when children see this movie, many will leave with a feeling that, in some ways, this is the essence of France.



Angelica listens to Coco la Bouche
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If we leave iconization aside, though, there are several more damaging stereotypes in this film. As can be expected, the villains in this film are French. Coco la Bouche, the main villain tries to seduce Chas Finster into marrying her, so that she can receive a promotion at Euro-ReptarLand. Coco is loud, wears outrageous, alternative clothing and takes the authoritative role in all situations. In a heavy Susan Sarandon-produced French accent she screams, “Get off your derrières and get this show on the road!” She hates children, but pretends to love them to get what she wants. She would do anything, in fact, to get her way. She is loud, obnoxious, overbearing, and yet quite similar to a view of the French that many of us, as Americans, may already have in our minds. As a children’s character, though, she is scary. Children, who normally have a disdain for villains, can find it easy to hate her, because she admittedly hates them. And conveniently, she is French. She can serve as a scapegoat.

In the end, everything turns out well, as is usually the case in children’s films. Yet, the stereotypes continue. The camera focuses on a man in a boat wearing a hat much like Maurice Chevalier often wore. He is with a girl holding a parasol, and the boat is equipped with baguettes and wine, in the typical French fashion. Chas remarks, on his being deceived by Coco, “I guess I got caught up in the romance of Paris.”



Conclusion

As Gerbner has explained, “most of what we know, or think we know, we have never personally experienced. We live in a world erected by the stories we hear and see and tell” (116). Film erects stories for us and presents us with a world, which we can dismiss as being false, but which we will most likely deem to be true, dependent on circumstances and what we already know to be true. The pervasiveness of stereotypes is destructive for this reason. If we are repeatedly told something negative about a culture and have no reason to believe otherwise, we will accept the negativity and it will reflect badly on the country.

Although it is difficult and maybe impossible to understand other cultures completely, and although stereotypes can provide us with a starting platform on which to form our opinions, we should not and cannot allow them to be our entire perception of who someone is or what something entails. To do so, is, if nothing else, an insult to our own intelligence and priorities. In today’s society, we often see ourselves as being accepting of almost everything. We sometimes even smile on differences, depending on the various levels of the difference. However, as we have seen, many of us, including those of us who make films and those of us who continue to watch them, are less than accepting of some things. The French are not inherently bad, but many of us would like to believe that they are. Paris as the city of love is slightly more convincing and prevalent, but this too, although cast in a positive light, is a stereotype.

Apart from deceiving ourselves, stereotypes can have deeper longer-lasting effects. They can put strains on every aspect of our lives. As Heisbourg has pointed out,

“accurate perceptions are key to the successful conduct of foreign and security policy, and this naturally applies to relations between the world’s most powerful nation and its allies, partners and rivals” (18). Although it is unlikely that we could ever have an “accurate” perception of another culture without living amongst it, some perceptions come closer to the truth than do others.

Stereotypes, in some ways, serve to bring people together, while they tear others apart. “Cultural stereotypes tend to feed nationalism, especially when they cast an invidious light on other tribes” (Melloan A27). Fighting a common enemy brings people together. We see the same phenomenon in war in which a country that is in strife will band together when faced with opposition. Thus, even outside of a war situation, seeing the French as the enemy, or even as the joker, helps us to gather together and to feel better about our country and about our problems. However, stereotyping does not, in effect, make us any better. When we believe untruths about others for the purposes of rising above them, we may rise temporarily, but we will be floating on air with nothing to support us. Stereotypes help us to deceive ourselves temporarily, but when they are used repeatedly, decade after decade, when they become a part of our pop-culture and infiltrate our everyday lives, we have to be careful to itemize and differentiate between what is real, deceiving but innocent, or irreparably harmful. In failing to do this, we can only expect to deceive ourselves further.

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