



# **“Beyond stereotypes”: representations of a foreign culture in film students’ productions**

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## **Abstract**

### **“Beyond stereotypes”: representations of a foreign culture in film students’ productions**

*Growing concerns about the continued use of cultural stereotypes in media production, and the subsequent decrease in diversity, resulted in the launch of a student film production programme between three tertiary institutions in South Africa and Finland during the first half of 2006. The aim of the programme was to encourage students to produce films about a foreign culture that moved “beyond stereotypes” and reflected a greater understanding of that society. This article examines the production process, participants’ experience and analyses the final products that were produced in the nine weeks the students spent in Helsinki, Finland. To what extent can media productions, such as film, be devoid of stereotypes?*

## **Opsomming**

### **“Kykies verby die stereotypes”: uitbeeldings van ’n vreemde kultuur in filmstudente se produksies**

*Daar is groeiende kommer oor die volgehoue gebruik van kulturele stereotypes in mediaproduksies, want dit lei tot ’n afname in verskeidenheid. Om dié rede is daar besluit om in die eerste helfte van 2006 ’n studentefilmprojek tussen drie tersiêre instellings in Suid-Afrika en Finland van stapel te laat loop. Die doel van die program was om nege studente films oor ’n vreemde kultuur te laat vervaardig wat verder kyk as stereotypes en groter begrip toon vir die ingewikkelde aard van gemeenskap-*

*pe. Hierdie artikel ontleed hoe die deelnemende studente die probleem van stereotiperende uitbeeldings tydens die vervaardiging van hulle films opgelos het. Die artikel ontleed ook die deelnemers se ervarings in die finale produkte wat in die nege weke vervaardig is wat die Suid-Afrikaanse studente in Helsinki, Finland deurgebring het. Tot watter mate kan mediaproduksies stereotipe-vry wees?*

## 1. Introduction

It is largely accepted that cultural representations in the media are often based on stereotypes. These stereotypes are generalised and simplistic representations of by far more complex social groups and behavioural patterns. The continued use of these representations is largely perceived as being problematic as they can be misrepresentative of the culture in question. Yet, the continued prevalence of cultural stereotypes in the media is in part due to the space and time constraints of the media itself, media producers' understanding and knowledge of a foreign culture, and audience expectations and assumptions about those foreign cultures. This article will show that although the use of stereotypes may be heavily contested, it is often not viable or indeed possible to remove them completely from media production due to existing paradigms of understanding.

Much has been written critiquing the use of stereotypes in media products, yet little has been done to prove whether the media can reflect reality without these representations. In 2006, a research, training and development initiative, the Metacultural Intelligibility in Broadcasting (MIB) research programme, was introduced at Arcada Institute, Helsinki Finland, to address the increased use of stereotypes and the subsequent decrease in cultural diversity in film narratives. The programme has continued into 2008 and is described as "a systematic enquiry into the universe of communicative cultures and a response to the challenges posed by contemporary television broadcasting ... to help preserve cultural diversity in broadcasting" (Lundsten & Stocchetti, 2006:7). It is a multicultural enterprise, designed to train emerging media producers to reconsider the use of cultural stereotypes in their content. As part of the programme postgraduate students from South Africa and Finland have been afforded the opportunity to spend nine weeks in each of the two countries to make films exploring a foreign culture. Their assignment was to move "beyond stereotypes".

Tertiary education institutions participating in the programme included Arcada in Helsinki, both branches of the South African School of

Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance (AFDA) in Johannesburg and Cape Town, and Wits TV at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

This article analyses the films produced by the South African students in the nine weeks spent in Finland and their experience of trying to depict some aspect of the “visited” culture without resorting to stereotypes. To this end, the programme becomes a case study for exploring the following research question: To what extent can media productions, such as film, be devoid of stereotypes, given existing fictional narratives, audience expectations, and the producer’s own understanding of society?

## 2. Cultural representations and stereotypes

Before describing the study, it is necessary to define the concepts central to both the programme, and thus the research: *culture*; *representations*; and *stereotypes*.

It is difficult to provide a single definition of *culture*. It is a dynamic term, and has many diverse meanings – some include aspects of social behaviour and others may include material products, largely depending on how the concept is applied (Sardar & Van Loon, 2004:4). For the purposes of this article, two broad definitions will be used.

The first definition is provided by Kellner (2003:2):

Culture in the broadest sense is a form of highly participatory activity, in which people create their societies and identities.

The second is provided by Hall (2002:2-3) who indicates that at the simplest level:

Culture is about ‘shared meanings’ ... Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings between members of a society or a group ... In part, we give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce.

This definition is particularly pertinent to the MIB research programme, given its interest in the production of cultural representations in film. In this case, *representation* refers to:

... the process by which signs and symbols are made to convey certain meanings. Importantly, this term refers to the signs and

symbols that claim to stand for, or represent, some aspect of 'reality', such as objects, people, groups, places, events, social norms, cultural identities and so on. These representations allow us to communicate and make sense of our surroundings. (Bernstein, 2002:260.)

The concept *representation* implies that images in the media are constructs of reality and the result of a process of selection, and not necessarily a reflection of actual events and people (Bernstein 2002; Croteau & Hoynes 2003; Schudson 2003; Williams, 2003).

Representations form part of a larger narrative – an important component of all media content. News articles, television shows and films tend to adhere to specific principles of narrative in order to appeal to a larger audience. Often the narrative needs to include familiar codes that the audience can easily identify and interpret. Bernstein (2002:264) argues that "In order to represent 'reality', codes and conventions of presentation have to be used; without them, media texts can hardly be expected to be understood by the audience."

Therefore, narrative models tend to have strong ideological, political and cultural inclinations. They allow the public to understand events in terms of their (the audience's) expectations and existing points of reference – whether those are "true to life" or not. The dominant understanding or "preferred" reading of the message is most likely to apply. This is where the use of cultural stereotypes is most effective.

In Media Studies, stereotypes refer to "the continuous repetition of ideas about groups of people in the media. It involves taking an easily grasped feature or characteristic assumed to belong to a group and making it representative of the whole group." (McQueen 1998:141; cited in Bernstein, 2002:265). Ting-Toomey (1999:161) writes that "Stereotyping is an exaggerated set of expectations and beliefs about the attributes of a group membership category. A stereotype is an over-generalisation about an identity group without any attempt to perceive individual variations within the identity category." Similarly, Hall (2002:257) states that: "Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics" which may be assigned "according to class, gender, age group, nationality, 'race', linguistic group, sexual preference and so on".

Media content producers often use stereotypes to appeal to a large target audience. Kay (1994:7) maintains:

We all do stereotypic reasoning: for better or worse, we develop default inferences about people and then, on the basis of a little information, we assume much more until we recognise we need to alter our assumptions. One of the dangers of such stereotypic reasoning is that people build inaccurate stereotypes and are often slow to recognise the need to relinquish assumptions.

There is much academic debate in Media Studies as to whether the use of stereotypes in media content is advantageous or disadvantageous. A number of scholars view stereotypes as being a form of negative reinforcement, eventually leading to or exacerbating discrimination and even racism. As Frederick (1993:190) argues “They are a set of beliefs based on simplistic and often false assumptions held to be true ... While the stereotype may be accurate for some members of the group, people tend to disregard the cases for which it is not true, and neglect variations that do exist.”

In contrast, the argument exists that, given the nature of media itself, it is impossible to present characters or events in any great depth, and that their interpretation and influence on the understanding of the audience, depends on their usage. Ting-Toomey (1999:163) refers to “mindful stereotyping” – a practice whereby stereotypes are used “with a willingness to change loosely held images based on diversified, firsthand contact experiences”. This openness to alter one’s perspective of the group means that stereotypes are constantly changing as more knowledge is acquired. For the purpose of this article, the term *critical* will be used in lieu of *mindful*, referring to an active awareness on behalf of a filmmaker to how a stereotype is being used in a film’s narrative.

Thus, participants were tasked with developing “a more sophisticated understanding of local culture, its impact on film production, and how to express cultural difference and/or diversity by means of a film” (Hyde-Clarke, 2006q).

### **3. The MIB programme**

In January 2006, the production based training programme was launched in Helsinki, aimed at producing unique perspectives on foreign cultures in short films. The participants spent nine weeks filming seven to sixteen minute documentaries in Finland. It should be noted at this stage that none of the South Africans were aware of any Finnish stereotypes. Thus, their experiences centred on grappling with more global stereotypes in their films: the image of Africa,

gender issues, immigrants, social groupings (such as Goths), et cetera.

During the first month, participants spent most of their time in the classroom, discussing experiences, and watching Finnish documentaries. When not in the classroom, they were visiting places of interest such as museums, meeting and interviewing some Finnish personalities, and trying to identify potential ideas for films. Filming began in the fifth week of the programme, and the final products were screened on 9 March 2006.

The process, as well as the films, was documented as part of the research component, in order to determine the effectiveness of the programme in introducing participants to a foreign culture, and their ability to provide new perspectives in film that would challenge more traditional stereotypical representations.

#### **4. Research methodology**

This article relies predominantly on qualitative research, combining recorded and transcribed interviews, and two surveys with open-ended questions. One of the important components of qualitative research is that it allows "the recognition and analysis of different perspectives" (Flick, 1998:4). This allows the researcher to consider participants' knowledge and understanding of a foreign culture, as well as whether and to what extent that knowledge changes over time, thereby altering the representations in the films.

During the period in question, participants met with the researcher once a week for a thirty minute interview. During the entire nine weeks of the programme, except the fourth, participants met the researcher in groups of three, comprising of one member from each institution. It was intentional to have members from different institutions in the same group in order for participants to meet each other and to learn a bit about the other people's interests and skills in the programme. In the fourth week, participants had individual interviews with the researcher to determine their ability to identify various factors that were influencing their representations of Finnish culture.

All of the interviews were semi-structured, allowing for both set and open questions. During the interviews it was important that the researcher did not elicit any responses that were not the participant's own. Instead the decision was taken to ask guiding questions that would allow the participants the freedom to explore their ex-

periences and understanding. This allowed them to find meaning in an unfamiliar environment. Participants were encouraged to speak freely, and in group interviews often used each other to determine the effectiveness and direction of their argument, thereby interacting with both the group and the researcher.

Thus, the perspective taken in this study is largely constructionist – where interviewer and interviewees are actively involved in constructing meaning. There are two distinct types of narratives that need to be considered in this research. The first are the narratives participants used in the interviews, and the second would be the narrative of the films. It is important to note that all the narratives provided are subjective. Also, the amount of information that a participant could provide was affected by the time constraint of the interview itself.

In addition to the weekly interviews, participants completed one survey at the start of the programme in order to determine their prior knowledge of the foreign culture, and one at the end to reflect on their experiences as film makers and their thoughts on their final product. The answers in an open-ended questionnaire can subsequently be coded (Silverman, 2005:13). Given the nature of some of the questions in the surveys, it was possible to compare a number of the answers and tabulate the responses for statistical purposes. For example: 100% of the South African participants had never visited Finland before; 80% of all the participants admitted that they were hoping to learn about the new culture and understand the people better; and 60% claimed that most of their information about the visited country had come from travel guides and internet sites. All the participants attended the interviews and completed both surveys.

Naturally, there are concerns about this process. The first is that the researcher only had access to the information imparted during the interview, all of which was largely anecdotal. Also, although every attempt was made not to elicit certain responses to the questions, participants were aware of the purpose of the research and so would probably tailor their responses accordingly. Alasuutari (1995:91) argues that “It can safely be argued that no interviewee will answer any of the questions presented without giving at least some thought to the purpose of those questions.”

In addition to these concerns, there have been queries about the quality and quantity of material produced in group interviews that needed to be considered. The first is that people may not be as

forthcoming about their personal experiences when speaking in a group, and the second is that group members may want to be seen as "part of the group" and will agree to everything being said by group members (Alasuutari, 1995:93). These aspects did not appear to be too limiting in this study as group members frequently disagreed with each other, or provided an alternative understanding of an experience.

## **5. The teams and film themes**

It was decided that the group of nine participants would compile three short documentaries on an aspect of Finnish culture. Each film would be worked on by a team of three, with one participant from each institution. Each team therefore had two South Africans and one Finn. It was suggested that the Finn be the producer of the film, due to language and communication needs, and that the South Africans be responsible for the other activities, such as narrative, filming, directing and editing. Participants expressed concern that this approach may not be that effective as it seemed. "It's a bit heavy and formulaic: take three people from three institutions and sit back and hope for genius. That doesn't necessary happen." (Hyde-Clarke, 2006c.) However, they did admit that it would be useful in honing their skills for working with other people, who may approach things differently.

After a week of pitching ideas and reworking aspects of those ideas, three topics were accepted for filming. They included *Global motherhood* (a story about two Finnish women who are either waiting for or have adopted a black South African child), *The barbershop* (a compilation of thoughts and experiences of African immigrants in Helsinki), and *Snapshots* (a collage of people who use the photo booth in Helsinki's Central Railway Station, the main transit point in the city, and their thoughts about travel, life, etc.). The three films offered very different perspectives, and appeared to explore varying characteristics of Finnish people and society. It was also felt that they were financially feasible, given the limited budget allocated to each team.

When asked about their nomination of certain themes, participants in two of the teams cited familiarity as part of their choice. The *Global motherhood* topic had been suggested by a participant who had a young child, and who was interested in the experiences of South African children abroad. *The barbershop* was to be filmed by two black South Africans who felt that it was a familiar and comfortable space in an otherwise seemingly alien landscape. Inte-



restingly, one of these participants would later acknowledge that they never had nor were likely to frequent a similar space in South Africa. All the participants were aware that they would have to attempt to avoid stereotypical representations in their films about the foreign culture.

## **6. The films**

On 9 March 2006 the films were presented to a general audience. Although all were incomplete, comments were received from those in attendance. The three documentaries provided very different narratives, but did these representations provided unique perspectives? Were the films devoid of stereotypes?

This section shall briefly outline each narrative and identify some of the effects that trying to move “beyond stereotypes” had had on the final products.

### **6.1 *Global motherhood: from mum, with love***

The film had been divided into three chapters – of which the first and third had been filmed by the screening. The first chapter introduced the viewer to a Finnish woman who is waiting to hear whether or not her application to an adoption agency with a centre in South Africa has been successful. The third section presented a Finnish woman who already has a South African child, their relationship and her experiences and thoughts. At the start of filming, the director indicated the following intention: “it will look at the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of intercontinental adoption ... how the child’s fate or destiny changes when they are adopted by a foreigner” (Hyde-Clarke, 2006c).

From the outset this film had the potential to become a very stereotypical version of “the West coming to save Africa from itself”, feeding into the belief that Africa is indeed a lost and “hopeless continent” – the much debated headline of *The Economist*, 13-19 May 2000. This was particularly worrisome to the team as the middle chapter was envisaged as being the South African perspective – initially thought to be the mother who has decided to give her child up for adoption. There was the danger that the stark contrast between the Finnish families and the South African mother would simply reinforce the notions of abundance versus deprivation.

The director of the project realised the pitfalls of the project in the seventh week, once the team had a chance to view the footage gathered for the two Finnish sections. The decision to include the

South African mother was then questioned for a number of reasons. The first was that she would be the only person in the film losing something instead of gaining. Secondly, the director expressed the worry that it would cater to the "typical" image that people expect from Africa ... "and it's not all starving mothers, and bloated babies with flies in their faces. There is so much diversity; I just don't want it to be another negative image of African women" (Hyde-Clarke, 2006j). So, how then would the participants progress? The answer was uncertain.

Sadly, the second chapter was never filmed. The students decided to move onto a different topic in South Africa and so *Global motherhood* remains incomplete. However, those involved felt that in the end the film could have included a slightly new perspective, even if only for a South African audience (Hyde-Clarke, 2006j). Instead of the Finnish women appearing to want to save an African baby, they tell the story of a baby coming to fulfil them – that it is a union of two people who need each other as opposed to the rescue of one.

However, there were some concerns raised by the audience about the complete focus on the female figures. After all, it was clear from the film that the adoption agency dealt primarily with married couples, so why then had the director chosen to speak only to the women? It was felt that this emphasised the "female as nurturer" stereotype. Some men in the audience felt that this was somewhat insulting, as they too contributed to child rearing responsibilities. Thus, the shadow of the stereotypical narrative and reasoning remains, but some additional material and alternative perspectives show the situation in a slightly more complex light.

## **6.2 *The barbershop*: talking heads**

This film was based on a series of head shots of immigrant men of African descent having their hair cut at a barbershop in Helsinki. Through a number of questions about hair styling the filmmakers intended to construct issues of identity in a foreign space. At first glance, the film was rich with stereotypical characters: the loud and brash US marine, the boxer, the silent barber who listens without comment, and the absent female voice. Young black men are often associated with violent activities (Elliot, 2003:13) and women (especially African women) are frequently under-represented (Williams, 2003:131). The audience is also very familiar with these stereotypical caricatures of black men as they have been present in a number of television sitcoms and films, mostly of American origin.

So how then, did the participants hope to move “beyond stereotypes”?

According to team members, what made the film “unique” was the location of the characters – an African barbershop in wintertime Helsinki, a place of “whiteness” – and the differences between the personalities of the characters – a group typically represented as a “homogeneous blob” (Hyde-Clarke, 2006m). Although, the participants did admit that some of the film’s message may have been lost in the film-making process.

The African barbershop was initially chosen as it represented all that was “not Finnish” according to traditional stereotypes, whilst at the same time being in Finland frequented by people who live in or were born in Finland and who share one common feature: their race. Notably, it is also the only African barbershop in Helsinki.

Initially the idea was to get three previously identified central figures to discuss their feelings of identity, all of whom spent a considerable amount of time in the shop. The first challenge that participants faced was that there seemed to be reluctance on behalf of interviewees to discuss their identity as black men in Finland in front of the camera. Much to the frustration of the team, they also seemed to be manipulating the situation to create better images of themselves. One of the team members provided the following example:

We went to film him going to work. He was supposed to go on the Metro (public transport) to work, like he always does. But on day of the shoot he had organised a car as he didn’t want to be seen going to work without a car. (Hyde-Clarke, 2006i.)

The participant then went on to note that this interviewee later admitted to concerns about being “other-ed” on the Metro as he would have had a camera trained on him all the time. This indicated to the team that the interviewees were very aware of immigrant stereotypes, and how they would be represented, and were altering their behaviour accordingly. The combination of this with the lack of willingness to speak about their experiences meant that the issue of identity construction was becoming elusive. In the seventh week, due to a series of unpredictable events, all three interviewees essentially withdrew from the process. Thus, the version screened bore little resemblance to the idea pitched at the start of the process.

Perhaps another more subtle dimension that should be considered was the expectations of the participants themselves. Two of the South Africans admitted that they had lost perspective early in the

process, associating too much with the interviewees chosen and losing their ability to be objective. "We were using black subjects in a foreign white space, it became complicated as we were trying to relate or put our own opinion on the film." (Hyde-Clarke, 2006m.)

This meant that often participants found themselves wanting the interviewees to confirm what they were feeling or thought the immigrants should feel (displaced, as outsiders, the "other"). As a result, they unconsciously adopted what they later referred to as "guerrilla camera work" – arriving with cameras and just filming without taking time to really understand the people and the environment. In the end, they found themselves disappointed as footage was not what they had expected and people did not say what they had hoped. "There was a need to confirm the characters and to get to know them before interviewing them. That way you would know how they would react to the questions. We can't do anything now as we already have the footage." (Hyde-Clarke, 2006e.)

The above comment points to a design flaw in the process that should have been considered at the planning stage.

The film-making process was also affected by what appeared to be three conflicting rationales for the overall narrative: a desire to cement the stereotype of the "other-ed" black person in a predominantly white space; an attempt to show diversity in Finnish society, understood by the participants as being racially homogenous; and the desire to show diversity among the African characters themselves. This was perhaps too ambitious a project to present in a seven to sixteen minute film.

When asked whether they felt that the final product had managed to move "beyond stereotypes", they replied: "It is tricky as the film is about African immigrants, which is a stereotype in itself. The film is trying to show that they are not the same; that they are from different backgrounds and places but that they come together as they are all different together." This was confirmed again at the end of the programme: "The fact that the subjects are so different, allows a natural complexity/texture (uncharacteristic of the black stereotype) to come through." (Hyde-Clarke, 2006p.)

However, little was said about the fact that there was no female voice in the film at all, cementing yet another media representation in the process: the absent or voiceless African female.

Despite these challenges, the film was well received by some Finnish members of the audience. “This film is really ‘beyond stereotypes’ as we never met these people on the street. You never see them on Finnish television. It gives a voice to a group that you never hear.” (Hyde-Clarke, 2006n.)

The team working on this film felt that ultimately it was impossible to completely discard stereotypes: “Stereotypes can be found in every film, but how those stereotypes are presented makes a difference. They need soul. People will also find them, even if they are not there – to get an emotional connection.” (Hyde-Clarke, 2006o.)

### 6.3 *Snapshots*

This team originally decided to film a photo booth and its patrons in the Central Railway Station in Helsinki. Compared to the other two teams, they had a very different experience. Their decision to film at that location was based on a variety of information they had received about the Station from the media and from Finnish colleagues: the whole of the population of Helsinki passes through the Station at some point in time. But they had no clear narrative. They had identified no definite interviewees, and had composed no set questions.

Hence, no specific stereotype had been identified to counter or to reinforce, the team instead chose to go “beyond stereotypes” by trying to move away from generalisations about groups.

I think that this is important: don’t generalise. It’s like, when she speaks it is on behalf of Finland, and when he speaks, it’s on behalf of South Africa. Actually, we are all speaking on behalf of ourselves. We get into South Africa or Finland and ten people will give you ten different answers to the same question. We can’t say we are coming as South Africans always or as a Finn always. I am coming as myself. (Hyde-Clarke, 2006b.)

Their strategy was simple: go to the booth at the Station, and talk to whoever wanted to use it. Since the booth is located at a major transit point, it was thought that people would probably talk about travel. As an extra thought, they toyed with the idea of asking people: “If you could say one thing to the world what would it be?” (Hyde-Clarke, 2006d.)

Although an interesting approach, it did have one major challenge, namely that the lack of a clear narrative meant that the team was never entirely certain about how they would present their findings in

the final product. Also, without a recognisable plot, would the audience understand the purpose of the film? Other problems included a series of unexpected issues: people naturally using the booth did not necessarily want to appear on film; and not everyone spoke English. The process promised to take more time than they had allocated. As a result, the team decided to change their method. They would approach people in the Station regardless of whether they wanted to use the booth or not, ask them whether they were prepared to be filmed and then alter the questions accordingly. "So, we have been able to get a range of interesting people, and target a large range of ages and nationalities." (Hyde-Clarke, 2006f.)

The issues around travel and journeys had to be discarded. Instead, they asked the question: "What do you think makes people happy?" (Hyde-Clarke, 2006f.) From the answers they received they would then ask follow-up questions.

For the first seven weeks, this film promised more of a visual treat. There was still no clear narrative emerging. Interestingly though this did not really seem to worry the team. "We are hoping to be able to present a view of the complexity of Finnish society to some degree. The film looks at how people talk and dress, how they phrase what they say. It becomes a mosaic of people." (Hyde-Clarke, 2006h.)

Did the participants feel that they had managed to move "beyond stereotypes"? All agreed that they had:

We started with stereotypes, but as we got to know people they fell away. They just aren't there anymore. We actually went to 'look' for stereotypes (the Goth, the businessman, the unmarried young mother) but when we speak to them they just don't conform. They are just normal people. (Hyde-Clarke, 2006k.)

I think *Snapshots* gives a great overview of the entirety of contemporary Finnish culture. It offers a wide variety of people living in Finland and gives them a voice. We allowed them to express their opinions, which, when closely examined, reflect a lot about them and the society surrounding them. (Hyde-Clarke, 2006p.)

In this case, the stereotype – a common and generalised representation of a group that results in the loss of the individual (Lester & Ross, 2003:2) – had been challenged by the representation of the individual, or in this case, many individuals from different backgrounds and social groups. In addition to this, each individual had

been afforded the opportunity to speak for themselves. And importantly, they did not speak on behalf of a larger group, nor were they spoken for. This strategy may contribute to establishing a “unique” perspective of a culture, provided the overall narrative remains intelligible to the audience. As the participants had discovered, there still needs to be some recognisable themes to be the “glue” (Hyde-Clarke, 2006g).

## **7. Representations of a foreign culture: the question of time**

The time allocated to the project was constantly identified as being a hurdle to the process. Interestingly, this issue is often considered to be one major component contributing to the proliferation of stereotypes. The amount of time allotted to better research a scenario does affect the understanding of a culture and the ability to depict it to a wider audience. But how much time is enough? Conceivably it may be possible to spend years immersed in a foreign culture, and never really understand it.

Also, there are very few, if any, careers in the media industry where reporters or film makers are afforded as “much time as needed” to file a report or create a representation of a society. In fact, it is not uncommon for media personnel to “parachute” into a foreign environment and be expected to provide a comprehensive narrative of an event for the international audience in a few short minute film clips within a few days, even a few hours, of arrival. Hence, time, or more importantly the lack of it, is one of the reasons cited for the continued reliance and use of narrative “formats” and stereotypical representations.

The participants were experiencing a common phenomenon. As they felt “rushed”, they found themselves reverting back to various stereotypes to explain their experiences and interpretations. Notably, in some instances, by trying to avoid using one stereotype (societal or racial), they represented another (gender). This was most obvious in the adoption story, where the team tried to avoid depicting Africa as a hopeless continent by focusing on the aspiration of the Finnish women, and by default this led to the exclusion of men in a family structure.

In some cases, forced by a need to gather and convey information quickly, the stereotypes were strengthened by default, through the use of reference. All information received and disseminated was compared and contrasted to a known representation, and then used

accordingly. Thus the stereotype in question was still given agency by default.

Alternatively, in a desire to avoid using stereotypes completely, participants would try to find information that would completely negate any element of that stereotype. This meant that occasionally participants would find themselves actively seeking information that would break down or disprove a particular representation, regardless of whether or not it had some relevance to the group in question. Frequently, they would find themselves seeking or arguing for an extreme or "abnormal" depiction of a group; only to discover that they then had to revert back to a version of the discarded stereotype as more information came in.

Although not explicitly aware of these phenomena, there appeared to be an implicit realisation that trying to produce a film without the use of any stereotypes was proving almost impossible.

## **8. Conclusion**

This then raises the central question of the research process: can one move "beyond stereotypes" in cultural representations? In other words, is it possible to discard stereotypes in media products? Can a media representation ever be a reflection of reality? To the latter, Croteau and Hoynes (2003:196) argue that "the answer is an emphatic no".

This article supports that notion. It does not appear possible to be able to produce media content, in this case film, without any stereotypes in the narrative.

Clearly, a combination of the filmmaker's expectations and perceptions, the amount of time given to interact with and understand a new culture, and the narrative structure of the film itself, all contribute in some way to make media content a representation, or construction, of reality, and not a reflection. In addition, there still needs to be some coherence to existing codes and conventions for audience intelligibility. The audience may not see new information or an unfamiliar narrative as providing a clearer depiction of a group. Instead, such approaches may serve to unintentionally reinforce an older version of the stereotype, or be discounted as being too *deviant* of normal expected behaviour. In some cases, new information may be deemed unintelligible or irrelevant simply because it is so totally different to the audiences' cultural understanding of events.



This highlights the tension that may exist between a filmmaker wanting to impart new knowledge and understanding to an audience, and the audience's failure to comprehend the intended meaning behind the representation.

Thus it seems that a few *expected* images and ideas need to remain in some form. However, it is the way they appear that needs to be considered if media content producers really do intend to move "beyond stereotypes", and preserve cultural diversity in broadcasting. Yet, even with the critical use of stereotypes in film, one participant felt it unlikely that a foreign filmmaker could ever make a perfect representation of a "visited" culture. "No matter how hard we try, we are not going to give 100% of what a Finn would stand up and say about their nationality and their country. It's an outsider's perspective." (Hyde-Clarke, 2006a.)

In fact, given the above arguments, it is probable that the very notion of moving "beyond stereotypes" is flawed. After all, what does it really mean? Participants appeared to understand it to mean to avoid using stereotypes in their productions, and then seemed perplexed or discouraged when attempts to discard them completely failed; as did efforts to show them as totally *untrue* representations of a culture.

However, if one considered that "beyond stereotypes" could indicate something less stringent than the absolute removal of these representations, which was proving problematic anyway, then the programme has had some success. The two methods in this programme that seemed to have the most effect in questioning existing perceptions have been to supplement old representations with new information, or to incorporate *individual* narratives that may work against more generalised accounts.

As was discussed in the analysis of the films, even though participants were cognisant of the need to avoid the use of stereotypes in their content, some remained. Perhaps one should consider the use of intended stereotypes versus the use of unintended ones. Media content is rife with the intended or deliberate use of stereotypes or stereotypical narratives for fast audience intelligibility. These are often the most problematic; and it is their effect on audience understanding and in some cases behaviour that decreases cultural diversity in media content and is of concern to analysts. These representations tend to simply reinforce existing perceptions without adding any new information. However, if media producers were more sensitive to the use of stereotypes, perhaps such re-

presentations would decrease, until only unintended or incidental stereotypes remained.

If one were to take this interpretation of "beyond stereotypes", while there are still stereotypes in the film students' productions, it may be argued that to some extent the films did provide a unique perspective of a foreign culture. Participants in the MIB programme discovered that it was certainly possible to use stereotypical representations and at the same time convey them in a critical light, thereby slightly altering previous assumptions and expectations through the introduction of new material intelligible to a greater audience.

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### **Key concepts:**

cultural  
culture  
film production  
representation  
stereotypes

### **Kernbegrippe:**

filmvervaardiging  
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kultuur  
stereotypes  
uitbeelding

