

Stereotypes on Television

I've always been cautious of stereotypes that I see and here on television. Many people are quick to judge everyone that belongs to an ethnic group because of what they see and hear on television. My first lesson on stereotypes came when I was pretty young. When I was about seven years old my parents sat my older sister and I down at our kitchen table and told us that my dad had gotten a new job. To me that wasn't a very big deal until they told us that the new job was in the United States. I'm from France and moving to the United States of America not only meant changing schools and making new friends, it also meant leaving everyone I knew behind, and learning a new language. Going to see Grandma and Grandpa would now mean that we would have to hop on a plane. We were moving to Austin, Texas. To a seven-year-old kid, who spent the better part of his day watching television and playing with his friends, the word Texas equalled cowboys, saloons, bad guys, sheriffs, and Indians. My friends and I all thought it was the coolest thing. My parents tried to tell me that Austin was a large city and that it wasn't at all like the westerns on television, but to me the Texas on my television was the Texas in real life. Why did television have such an effect on my view on Texas? As a kid my thinking was, "if it's on television it has to be true." To me the lifestyles on television had to be real.

Upon arriving in Austin people from his work informed him that his services were better needed in Chicago. When I learned the news the first things that came to my mind were Al Capone and gangsters. On television that's what Chicago was known for. I remember running around with my friends playing cops and robbers. My best friend was Al Capone and I was the Chief of police. All our friends split into two teams and we went around the neighbourhood shooting each other with our pretend guns.

I remember a couple of days before we were to leave Paris we had dinner at my aunts house. My Mothers whole family had come to wish us well. I remember listening to my uncles and aunts talking with my mom at the dinner table about Chicago. One of my uncles said jokingly, "Make sure you don't run into Al over there." That whole evening was filled with talk of Chicago and gangsters. Television is such a powerful tool, because it exaggerates the stereotypes that people have about people and places. Back then people watched television and didn't realize that many groups and places are either under represented or misrepresented.

I remember when I first started going out with this girl mid way through my senior year in high school. When she found out that I was French the first thing she said was, "But you don't have an accent." I remember telling me that she told her friends and they all said that that was so cool. They told her that French people are known for being romantic. That was news to me. When she first met my family she was amazed that my parents were so nice. She had always heard that French people were rude. When I meet people for the first time and they learn that I'm from France the first thing that they say is what my girlfriend senior year said, "but you don't have an accent." Then they usually ask me if I can speak the language, because it seems that if you don't have a French accent you can't be French. Then they usually say that they would have never guessed I was French

at all. They usually ask me if French people are really as rude as they show on television and if I have a beret.

When I saw the movie National Lampoon's European Vacation for the first time I was with a bunch of my friends. The movie was funny, but I couldn't help but think that every group that was represented in that movie was stereotypical. The French were rude and the Germans drank beer. People walk away from those movies and it reinforces the pre-conceived notions that they have about people and places. In Sitcoms ethnic groups are represented purely by their stereotypical roles. Europeans always have accents and they are either the romantic good looking young person or the old and cranky.

Another stereotype is that Europeans smell. I saw an episode of the sitcom Friends that exemplified these stereotypical views. In the episode the character played by Courtney Cox falls for this Italian guy. At the end of the show Courtney Cox is stuck with this guy in an elevator. At first she can't believe her luck, she can be stuck with this guy forever. Then she starts to smell something, body odour. At first she thinks that it's her, so she smells her armpit. Then she realizes that it's not her, but him. Stereotyping is something that I personally try to stay away from. Every time a show comes on and there is a "Frenchman" on there I laugh, because I know that that's what my friends first thought a person from France should be like. Although there are French people that fit the stereotype, my friends and I both know, from experience, that most people don't fit into the stereotypes that are assigned to them. I understand that television offers only a small interpretation of how the world is and how the people on this planet act.