23

Stereotyping

Richard Dyer

Gay people, whether activists or not, have resented and attacked the images of homo-sexuality in films (and the other arts and media) for as long as we have managed to achieve any self-respect. (Before that, we simply accepted them as true and inevitable). The principal line of attack has been on stereotyping.

The target is a correct one. There is plenty of evidence[1] to suggest that stereotypes are not just put out in books and films, but are widely agreed upon and believed to be right. Particularly damaging is the fact that many gay people believe them, lead-ing on the one hand to the self-oppression so characteristic of gay people's lives,[2] and on the other to behaviour in conformity with the stereotypes which of course only serves to confirm their truth. Equally, there can be no doubt that most stereotypes of gays in films are demeaning and offensive. Just think of the line-up – the butch dyke and the camp queen, the lesbian vampire and the sadistic queer, the predatory schoolmistress and the neurotic faggot, and all the rest. The amount of hatred, fear, ridicule and disgust packed into those images is unmistakable.

But we cannot leave the question of stereotyping at that. Just as recent work on images of blacks and women has done,[3] thinking about images of gayness needs to go beyond simply dismissing stereotypes as wrong and distorted. Righteous dismissal does not make the stereotypes go away, and tends to prevent us from understanding just what stereotypes are, how they function, ideologically and aesthetically, and why they are so resilient in the face of our rejection of them. In addition, there is a real problem as to just what we would put in their place. It is often assumed that the aim of character construction should be the creation of "realistic individuals", but, as I will argue, this may have as many drawbacks as its apparent opposite, "unreal" stereotypes, and some form of typing may actually be preferable to it. These then are the issues that I want to look at in this article – the definition and function of stereotyping and what the alternatives to it are.

Ideology and Types

How do we come to our "understanding" of the people we encounter, in fiction as in life? We get our information about them partly from what other people tell us – although we may not necessarily trust this – and, in fiction, from narrators and from the "thoughts" of the characters, but most of our knowledge about them is based on the evidence in front of us: what they do and how they do it, what they say and how they say it, dress, mannerisms, where they live and so on. That is where the information comes from – but how do we make sense of it? Sociological theory suggests four different, though inter-related, ways of organising this information: *role, individual, type and member*.[4] When we regard a person in their *role*, we are thinking of them purely in terms of the particular set of actions (which I take to include dress, speech and gesture) that they are performing at the moment we encounter them. Thus I may walk down the street and see a road-sweeper, a house-wife, a child, an OAP, a milkman. I know from what they are doing what their social role is, and I know, because I live in this society, that that role is defined by what sociologists call "variables" of occupation, gender, age and kinship. Although this notion of role has developed within a tradition of sociology that views social structure as neutral (not founded upon power and inequality), it is nonetheless valuable because it allows us to distinguish, theoretically at least, between what people do and what they are. However we seldom in practice stop at that, and role usually forms the basis for other inferences we make about people we encounter. We can see a person in the totality of her/his roles – their sum total, specific combination and interaction – a totality that we call an *individual*, complex, specific, unique. Or we can see a person according to a logic that assumes a certain kind-of-person performs a given role, hence is a *type*. Both individual and type relate the information that has been coded into roles to a notion of "personality" – they are psychological, or social psychological, inferences. The last inference we can make, however, is based on the realisation that roles are related not just to abstract, neutral structures but to divisions in society, to groups that are in struggle with each other, primarily along class and gender lines but also along racial and sexual lines. In this perspective, we can see the person – or character, if we're dealing with a novel or film – as a *member* of a given class or social group.

   One of the implications of this break-down is that there is no way of making sense of people, or of constructing characters, that is somehow given, natural or correct. Role, individual, type and member relate to different, wider, and politically signific-ant ways of understanding the world – the first to a reified view of social structures as things that exist independently of human praxis, the second and third to explana-tions of the world in terms of personal dispositions and individual psychologies, and the fourth to an understanding of history in terms of class struggle (though I extend the traditional concept of class here to include race, gender and sex caste). Since the main focus of this article is stereotyping, I shall deal first and at greatest length with the question of type, but I also want to go on to deal with the two chief alternatives to it, individuals and members.

When discussing modes of character construction, it is I think better to use the broad term type and then to make distinctions within it. A type is any simple, vivid, memorable, easily-grasped and widely recognised characterisation in which a few traits are foregrounded and change or "development" is kept to a minimum. Within this, however, we may make distinctions between social types, stereotypes and member types. (I leave out of account here typing from essentially earlier forms of fiction – *e.g.* archetypes and allegorical types – where the type is linked to metaphysical or moral principles rather than social or personal ones.) I shall deal with the first two now, and member types in the last section, since they are in important ways different from social and stereotypes.

The distinction between social type and stereotype I take from Orrin E. Klapp's book *Heroes, Villains and Fools*. The general aim of this book is to describe the social types prevalent in American society at the time at which Klapp was writing (pre-1962), that is to say, the range of kinds-of-people that, Klapp claims, Americans would expect to encounter in day-to-day life. Like much mainstream sociology Klapp's book is valuable not so much for what it asserts as for what it betrays about that which is "taken for granted" in an established intellectual discourse. Klapp's distinction between a social type and a stereotype is very revealing in its implications:

> . . . stereotypes refer to things outside one's social world, whereas social types refer to things with which one is familiar; stereotypes tend to be conceived as functionless or dysfunctional (or, if functional, serving prejudice and conflict mainly), whereas social types serve the structure of society at many points.[6]

The point is not that Klapp is wrong – on the contrary, this is a very useful distinction – but that he is so unaware of the political implications of it that he does not even try to cover himself. For we have to ask – who is the "one" referred to? and whom does the social structure itself serve? As Klapp proceeds to describe the American social types (*i.e.* those within "one's social world"), the answer becomes clear – for nearly all his social types turn out to be white, middle-class, hetero-sexual and male. One might expect this to be true of the heroes, but it is also largely true of the villains and fools as well. That is to say that there are accepted, even recognised, ways of being bad or ridiculous, ways that "belong" to "one's social world". And there are also ways of being bad, ridiculous and even heroic that do not "belong".

In other words, a system of social- and stereotypes refers to what is, as it were, within and beyond the pale of normalcy. Types are instances which indicate those who live by the rules of society (social types) and those whom the rules are designed to exclude (stereotypes). For this reason, stereotypes are also more rigid than social types. The latter are open-ended, more provisional, more flexible, to create the sense of freedom, choice, self-definition for those within the boundaries of normalcy. These boundaries themselves, however, must be clearly delineated, and so stereotypes, one of the mechanisms of boundary maintenance, are characteristically fixed, clear-cut, unalterable. You appear to choose your social type in some measure, whereas you are condemned to a stereotype. Moreover, the dramatic, ridiculous or horrific quality

of stereotypes, as Paul Rock argues, serves to show how important it is to live by the rules:

> It is plausible that much of the expensive drama and ritual which surround the apprehension and denunciation of the deviant are directed at maintaining the daemonic and isolated character of deviancy. Without these demonstrations, typifications would be weakened and social control would suffer correspondingly."

It is not surprising then that the *genres* in which gays most often appear are horror films and comedy.

The establishment of normalcy through social- and stereotypes is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups – a habit of such enormous political consequences that we tend to think of it as far more premeditated than it actually is – to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world-view, value-system, sensibility and ideology. So right is this world-view for the ruling groups, that they make it appear (as it does to them) as "natural" and "inevitable" – and for everyone – and, in so far as they succeed, they establish their hegemony. However, and this cannot be stressed too emphatically, hegemony is an *active* concept – it is something that must be ceaselessly built and rebuilt in the face of both implicit and explicit challenges to it. The subcultures of subordinated groups are implicit challenges to it, recuperable certainly but a nuisance, a thorn in the flesh; and the political struggles that are built within these sub-cultures are directly and explicitly about who shall have the power to fashion the world.

The establishment of hegemony through stereotyping has then two principal features which Roger Brown has termed ethnocentrism, which he defines as thinking "of the norms of one's group as right for men [sic] everywhere", and the assumption that given social groups "have inborn and unalterable psychological characteristics".[5] Although Brown is writing in the context of cross-cultural and inter-racial stereotyping, what he says seems to me eminently transferable to the stereotyping of gays. Let me illustrate this from *The Killing of Sister George*.

By ethnocentrism, Brown means the application of the norms appropriate to one's own culture to that of others. Recasting this politically (within a culture rather than between cultures), we can say that in stereotyping the dominant groups apply their norms to subordinated groups, find the latter wanting, hence inadequate, inferior, sick or grotesque and hence reinforcing the dominant groups' own sense of the legitimacy of their domination. One of the modes of doing this for gays is casting gay relationships and characters in terms of heterosexual sex roles. Thus in *The Killing of Sister George*, George and Childie are very much presented as the man and woman respectively of the relationship, with George's masculinity expressed in her name, gruff voice, male clothes and by association with such icons of virility as horse brasses, pipes, beer and tweeds. However, George is not a man, and is "therefore" inadequate to the role. Her "masculinity" has to be asserted in set pieces of domination (shot to full dramatic hilt, with low angles, chiaroscuro lighting and menacing music), and her straining after male postures is a source of humour. *Sister George* emphasises the absence of men in the lesbian milieu, by structuring Childie and George's quarrels around the latter's fears of any man with whom Childie has dealings and by the

imagery of dolls as surrogate children which are used in a cumulatively horrific way (analogous to some to her horror films, including the director's [Robert Aldrich] earlier *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* [1962]) to suggest the grotesque sterility of a woman loving another woman (and so denying herself the chance of truly being a woman, *i.e.* a heterosexual mother).

The idea that this image of lesbianism indicates an inborn trait (hence reinforcing the idea that the way the dominant culture defines gays is the way we must always be) is enforced in *Sister George* partly through dialogue to that effect and partly through a chain of imagery linking lesbianism with the natural, bestial or low – the lingered-over *cigar-butt eating* episode, the emphasis on their relationship as founded on *physical domination* rather than affection, George's close friendship with a *prostitute* (someone who lives off her natural functions), the *descent* into the Gateways club, the important scene in a *lavatory*, the end of the film with George *mooing* to a deserted studio. The link between lesbians and animals is a strong feature of the iconography of gay women in films-they often wear furs, suede or feather (*e.g. The Haunting, Ann and Eve, Once is not Enough*), are interested in horses or dogs (*e.g. The Fox, La fiancée du pirate*), or are connected, through composition, montage or allusion, with animals (*e.g. Les biches, Lilith*, the cut from two women kissing to a back projection of a tarantula in the "hippie" club in *Coogan's Bluff* [1969]).

What is wrong with these stereotypes is not that they are inaccurate. The implications of attacking them on that ground (one of the most common forms of attack) raise enormous problems for gay politics – first of all, it flies in the face of the actual efficacy of the hegemonic definitions enshrined in stereotypes, that is to say, gay people often believe (I did) that the stereotypes are accurate and act accordingly in line with them; and second, one of the things the stereotypes are onto is the fact that gay people do cross the gender barriers, so that many gay women do refuse to be typically "feminine" just as many gay men refuse to be typically "masculine" and we must beware of getting ourselves into a situation where we cannot defend, still less applaud, such sex-caste transgressions. What we should be attacking in stereotypes is the attempt of heterosexual society to define us for ourselves, in terms that inevitably fall short of the "ideal" of heterosexuality (that is, taken to be the norm of being human), and to pass this definition off as necessary and natural. Both these simply bolster heterosexual hegemony, and the task is to develop our own alternative and challenging definitions of ourselves.

Stereotyping Through Iconography

In a film, one of the methods of stereotyping is through iconography. That is, films use a certain set of visual and aural signs which immediately bespeak homosexuality and connote the qualities associated, stereotypically, with it.

The opening of *The Boys in the Band* shows this very clearly. In a series of brief shots or scenelets, each of the major characters in the subsequent film is introduced and their gay identity established. This can be quite subtle. For instance, while there is the "obvious" imagery of Emory – mincing walk, accompanied by a poodle,

shutting up an over-chic, over-gilded furniture store – there is also, cross cut with it, and with shots of the other "boys", Michael going shopping. He wears a blue blazer and slacks, we do not see what he buys. It is a plain image. Except that the blazer, a sports garment, is too smart, the slacks too well pressed – the casualness of the garment type is belied by the fastidiousness of the grooming style. When he signs a cheque, at chic store Gucci's, we get a close-up of his hand, with a large, elaborate ring on it. Thus the same stereotypical connotations are present, whether obviously or mutedly, in the iconography of both Emory and Michael – over-concern with appearance, association with a "good taste" that is just shading into decadence. The other "boys" are similarly signalled, and although there is a range of stereotypes, nearly all of them carry this connotation of fastidiousness and concern with appearance. This observation can be extended to most gay male iconography – whether it be the emphasis on the grotesque artifices of make-up and obvious wigs (*e.g. Death in Venice*), body-building (*e.g. The Detective*), or sickliness of features, connoting not only depravity and mental illness but also the primped, unexposed face of the indoors (non-active, non-sporting) man (*e.g. The Eiger Sanction*).

Iconography is a kind of short-hand – it places a character quickly and economically. This is particularly useful for gay characters, for, short of showing physical gayness or having elaborate dialogue to establish it in the first few minutes, some means of communicating immediately that a character is gay has to be used. This of course is not a problem facing other stereotyped groups such as women or blacks (but it may include the working class), since the basis of their difference (gender, colour) shows whereas ours does not. However, while this is true, and, as I want to argue later, some kind of typing has positive value, it does seem that there may be a further ideological function to the gay iconography. Why, after all, is it felt so necessary to establish from the word go that a character is gay? The answer lies in one of the prime mechanisms of gay stereotyping, synechdoche – that is, taking the part for the whole. It is felt necessary to establish the character's gayness, because that one aspect of her or his personality is held to give you, and explain, the rest of the personality. By signalling gayness from the character's first appearance, all the character's subsequent actions and words can be understood, explained, and explained away, as those of a gay person. Moreover, it seems probable that gayness is, as a material category, far more fluid than class, gender or race – that is, most people are not either gay or non-gay, but have, to varying degrees, the capacity for both. However, this fluidity is unsettling both to the rigidity of social categorisation and to the maintenance of heterosexual hegemony. What's more, the invisibility of gayness may come creeping up on heterosexuality unawares and, fluid-like, seep into the citadel. It is therefore reassuring to have gayness firmly categorised and kept separate from the start through a widely known iconography.

Stereotyping Through Structure

Stereotypes are also established by the function of the character in the film's structures (whether these be static structures, such as the way the film's world is shown to be organised, materially and ideologically, or dynamic ones, such as plot). I'd like

here to look at a group of French films with lesbian characters – *Les biches*, *La chatte sans pudeur*, *Emmanuelle*, *La fiancée du pirate*, *La fille aux yeux d'or*, *Les garces* and *La religieuse*. Others could have been used, but I am restricting myself to films I have seen relatively recently. I suspect that the vast majority of films with lesbian characters in them are built on the structures I'm about to suggest, but that would require further work. There is no particular reason for picking a group of French films rather than, say, American or Swedish, although lesbian characters have been relatively common in French cinema since the late forties (*e.g. Quai des Orfèvres, Au royaume des cieux, Olivia, Huis clos, Thérèse Desqueyroux, La fille aux yeux d'or etc.*). There is also some polemical intent in the choice – I have deliberately made no distinction between the high-class porn of *Emmanuelle*, the critically acclaimed *auteurist* films *Les biches* and *La religieuse*, the commercial soft porn of *La chatte sans pudeur* and *Les garces*, the quasi-feminist *La fiancée du pirate*, and the chicly decadent *La fille aux yeux d'or*. The point is that lesbian stereotyping is no respecter of artistic merit or intellectual ambition. Whatever the ultimate merits of these films, in terms of lesbianism there is little to choose between them.

There is some iconographic stereotyping in these films. The chief lesbian characters are usually considerably smarter than the other female character(s) – they are often associated with the older world of *haute couture* (older in the sense both of a previous age and of being for older women), their clothes more expertly cut, their appearance always showing greater signs of thought and care, smart coiffure, use of unflashy, quality jewellery, and a taste for clothes made from animal skins. Mannish clothes are also found – jodhpurs and hacking jacket for Irène in *La fiancée du pirate*, khaki shirt and trousers for Bee in *Emmanuelle* – though this never goes so far as actually wearing men's clothes. Rather they are well coutured women's versions of men's clothing. What both types of clothing emphasise are hard, precise lines, never disguising the female form, but presenting it conspicuously without frills or fussiness or any sort of softness – in a word, without "femininity". (The exception here is the Mother Superior in *La religieuse*, who deliberately softens the lines of her habit with frills.) However, the full significance of this, especially as it compares to the rather dressed-down appearance of the central female protagonist, only becomes clear from a consideration of the films' structures.

In terms of the structure of the lesbian relationships as the films show them, it seems that the films always feel a need to recreate the social inequality of heterosexuality within homosexuality. By this I mean that whereas heterosexual relationships involve people defined as social unequals (or oppressor and oppressed, men and women) – an inequality that while not insuperable is always there as a problem in heterosexual relationships – homosexual relationships involve two people who, in terms of sex caste, are equals (both women or both men). Films, however, are seldom happy to acknowledge this and so introduce other forms of social inequality which are seen as having a primary role in defining the nature of the gay relationship. In the case of the films under consideration, this is done primarily through age, but with strong underpinnings of money and class. Thus Leo (*La fille aux yeux d'or*), Elaine (*Les garces*), Bee (*Emmanuelle*), and Frédérique (*Les biches*) are older than "the girl", Juliette, Emmanuelle and Why respectively, while Leo and Frédérique, as well as Irène (*La fiancée du pirate*) are also richer. (This of course in turn relates

to the ideological connection of gayness with the idle sexual experimentation of the rich and the mistaken belief that there is no such thing as a working-class gay.) This inequality is more clear-cut between the Mother Superior and Suzanne in *La religieuse*. In the films under discussion, only Martina in *La chatte sans pudeur* is no older or richer than Julie. But it is clear that she, like Leo, Elaine, Bee, Frédérique, Irène and the Mother Superior, is the stronger of the lesbian pair. This is partly because she, like them, is shown to take initiative and precipitate various events in the plot; and partly because, like them, she is involved in the central structure of the film, which we may characterise as a struggle for control.

This struggle is for control over the central female character. Control here means, as much as anything, definition, for what characterises these central figures is that they are without character, they are unformed. (Hence their dress is iconographically almost striking in its non-descriptness.) They are not just passive, they are nothing, an absence. Suzanne takes no decisions after her initial (defeated) stand against taking holy orders – things happen to her, people struggle to make her what they want her to be. The same negative function holds for the others. Why does not even have a name – she is just a question mark. And similarly we never get to know the name of the girl with golden eyes.

In this struggle it is the lesbian who must be defeated. The central character is sexually malleable to a degree – she will be had by anyone, not because she is voracious but because her sexuality is undefined. But defeat of the lesbian by the man signals that the true sexual definition of a woman is heterosexual and that she gets that definition from a man. This is clearest in *Emmanuelle*, where there is not so much a struggle between a lesbian and a heterosexual male protagonist as a progression for Emmanuelle from vaguely unsatisfactory marital sex through lesbian-ism (with Bee) to relations with Mario. (In this *Emmanuelle* is following the plot structure of very many recent soft pornography films.) After her affair with Bee, Emmanuelle says "I'm not grown up yet" (*i.e.* that relationship was not an "adult" one), while Mario is explicitly introduced as a philosopher-tutor in sexuality. The filming further reflects this progression – where the lesbianism takes place out of doors and is suffused with light, white, the later sex scenes, presided over by Mario, are indoors, dark with patches of deep rich colours. The open air purity and simpli-city of lesbianism ("pretty enough in its way", the film grants), is replaced by the dark, vibrant secrets of "mature" sexuality.

There are variations on this structure. In *La religieuse* the opposite of lesbianism is asexuality – but that is defined and demanded by priests, and throughout the film men are seen as sources of rationality set against the various insanities of convent life. In *La fille aux yeux d'or* the lesbian gets her revenge by murdering the girl. In *Les biches*, Why herself murders Frédérique and probably Paul, who, having "defined" her, have now both let her down. In all cases, the "committed" lesbian (as opposed to the "undefined" girl) is seen as a perverse rival to the man (or men), condemned for trying to do what only a man can – or should – really do, that is, define and control women.

The only exception is *La fiancée du pirate*, where Maria rejects both Irène and the men, and leaves the town. Yet despite the wonderful élan of the film's ending,[10] it is

still based on the same structure, with the lesbian character playing the same predatory, competitive role as in the other films. In other words, even in a film of great feminist appeal, heterosexual thought and feeling structures remain intact. And the gayness is there to reinforce the sense of rightness of those structures.

Individuals

The alternative to character construction through types is often held to be the creation of "individuals". Indeed, in certain usages, this is what the word "character" means – thus Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg can remark, "in so far as a character is a type, he [sic] is less a character.[11]

This approach to character construction derives from the novel. As lan Watt has shown, the novel made a decisive break with previous modes of fiction – in terms of character construction, it replaced historical, mythic or archetypal personages with particular, individuated characters situated in time and space; it introduced the elements of time and memory, and with them changes of personality and consciousness of those changes. Watt argues that these developments in fiction went hand in hand with the development of "realist" philosophy (e.g. Descartes, Locke), although not necessarily through any direct influence of the one on the other. Rather:

> . . . both the philosophical and the literary innovations must be seen as parallel manifestations of larger change – that vast transformation of Western civilisation since the Renaissance which has replaced the unified world picture of the Middle Ages with another very different one – one which presents us, essentially, with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places.[12]

In other words, capitalism and its peculiar conception of the individual.

In the cinema, character construction in terms of individuality draws on several aspects of the medium – "invisible" photography, which places characters in a definite time and space; stars, whose particularity and real existence outside the film fiction "guarantees" the "uniqueness" of the characters they portray; linear narrative which permits the showing of change over time; acting and scripting traditions which signal the notion of individuality; and, very often, a deliberate "going against" types of the kind analysed by Christine Geraghty in her article on *Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More*.[13]

All of these features are evident in such individuated characterisations as those played by Dorothea Wieck and Hertha Thiele in *Mädchen in Uniform*, Danielle Darrieux in *Olivia*, Dirk Bogarde in *Victim*, Shirley MacLaine in *The Loudest Whisper*, Peter Finch in *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, and Al Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon*. All avoid the more "expressionist" modes of photography available in their period (*Mädchen in Uniform*) or genre (*Victim, Dog Day Afternoon*). All are stars who also have a

reputation for being "actors" – *i.e.* not just embodiments of modes of being but also interpreters of roles, fixing character with nuances of gesture, attention to the details of performance etc. Personal change and consciousness of change become key elements in the narrative development – for instance, Shirley MacLaine realises that perhaps after all she did love Audrey Hepburn "like that", and hangs herself; Dirk Bogarde accepts his gayness and resolves to fight blackmail openly in the courts. Stereotypes of gays are shown in *Victim* and *Dog Day Afternoon*, the better to distinguish Bogarde and Pacino from them. (Pacino becomes a hero for the crowd outside the bank, but the film never allows this to become identification with the painted gay activists who turn up to support him.) Going against stereotypes can also operate at the structural level – thus triangle situations like those in the French films (two people of opposite sex in love with the same person) are set up in *The Loudest Whisper* and *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, but Shirley MacLaine and Peter Finch do not fight to control the ones they love but rather insist on granting them autonomy. They even get on with their rivals – James Garner and Glenda Jackson, respectively.

There is no doubt that these performances had a progressive impact. They showed that gays are human – that is, that gays can be portrayed according to the norms of what it is to be human in this society. The problem is that these norms themselves, by their focus on uniqueness and inner growth, tend to prevent people from seeing themselves in terms of class, sex group or race. The very density, richness, refinement and "roundness" of these characterisations, and especially the device of setting up the individual gays over against the stereotypes, make it very difficult to think of there being solidarity, sisterhood or brotherhood, collective identity and action between the gay protagonist and her/his sex caste.[14] The net result is that these films tend to stress gayness as a personality issue, a problem to which there are only individual solutions – suicide (*Mädchen in Uniform, The Loudest Whisper*), bank-robbing (*Dog Day Afternoon*), mature resignation (*Sunday Bloody Sunday*) and so on.

This does not mean that individual character construction is unable to deal with social issues, with the determinations that act on a human life. For instance, *Mädchen in Uniform*, as Janet Meyers writes, brings out:

> . . . the causal connection . . . between the control and repression of feelings between women and the maintenance of fascist values.[15]

Equally, *Victim* makes clear how the law operates on the lives of gay men. Yet in both cases the central articulation is still the individual versus society as a whole, not the individual as a member of an oppressed group. This becomes quite clear if one considers *Victim*, the film amongst this group which gets closest to seeing gays as oppressed – but it does that not through Bogarde, who keeps his distance from the other gays, even when he embarks on his personal crusade for law reform, but through the cross-section of gay types that are set over against him (who perhaps come close to being member types rather than stereotypes).

Member Types

Member types are not, in their mode of construction (*i.e.* use of vivid, recognisable icons, lack of development etc.), different from social- and stereotypes. Where they differ is in the correlation made between the type and social reality. Social- and stereotypes are linked to psychological categories, sorts of personality, within or without a cultural hegemony. Member types, on the other hand, are linked to historically and culturally specific and determined social groups or classes and their praxes, which are almost bound to be outside the present cultural hegemony (in so far as it has so much invested in the notion of individuality).

Member types may, for now, be achieved by strategies such as more "obvious" typing, melodrama, fantasy and montage, which, as Pam Cook writes of Dorothy Arzner's films, "denaturalise" the stereotypes, and allow for an understanding of the concrete and ideological forces that determine them.[16] I'd like to suggest how this may happen from an account of *Some of my Best Friends Are . . .*

Best Friends is obviously similar to *The Boys in the Band* – a single evening in a single setting, with some claim to presenting an anatomy of male gay life. There is not much to choose between them in terms of the particular gallery of types they choose to present. But *Boys* is more subtle and individualising (*i.e.* it is a mixture of type and individual character construction). Its narrative centres on character development (*e.g.* Larry and Hank come to see more clearly the nature of the problems of their relationship and resolve to work at improving it; Alan realises he does love his wife; Michael comes face to face with his own self-disgust, and this brings out reserves of strength in the insecure Donald; and so on). By setting it in a private home and excluding non-gay characters (except Alan) and women, the drama is located in individual personalities, personal strengths and weaknesses. By using loose pacing, allowing for *longueurs* and the illusion of randomness, and eschewing non-naturalistic devices such as non-eye-level camera angles, inserts, varieties of editing rhythm and so on, it conforms to the perceptual conventions of realism. Point for point, *Best Friends* is different.

The narrative is organised around a multiplicity of strands, none of which can be developed in terms of exploration of character, and which usually come to a head in a series of melodramatic or comic set pieces – Terry's mother denouncing him, and Scott insisting he stay with him rather than go and beg her forgiveness; Cheri/ Philip, realising Tom cannot accept him (because he's a man), suddenly hoisted above everyone's heads, with wings and wand, to the chant of "We believe in fairies!" – set pieces which orchestrate, respectively, the opposed loyalties of family and sexuality, and the possibility of gay solidarity. That is to say, this organisation of types permits a certain generalising force about the gay *situation*. Particularly inter-esting here is the way the exaggeratedly heterosexual role-play of the hustler, fag-hag Lita and transvestite Karen (which in the case of the first two is also intended by them as a taunt to the gay characters) is exposed as factitious, inappropriate and masking profound insecurities, alongside the low key style of the couples and the freely embraced camping about of Cheri and the rest.

Where *Boys* is set in a private home, *Best Friends* is set in a gay club, which is controlled by straight society. This allows it to show the operation of oppression on the lives, life-styles (and hence life-types) of gay people. The enclosedness of *Boys* can only be seen as a function of the characters' own cliqueishness, whereas *Best Friends* shows that this banding together (with which straights often reproach gays) is a product of ghettoisation. The song, *Where Do You Go?*, and much of the dialogue, emphasises this. The economics of the ghetto – the straight owner's recognition of the club as "a gravy train", his mock friendly relations with the police to whom he is paying protection – are clearly located in non-gay interests; and the fact that the policeman who collects the protection turns out to be the transvestite Karen's boyfriend reinforces the notion that gay people work in the interests of straight society (often against themselves). The oppressiveness of the ghetto is finally made clear by the end of the film, where our hoped-for romantic moment – Barrett coming back for Michel to commit himself to him rather than clinging on to his empty heterosexual marriage – is denied us because the straight owners cannot be bothered to open up the club for Barrett. We know Michel is inside. As they drive away, one of the barmen remarks that there is still someone in the club asleep, but they decide to leave him – "He'll still be there in the morning – where else has a faggot got to go?" Thus the control of the ghetto – by straights – is shown, schematically perhaps but chillingly too, as destructive of gay relationships.

Best Friends maintains a tight, even old-fashioned, control on the narrative, building to melodramatic climaxes and wringing all the emotion out of them. It makes free use of camera angles and composition to stress the characters' relatedness to the specific environment of the club (thereby reinforcing the notion of a social situation). Cutting in of events from the characters' pasts make connections – of tension and release, of conflicting demands – between how they are placed within the dominant straight culture and the brief, concentrated moment of gayness permitted them in ghetto life. Cut-in fantasy sequences, such as Karen's vision of herself dressed and beautiful as Lita, dancing with the hustler in tie and tails; Howard's daydream of the club members dressed as choristers (thus reintegrating for him his gayness and his religious beliefs) – suggest the gap between aspiration and reality in gay lives.

In all these ways then *Some of My Best Friends Are* . . . suggests the possibility of a mode of representation that does not dissolve concrete social distinctions into psychologistic ones (whether these be individualised or social/stereotypical), but emphasises such distinctions as the basis of collective identity and the heart of historical struggle. It would be absurd to maintain that *Best Friends* actually achieved this (and much more so that it was consciously aiming to). And there is the additional problem that we are brought up to "read" types in the psychologistic ways I've suggested, so that it is doubtful if the majority of cinema-goers would actually construct from *Best Friends* the kind of anatomy of ghetto oppression that I've just done. What I hope to have brought out, however, is the importance of holding on to some concept of typing (in the way we make films, as producers or audience) at the same time as we are exposing the reactionary political force of most social and stereotyping.

Notes

1   See Ken Plummet, *Sexual Stigma*, Tavistock, London, 1974.
2   The concept of self-oppression is crucial to an understanding of the politics of homosexuality. It is excellently examined in Andrew Hodges and David Hutter, *With Downcast Gays*, Pomegranate Press, London, 1974.
3   *E.g.* Jim Pines, *Blacks in Films*, Studio Vista, London, 1975; Claire Johnston (ed.), *Notes on Women's Cinema*, SEFT, London, 1973).
4   Classic texts this in this area include G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, University of Chicago Press, 1934; Alfred Schutz in M. Natanson (ed.), *Collected Papers*, Martinus Nijhoff. The Hague, 1967; Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Allen Lane, London, 1967; Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, Free Press, New York, 1951; Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality*, Longman, London, 1972. The terminology used is my own.
5   A view stemming ultimately from Durkheim but detectable in most mainstream sociology.
6   Orrin E. Klapp, *Heroes, Villains and Fools*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1962, p. 16.
7   Paul Rock, *Deviant Behaviour*, Hutchinson, London, 1973, pp. 34–5.
8   Roger Brown, *Social Psychology*, Macmillan, New York & London, 1965, p. 183.
9   *La chatte sans pudeur* and *Les garces* were distributed in this country with the titles *Sexy Lovers and Love Hungry Girls* respectively.
10 The ending of *La fiancée* is a problem, I think. She is probably on her way to join a man who runs a travelling cinema; one of the films he shows, a poster for which she passes on her way out of the village, has the same title as the film we are watching. In a sense then, his film defines her . . .
11 Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, OUP, Oxford, 1966, p. 204.
12 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, Penguin, 1963, p. 32.
13 Christine Geraghty, "*Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More*", *Movie* (London), No. 22, pp. 39–42.
14 This is perhaps further enforced by the fact that the stars playing the parts are assumed not to be gay – were when the film was made.
15 Janet Meyers, "Dyke Goes to the Movies", *Dyke* (New York), Spring 1976, p. 38.
16 Pam Cook, "Approaching the work of Dorothy Arzner", in Claire Johnson (ed.). *The Work of Dorothy Arzner*, BFI, London, 1974.