

Learning outcomes

- ◇ Students will sharpen their analytical abilities and understanding of the use of imagery
- ◇ Students will gain a more nuanced understanding of how stereotypes and prejudice can be maintained and reinforced through popular culture
- ◇ Students will consider that the use of stereotypes doesn't have to be malicious to be a stereotype

EXPLORING STEREOTYPES

Lesson in brief

Students will watch the first part of Disney's *Aladdin* and consider the representation of the different characters and how these link to pervasive stereotypes about the Arab world.

National curriculum

Citizenship – key stage 4 – unit 03 – Challenging racism and discrimination
A simple exercise – but conceptually quite challenging – suitable also for A-level classes, for instance General Studies and Critical Thinking

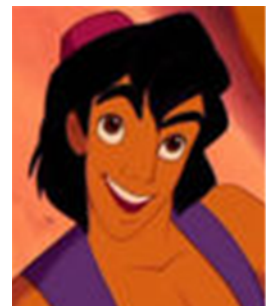
Materials: Video or DVD of Disney's *Aladdin*

Stereotypes are not always as easy to identify as we might like to think and sometimes stereotypes are at work where we least expect them. This exercise makes use of Disney's *Aladdin* to explore how stereotypical images and assumptions are present even in forms of entertainment.

Lesson Plan

Starter

- ◇ Begin the class by recapping what stereotypes are and why they are important. This is a key part of the exercise, because otherwise students may simply dismiss the idea that looking at film is instructive with the argument that 'films are just fun.' If stereotypical images are important, then they remain so wherever they occur. If students are able to grasp this, their understanding of discrimination and stereotypes will be more sophisticated and nuanced.



Activity

- ◇ Watch the first ten minutes of the film *Aladdin* – from the opening song to the part where Aladdin escapes from the palace guards.
- ◇ Ask the students about stereotypical images or impressions that they noticed and record them on the board.

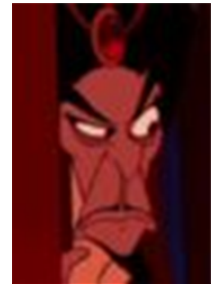
The following sets of stereotypes are at work in the film. Give the students prompts if necessary.



◆ **Climate and region** – Heat, desert climate. Deserts, camels, onion-domed roofs, minarets are common images of the Middle East. Point out, however, that the Arab world has a large amount of geographical and architectural diversity.

◆ **Race/foreigners** – How are the good and bad characters represented apart from their actions? There is a trend whereby the bad characters are darker in colour and have grotesque features in general and larger noses in particular. (It is worth pointing out that not only is this the stereotypical image of the Arab, but it was also typical of anti-Semitic images). The good characters – Aladdin and Jasmin – by contrast, have lighter Anglicised features and Americanised accents. Can this be considered coincidental?

◆ **Moral characteristics** – Most of the people – apart from Aladdin and Jasmin – are seen as thieving, violent, despotic, ruthless, and deceitful. The women are either wholly veiled or in belly-dancing dress, and seem either oppressed or lecherous.



◆ **Timeless/magical** – When is this set? The film seems to blend current time with distant time and magical time. (You may want to point out that in the initial version of the film which was due to be released shortly after the Gulf War the city was called Baghdad, but then because of the war, Baghdad was deemed to real, and the name changed to Agrabah – which in Arabic means ‘most strange.’) Note also the out-of-place exotic elements such as the monkey, turbaned Indian on bed of nails and snake charmer.



Plenary/Following-up

This exercise would be best effective with a discussion. Below are some suggestions for material for such a discussion. They can also be used as the basis for homework.

A BBC investigation found that those with Muslim sounding names were three times less likely to get an interview than those with English sounding names. Investigators sent applications with made-up names to 50 companies. The job candidates with equivalent qualifications and experience were given names that sounded English, black African or Muslim. Researchers found that those with English sounding names were the most successful in getting interviews (23%), the black Africans less so (13%) and the Muslim candidates were even less successful (9%).

Do students think this type of stereotyping comes out of the conscious decisions of employers to predominantly hire white Britons, or might it be the result of unconscious stereotyping? If unconscious – how might popular culture play a role?

A survey of Muslims in Britain in January 2007 found that many felt that negative images of Islam both on film and on TV were linked to their social experiences of exclusion, hatred and discrimination.

After an outcry from the American-Arab anti-Discrimination Committee, Disney agreed to change the lyrics of the opening song for the video version. The original,

“Oh, I come from a land, From a faraway place, Where the caravan camels roam, Where they cut off your ear If they don’t like your face, It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home”

was changed to

“It’s flat and immense, and the heat is intense. It’s barbaric, but hey’ it’s home.”

Do students think this is an improvement? Do they imagine that Arabs watching Aladdin would be satisfied with the change?

Negative stereotypes are particularly harmful when positive images of that group are absent. In terms of the representation of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood, this is arguably the case – research has shown that out of about a thousand films from 1896 to the present that included Arab characters or references, only around 12 gave positive depictions, 52 were neutral, and 900 were negative. Aladdin was one of the positive ones.