The Identity Wars

Media Representation of Italian/Americans and the Intricate Negotiation of Identity

A Presentation by: Matthew A. Masucci
HBO Crime-Family Drama Sparks debate

American Italian Defense Association (AIDA) sues show for harming image of I/A’s by portraying as criminal and morally corrupt.

Reignites ongoing debate between I/A intellectuals and activists on the H-ItAm listserv

Raises over Identity Politics, Identity, Sterotyping, and Essentialism

Is it Possible to Reconcile??
The Sopranos Question
Stereotypes: What’s at Issue?
(©1990 by Gary M. Grobman)

- A simplified and fixed image of all members of a culture or group (based on race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, national origins)

- Generalizations about people that are based on limited, sometimes inaccurate, information (from such sources as television, cartoons or comic books, minimal contact with one or more members of the group, second-hand information)
Stereotypes: What’s at Issue?

- Initial predictions about strangers based on incomplete information about their culture, race, religion, or ethnicity
- A single statement or attitude about a group of people that does not recognize the complex, multidimensional nature of human beings
- Broad categories about people that fail to differentiate among individuals, peoples, and societies
- Identification of easily observable characteristics of groups of people
Survey of 1,200 teens shows: ©2000 Zogby

- 44% said I/A’s most often cast as crime bosses or gang members
- 34% associated I/A’s with restaurant workers
- When Italian American teens were asked if their ethnic heritage was accurately portrayed on television or in the movies, 46% agreed and nearly 30% said they were proud of their TV image.

This study revealed that:
- Teens learn the less admirable aspects of their heritage from entertainment industry stereotyping.
- Teens' perceptions of other ethnic, religious, and racial groups are shaped by entertainment industry stereotypes.
Stereotypes: What’s at Issue?

- Representations are both positive and negative.
- Media images could not work unless there was preexisting representational expectations.
- How can we critically examine media representations of particular groups?
- Must learn critical media literacy tools.
- Think about what the representations represent!
Media Images

Negative I/A Portrayals

2002 Maine gubernatorial candidate Jonathan Carter V. U.S. Congressman and gubernatorial candidate John Baldacci Ad. Campaign
"It is what we have been saying all along," says Piccigallo. "It isn't 'just a movie' or 'only a TV show.' The line between fiction and fact has become dangerously blurred to the detriment of Italian Americans in public life. These events present irrefutable evidence of the very real damage stereotyping does to Italian Americans. Instead of telling Italian Americans to 'lighten up,' the press's reporting should clean up." OSIA Executive Director Philip R. Piccigallo
Negative I/A Portrayals

Wrigleys Eclipse-Polar Ice
Neutral Media Images?

Budweiser: How You Doin’?
Positive I/A Portrayals

*Ragu Sauce*

*Come, help Mama stir the sauce. Don't stand there like a part of the wallpaper!*
Positive I/A Portrayals
Ragu Sauce
New & Improved!
Media Images (cont.)

Positive I/A Portrayals

Olive Garden
Uncle Dom’s Cabin v. “One Voice”

- **One Voice** - Activists claim to speak for 25 million I/A’s on number of political issues (essential I/A identity)

- **Uncle Dom** - “actors, writers, directors, and certainly journalists” who contribute to the exploitation of I/A’s in the media

- Seem to advocate a more complex understanding of identity??

  (Or just sell-outs?)
Reconciliation?

- A Cultural Studies influenced take on I/A identity helps to recognize complexity
- Interventions from feminist, gay and lesbian, and others help to interrogate the construction of identity and the recognition of fractured identifications.
  - Al Giardello “G” on Homicide: Life in the Streets
  - Family reconsidered
- Strategic Essentialism - Spivak
Conclusion

- Construing identity as what Stuart Hall would call a "floating signifier": must take seriously the constructed, contested, and negotiated meaning.

- While politically useful, helpful to move beyond an essential political strategy. Only replaces one stereotype with another.
Conclusion

As Anthony Tamburri (1998) in *A Semiotic of Ethnicity* claims:

“Only when all groups and their differences are foregrounded on equal terms through the exploratory lens of cultural studies-one thing that must take place both within and outside the I/A community-can a useful expression of difference leading to a more critical discourse and intellectual exchange take place”
Activity

- Complete the sentences…
- Break up into small groups
- Compare your answers
- How does the media in all its forms influence these prejudices?