

Stereotyping in the film the birdcage (1996)

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Marketing, education, suggestion and propaganda all subtly influence the opinions and values a society's members hold. All too often, we have no clear idea how we came to hold the opinions we develop over the course of our lifetimes. From the earliest days of the film industry's rise at the beginning of the twentieth century, film has had an enormous impact in shaping public views and ideas about everything from what it means to be a "good citizen" to what roles are acceptable and proper in a "civilized" society.

With the exception of academics and serious students in film or cultural studies, most movie-goers regard the viewing of films (with the exception - sometimes - of documentaries) as simply an entertainment activity when, very often, central to the experience is the swallowing of messages that the creators of the film wish to advance. Since films are often very expensive to produce, the films that find financial backing must also meet with the approval of a society's elite, moneyed class.

It is most often the case, then, that subtle messages and affirmations about the political, social and personal norms the dominant class wishes to endorse and inculcate are embedded in films that reach a wide segment of the population. Richard Dyer, Professor of Film Studies at King's College London, in his essay *Stereotyping (1)*, argues that one of the most common methods by which the dominant economic class attempts to reinforce the worldview it wishes to have embraced by the people, is the employment of stereotypes, which are often one-dimensional, static characterizations of people in various social roles or members of classes of people.

These stereotypes range from the flattering depiction of Hero or Faithful Servant, for example, to the cartoonish, demonic or depraved portraits of a “typical” member of a group of people whose behavior or values the dominant class finds antithetical to their interests. Dyer argues that learning to recognize the use of stereotypes in films is provides some self-defense against being oblivious to the attempt to influence one’s thinking and opinions.

One such group which has long been the target of such propaganda via stereotyping in films is the homosexual community. It was with the rise of capitalism that homosexuality began to be seen as leading to lifestyles that were not conducive to the provision of good, stable, obedient workers.

One of the most influential frameworks for analysis of human relations and the evolution of social norms and political structures from the late 19th century through the present has been Marxist analysis, based on the works of Karl Marx (1818-1883). Dyer employs Marxist analysis, with a nod to sociological terminology (role, individual, type, member) to illustrate that stereotyping in film can occur through the use of iconography “Iconography is a kind of short-hand—it places a character quickly and economically.

P. 32), structurally (“.... by the function of the character in the film’s structure {whether these be static structures, such as the way the film’s world is shown to be organized, materially and ideologically, or dynamic ones, such as plot. P. 33}, and through typing – the opposite of individuation of characters, instead ascribing of attributes to a person based on the idea they are a certain “type,” and we can understand all we need to know about them by being familiar with that type.

While we, generally, think of stereotyping in a negative light, one consideration clearly of great importance to Dyer is the idea that some aspect of typing –insofar as the typing reflects the positive attributes of gay people – should not be discarded entirely, since the recognition for the audience, of some level of commonality in the experience of being gay will serve to illuminate for viewers the struggles faced and the oppression experienced, hopefully leading to more support in the larger society for improved status and equalcivil rightsfor gay people.

In analyzing the use of stereotypes in *The Birdcage* (Mike Nichols, 1996), I will argue that, while the use of stereotypes by the filmmakers was clearly done with the intention of exposing the stupidity of so many of society's prejudices, the film does not entirely succeed in leaving the audience with anything close to realmotivationfor re-thinking approval for the established social idea that gays are somehow " other" and, at best, sympathetic clowns. The audience simply gets its laughs and goes home.

A remake of the French film *La Cage aux Folles* (Jean Poiret and Francis Veber, 1978), *Birdcage* is set in drag club called *The Birdcage* in South Beach, Florida. We learn very early in the movie that Armand Goldman, played by Robin Williams, owns the club and his partner, Albert, played by Nathan Lane, appears regularly as " Starina", the show's star drag queen. The plot of the movie develops when Armand's son Val becomes engaged to Barbara Keeley, the daughter of the hypocritical, ultraconservative Republican Ohio Senator Kevin Keeley, who is seeking re-election as the co-founder of the " Coalitionfor Moral Order. In light of the engagement, the young couple decides that it is finally time for the two families to meet.

However, Val requests that Armand and Albert must conceal their homosexuality for this meeting. Stereotyping is not just employed in presenting the characters in Birdcage; the sets also are highly stereotyped and function almost as additional characters. The film opens with the camera panning around from the outside the club, and the viewer gets a quick look at the outside environment.

They see bright lights in the night, palm trees, and pedestrians milling about the streets or waiting in line, all in scantily clad outfits and bathing suits. Sequences similar to this occur numerous times throughout the movie when showing the outside environment. Whether they're at the beach or in the streets, day or night, the surrounding people are dressed in skimpy clothing, small bikinis, or Speedos. This aspect of the environment is emphasized when the senator and his family are stuck in traffic right outside of the club, approximately seventy-five minutes into the film.

While all the cars are stuck in traffic, people are chaotically climbing in and out of open-roofed cars or roller-skating by. Women and men in skimpy and brightly colored bikinis, thongs, and Speedos continuously pass the senator's idled car while the family stares, aghast, and Mrs. Keely states, " This is less like Palm Beach than I imagined. " Despite the fact that no indication is given that there is any special occasion being celebrated in South Beach, the carnival-like atmosphere and setting depicts the gay generated environment in a one-dimensional, stereotyped manner.

While the sexual orientations of the pedestrians is not defined, these sequences are stereotypical cues that the sultry, brightly colored, free-wheeling Florida locale surrounding the drag club, an environment where all

the citizens present themselves flamboyantly and provocatively through their dress is to be seen as the typical environment for such a club, a “ gay paradise. ” The home of Armand and Albert, located above The Birdcage, is abundantly decorated with stereotypically gay ornamentation. Every available surface is purposefully adorned with lit candles, decadent glass sculptures, flouncy lamps, poufed pillows and homoerotic artwork.

The walls are either bright yellow or covered in obnoxious, loud, jungle-themed wallpaper. The significance of the iconographically gay character of the setting is emphasized when Val makes clear that the decor poses as big a pitfall for the senator’s visit, as does the presence of drag queen, Albert. Approximately thirty-six minutes into the film, Val insists that they redecorate prior to the Keeley’s arrival. Armand does not understand what is wrong with the decor, and Val points out to a nude sculpture of Neptune, a portrait of a man in drag without his wig, numerous primitive sculptures depicting exaggerated male erections.

At first, an offended Armand replies “ But this is art! ” and casually turns the erect sculptures around to face the wall, but eventually, out of love for his son, he gives in and clears his home of the many “ gay signaling” items he possesses, completely redesigning it into a setting similar to a Catholic monastery (Armand is Jewish.). The most ridiculously, screamingly stereotyped character in Birdcage of Armand’s spouse, the drag queen star, Albert.

It is no accident that the character, Albert, is the embodiment, not only of the drag queen type, but also of the worst stereotyped version of a woman: shrill, melodramatic, self-absorbed, vain, overly emotional, and prone to

hysterics, suspicion and jealousy. The viewer is introduced to him five minutes into the film while he is in a fit of hysterics. Albert, suddenly devastated by the recognition that he is no longer young and beautiful, and convinced Armand is losing interest in him, is extremely upset and refuses to prepare for his nightly stage performance.

The audience immediately sees that Albert is overreacting by the melodramatic way he behaves in this scene. As Armand attempts to enter the dressing room, Albert, who was previously hiding under some sheets, wailing and lamenting his sorrows to the couple's housekeeper Agador, squeals and barricades the door because he doesn't want Armand to see him in his "hideous, hideous, fat and hideous" state. Even in the chaos of Armand trying to break into the room, Albert's shrieks are completely audible over the ruckus. Once Armand enters the room, Albert begins to make melodramatic claim after melodramatic claim: "I'm in such pain!

It'll never pass! I hate my life. " " Never mind about me feelings. " " Don't use that tone to me...that sarcastic, contemptuous tone that means you know everything because you are a man, and I know nothing because I was a woman", " I was adorable once, young and full of hope and now look at me! I'm this short, fat, insecure middle-aged little thing! " Such behavior and sentiments are typically attributed to the stereotypical, emotionally unstable and utterly dependent woman, Albert's character embodies the classically drawn stereotype of a melodramatic, overly emotional, ridiculous gay man who might as well be considered a woman.

While Albert's raging hysterics, melodramatic behavior and "prissiness" was on full display in this particular scene, his diva-like self-absorption and

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hysterical reactions are carried throughout the entire film, with the exceptional surprise when he rises to the occasion and “ saves the day,” later in the film Fifty minutes into the film, in an attempt to win the favor of Barbara’s parents, Armand tries to teach Albert how to portray himself as a straight man. This attempt, however, is completely unsuccessful.

No matter how hard he tries, Albert cannot walk without swishing his hips while holding out the palms of his hands, his posture is too upright, and the register of his voice is too high. The fact that Albert is incapable of pretending not to be a flamboyant, over-the-top, and extremely feminine person tells the viewer that his “ gay-ness” is what completely defines his entire personality and every aspect of his behavior, and further sets the stereotype in stone.

Structurally, the characterization of the relationship between Armand and Albert is reduced by its definition as reflecting a cartoonish parody of the stereotypical traditionally defined roles played by “ husband and wife. ” While it is clear that the Albert has a more feminine personality than Armand, the film also depicts Albert as the “ mother” and caretaker of the household.

For example, twenty minutes into the film, Armand is silently reading the newspaper and drinking coffee in the kitchen, Albert is feverishly folding the laundry, babbling about matters such as how ratty Val’s shirt is and how he got a pork roast for dinner instead of fillet minion. This scene and many others show how this movie depicts the roles of a gay relationship as being identical to the stereotypical gender roles of a heterosexual couple. There is

no question that the creators of this film intentionally employed thoroughly stereotyped characters.

There is little to no individual character development whatsoever. However, since these stereotypes are so over-the-top and blatant, there must have been a conscious effort on the part of the filmmakers to feed into such stereotypes. This film is merely a lighthearted nod towards the ridiculous stereotypes that much of society today believes to be completely realistic depictions of homosexuals. Therefore, such obvious stereotyping does not outweigh the comedy or the quality of the film, but rather define it.