

## STUART HALL "ENCODING / DECODING" (1973)

Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79. London: Hutchinson, 1980. 128-138.

Hall begins by pointing out that traditionally, mass-communications research has "conceptualized the process of communication in terms of a circulation circuit or loop" (128). This model has been criticized for its "linearity – sender/message/receiver – for its concentration on the level of message exchange and for the absence of a structured conception of the different moments as a complex structure of relations" (128). Good Marxist, or more accurately, good Structuralist Marxist that he is at this stage of his career, Hall suggests that it is possible to conceptualise this process, rather, in an Althusserian fashion, that is

in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments - production, circulation, distribution / consumption, reproduction. This would be to think of the process as a 'complex structure in dominance', sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence. (128)

Hall's goal is to analyse what "distinguishes discursive 'production' from other types of production in our society" (128).

The 'object' of the practices referred to above, Hall argues, is "meanings and messages in the form of sign-vehicles of a specific kind organized, like any form of communication or language, through the operation of codes within the syntagmatic chain of a discourse" (128). The apparatuses, social relations and practices of production which comprise a social formation together inform, he argues, the precise form of the "symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of 'language'" (128) in this way. It is in this "discursive form" (128) that the circulation of the 'product' (any message) takes place. The process of signification thus requires "at the production end, its material instruments - its 'means' - as well as its own sets of social (production) relations - the organization and combination of practices within media apparatuses" (128). However, it is

in the discursive form that the circulation of the product takes place, as well as its distribution to different audiences. Once accomplished, the discourse must then be translated - transformed, again - into social practices if the circuit is to be both completed and effective. If no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no 'consumption'. If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect. (128)

Hall warns that

while each of the moments, in articulation, is necessary to the circuit as a whole, no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated. Since each has its specific modality and conditions of existence, each can constitute its own break or interruption of the 'passage of forms' on whose continuity the flow of effective production (that is, 'reproduction') depends. (129)

Hall stresses that while the content of a message is important, it is vital to "recognize that the discursive form of the message has a privileged position in the communicative exchange (from the viewpoint of circulation), and that the moments of 'encoding' and 'decoding', though only 'relatively autonomous' in relation to the communicative process as a whole, are *determinate* moments" (129). For this reason, a

"raw' historical event cannot, *in that form*, be 'transmitted' (129) by, say, a television newscast for the simple reason that events can only be signified, in this example, "within the aural-visual forms of the televisual discourse. In the moment when a historical event passes under the sign of discourse, it is subject to all the complex formal 'rules' by which language signifies" (129). In other words, the event in question

must become a 'story' before it can become a *communicative event*. In that moment the formal sub-rules of discourse are 'in dominance', without, of course, subordinating out of existence the historical event so signified, the social relations in which the rules are set to work or the social and political consequences of the event having been signified in this way. The 'message form' is the necessary 'form of appearance' of the event in its passage from source to receiver. Thus the transposition into and out of the 'message form' (or the mode of symbolic exchange) is not a random 'moment', which we can take up or ignore at our convenience. The 'message form' is a determinate moment. (129)

At other levels, however, of the communicative circuit, the form of the message comprises the "surface movements of the communications system only and requires, at another stage, to be integrated into the social relations of the communication process as a whole, of which it forms only a part" (129).

From this general perspective, Hall contends that we may crudely characterize, for example, the television communicative process as follows: the

institutional structures of broadcasting, with their practices and networks of production, their organized relations and technical infrastructures, are required to produce a program. Production, here, constructs the message. In one sense, then, the circuit begins here. Of course, the production process is not without its 'discursive' aspect: it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure. Further, though the production structures of television originate the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, 'definitions of the situation' from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part. (129)

Thus, in Marxist terms, "circulation and reception are, indeed, 'moments' of the production process in television" (130). The "consumption or reception of the television message is thus also itself a 'moment' of the production process in its larger sense, though the latter is 'predominant' because it is the 'point of departure for the realization' of the message" (130). Production and reception of the (television) message are "related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole" (130).

At a certain point, however, the broadcasting structures must "yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse. The institution-societal relations of production must pass under the discursive rules of language for its product to be 'realized'" (130). This initiates a "further differentiated moment, in which the formal rules of discourse and language are in dominance" (130). Before the message can "have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (130). It is this set of decoded

meanings which "‘have an effect’, influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioral consequences" (130). In a 'determinate' moment, the "structure employs a code and yields a 'message'" (130). At another determinate moment, the "'message', via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices" (130). The typical processes by which messages are received are "framed by structures of understanding" (130) and informed by "social and economic relations, which shape their 'realization' at the reception end of the chain and which permit the meanings signified in the discourse to be transposed into practice or -consciousness (to acquire social use value or political effectivity)" (130).

Hall stresses that there may be a discrepancy between the intended meaning and the interpreted meaning of the message in question: the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry -that is, the degrees of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange - depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the 'personifications', encoder-producer and decoder-receiver. But this in turn depends on the degrees of identity/non-identity between the codes which perfectly or imperfectly transmit, interrupt, or systematically distort what has been transmitted. (131)

The "lack of fit between the codes" (131) has much to do with the "structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences" (131) as well as the "asymmetry between the codes of 'source' and 'receiver' at the moment of transformation into and out of the discursive form" (131). In short, so-called "'distortions' or 'misunderstandings' arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange. Once again, this defines the 'relative autonomy, but 'determinateness', of the entry and exit of the message in its discursive moments" (131).

Hall ends by identifying three "hypothetical positions from which decodings of a televisual discourse may be constructed" (136). The first hypothetical position is that of the "*dominant-hegemonic position*" (136):

when the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say, a television newscast or current affairs program full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say that the viewer is *operating inside the dominant code*. This is the ideal-typical case of 'perfectly transparent communication' - or as close as we are likely to come to it 'for all practical purposes'. (136)

He continues:

Majority audiences probably understand quite adequately what has been dominantly defined and professionally signified. The dominant definitions, however, are hegemonic precisely because they represent definitions of situations and events which are 'in dominance' (global). Dominant definitions connect events, implicitly or explicitly, to grand totalizations, to the great syntagmatic views-of-the-world: they take 'large views' of issues: they relate events to the 'national interest' or to the level of geo-politics, even if they make these connections in truncated, inverted or mystified ways. The definition of a hegemonic viewpoint is (a) that it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture; and (b) that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy - it appears coterminous with what is 'natural', 'inevitable', 'taken for granted' about the social order. (137)

The second position is what Hall terms the "*negotiated code* or position" (137):

Decoding within the *negotiated version* contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules - it operates with exceptions to the rule. It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to 'local conditions', to its own more *corporate* positions. This negotiated version of the dominant ideology is thus shot through with contradictions, though these are only on certain occasions brought to full visibility. Negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics are sustained by their differential and unequal relation to the discourses and logics of power. (137)

Last but not least, Hall argues, it is possible for a viewer "perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a *globally* contrary way" (137-138): he/she

detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference. This is the case of the viewer who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages but 'reads' every mention of the 'national interest' as 'class interest'. He/she is operating with what we must call an *oppositional code*. One of the most significant political moments (they also coincide with crisis points within the broadcasting organizations themselves, for obvious reasons) is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the 'politics of signification' - the struggle in discourse - is joined. (138)