

Stuart Hall. "The work of representation." in the volume, *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*, Sage Publications, first edition 1997. pp 13-74.

Imaging Resistance Final Paper

The Work of Representation by Stuart Hall is an overview of the work of individuals such as Ferdinand de Saussure a linguist and semiotician from Switzerland and Michel Foucault a French philosopher, writer, and political activist. The work of Saussure and Foucault is focused on the way individual members of a society, societal groups, and society at large create meaning. As my first foray into this world of these theorists, I thought I would quickly be in over my head. Happily, the way Hall explains these complex ideas facilitates an easy reading and understanding of concepts that might otherwise be extremely challenging to the newcomer. Reading about these ideas lead to what felt like a cascading series of revelations that appeared to lie just beyond my everyday thoughts, making connections that now seem obvious, and lifting a veil of sorts from the way I view the myriad social constructs in which we all exist. Saussure's theories led me to think of William Gladstone's work on the use (or lack thereof) of the word blue in Homer's epic poem the Odyssey. Foucault made me think about the relationship between meaning making and power dynamics as it relates to current attempts to distort and control discourse and therefore truth and meaning in the media and by those who have more power than the rest. Understanding how representation and meaning are produced not only allows us to better understand how culture develops over time, but also how it can exist as a tool for a critical analysis of both culture and society. This is one important take-away of Hall's book.

The book begins with a general introduction to the concept of representation and its importance in conducting cultural studies. Representation essentially means using some form of language to represent an object, concept, or idea in a meaningful way so that it can be understood by someone else in the same culture as you. Representation, or the use of representation is broken into three different theories. The first being reflective: using language to

reflect on a meaning that already exists, the second intentional: language is used to express an individual's intended meaning, and the third constructionist: the creation of meaning through the use of language. In a sense the first two inform the third which the author spends the majority of the article talking about, and for good reason. The constructionist approach to representation seems to be the culmination of ideas found in the reflective and intentional approaches, as well as adding to these capacities the application of a cultural and historical lens to examples of representation, discourse, culture, knowledge, power, and meaning.

In the next couple of paragraphs I will describe the work that has been done in the field of representation as described by the author. I feel it would be difficult to discuss how Hall uses representation to show the relationship between discourse and power/knowledge in the context of a photographic or painted image. We have so far discussed what representation is, but to apply this critically, we must understand how meaning is created within the context of a specific culture. Hall begins by explaining how semiotics is the study of signs. These signs work as a system of words or images, and this system works along with another system that is our system of concepts. These systems work together to form our system of representation. Signs can be visual or what is called *iconic*, for example a drawing or photograph of a rock, or they can be *indexical* which is the written or spoken word "rock". For all of these systems to work together properly they must exist within a shared language or culture, sometimes referred to as a shared *code*. A great example that Hall uses to show the relationship between a way of life and the production of knowledge is the way Inuit people (who live their lives surrounded by various forms of snow as ground-cover and precipitation) have an astounding 34 specific words for different kinds of snow and ice conditions. For example, while we can roughly translate each of these concepts into English, we will never grasp these variations because of our comparatively limited English linguistic sign system. Hall then describes the reflective, and intentional models of representation and uses their shortcomings to explain the constructionist model of representation. Stated simply, the reflective model believes meaning is inherent in people,

places, and things; the process of naming something is a simple reflection of its true or “inner” nature. The intentional model by contrast, posits that the author or speaker is the creator of the meaning. Hall gives us an example by pointing out that English and French have entirely different words for tree (in French, *arbre*). And yet, their spelling and sound bear no relation to one another. Hall therefore concludes that the reflective model is flawed. The intentional model is also similarly flawed, since we know that an author or speaker must impart their knowledge about an object by using a shared *code* in order to be understood and for meaning to be generated. Using the shortcomings of these two models Hall explains that the constructionist approach is superior in so far as it understands that the material world does not inherently have meaning, but rather, meaning is created or constructed through the use of a shared sign system such as a common language. To give a concrete example, Hall talks about how traffic lights impart meaning to the viewer. Our shared cultural system for one reason or another chose the color green and red to represent the idea of stop and go for traffic lights. Green and red don’t have any inherent meaning that would cause us to choose them to manage traffic in this way; it is only the difference between the two that allows us to impart these ideas on those colors used in that context. The green may as well be yellow, and the red purple, or any other binary set of colors.

Hall follows this brief summation of the course of semiotics with a longer breakdown around the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, and Michel Foucault; and as a segway between the two theorists, he brings in the work of Roland Barthes. Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist born in 1857 who died in 1913. Though he is known as the “father of modern linguistics,” his views on representation and his models for language and representation were highly influential for establishing semiotics as a theory, especially regarding the way representation works within a spectrum of cultural fields (p. 30). For Saussure, ‘Language is a system of signs,’ whether these signs are spoken, written, drawn, or photographed. He called these *signifiers* and the corresponding thought, concept, or idea that these signifiers invokes is known as the

signified. He argued, as was discussed above regarding traffic lights, that *signifiers* do not contain an inherent meaning, instead their meaning is produced by the difference between *signifiers*. However critics of his pointed out (and rightfully so) that not all things exist as binaries. There is a spectrum or gradient between the differences in things: between black and white there is a range of gray values, between noon and midnight there is dawn, and dusk, etc. Being a linguist first and foremost, Saussure naturally broke from the intentional model of representation. He posited out two influential things about the relationship between language and semiotics as follows: meaning can only be generated if an author or speaker and their reader or listener share the same code which Saussure dubbed *langue*, and *parole* which would be the spoken or written word with meaning. Additionally since cultures and languages change with time so do the meanings produced by *langue* and *parole*. Aside from the criticism about the binary structure of *signifiers* and *signified*, critics felt that Saussure's focus primarily on creating a structured model (which lead to him being called a *structuralist*) inhibited him from diving deeper into the "more interactive and dialogic features of language" (p. 35). In addition, he did not have a way of explaining how language works with regard to the power relationship between different speakers, or speakers and listeners, or writers and readers. However, (and I agree with Hall on this point) Ferdinand de Saussure's work in dividing language into a structured system, identifying that a speaker and interpreter be required to use the same code or *langue* to make meaning, and understanding that there was a cultural aspect to all of it was invaluable to the work of future semioticians.

Bridging the gap between Saussure and Michel Foucault, Hall brings up the work of Roland Barthes. Barthes was a French theorist, essayist, and semiotician born in 1915 who died in 1980. Barthes's collection of essays entitled *Mythologies* applied semiotics to popular culture. Barthes translated the idea of *signifiers* and *signified* to aspects of culture and came up with *denotation* and *connotation*. Similar to Saussure's *signifiers*, Barthes's denotation is the first level of description we encounter, while the second level of meaning is that of *connotation*. Hall uses

the example of the difference between wearing a pair of jeans or a dress to elaborate: we understand jeans as casual wear to be worn when not engaging in high-brow social functions and a dress as the proper formal wear to do so. This new system of classification brings semiotics into the field of culture. When Hall talks about Barthes' essay "Myth Today" in *Mythologies* we begin to see the link between the early work of representation and Foucault's work on discourse, knowledge, and power. Barthes uses the example of the cover on the French magazine *Paris Match*. In this poster the visible *signifiers* are a black child wearing a uniform, saluting, with uplifted eyes. The deeper reading of this poster produces the message that despite France's colonial past, all of its citizens regardless of skin color or place of birth, are still loyal to the French flag and nation. In other words France still has a strong, yet benevolent militaristic and imperialist presence on the global stage.

In my opinion, it's at this point of the article where Hall is most interesting. Here, important aspects of the work carried out in the theoretical research of representation becomes most useful for contemporary readers. In 4.3 *From discourse to power/knowledge* Hall covers the late work of Michel Foucault who was concerned with the relationship between knowledge and power. Foucault asked, how is power formed through *discourse* and how does it produce a mutual agreement or social contract that is ultimately codified through our common language. It is here we begin to delve into ideas such as the power dynamics between viewer and subject and the greater social construction enfolding both positions. Foucault delved even further into applying semiotics to culture with this concept that meaning is created through *discourse*, rather than through the structure of language alone. Foucault was interested in "relations of power not relations of meaning" and "the various disciplines of knowledge in the human and social sciences. This is what he called the "subjectifying social sciences" (Hall, p. 43). An *episteme* is a way of talking about a topic, but it also specifies how and how not to talk about a topic, what is acceptable what is not etc., and these are found in the artifacts of a culture. When institutions or political apparatuses have a common manner of talking about or signifying something it

becomes a *discursive formation*. Foucault believed that the material world exists, but knowledge about it can only be produced through *discourse* which is apt to change as cultures do over time. For example, when speaking of mental illness he believed that the concept of madness is not an objective fact, and that only by creating a *discursive formation* about mental disorder does a society and its institutions produce “knowledge” of what it means to be mentally ill, or, who is mentally ill, and who is not etc. Stated best by Hall, “It (Foucault’s idea of discursive formation) saw knowledge as always inextricably enmeshed in relations of power because it was always being applied to the regulation of social conduct in practice (i.e. to particular bodies [p. 47], or subjects). Foucault believed power and knowledge were inextricably linked, and that although knowledge does not have to be “true,” if it is linked to a position of power then knowledge can become the “Truth.” This kind of power and knowledge becomes a *regime of truth*, that may or may not be objectively true, but which is perpetuated because it serves a status quo or system of power. The other aspect of power and knowledge that Foucault believed in was that everyone, no matter what their position is: –oppressor, oppressed or subject, subjugator– are bound up in *discursive formations* and this net of power. This relationship to power exists at all levels of society and culture as well for instance from the microcosmic scenario of a little community who has a Puritan view about the body and sexuality, to a macro-scale society, where organizations such as the MPAA rating system regulate motion pictures. At all levels of society and existence we’re bound up in these discursive formations. I do not agree with the critics of Foucault’s work who say he has tried to incorporate too much into *discourse* since by nature of its own theory is cognizant of the fact that things change over time. In my opinion the discursive model of how power and knowledge are formed can be applied to all levels of society, and all artifacts of a culture.

Hall finishes his essay by applying Foucault’s method to two works of art: Andre Brouillet’s, *A clinical lesson at La Salpetriere*, and Diego Velazquez’ *Las Meninas*, and specifically to identify who is the subject/subjugator, and what are the relationships to positions

of power here. To Foucault the subject is produced within *discourse* itself. Everyone exists in subject positions whether they be subject to someone else or subject to one's own inner monologue. The subject cannot be, and cannot make meaning outside of an *episteme* or *discursive formation*, therefore all people are subjected to the rules and conventions of a time and culture. Jean-Martin Charcot was a psychiatrist who specialized in the area of female hysteria. He would create a spectacle for his students by inducing hysterical fits in women and then treating them with hypnosis. Charcot often had scenes of these immortalized by having them turned into prints, paintings, and later photographs. These created an *episteme* about this condition (which we now know is a false one used to classify a variety of unrelated ailments) and his position as the leader of knowledge about it putting him in a position of power. In *Las Meninas* by Diego Velazquez we are encountered with an absolutely dizzying feat of identifying who the subject is, and where the positions of power lie. The title of the painting leads us to believe the subject(s) are the princesses in the painting. However, upon closer inspection one can follow the gaze of said subjects (as well as the painter) back to where we the viewer stand. Then, looking directly back into the room one sees the reflection of the royal couple in a mirror and one can deduce that we are them (but not really). The statement made by this painting can be read as the royal couple holding dominion over all the painting includes. Why stop there, when one can imagine that their dominion extends beyond the walls of the painting to everything in their domain.

In Horacio Legras' article "Seeing Women Photographed in Revolutionary Mexico," we encounter a fantastic use of the discursive method in analyzing the photos of *soldaderas* (or women soldiers). The context is the *discursive formation* around the Mexican Revolution, including the formation of a new order, heroic acts, the sacrifice of life, and a need to document this monumental happening. Legras notes that Leon Trotsky (who poetically met his end in Mexico City at the hands of an assassin) wrote that "art cannot capture ... the intrinsic overdetermination of history that makes revolutions both possible and conceivable." (Legras, p.

9). However, a fervent need to document, and in a way narrate and immortalize a *regime of truth* whether based in actual reality or a constructed one. A particularly interesting part of this article is when he applies the discursive method to the photograph of *General Ramon F. Iturbe with four women dressed as soldiers* (Mauricio Yuanez). When asking the question who is the subject of this photo, he also asks to what purpose was this photograph taken, and whose desires does it fulfill? The women in the photo were apparently referred to at the time as the generals "feminine staff," although Iturbe said there was no such thing as a "feminine staff." (Legras, p. 14) It turns out these were daughters of well-to-do members of Durango society, as can be imagined by a *connotative* reading of their perfectly white, lace dresses (certainly not the garb of a member of the hardworking and generally poor farming class who started the revolution). In the middle of the photograph, the young general bedecked in arms and bandoliers seems to be trying his best to preserve an aura of masculinity, while seated amongst a group of high society women posing as *soldaderas*. The whole image is, in a way, a farce, a *regime of truth* constructed in a photograph. Legras says that what speaks for the intention of this photo is what is lacking. These are not real revolutionaries (aside from the general), but it is an attempt by someone (the women, the photographer, their fathers?) to place them into the narrative of the revolution by inserting them into this artifact of the revolution. So, who is the subject? The seated general, the women, the weapons and other *signifiers* of a revolutionary, or what is left unsaid about the intentions behind this photograph?

As far as criticism goes, I don't really have much negative to say about Hall's work. I do share some of the same criticisms which he levels at earlier attempts to define and understand how representation works. However, just like the application of the discursive approach today to make sense of our world of meaning is ever changing, chasing a truth with a lower-case "t", the timeline of the work on understanding representation took a similar course. The earliest work in representation was necessary for what came later, just like the progressive theory of truth which is where this article ends up. Meaning is essentially made of a combination of social factors,

common understandings, codes, and cultural context as discussed before. Therefore it is in a state of constant flux and change requiring a more discursive approach over that of a constructionist approach. If anything, reading this article has pushed me to explore the subtleties in meaning behind every image, and advertisement. It has made me far more aware of the hidden interplay of power dynamics within the artifacts of our culture.

Bibliography

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