A critical analysis of stuart hall's text, encoding decoding

Beyond its literal meaning, a particular word may have a multitude of differing underlying meanings, and this is what Stuart Hall refers to as ' Semiotics', except that he calls the actual word in question the ' denotation', and the series of meanings which that word can represent the ' connotations'. In this essay, I will critically analyse Hall's model of ' encoding/decoding', and evaluate his methods in terms of its assumptions, implications, strengths and weaknesses.

In semiotics, ' denotation' and ' connotation' are terms describing the relationship between the ' signifier' and its ' signified', and Hall motions that the meaning of a word or text includes both the ' denotation' (for example, " lion"), and the ' connotation' (which may be, in this case, " England"). Hall dictates that the media is only the catalyst for damaging effects or actions by those influenced by it, and the consumers of any kind of media are therefore not directly affected by the images or ideals conveyed by them.

The discourse here is that there are many arguments, signs, symbols and ideas centred around one idea, and an individual has the power to produce their own perceived truths and versions of events in order to establish their own rationale. In his writings, Stuart Hall is more concerned with social totality than instantaneous perceptions and prejudice, and how media effects are created.

He admits that there is an influence of the media on both individuals and even social groups, but argues that these effects can be beneficial as well as detrimental, and by doing so he takes the ' media effects debate' and expands it into a much broader sphere of understanding. Similar to Hall's

text is the writing of Christine Geraghty in, " Representation and Popular Culture," where she discusses how typical media consumers believe what they are presented with, through both imagery and text, especially in those groups highly susceptible to its influences, such as women, children and religious believers.

In discussing the theory of popular culture and related media influence, Geraghty states: " What it suggests is a process whereby a pre-existing given, whether it be a physical object or philosophical abstraction, is translated, so that it can be comprehended and experienced by a recipient, an observer, an audience. " (1996: 265) This argument is heavily intertwined with Hall's theory of individual discourse and understanding, in that it is claiming, concurring with Hall, that the interpretation of the media is a subconscious, uncontrollable process which large social groups and individuals alike are susceptible to.

This appears to be the main crux of both arguments, albeit that Hall focuses on the individual, and Geraghty focuses mainly on the effect of the media on the rationale of larger social groups. Both theorists present the supposition that consumers of the mass media follow an ideological belief that everything that is seen on television, or read in a newspaper is real and ' correct'. The process of communication is not one involving the simple model of ' sender/message/receiver,' but in Hall's model it is one involving production, circulation, consumption and reproduction.

It is a ' complex structure in dominance1' where each level is relatively autonomous. Meanings are produced and organised as codes in a '

syntagmatic' discourse – by this, I mean one that unfolds over time and explains meaning by a system of differences and connotations. Yet, to concur with Hall, there can be no guarantees of the process' success in its translations in the circulations of the process of meaning. Hall recognises this fact when he states, " what are called ' distortions' or ' misunderstandings' arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange. "

This is perhaps related to one of the biggest problems with Hall's model of media communication – the fact that although it is perhaps all-inclusive in one sense, his analysis, including his diagram of the encoding and decoding of the media is perhaps restricted by the limitations it sets itself. I will examine Hall's model of semiotics in greater depth later on in my essay, when I approach the faults of semiotic analysis in general. In understanding the images presented within the media, one must touch upon a number of frameworks, a number of discourses that help to organise meaning.

During the process of recognition and understanding, one must relate visual signs, for example those of a photograph, to a wider set of understandings. Some of these may be signified directly from what is in that photograph, and others depend on inherited cultural knowledge that can be activated by the photograph. Once again, Geraghty relates to this theory when she says: " An active role is given to the audience in this process of understanding since meaning develops not on the photograph itself, but on the resources of the viewer… he viewer may be active, but is not free. " (1996: 270/1) Both the photographic and what Hall calls, the ' televisual' sign are complex, more so

in the case of the latter. It is itself constituted by a combination of two types of discourse, visual and aural.

However, since the ' televisual' media ultimately translates a three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional medium, it cannot become the actual concept or article it is signifying, or as Stuart Hall puts it, " The dog in the film can bark, but it cannot bite! " Both Hall and Geraghty argue that the decoding of an image from the media by a consumer is controlled by the cultural knowledge and understanding by that individual from previous experiences or forms of education, so where there may be only one intended understanding from the ' encoders' (i. e. the television companies), a multitude of connotations in meaning by the ' decoders' (i. e. the consumers of that media) may be deduced by a large number of separate individuals and social groups according to their heredity.

What the television companies seek to ' encode' to their consumers, is what Hall refers to as ' dominant or preferred meanings4. ' This is where Hall's argument comes into question to an extent, as any differences at the decoding end of the process of production and consumption are seen as ' misunderstandings,' and are referred to, as mentioned before, as dominant readings, under the guise of being errors.

In these instances in his text, Hall presents his argument as if it were a purely objective, scientific account rather than one of subjective interpretations, ' yet few semioticians seem to feel much need to provide empirical evidence for particular interpretations, and much semiotic analysis

is loosely impressionistic and highly unsystematic5. ' Much of Hall's writing in his text is preoccupied with classification.

Hodge and Tripp note, there can hardly be ' an exhaustive semiotic analysis… because a ' complete' analysis… ould still be located in particular social and historical circumstances (1986: 27). ' Stuart Hall classifies almost everything in his text, not just the themes of denotation and connotation, but even goes as far as to define social groupings as ones that follow the ' dominant code' (i. e. the popular opinion at the time), those who ' negotiate' that version (to make that idea work with their own beliefs), and those who take an ' oppositional' stance (in order to create a sense of personal identity).

This constant classification throughout the text, despite how well it engineers Hall's models of semiotics, also impairs his thesis somewhat by restricting any form of adaptation, and as a result, in intimately describing the social majority, neglects the minority who fall outside these groups, and distances his argument from any form of autonomy, and thus any form of freedom. However, this is probably the strongest point of Hall's argument as well, as this quote from an academic website states: " Hall does not investigate the concept of openness in detail.

He frames it between aberrant misunderstandings and perfect transparency: limits and parameters are central to all semiotic theorizations of openness: a message is not open to any decoding whatsoever, even when it is a so-called open work. 6″ As this statement suggests, Hall may vaguely touch upon the concept of the ' open' individual, but in doing so, he does still define the

majority of the encoding/decoding model, and by doing this he sets the boundaries of modern semiotics, yet to be exceeded by any other theorist's efforts.

In many ways the strength of his argument comes from the depth of his definitions of the majority, and as a result, his model of semiotics is extremely convincing. Semiotics makes us aware that the cultural values, with which we make sense of the world, especially in the context of the media world, are a multitude of conventions that have been handed down in social heredity by the members of the culture of which we are a part. ' It reminds us that there is nothing ' natural' about our values; they are social constructs that not only vary enormously in the course of time, but differ radically from culture to culture7.

Although things may exist independently of signs and signifiers we know them only through the mediation of such definitions. Whilst processes of mediation are relatively transparent to the typical consumer, through their inclusion in routine everyday practices, for example, watching television, adopting Hall's semiotic approach helps us to understand specific denotations in the media's encoding process, as well as aiding media companies to create means of televisual production that the typical consumer can comprehend and ' decode' in the ways in which the meaning is intended.

John Sturrock in his criticism of semiotics comments that the ' dramatic extension of the semiotic field, to include the whole of culture, is looked on by those suspicious of it as a kind of intellectual terrorism, overfilling our

lives with meanings8. This relates to the claim that theories of semiotics are ' imperialistic' in their methods, and this could be classed as another problem with Hall's model of encoding/ decoding, in that it lays out such a detailed analysis of the structures of methods of programming the media for ' correct' consumption by its consumers, that the unpredictability and perhaps the character of televisual broadcasting has disappeared with the uniform nature that it practices in contemporary society.

With the inclusion of Hall's ideas in the processes of broadcasting, restrictions on the nature of the encoding of programs mean that, although the results do not come guaranteed, there is much less scope than in the past to individually decode the messages of a program and create differing meanings from the majority of society. In favour of Hall's argument, however, it does provide an in depth insight into the theory of the ' effects debate'.

As mentioned earlier, Hall expands the argument into a much broader sphere of understanding, as ' pre-Hall', the popular belief was that the relationship between the media and the consumer was a straight line of effect. In saying this, I mean that this belief dictated that the consumer public instantaneously acted upon anything portrayed by the media, including violence, as the (in Hall's terms) ' encoded' violence was thought to automatically ' decode' as violence as well.

Stuart Hall's model of encoding/ decoding gave support to arguments in agreement with Schramm's circumspection: For some children under some condition, some television is harmful. For other children in other conditions,

or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children under most conditions television is probably neither harmful nor particularly beneficial. " (Schramm et al. 1961: 13) This argument gave credit to the theory that not enough leeway is given to children and other susceptible groups in modern culture. Society looks upon them as extremely venerable creatures that have very little individual restraint or control.

In fact, the opposite is true. As long as these groups receive the ' correct' upbringing and education so that they know the difference between wrong and right, violent films should have no more effect on these groups of today than the rest of the population of consumers. By using Hall's model to understand the nature of ' decoding' amongst those who consume media, theorists began to reach the conclusion that it is not the media who is at fault, but society itself and the nature of the heredity within it.

However, despite these advancements in the analysis of the ' effects debate,' the arguments have still to be quashed, meaning that there is a possibility of perhaps an even deeper analysis than Hall's, of the discourses of televisual programming and its translation by consumer society. It is clear from this analysis of Stuart Hall's theory of ' encoding/decoding', that, despite the possibility of a necessity for a deeper investigation of the subject, the argument provides a sound definition of the relationship between the media and its consumers. Equally, as there are merits in Hall's model, there are also faults, albeit superficial ones.

There is debate to whether Hall's arguments and restrictions hinder the production of media artistry, or provide excellent foundations for its effective

distribution amongst its consumers. There is evidence, although not empirically substantial, for both sides of this argument – on the one hand, Hall's model provides deep insight to once heavily debated issues in contemporary media, such as its help in developing the ' effects debate' further than once was possible, and providing a framework with which the media industry can accurately predict how their ' encoded' productions will be ' decoded' by the consumer population.

On the other hand, one could say that Hall's model restricts the media industry in its openness for experimentation and as a result, does not give the consumer the autonomy or freedom to construct his or her own meanings from the media presented to them. Whether it is beneficial or detrimental to the media industry, Stuart Hall's model of ' encoding/decoding' still remains, to this day, one of the foremost definitions of mediated semiotics encountered in contemporary media studies.