4 Structuralism and semiotics

Introduction

This chapter focuses on structuralist theories of media and the method of semiotics that emerged from theoretical themes which underpin structuralism. The work of a linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, will begin our discussion. Central to Saussure's theory of language is the distinction between synchronic and diachronic forms of analysis. Synchronic analysis explores language as a system at a given moment in time. It is a 'snapshot' form of analysis. Diachronic analysis, on the other hand, explores a language system as it evolves over a period of time. Etymology is a type of diachronic analysis. By contrast:

Structuralism as a whole is necessarily synchronic; it is concerned to study particular systems or structures under artificial and ahistorical conditions, neglecting the systems or structures out of which they have emerged in the hope of explaining their present functioning.

(Sturrock 1979: 9)

Unlike theories of modernity, structuralism is oblivious to history in its search for what language means and represents here and now. Semiotics is the method that serves this purpose. Semiotics analyses language as a whole system that structures its individual parts into distinct units of meaning. These units of meaning are referred to as signs. Since the system is constantly changing – new signs emerge, old signs become obsolete – what semiotics does is freeze the moment in order to analyse the system at work. Structuralism is the theoretical framework that seeks to understand how systems work to structure their individual parts at any given moment in time.

Language is the system par excellence, but inextricably linked to language are social, cultural, political and economic systems. Societies, like languages, structure their individual parts (i.e. citizens) precisely through processes of differentiation. Our social lives are structured by powerful agents of the social system such as governments. Media institutions are also powerful agents of the social system, but at the same time these agents are structured by the system too. As we will discuss in relation to structuralist theories of myth, ideology and hegemony, it is possible to theorize media texts (especially news) and the institutions that produce them as meaning-makers. The ways in which we perceive our social and cultural lives are shaped to a great extent
by what we see on television or read in newspapers or hear on the radio. Media — among other meaning systems — structure our lives. Of course, we do not simply accept what we see on television or read in the newspapers or hear on the radio. As Hall (1980) notes, we ‘decode’ media texts in different ways — sometimes we agree, sometimes we disagree. Nonetheless, the power to decide what stories, ideas, tastes and values are offered to us via media communications is structured unequally in favour of some interests (the ruling ones) rather than others (the interests of the silent majority). Hebdige’s subcultural theory reminds us that ideological and hegemonic power can be met with resistance, but for Foucault resistance is banal because we have internalized the power structures that oppress us.

**Saussure and Barthes: language and myth**

Before we can begin to understand structuralist theories of media, it is first necessary to probe in greater depth the theory of *language* outlined by Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* (first published in 1916). Saussure dismissed the notion that language simply reflects reality and instead suggested that language operates within its own system. This system *constructs* meanings within a language — meanings do not evolve in any natural or unique way. He called this approach semiology, which means the study of signs, but we will use the more common term for this approach, known as semiotics. A sign (word) such as ‘rat’, for instance, has two properties: a sound and an idea. But there is no connection between the sound and the idea: ‘the choice of a given slice of sound to name a given idea is completely arbitrary’ (Saussure 1966: 113). Even a sign like ‘sizzle’ — which some would cite as an example of onomatopoeia — has no meaning in relation to its sound, according to Saussure’s theory of language. Working as a system, the signs (i.e. words) that form a language are able to signify ideas precisely because they are different from other signs: ‘Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others’ (Saussure 1966: 114). So language is structured through difference, and different ideas depend on different sounds, or ‘the phonic differences that make it possible to distinguish this word from all others, for differences carry signification’ (Saussure 1966: 118).

For example, we can only understand the word ‘rat’ as a unit of meaning in the English language because its sound — as well as the idea or thing it signifies — differs from that of other words, such as ‘mouse’ or ‘cat’. If ‘rat’ was the word used to signify all of these ‘real’ things (i.e. mouse and cat as well as rat), its meaning would be imprecise and the whole system of language would have effectively failed to signify. However, in Latin there is only one term — ‘mus’ — to refer to both a rat and a mouse. Latin speakers, historically, have
not distinguished between the two creatures because they are 'indifferent' to Latin cultures. Likewise, Eskimos have several different words to describe 'snow' whereas English speakers only use one. As Umberto Eco rightly demonstrates in support of Saussure, 'any cultural phenomenon is also a sign phenomenon' (Eco 1973: 61). Cultural meanings are therefore specific to language systems that operate within the rules of semiotics.

Saussure shows, therefore, that any single sign (or word) in a language system is inextricably linked with the system as a whole. A word's 'content is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists around it' (Saussure 1966: 115). In order to illustrate this, he makes a distinction between the langue (the whole system or structure) and the parole (specific utterances within this system) of a given language. An utterance (parole) can only signify meaning effectively in its relation to the whole system of a language (langue). The analogy to a game of chess is a good one:

Each individual move in chess is selected from the whole system of possible chess moves. So we could call the system of possible chess moves the langue of chess. Any individual move in a game of chess would be parole, the selection of a move from the whole set of possible moves in the langue of chess.

(Bignell 2002: 8)

This distinction between langue and parole can be applied not only to the formal properties of a language (linguistics) but also to uses of language in social contexts. As Figure 4.1 shows, language usage is structured by a system that works along two axes: the syntagmatic (meanings which exist at a specific moment in time) and the paradigmatic (meanings which could be used to substitute existing ones). The examples in Figure 4.1 prove Saussure's point that changes in the paradigmatic features of a language system alter the whole structure of meaning as carried by the syntagmatic features, and vice versa.

Following Saussure, Roland Barthes's theory of myth is indebted to his predecessor's claim that a word's idea (its signified element) and its sound (its signifier element) are unconnected but together make up the total meaning of that word (its sign), which can only be understood in relation to all other signs – as in the relationship between langue and parole. However, Barthes extends Saussure's theory of language systems by applying it to the systems by which societies and cultures develop 'myths'. Societies and cultures, like languages, are considered to be structured by a 'whole' system that determines their individual parts. Of course, language as a system is also fundamental to how societies or cultures persist. But Barthes suggests that purely linguistic meanings are radically changed by social and cultural practices.

Barthes's most important work in this respect is Mythologies (first
PARADIGMATIC DIMENSION

(vertical substitutions of meaning)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Politicians</th>
<th>suffered</th>
<th>defeat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>have</td>
<td>expressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Courts</td>
<td></td>
<td>enjoyed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SYNTAGMATIC DIMENSION (horizontal substitutions of meaning)

Figure 4.1 Syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions of semiotics

published in 1957). Here he develops Saussure’s notion that meanings do not simply refer to real things. Furthermore, meanings can develop beyond their linguistic properties and take on the status of myths. Saussure suggested that the meaning of any term in a language system consists of a signifier plus a signified to give a sign (Figure 4.2).

SIGNIFIER (sound/phonetic quality) + SIGNIFIED (idea) = SIGN (total meaning)

Figure 4.2 Saussure’s semiotic theory of language

Barthes, on the other hand, introduces an extra dimension to this equation (Figure 4.3).

Language \{ SIGNIFIER + SIGNIFIED = SIGN

Myth \{ SIGNIFIER + SIGNIFIED = SIGN

Figure 4.3 Barthes’s semiotic theory of language and myth

Source: Barthes (1993: 115)

Language – the first order of signification in Barthes’s model – is therefore capable of generating a second order of signification called myth. This is the basis for Barthes’s approach to semiotics. In Figure 4.3 we can see how a sign (i.e. an idea plus a sound) such as ‘rat’, which operates in a first order of signification, becomes a signifier within a second-order ‘myth’ system of signification. In the case of rat, therefore, its sign in the ‘language’ order of
signification defines it as, say, 'a small rodent with a pointed snout'. However, its sign in the 'myth' order of signification would be extended to what rat means in particular social and cultural contexts. In English-speaking, Western countries such as Britain, rat as a myth signifies dirt, disease, the darkness of underground sewers and cellars. Most of the mythical meanings that we attach to 'rat' are negative, because most of us dislike or even fear the 'real' creature which the word signifies. The distinction between language and myth is sometimes equated to the distinction between denotation and connotation. Denotation is similar to a dictionary definition of a sign; connotation, by contrast, refers to the wider social and cultural meanings (myths) attached to a sign. Rat denotes rodent; it connotes much, much more (dirt, disease, and so on).

How does Barthes's semiotic – or structuralist – theory of myth apply to media? If we consider media to be an important – perhaps the most important – element within a social and cultural system of signs that are capable of generating myths, then clearly television, the internet and other mass communications can help to nurture some myths and not others. Barthes's best-known example of myth-making derives from a medium. He analyses the front cover of an issue of *Paris-Match*, a French magazine, which depicts a black boy in military outfit looking upwards and saluting what is assumed to be the French flag. Barthes reads this image (i.e. sign) as language and myth. On the level of language, the image denotes a black boy giving a French salute. Far more can be read into what this image connotes though. As a myth, Barthes suggests that the image signifies 'that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag' (Barthes 1993: 116). The image of the proud black soldier connotes a myth that France is a multicultural land of opportunity far from an oppressive colonizer of foreign peoples. Clearly, the meanings signified by this image as language and myth are only made possible in how they compare with the vast range of other meanings that an image like this might depict if it was configured differently. If the boy in the image is white and not black, the image's meaning is radically changed.

Barthes applies his theory of myth to several 'mythologies' associated with his native French culture, such as wine and Citroen cars. We can apply his theory to contemporary media mythologies, although we would need to stretch our imagination and thought processes in the same way that Barthes did. For instance, BBC News 24 occasionally broadcasts a pre-recorded trailer just before headlines appear 'on the hour'. In the order of a language system, the moving images shown denote foreign correspondents 'on location' in various parts of the world, reporting on different kinds of news stories (environmental, political, financial, and so on). A timer counts down the seconds from 30 to 0 in anticipation of the headlines that will immediately follow once the trailer has finished. But we can read this sequence of images...
on the more sophisticated order of a myth system. From this reading we can appreciate how the BBC News 24 channel – and its journalists – takes on connotations of a professional organization dedicated to fast, concise, global news coverage. BBC foreign correspondents are eyewitnesses to international affairs in a not dissimilar way that Britain has its metaphorical eyes on the world. We seek out evil, we search out poverty and disease – ‘we’ the BBC, like the country we represent, are a force for good, and a picture of fine health compared to the tyranny and misfortune of others. The timer, moreover, connotes punctuality and recency (i.e. BBC news values). News does not occur on the hour – in reality, it can occur at any time – but news is always made fresh by headlines ‘on the hour’ to reinforce the myth that news is always ‘new’. A timer that began counting down the seconds from 30 minutes to zero, rather than 30 seconds, would generate very different meanings (and myths) about BBC News 24. Instead of pandering to breaking news or the headline stories, we might read this news channel as dedicated to programming that deals with in-depth debate and dialogue.

The need to ‘stretch one’s imagination’ when identifying media mythologies points to a weakness with semiotics as a method and the structuralist theory it informs. Far from a science, semiotics is a highly subjective method of reading social and cultural myths that depends entirely on ‘the analytical brilliance of the semiotician’ (Couldry 2000a: 75). Moreover, as well as being unable to account for historical changes in language and myth, given its focus on synchronicity, semiotics is only able to analyse one particular text in isolation. What Nick Couldry calls the ‘total textual environment’ (Couldry 2000a: 73) – the multitude of media texts and technologies that we interact with on a daily basis – cannot be penetrated by semiotic analysis. Moreover, semiotics as a method of textual analysis is easily abused to make claims about how media texts signify meanings in everyday use. Angela McRobbie acknowledges that while semiotics can ‘read’ ideologies in media texts, it cannot account for the views of readers/audiences and therefore cannot ‘understand the complex and contested social processes which accompany the construction of new images [and texts]’ (McRobbie 1994: 165). Similarly in relation to semiotic analysis of music texts, Tia DeNora rightly interprets ‘an epistemologically naïve move’ in ‘a tacit shift in many semiotic “readings” of music ... from description of musical material and its social allocation to the theorization of that material’s “wider” significance and cultural impact’ (DeNora 2000: 28). Semiotics, given that it can only ever be one person’s interpretation of what they read, hear or see, is certainly not a substitute for empirical audience research.
Hall: Encoding/Decoding, ideology and hegemony

While he does not theorize ideology in any great depth, Barthes is nonetheless clear that myths contain ideological meanings. Myth and ideology in their structuralist senses are synonymous. For Barthes, the ideology of French colonialism is expounded in the proud salute of the black soldier. It is only by deconstructing a myth, or reading a myth's hidden meanings, that its ideology – the values and beliefs it upholds – can be exposed. The concept of 'ideology' has been theorized to a greater extent by structuralist Marxists who followed Barthes, such as Louis Althusser and Stuart Hall. Althusser (1971) argued that individuals in capitalist societies are governed by ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), including schools, legal systems, religious institutions, media communications, and so on. These ISAs espouse the ideologies of powerful political institutions, such as governments and armies, in implicit – not explicit – ways, and sometimes without knowing it. As such, individuals 'internalize' ruling capitalist ideologies, unaware that their lives are repressed by the very institutions that represent and serve them (and perhaps even employ them). As Hall notes, Althusser's approach was more sophisticated than the classical Marxist notion of top-down 'false consciousness' which suggests that ideology is imposed 'from above' by elite powers upon the unknowing masses (see discussion of Adorno in Chapter 7, for a version of classical Marxism). ISAs point to a 'more linguistic or "discursive" conception of ideology' (Hall 1996a: 30) that is reproduced by various institutional practices and structures. Ellis Cashmore (1994) applies Althusser's theory of ISAs to television by suggesting that viewers are given a partial view of the world that fits with state interests, even when television is not explicitly state-controlled.

Although Althusser's ideas can be applied to media, the ideas of Hall rework structuralist theories of ideology into a more systematic theory of media in their social and cultural functions. Hall also criticizes Althusser for assuming that ideology, although internalized, always functions to reproduce state capitalist values: 'how does one account for subversive ideas or for ideological struggle?' (Hall 1996a: 30). As such, Hall defines ideology in a discursive sense as 'ideas, meanings, conceptions, theories, beliefs, etc. and the form of consciousness which are appropriate to them' (Hall 1977: 320). Hall, along with other theorists associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) such as Dick Hebdige and David Morley, investigated the relationship between media and ideology through semiotic analysis of systems of signification in texts such as television news bulletins.

Hall's aim is to rediscover ideology as a concept that can reveal the 'politics of signification' engaged in by media institutions. His starting point
is to attack behaviourist theories of media. Models of 'effects' such as Lasswell's formula theorize the communication process in terms of its reliability (see Chapter 2). If messages are not received as intended, this is deemed to be a failure of communication in a technical or behavioural sense. According to 'effects' perspectives, messages are not received correctly if the channels of communication from sender to recipient are distorted by electrical or human error. The meanings of messages themselves, however, are assumed to be distortion-free and universally transferable. But Hall argues that behaviourist models are flawed because they fail to situate media communications within existing social, economic and political structures. The meanings of messages, then, are able to be distorted and interpreted differently than intended according to the positions of producers (senders) and audiences (recipients) within these existing structures:

Meaning is a social production, a practice. The world has to be made to mean. Language and symbolization is the means by which meaning is produced. This approach dethroned the referential notion of language, which had sustained previous content analysis, where the meaning of a particular term or sentence could be validated simply by looking at what, in the real world, it referenced.

(Hall 1982: 67)

Content analysis – a favoured method of cultivation theory (see Chapter 2) – is rendered meaningless by this structuralist perspective on meaning as social production. Like Saussure and Barthes, Hall states that meaning is a discursive process that operates within a language system (what he terms 'a set of codes') loaded with ideological signification. Media institutions and the texts they generate are important ideological dimensions through which we make sense of the world. Hall deploys semiotics to understand the sense-making process by which media transmit messages to their audiences. Language is encoded (made to mean something) by those with 'the means of meaning production' (i.e. producers) and is then decoded (made to mean something) by audiences (Hall 1982: 68). Hall extends this semiotic theory of meaning construction to a model of media production and reception which is commonly known as the Encoding/Decoding model (see Figure 4.4). Unlike the behaviourist approach to communication, Hall's Encoding/Decoding approach does not assume a direct correspondence between the meaning intended by a sender and how that meaning is interpreted by a recipient: 'The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical' (Hall 1980: 131). Hall is interested in how media represent – and misrepresent – what they mean rather than simply reflect those meanings on to their audiences. While encoding and decoding are separate processes, they are not arbitrary however. Encoding – at the phase of
production – operates within a set of professional codes such as technical competence and high-budget production values. These professional codes generate preferred meanings that 'have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized' (Hall 1980: 134). Television is the medium that Hall is most interested in. In Britain, for example, the BBC operates a professional code in line with their public service ethos. One characteristic of this code relates to political impartiality – the BBC is not allowed to take sides in party politics, otherwise it would be breaking its code and being unprofessional. The preferred meanings encoded by BBC news channels, therefore, include political impartiality. The assumption is that audiences will not decode partial political points of view if – as seems likely – they adopt the BBC’s preferred meanings in their news broadcasts.

While Hall argues that preferred meanings have considerable weight in determining how messages are decoded, they are not determinate. This returns us to a basic – but crucial – theory of structuralism that informs the Encoding/Decoding model: 'In a “determinate” moment the structure employs a code and yields a “message”; at another determinate moment the “message”, via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices' (Hall 1980: 130). It is precisely because encoding and decoding are distinct, determinate moments that explains why the meaning structures of media messages do not reflect reality in an objective sense. Rather, in the case of television, messages ‘can
only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual discourse' (Hall 1980: 129). A news event such as a state funeral, for instance, cannot represent the experience of actually being in attendance at the funeral – it can only signify what the experience is ‘really’ like through the meaning structures (rules and conventions) of the televisual message. Media – like language systems – are therefore structured through a set of rules, codes and values that make them highly prone to ideological constructions of meaning, or what Barthes refers to as myths. Television is a primary myth-maker – constructor of ideology – according to Hall. Processes of editing, selection, camera operation and arrangement are all important aspects of encoding, in the sense of determining preferred meanings (Hall 1975). BBC news bulletins – like those of all news institutions – are loaded with the ideology of professionalism. What news stories are selected, how each of them are edited, and how they are arranged in a particular order (of importance) are just some of the ways in which the ideology of media professionalism is constructed. Ideologies of newsworthiness do not correspond to an objective set of criteria. On the contrary, newsworthiness is highly subjective and differs from institution to institution, and from country to country. Nonetheless, wherever newsworthiness is practised (on the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and so on), it exerts its preferred meanings upon its audience.

Encoded ideologies such as media professionalism and newsworthiness, however, do not determine meaning structures at the reception phase. Hall (1980) identifies three categories of decoding through which audiences make meaning of media messages. First and in keeping with the professional code, an audience member may adopt a dominant code which accepts the preferred meanings intended by the encoders (i.e. media producers). A second possibility is that an audience member adopts a negotiated code which accepts some preferred meanings of a media production but opposes others. On a general level, the encoded meanings may be understood and endorsed; but on a more specific, local level these meanings and the rules within which they operate may be discarded, as audience members consider their own positions to be exceptions to the general rule. For example, a parent may adopt a negotiated code when decoding a television show about how to care for babies. He may agree that, in general, the best advice is to lay a baby on its back when placing her in a cot, but disagree in the case of his own son who only ever goes to sleep on his front. Third and finally, an audience member may completely disagree with the preferred meanings of media producers (both on a general and local level), in which case they adopt an oppositional code and ‘decode the message in a globally contrary way’ (Hall 1980: 137-8). For example, a news story might be encoded with an ideological message about how ‘yobbish’ youths are becoming more troublesome and anti-social than previous generations of young people. An oppositional code is adopted at the moment of decoding, however, by someone with historical knowledge of how young
people have committed crimes and been stigmatized by societies (including mass media institutions) since time immemorial.

Hall’s Encoding/Decoding model is an attempt to rediscover and rescue ideology from its conception as an omnipotent, oppressive force wielded by the ruling classes upon the masses in the classical Marxist tradition of political economy theory (as we will discuss in Chapter 7). However, in a later work (Hall 1996a), he refers to the ‘problem of ideology’ as a concept. Can it still withstand application in contemporary, democratic societies where media institutions appear free from the power of states and commercial forces? He acknowledges that Marxist theories of ideology tend to overemphasize ‘negative and distorted features’ of bourgeois capitalist ideas and values (Hall 1996a: 28). Nevertheless, he remains sympathetic to Marx’s original formulation of ideology and particularly to the related concept of hegemony formulated by Antonio Gramsci. Unlike many Marxist conceptions of ideology (such as that of Adorno), Marx did not suggest that ideology amounts to mass deception but rather to a situation where individuals within capitalist social systems can only gain a limited impression of the consequences of such systems, given ideological constraints imposed by ruling power elites. The best revision of Marx’s ideas, argues Hall, is by Gramsci who contends that ‘in particular historical situations, ideas “organize human masses, and create the terrain on which men [sic] move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.”’ (Hall 1996a: 41, quoting Gramsci 1971). Social, economic and political ideas create struggle, and ‘ideological struggle is a part of the general social struggle for mastery and leadership – in short, for hegemony’ (Hall 1996a: 43).

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony marks a fundamental shift from orthodox structuralism to a more discursive form of post-structuralism with which Hall, among others (see also discussion of Foucault in this chapter), has identified. Hegemony, unlike orthodox approaches to myth and ideology, is about a dialogue between those parts of a society with and without the power to signify their values and intentions:

[H]egemony is understood as accomplished, not without the due measure of legal and legitimate compulsion, but principally by means of winning consent of those classes and groups who were subordinated within it ... This approach could also be used to demonstrate how media institutions could be articulated to the production and reproduction of the dominant ideologies, while at the same time being ‘free’ of direct compulsion, and ‘independent’ of any direct attempt by the powerful to nobble them.

(Hall 1982: 85–6)

In other words, hegemony is a ‘give and take’ form of power. Hegemony works to permit dissenting voices and oppositional politics, but to suppress
the force of dissent and opposition by actively seeking out support from all parts of a society. Media are argued by Hall to encode their products in the interests of dominant hegemonic forces, such as governments: 'The professional code operates within the “hegemony” of the dominant code' (Hall 1980: 136). Even if media institutions do not intend to collude with the forces of hegemony that operate in their countries or regions, they are likely to do so unwittingly because hegemony – unlike more orthodox versions of ideology – is a function of existing social structures and practices; not an intention of individuals. Unlike behaviourists such as Katz and Lazarsfeld, who argued that media have no direct effects other than to reflect the consensus opinion among people, Gramsci and Hall would argue that media – in their propensity to serve a hegemonic function for the good of those in power – effectively manufacture consent (see discussion of Herman and Chomsky in Chapter 7 for a political economy approach to hegemony).

**Glasgow Media Group: the ideology of news**

Structural Marxist theories about the ideological function of media have been tested out using the types of empirical methods associated with media effects research. Perhaps the most substantial and innovative examples of this research were undertaken by the Glasgow Media Group (GMG) in Britain from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. Its findings suggest that Hall’s Encoding/Decoding model affords the audience too much scope for alternative decodings of television productions:

> although there are variations in audience ‘readings’ of media reports, there are pervasive common themes in the meanings conveyed to the public… even though people may ‘resist’ the dominant message of a programme, it may still have the power to convey facts and to influence their ideas, assumptions, and attitudes.  

*(Eldridge et al. 1997: 160)*

John Eldridge et al. have tended to theorize media – television news organizations in particular – as influential shapers of public opinion. Rather than take the ‘effects’ approach associated with behaviourism, though, the GMG has re-articulated the debate in terms of the power of media to serve the interests of dominant ideologies. Media are ideological in the sense that they present ‘a way of seeing and understanding the world which favours some interests over others’ (GMG 1982: 3).

Early studies by the GMG (1976; 1980; 1982) centred on television news reports. Extensive textual and image analysis – inspired by Barthes’s ideas about denotative and connotative levels of signification – revealed that ‘news
is not a neutral product ... it is a sequence of socially manufactured messages, which carry many of the culturally dominant assumptions of our society' (GMG 1976: 1). The GMG aimed to ‘unpack the coding of television news’ and ‘reveal the structures of the cultural framework which underpins the production of apparently neutral news’ (GMG 1976: 1). News presents itself as ‘truth’ and ‘fact’ under the guise of impartiality, as Hall argues, but GMG researchers set out to deconstruct what they called its ideology of truth and neutrality. Analysis of news programming was coupled with participant observation of newsroom practices at the two main news broadcasters in Britain, the BBC and ITN (Independent Television News). The ideological functions of television news are laid bare in the case of reports on industrial strikes by trade unions. Analysis revealed that these reports tended to represent bosses as rational, civilized individuals who were often invited to the studio for interviews, while trade union officials and ordinary workers were represented as emotive members of the baying crowd. In its worst forms, such media representation can construct a biased perspective in favour of dominant ideological interests (i.e. those of bosses) and ‘the laying of blame for society’s industrial and economic problems at the door of the workforce’ (GMG 1976: 267). While the workforce is never directly criticized by ‘neutral’ news presenters and journalists, its side of the argument is presented in a less favourable light by being ignored, sensationalized or juxtaposed with negative images of violent confrontation on picket lines – confrontation that it is often provoked by police and other state authorities.

Akin to Hall, the GMG’s argument is that the structural qualities of television news productions determine the ways in which they are interpreted as much as the content of specific news stories. News media therefore possess ‘the power to tell people the order in which to think about events and issues’ (GMG 1982: 1). As well as industrial disputes, the GMG’s later studies examined media representations of AIDS (Kitzinger 1993; Miller and Williams 1993), child abuse (Eldridge et al. 1997) and the women’s peace movement (Eldridge 1995) among other topics. In each case, news reports were deconstructed to reveal an ideological bias in the way media represented certain groups (police, politicians, doctors, and so on) in comparison to others (social workers, gay people, feminists, and so on). While the GMG’s research has achieved the status of a long and established tradition in media studies, its theoretical framework has been criticized in at least two respects. First, it could be argued that the ideological force of media is most pervasive and least noticeable in their capacity to be impartial, as suggested by Hall’s professional code. This would problematize the GMG’s claim about the ideological function of biased news reporting because

[the] ideological effectivity of the news is greatest in those areas where the operation of the particular signifying conventions which
constitute the news and seem to secure impartiality ... conceal the operation of another, ideologically loaded set of signifying conventions.

(Bennett 1982: 304)

In other words, the ideological bias of news reporting is powerful precisely because it is concealed under a veil of impartiality that not even the most perceptive textual analysis could detect. A second criticism of the GMG has been its lack of sustained audience research to test whether the ideological functions of media representations actually affect viewers' opinions at the point of reception and thereafter. This leaves the GMG open to an elitist fallacy given the underlying assumption – by not analysing audience responses – that media researchers and theorists can see what the rest of us cannot.

**Williamson: the ideology of ads**

Structuralist theories of ideology have also been applied to the meanings of advertisements. As well as selling goods, ads create structures of meaning, and ‘in providing us with a structure in which we, and those goods, are interchangeable, they are selling us ourselves’ (Williamson 1978: 13). Informed by structural Marxism, Judith Williamson analyses how ads structure the ways we identify with ourselves in relation to the goods they sell to us. She agrees with Althusser's idea that ideology is ‘internalized’ in individuals through subtle or subliminal techniques on the part of ISAs. The advertising industry, Williamson suggests, is a highly pervasive ISA in advanced capitalist societies. One such function served by the ideology of ads is to mask the reality of stark class differences in such societies – ads assume that we all have equal access to wealth and luxury. Not everyone can afford a Versace dress but ads – and advertisers – take insufficient account of different consumer needs and expenditure. Williamson does not attempt to measure the effects of advertising on people's spending habits. This kind of research – typical of the behaviourist approach – would be worthwhile to some extent but would tell us little about how advertising structures our values, tastes, ideas and expectations. Instead, Williamson's semiotic analysis of visual signs in ads reveals their hidden ideological meanings and intentions, and their ideological power to structure our lives.

How do ads signify their ideology? Williamson's answer to this question forms her main theoretical argument, which is that ads construct ideological meaning 'not on the level of the overt signified but via the signifiers' (Williamson 1978: 24). She states that 'the signifier of the overt meaning in an advertisement has a function of its own, a place in the process of creating
another, less obvious meaning’ (Williamson 1978: 19). In other words, beneath the surface images (i.e. signifiers) contained in any ad can be deciphered hidden meanings using the method of semiotics. So ads make their meaning through a play on the meaning of signifiers rather than what is being signified (i.e. the obvious product meaning). Perfume ads are a good example because they cannot give any ‘real’ meaning or information about the products they are selling. How can smell be signified without a sample of perfume being attached? In the absence of sufficient ‘signifieds’, then, perfume products are sold as ‘unique, distinctive’ consumables through less overt ‘signifiers’ – images that are attached to those products. Perfume becomes associated with a particular style or ‘look’ rather than – as it ought to be associated – with a particular smell. These signifiers that work their meaning beneath the surface messages of ads are drawn from what Williamson calls a ‘referent system’, akin to systems of signification that operate on the basis of differentiation (see discussion of Saussure). Referent systems make connections with images that are auxiliary to those of the product being advertised. There are, in fact, only superficial differences between one perfume product and another (even if one is ten times more expensive than another!), but referent systems are sophisticated enough to carve out and manufacture differentiation even so. As such, referent systems constitute the ideological dimension of ads.

Nonetheless, the ideology of ads can only work its ulterior motives – to mask class differences, to present a world of glamour and happiness, and so on – at the moment in which they are received by consumers. Williamson explains that the reason why the ideological meaning buried in an ad is so elusive and invisible to us is because ‘we constantly re-create it. It works through us, not at us’ (Williamson 1978: 41). As consumers, we are lured into accepting the ideology of ads because they afford us an active role in deciphering their hidden meanings. However, this ‘activity’ afforded to us is a phoney activity that sucks us into an ideological vacuum wherein we are prevented from seeing a real world – outside referent systems – of inequalities and hardship. One way that we re-create and, moreover, appear to embrace the ideology of ads is by falsely decoding them as personal invitations to improve ourselves. Ads appear, through their signifiers, to address us as individuals, but although we might sense that ads are addressed to lots of people – not just you or I – we are still inclined to accept the invitation: ‘You have to exchange yourself with the person “spoken to”, the spectator the ad creates for itself ... The “you” in ads is always transmitted plural, but we receive it as singular’ (Williamson 1978: 50). Ads provide consumers with an activity, but in partaking in this activity – substituting yourself for ‘you’ – we are internalizing its preferred ideology, which is that you ‘yourself’ can be like the ideal ‘you’ represented in the ad. So while ‘we can “consciously work” in “producing” a meaning ... we do not produce a genuine “meaning” but
consume a predetermined "solution"' (Williamson 1978: 75). Ads pretend to empower us but only in ways that they would wish us to be empowered.

They wish us to think 'I am empowered enough to convince myself that I am like the woman in that ad with men flocking around her as she sits in that expensive sports car, which I can also afford and am seriously thinking of buying . . . if I can arrange another high-cost loan with my bank!' The 'ideal' types in ads, moreover, are stereotypes that conform to dominant ideological representations of what 'success' and 'happiness' look like (see Qualter 1997). The 'people' represented by ads are typically white, affluent, relatively young and physically attractive but these shiny, happy people are hardly a typical cross-section of society.

Morley: the Nationwide audience

The work of David Morley, by contrast to Williamson's study of ads and the GMG's research on television news, has sought to apply structuralist theories of ideological meanings in media texts - particularly Hall's Encoding/Decoding model - to empirical research on media audiences. Echoing Hall and Williamson, Morley suggests in The Nationwide Audience (first published in 1980) that 'audiences, like the producers of messages, must also undertake a specific kind of "work" in order to read meaningfully what is transmitted' (Morley and Brunsdon 1999: 125). Moreover, media can only reproduce the dominant ideology of powerful institutions by articulating this ideology to audiences at their level of common sense. He states: 'I would want to insist on the active nature of readings and of cultural production. Too often the audience subject is reduced to the status of an automated puppet pulled by the strings of the text' (Morley and Brunsdon 1999: 273). This audience-centred approach to structuralist theory was tested out by the author in a research project that interviewed groups of people about their responses to viewing two episodes of Nationwide, a long-running BBC current affairs television programme that was popular in Britain between 1969 and 1984. These groups were selected according to occupational status and their opinions of what they viewed were applied to the three categories of decoding outlined in Hall's Encoding/Decoding model.

Morley's findings are interesting, even though - as he later recognizes (Morley 1992) - the somewhat contrived method of grouping people's presupposed ideological positions on the basis of their occupations alone must question the validity of these findings. What Morley found, however, to some extent met but in other ways contradicted expectations. Those groups who tended to decode the stories and debates presented by Nationwide using a dominant code (i.e. the preferred meaning suggested by the programme's representation of these stories and debates) included bank managers - who it
might be expected would accept the ideological consensus worked by the professional code at the encoding stage given their middle-class status – but also working-class apprentices (semi-skilled manual workers) whose subordinate position in existing social and economic structures might suggest that they were more than likely to disagree with dominant or preferred meanings. Moreover, those groups who tended to decode Nationwide using a negotiated code (accepting some preferred meanings but opposing others) included trade union officials and university art students, who it might be assumed would be more hostile (i.e. oppositional) to the capitalist-driven, dominant ideologies reinforced by the programme. While some groups decoded Nationwide along expected class lines, other groups confounded expectations. Moreover, a group of black further education students did not understand the programme's content, which would suggest the need for a further category of decoding – a rejection code.

Morley's subsequent critique of the Encoding/Decoding model is perhaps more significant than what he found initially by testing it out. He argues that 'in the case of each of the major categories of decoding (dominant, negotiated or oppositional) we can discern different varieties and inflections of what, for purposes of gross comparison only, is termed the same “code”' (Morley 1992: 118). There are three problems with the model that arise from its theoretical foundations in structuralism and semiotics. First, as referred to in the quote above, decoding suggests a single, universal form of audience interpretation of media texts which is surely too simplistic and fails to account for more subtle nuances in how we read the different meanings that a television programme or pop song might convey to us. The complexities of audience interpretations are tackled in a later study (see Morley 1986). Second, there is the issue of intentionality or what literary critics would term 'the intentional fallacy'. Morley notes that the Encoding/Decoding framework is too liable to confuse the ideological meanings of texts with the ideological motivations of producers or authors. Texts themselves are often difficult to interpret in terms of their political, economic or ideological bias without implicating producers with the self-same biases. And third, Morley criticizes the notion of preferred meanings that generate 'preferred readings'. Certain media texts, such as party political broadcasts and possibly news bulletins, can be deemed to present a preferred reading that corresponds more or less with that of the dominant ideology of ruling interests – politicians and big business owners, for example. However, it is much harder to identify the preferred reading of a fictional text such as a romantic film or pop song. Morley asks: 'is the preferred reading a property of the text, the analyst or the audience?' (1992: 122).

In order to bridge this institution-text-audience split in the ideological transfer of meaning, Morley suggests an alternative approach: genre theory (Morley 1992: 126–30; see also Morley 1980). Genre theory derives from the work of Stephen Neale who claims that 'genres are not to be seen as forms of
textual codifications, but as systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject’ (Neale 1980: 19). So media genres characterized by certain expectations and conventions – horror films, house music, reality TV, and so on – are defined as such by a combination of the institutions that produce them, the texts that constitute them, and the audiences that receive them. Genres ensure that audience expectations and prejudgements about a given media text are generally satisfied by industry production techniques. Genres, unlike the individual texts which make up their parts, are categorized by sets of rules determining how they signify meaning that must be governed by both producers and audiences in order for those genre categories to withstand signification. However, genres are not ideologically neutral in the way they generate this semiotic harmony between producers and audiences. On the contrary, certain genres demand different forms of ‘cultural competence’ (Morley 1992) that tend to result in one genre becoming associated with a different class of audience in comparison to another. In crude terms, working-class women are more likely to become culturally adept at watching soap operas, while middle-class men locate cultural competence in financial news programming. Morley’s discussion of cultural competence in relation to genre theory is not dissimilar to the concept of cultural capital (see discussion of Bourdieu in Chapter 9).

**Hebdige: Subculture**

The most systematic attempt to analyse oppositional forms of decoding in media and cultural texts is Dick Hebdige’s subcultural theory. Hebdige deployed semiotics to analyse how texts and products are used in subversive ways by youth subcultures such as punks and mods in order to articulate their resistance to dominant ideologies in society such as education and housing policies. Subcultures operate through a system of oppositional codes that offend the majority, threaten the status quo and contradict the ‘myth of consensus’ suggested by dominant codes (Hebdige 1979: 18). Like Hall, Hebdige applies hegemony theory to his structuralist approach, but his concern is more with how a dominant hegemony can be challenged and threatened rather than with how it maintains its hold over society. What does he mean by a ‘subculture’? Essentially, a subculture is an underground set of practices – usually working-class in character – that try to resist surveillance by the dominant culture (e.g. police) as well as incorporation into mainstream cultures. A subculture ceases to exist when it becomes incorporated, manufactured and packaged by commercial interests. Punks’ use of dog collars, bought from pet shops, cease to retain their subcultural value when they can be purchased for twice the price in High Street shops, for example.
According to Hebdige, subcultures resist surveillance and incorporation by creating their own internal logic of identity and cohesion. Two structuralist concepts underpin this claim: theories of homology and bricolage. Referring to Willis's (1978) theoretical conception, homology is defined as 'the symbolic fit between the values and lifestyles of a group, its subjective experience and the musical forms it uses to express or reinforce its focal concerns' (Hebdige 1979: 113). Music is only one media and cultural form, though, in which subcultures reinforce their concerns, fit together their values and experiences. Table 4.1 suggests some others, including the system of language (what Hebdige calls 'argot') adopted by a subculture to reinforce its unity.

Table 4.1 Homologies of youth subcultures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teds</th>
<th>Mods</th>
<th>Punks</th>
<th>Ravers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Rock 'n' Roll</td>
<td>Ska/reggae</td>
<td>Heavy rock</td>
<td>Acid house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothes</td>
<td>Suits</td>
<td>Smart casual</td>
<td>Homemade</td>
<td>Baggy casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects</td>
<td>Cigars</td>
<td>Scooters</td>
<td>Dog collars</td>
<td>Whistles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>Tobacco</td>
<td>LSD</td>
<td>Dope</td>
<td>Ecstasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argot/slang</td>
<td>'Spiv'</td>
<td>'About town'</td>
<td>'Piss off'</td>
<td>'Buzzin'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each subculture, therefore, becomes associated with a cultural inventory of signs and symbols that 'fit' with its identities and concerns. This model harps back to Saussure's syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions (see Figure 4.1). Through homologies, therefore, subcultures develop exclusive, sophisticated systems of signification that protect them from censure or exploitation by outsiders. However, we can see that any single change in the syntagmatic features of a subculture would affect the whole paradigmatic fit of meanings and therefore break down its homological unity. As soon as the scooter becomes a mass-produced fashion object not solely used by the mod subculture, the whole homological unity of mods is fractured.

Related to homology is the concept of bricolage (first used by Claude Lévi-Strauss, a well-known structural anthropologist) and its sister term appropriation. Bricolage and appropriation refer to the way in which symbolic objects are invested with subcultural meanings that are borrowed from different contexts and oppose their original functions. Dog collars had their original meaning - that is, as a pet-restraining device - opposed and appropriated by punks to fit with their own style and values. Similarly, 'the teddy boy's theft and transformation of the Edwardian style revived in the early 1950s by Savile Row for wealthy young men about town can be construed as an act of bricolage' (Hebdige 1979: 104). Black subcultures such as Rastafarians and rude boys had a particularly powerful influence on the bricolage practices
of white working-class youth subcultures in Britain during the post-war period. Rasta haircuts, fashions, reggae and cannabis use were all appropriated by white subcultures such as mods in order to express their resistance to dominant white, middle-class ideologies. This is akin to playing with Barthes’s interpretations of cultural myths to suit the interests of one’s own subculture while opposing the interests of the dominant culture. Mass media texts and the institutions that produce them are clearly outside the reference systems in which subcultures make their oppositional meanings. The most effective way to escape the ideological function of media, according to Hebdige’s subcultural theory, is to ignore them and seek out cultural forms untarnished by media exposure.

Despite the ongoing currency of 'subculture', concepts of homology and bricolage informed by theories of structuralism have undergone significant critiques and revisions since Hebdige’s account (see, for example, Clarke 1990; Muggleton 2000). This is partly because new media, information and manufacturing technologies have simultaneously widened and restricted the scope of opportunities for subcultures to evolve. Faster and more sophisticated production techniques enable the latest ‘subcultural’ music, fashion, argot, and so on to be delivered direct from ‘the street’ into multinational retail outlets in such short time that a subculture is strangled of its authenticity before it can get to its feet. Commercial incorporation is more ruthless now than in the days of mods and punks. Genre theory (see discussion of Morley) has been cited as an alternative to subcultural theory given its twin concerns with cultural production and (subcultural) consumption (Hesmondhalgh 2005). This would seem to offer a way forward in understanding how the internet provides new opportunities for subcultural networks such as Goths to form and disseminate their values and experiences among themselves (Hodkinson 2002). Indeed, the internet has served as a subcultural medium of consumption, albeit under the constant shadow of ‘offline’ production interests. For example, some resistant consumer practices – such as illegal music file-sharing – have become serious threats to dominant economic interests, such as major record companies. Whether or not unlawful music uploading and downloading is a subcultural practice in its strictest sense is open to debate, but it has certainly enabled consumers to wrestle authority from producers by forcing the music industry to explore alternative styles of music and forms of distribution (see Chapter 9 for further discussion of consumer authority in a non-subcultural sense).

**Foucault: discourse and disciplinary society**

The work of Michel Foucault is wide-ranging and not specifically concerned with media, so for the purposes of this book we will only focus on his theory
of discourse in relation to surveillance and what he called 'panopticism'. In The Archaeology of Knowledge (first published in 1972), Foucault (1989) argues that discourse functions to make certain ideas and values present while others are made absent. Discourse is an exclusionary mechanism that allocates power and knowledge to those whose ideas are included and made present at a given moment in time, but at the same time exerts power and knowledge over the excluded/absent. Foucault defines discourse - much like Saussure's definition of language - as a system of signification governed by rules that structure the ways in which we classify and divide its different meanings. He differs from orthodox structuralism, though, by investigating how discourse evolves and changes through history (diachronic rather than synchronic analysis) in the shape of discursive practices (see White 1979). The historical dividing of meanings and practices into different classifications (e.g. good versus evil) ensures 'the infinite continuity of discourse and its secret presence to itself in the interplay of a constantly recurring absence' (Foucault 1989: 25). People can gain power over time, for example, by articulating a discourse of goodness and comparing their own ideas with an absent discourse of evil that exists elsewhere. As such, discourse disperses power and knowledge by dividing and differentiating itself into what Foucault (1989) calls discursive formations.

An example of what he means by discursive formations is found in Discipline and Punish (first published in 1975):

Generally speaking, all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal); and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution (who he [sic] is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc.).

(Foucault 1995: 199)

The power to decide, say, what is criminal or lawful is exercised by those authorities who speak the discourse of law and construct discursive formations out of it. This is what Foucault means by 'binary division and branding'. The other half of the double mode that exercises control over individuals - the technique of discipline through coercion - is surveillance, the best example of which for Foucault is Jeremy Bentham's design for the 'panopticon'. Designed to be the ultimate prison, the panopticon consisted of a central watchtower in which prison officers could observe the inmates in their cells situated along several 'corridor-like' wings extended out from the watchtower. The cells housing the prisoners appear to those who watch over them 'like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic
mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately' (Foucault 1995: 200). Moreover, the panopticon's all-seeing power extends to situations in which the watchtower is unmanned. Inmates act and behave in a disciplined manner, as if they are being observed all the time, given their uncertainty as to whether they are or are not because they cannot see into the watchtower. As such, panopticism is both an externalized and an internalized power mechanism: 'Disciplinary power ... is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility' (Foucault 1995: 187). Like Foucault's theory of discourse, panopticism disperses power in such a way that it becomes instilled into individuals' consciousness until they accept the discursive formations exercised upon them (good versus evil, lawful versus criminal, and so on).

What has all this to do with media theory? Perhaps most importantly, Foucault argues that the panoptic mechanism of surveillance and its 'infinitesimal distribution of the power relations' extends beyond prison walls to what he calls the 'disciplinary society' (Foucault 1995: 216). As such, panopticism can be considered a function of media as well as prisons and other powerful social institutions. Television in particular has the power to make visible certain kinds of ideas and forms of behaviour to the exclusion of others. The powerful discourse of media – like the discourse of crime and punishment – classifies certain forms of knowledge as 'true' and others as 'false'. For example, health advice from medical 'experts' on television is classified as the truth in interplay with other, 'false' sources of medical knowledge – such as alternative medicines. At first, this seems awfully similar to the ideological function of media as theorized by Hall, Williamson and the GMG, among others. However, unlike ideology or hegemony which are forms of power external to individuals, Foucault conceives discourse as dispersed internally into individuals. There is no manufacture of consent, and there are no oppositional or resistant codes that individuals can adopt against a dominant culture, because power has been distributed everywhere into our hearts and minds. Media institutions – like hospitals, schools and other state apparatuses – disperse and distribute power through discourses that we cannot help but internalize and accept as 'the truth'. Big Brother (2000–) and the reality television genre could be theorized as a panoptic media discourse that includes and excludes certain types of participants. However, an Orwellian 'Big Brother' watching over us – the BBC is nicknamed 'Big Brother' by those who see its public service values as excessively paternal – does not fit with Foucault's theory of discourse as infinitesimally distributed. Rather, we are all 'little brothers' – or 'little sisters' – partaking in surveillance of ourselves and each other, regardless of what Big Brother might be doing.
Summary

This chapter has considered:

- Saussure's theory of language – 'differences carry signification' – that underpins structuralism and semiotics.
- Barthes's theory of myth that develops Saussure's ideas and shows how signs operate within wider social and cultural – not just linguistic – structures.
- Theories of ideology and hegemony in relation to the production and reception of media texts – with particular reference to the Encoding/Decoding model (Hall) and its subsequent application to media audience research (Morley).
- The ideology of news (GMG) and ads (Williamson) – and how the meaning structures of these media texts represent ruling political and commercial interests.
- Hebdige's subcultural theory, including concepts of homology and bricolage as forms of resistance to dominant cultural structures.
- Foucault's theory of discourse in relation to the disciplinary mechanisms of panopticism, and how this theory applies to media surveillance.

Further reading


Semiotics is clearly explained and then thoughtfully applied to examples from ads, magazines, newspapers, reality TV, cinema and interactive media. Accessible to all media students.


Even if somewhat dated, this edited collection of articles remains seminal to structuralist theories of representation, developed through semiotic, sociological, Foucauldian and gender perspectives. Suitable for all media students.

This edited collection of articles charts and evaluates the wide variety of Hall's work, from questions of ideology and hegemony to postmodernism and postcolonial theory (note that this book is also useful in relation to post-colonial perspectives discussed in Chapter 7). Recommended for advanced undergraduates and postgraduates.


A thoroughly critical analysis of structuralism, post-structuralism and the CCCS tradition of media and cultural theory. Suitable for all media students.