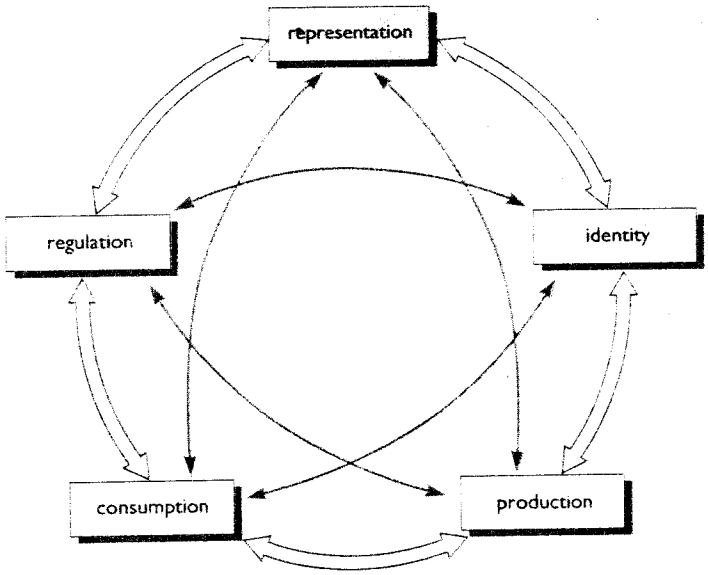
Stuart Hall # section 1

Representations

Introduction

Stuart Hall

The chapters in this volume all deal, in different ways, with the question of representation. This is one of the central practices which produce culture and a key 'moment' in what has been called the 'circuit of culture' (see **du Gay, Hall et al.**, 1997*). But what does representation have to do with 'culture': what is the connection between them? To put it simply, culture is about 'shared meanings'. Now, language is the privileged medium in which we 'make sense' of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged. Meanings can only be shared through our common access to language. So language is central to meaning and culture and has always been regarded as the key repository of cultural values and meanings.



The circuit of culture

But how does language construct meanings? How does it sustain the dialogue between participants which enables them to build up a culture of shared understandings and so interpret the world in roughly the same ways? Language is able to do this because it operates as a *representational system*. In language, we use signs and symbols – whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects – to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings. Language is one of the 'media' through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture. Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced. This is the basic, underlying idea which underpins all six chapters in this book. Each chapter examines 'the production and circulation of meaning through language' in different ways, in relation to different examples, different areas of social

* A reference in bold indicates another book, or another chapter in another book, in the series.

practice. Together, these chapters push forward and develop our understanding of how representation actually *works*.

'Culture' is one of the most difficult concepts in the human and social sciences and there are many different ways of defining it. In more traditional definitions of the term, culture is said to embody the 'best that has been thought and said' in a society. It is the sum of the great ideas, as represented in the classic works of literature, painting, music and philosophy – the 'high culture' of an age. Belonging to the same frame of reference, but more 'modern' in its associations, is the use of 'culture' to refer to the widely distributed forms of popular music, publishing, art, design and literature, or the activities of leisure-time and entertainment, which make up the everyday lives of the majority of 'ordinary people' – what is called the 'mass culture' or the 'popular culture' of an age. High culture versus popular culture was, for many years, the classic way of framing the debate about culture – the terms carrying a powerfully evaluative charge (roughly, high = good; popular = debased). In recent years, and in a more 'social science' context, the word 'culture' is used to refer to whatever is distinctive about the 'way of life' of a people, community, nation or social group. This has come to be known as the 'anthropological' definition. Alternatively, the word can be used to describe the 'shared values' of a group or of society – which is like the anthropological definition, only with a more sociological emphasis. You will find traces of all these meanings somewhere in this book. However, as its title suggests, 'culture' is usually being used in these chapters in a somewhat different, more specialized way.

What has come to be called the 'cultural turn' in the social and human sciences, especially in cultural studies and the sociology of culture, has tended to emphasize the importance of *meaning* to the definition of culture. Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of *things* – novels and paintings or TV programmes and comics – as a process, a set of *practices*. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings – the 'giving and taking of meaning' – between the members of a society or group. To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other. Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways.

This focus on 'shared meanings' may sometimes make culture sound too unitary and too cognitive. In any culture, there is always a great diversity of meanings about any topic, and more than one way of interpreting or representing it. Also, culture is about feelings, attachments and emotions as well as concepts and ideas. The expression on my face 'says something' about who I am (identity) and what I am feeling (emotions) and what group I feel I belong to (attachment), which can be 'read' and understood by other people, even if I didn't intend deliberately to communicate anything as formal as 'a

message', and even if the other person couldn't give a very logical account of how s/he came to understand what I was 'saying'. Above all, cultural meanings are not only 'in the head'. They organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects.

The emphasis on cultural practices is important. It is participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects and events. Things 'in themselves' rarely if ever have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning. Even something as obvious as a stone can be a stone, a boundary marker or a piece of sculpture, depending on *what it means* – that is, within a certain context of use, within what the philosophers call different 'language games' (i.e. the language of boundaries, the language of sculpture, and so on). It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we *give them a meaning*. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them. In part, we give things meaning by how we use them, or integrate them into our everyday practices. It is our use of a pile of bricks and mortar which makes it a 'house'; and what we feel, think or say about it that makes a 'house' a 'home'. In part, we give things meaning by how we *represent* them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them. Culture, we may say, is involved in all those practices which are not simply genetically programmed into us – like the jerk of the knee when tapped – but which carry meaning and value for us, which need to be *meaningfully interpreted* by others, or which *depend on meaning* for their effective operation. Culture, in this sense, permeates all of society. It is what distinguishes the 'human' element in social life from what is simply biologically driven. Its study underlines the crucial role of the *symbolic* domain at the very heart of social life.

Where is meaning produced? Our 'circuit of culture' suggests that, in fact, meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes or practices (the cultural circuit). Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we 'belong' – so it is tied up with questions of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups (which is the main focus of **Woodward**, ed., 1997). Meaning is constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part. In a sense, this is the most privileged, though often the most neglected, site of culture and meaning. It is also produced in a variety of different *media;* especially, these days, in the modern mass media, the means of global communication, by complex technologies, which circulate meanings between different cultures on a scale and with a speed hitherto unknown in history. (This is the focus of **du Gay**, ed., 1997.) Meaning is also produced whenever we express ourselves in, make use of, consume or appropriate cultural 'things'; that is, when we incorporate them in different ways into the everyday rituals and practices of daily life and in this way give them value or

significance. Or when we weave narratives, stories – and fantasies – around them. (This is the focus of **Mackay**, ed., 1997.) Meanings also regulate and organize our conduct and practices – they help to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed. They are also, therefore, what those who wish to govern and regulate the conduct and ideas of others seek to structure and shape. (This is the focus of **Thompson**, ed., 1997.) In other words, the question of meaning arises in relation to *all* the different moments or practices in our 'cultural circuit' – in the construction of identity and the marking of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct. However, in all these instances, and at all these different institutional sites, one of the privileged 'media' through which meaning is produced and circulated is *language*.

So, in this book, where we take up in depth the first element in our 'circuit of culture', we start with this question of meaning, language and representation. Members of the same culture must share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world, and thus to interpret the world, in roughly similar ways. They must share, broadly speaking, the same 'cultural codes'. In this sense, thinking and feeling are themselves 'systems of representation', in which our concepts, images and emotions 'stand for' or represent, in our mental life, things which are or may be 'out there' in the world. Similarly, in order to *communicate* these meanings to other people, the participants to any meaningful exchange must also be able to use the same linguistic codes – they must, in a very broad sense, 'speak the same language'. This does not mean that they must all, literally, speak German or French or Chinese. Nor does it mean that they understand perfectly what anyone who speaks the same language is saying. We mean 'language' here in a much wider sense. Our partners must speak enough of the same language to be able to 'translate' what 'you' say into what 'I' understand, and vice versa. They must also be able to read visual images in roughly similar ways. They must be familiar with broadly the same ways of producing sounds to make what they would both recognize as 'music'. They must all interpret body language and facial expressions in broadly similar ways. And they must know how to translate their feelings and ideas into these various languages. Meaning is a dialogue – always only partially understood, always an unequal exchange.

Why do we refer to all these different ways of producing and communicating meaning as 'languages' or as 'working like languages' ? How do languages work? The simple answer is that languages work *through representation*. They are 'systems of representation'. Essentially, we can say that all these practices 'work like languages', *not* because they are all written or spoken (they are not), but because they all use some element to stand for or represent what we want to say, to express or communicate a thought, concept, idea or feeling. Spoken language uses sounds, written language uses words, musical language uses notes on a scale, the 'language of the body' uses physical gesture, the fashion industry uses items of clothing, the language of facial expression uses ways of arranging one's features, television uses digitally or

electronically produced dots on a screen, traffic lights use red, green and amber – to 'say something'. These elements – sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes – are part of our natural and material world; but their importance for language is not what they *are* but what they *do*, their function. They construct meaning and transmit it. They signify. They don't have any clear meaning *in themselves*. Rather, they are the vehicles or media which *carry meaning* because they operate as *symbols*, which stand for or represent (i.e. symbolize) the meanings we wish to communicate. To use another metaphor, they function as *signs*. Signs stand for or *represent* our concepts, ideas and feelings in such a way as to enable others to 'read', decode or interpret their meaning in roughly the same way that we do.

Language, in this sense, is a signifying practice. Any representational system which functions in this way can be thought of as working, broadly speaking, according to the principles of representation through language. Thus photography is a representational system, using images on light-sensitive paper to communicate photographic meaning about a particular person, event or scene. Exhibition or display in a museum or gallery can also be thought of as 'like a language', since it uses objects on display to produce certain meanings about the subject-matter of the exhibition. Music is 'like a language' in so far as it uses musical notes to communicate feelings and ideas, even if these are very abstract, and do not refer in any obvious way to the 'real world'. (Music has been called 'the most noise conveying the least information'.) But turning up at football matches with banners and slogans, with faces and bodies painted in certain colours or inscribed with certain symbols, can also be thought of as 'like a language' – in so far as it is a symbolic practice which gives meaning or expression to the idea of belonging to a national culture, or identification with one's local community. It is part of the language of national identity, a discourse of national belongingness. Representation, here, is closely tied up with both identity and knowledge. Indeed, it is difficult to know what 'being English', or indeed French, German, South African or Japanese, *means* outside of all the ways in which our ideas and images of national identity or national cultures have been represented. Without these 'signifying' systems, we could not take on such identities (or indeed reject them) and consequently could not build up or sustain that common 'life-world' which we call a culture.

So it is through culture and language *in this sense* that the production and circulation of meaning takes place. The conventional view used to be that 'things' exist in the material and natural world; that their material or natural characteristics are what determines or constitutes them; and that they have a perfectly clear meaning, *outside* of how they are represented. Representation, in this view, is a process of secondary importance, which enters into the field only after things have been fully formed and their meaning constituted. But since the 'cultural turn' in the human and social sciences, meaning is thought to be *produced* – constructed – rather than simply 'found'. Consequently, in what has come to be called a 'social constructionist approach', representation is conceived as entering into the very constitution of things; and thus culture

is conceptualized as a primary or 'constitutive' process, as important as the economic or material 'base' in shaping social subjects and historical events – not merely a reflection of the world after the event.

'Language' therefore provides one general model of how culture and representation work, especially in what has come to be known as the *semiotic* approach – *semiotics* being the study or 'science of signs' and their general role as vehicles of meaning in culture. In more recent years, this preoccupation with meaning has taken a different turn, being more concerned, not with the detail of how 'language' works, but with the broader role of *discourse* in culture. Discourses are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society. These *discursive formations*, as they are known, define what is and is not appropriate in our formulation of, and our practices in relation to, a particular subject or site of social activity; what knowledge is considered useful, relevant and 'true' in that context; and what sorts of persons or 'subjects' embody its characteristics. 'Discursive' has become the general term used to refer to any approach in which meaning, representation and culture are considered to be constitutive.

There are some similarities, but also some major differences, between the *semiotic* and the *discursive* approaches, which are developed in the chapters which follow. One important difference is that the *semiotic* approach is concerned with the *how* of representation, with how language produces meaning – what has been called its 'poetics'; whereas the *discursive* approach is more concerned with the *effects and consequences* of representation – its 'politics'. It examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practised and studied. The emphasis in the *discursive* approach is always on the historical specificity of a particular form or 'regime' of representation: not on 'language' as a general concern, but on specific *languages* or meanings, and how they are deployed at particular times, in particular places. It points us towards greater historical specificity – the way representational practices operate in concrete historical situations, in actual practice.

The general use of language and discourse as models of how culture, meaning and representation work, and the 'discursive turn' in the social and cultural sciences which has followed, is one of the most significant shifts of direction in our knowledge of society which has occurred in recent years. The discussion around these two versions of 'constructionism' – the semiotic and discursive approaches – is threaded through and developed in the six chapters which follow. The 'discursive turn' has not, of course, gone uncontested. You will find questions raised about this approach and critiques offered, as well as different variants of the position explored, by the different

authors in this volume. Elsewhere in this series (in **Mackay**, ed., 1997, for example) alternative approaches are explored, which adopt a more 'creative', expressive or performative approach to meaning, questioning, for example, whether it makes sense to think of music as 'working like a language'. However, by and large, with some variations, the chapters in this book adopt a broadly 'constructionist' approach to representation and meaning.

In Chapter 1 on 'The work of representation', Stuart Hall fills out in greater depth the theoretical argument about meaning, language and representation briefly summarized here. What do we mean by saying that 'meaning is produced through language'? Using a range of examples – which it is important to work through for yourself – the chapter takes us through the argument of exactly what this entails. Do things – objects, people, events in the world – carry their own, one, true meaning, fixed like number plates on their backs, which it is the task of language to reflect accurately? Or are meanings constantly shifting as we move from one culture to another, one language to another, one historical context, one community, group or sub-culture, to another? Is it through our systems of representation, rather than 'in the world', that meaning is fixed? It is clear that representation is neither as simple nor transparent a practice as it first appears and that, in order to unpack the idea, we need to do some work on a range of examples, and bring to bear certain concepts and theories, in order to explore and clarify its complexities.

The question – 'Does visual language reflect a truth about the world which is already there or does it produce meanings about the world through representing it?' – forms the basis of Chapter 2, 'Representing the social: France and Frenchness in post-war humanist photography' by Peter Hamilton. Hamilton examines the work of a group of documentary photographers in France in the fifteen years following World War II, all of whom, he argues, adopted the representational approach, subject-matter, values and aesthetic forms of a particular practice – what he calls the 'humanist paradigm' – in French photography. This distinctive body of work produced a very specific image and definition of 'what it meant to be French' in this period, and thus helped to give a particular meaning to the idea of belonging to French culture and to 'Frenchness' as a national identity. What, then, is the status, the 'truth-claims', which these documentary photographic images are making? What are they 'documenting'? Are they to be judged by the authenticity of their representation or by the depth and subtlety of the feelings which the photographers put into their images? Do they reflect 'the truth' about French society at that time – or was there more than one kind of truth, more than one kind of 'Frenchness', depending on how it was represented? How did the image of France which emerges from this work relate to the rapid social changes sweeping through France in that period and to our (very different?) image of 'Frenchness' today?

Chapter 3, 'The poetics and the politics of exhibiting other cultures' by Henrietta Lidchi, takes up some of the same questions about representation, but in relation to a different subject-matter and a different set of signifying

practices. Whereas Chapter 2 deals with the practice of photography – the production of meaning through images – Chapter 3 deals with exhibition – the production of meaning through the display of objects and artefacts from 'other cultures' within the context of the modern museum. Here, the elements exhibited are often 'things' rather than 'words or images' and the signifying practice involved is that of arrangement and display within a physical space, rather than layout on the page of an illustrated magazine or journal. Nevertheless, as this chapter argues, exhibition too is a 'system' or 'practice of representation' – and therefore works 'like a language'. Every choice – to show this rather than that, to show this in relation to that, to say this about that – is a choice about how to represent 'other cultures'; and each choice has consequences both for *what* meanings are produced and for *how* meaning is produced. Henrietta Lidchi shows how those meanings are inevitably implicated in relations of *power* – especially between those who are doing the exhibiting and those who are being exhibited.

The introduction of questions of power into the argument about representation is one of the ways in which the book consistently seeks to probe, expand and complexify our understanding of the process of representation. In Chapter 4, 'The spectacle of the "Other"', Stuart Hall takes up this theme of 'representing difference' from Chapter 3, but now in the context of more contemporary popular cultural forms (news photos, advertising, film and popular illustration). It looks at how 'racial', ethnic and sexual difference has been 'represented' in a range of visual examples across a number of historical archives. Central questions about how 'difference' is represented as 'Other', and the essentializing of 'difference' through stereotyping are addressed. However, as the argument develops, the chapter takes up the wider question of how signifying practices actually structure the way we 'look' – how different modes of 'looking' are being inscribed by these representational practices; and how violence, fantasy and 'desire' also play into representational practices, making them much more complex and their meanings more ambivalent. The chapter ends by considering some counter-strategies in the 'politics of representation' – the way meaning can be struggled over, and whether a particular regime of representation can be challenged, contested and transformed.

The question of how the spectator or the consumer is drawn into and implicated by certain practices of representation returns in Sean Nixon's Chapter 5, 'Exhibiting masculinity', on the construction of new gendered identities in contemporary advertising, magazines and consumer industries addressed especially to men. Nixon asks whether representational practices in the media in recent years, have been constructing new 'masculine identities'. Are the different languages of consumer culture, retailing and display developing new 'subject-positions', with which young men are increasingly invited to identify? And, if so, what do these images tell us about how the meanings of masculinity are shifting in late-modern visual culture? 'Masculinity', Nixon argues, far from being fixed and given biologically, accretes a variety of different meanings – different ways of 'being'

or 'becoming masculine' – in different historical contexts. To address these questions, Nixon not only expands and applies some of the theoretical perspectives from earlier chapters, but adds new ones, including a psychoanalytically informed cultural analysis and film theory.

In the final Chapter 6, 'Genre and gender: the case of soap opera', Christine Gledhill takes us into the rich, narrative world of popular culture and its genres, with an examination of how representation is working in television soap opera. These are enormously popular sources of fictional narrative in modern life, circulating meanings throughout popular culture – and increasingly worldwide – which have been traditionally defined as 'feminine' in their appeal, reference and mode of operation. Gledhill unpacks the way this gendered identification of a TV genre has been constructed. She considers how and why such a 'space of representation' should have opened up within popular culture; how genre and gender elements interact in the narrative structures and representational forms; and how these popular forms have been ideologically shaped and inflected. She examines how the meanings circulated in soap operas – so frequently dismissed as stereotypical and manufactured – nevertheless enter into the discursive arena where the meaning of masculine and feminine identifications are being contested and transformed.

The book uses a wide range of examples from different cultural media and discourses, mainly concentrating on *visual* language. These examples are a key part of your work on the book – they are not simply 'illustrative'. Representation can only be properly analysed in relation to the actual concrete forms which meaning assumes, in the concrete practices of signifying, 'reading' and interpretation: and these require analysis of the actual signs, symbols, figures, images, narratives, words and sounds – the material forms – in which symbolic meaning is circulated. The examples provide an opportunity to practise these skills of analysis and to apply them to many other similar instances which surround us in daily cultural life.

It is worth emphasizing that there is no single or 'correct' answer to the question, 'What does this image mean?' or 'What is this ad saying?' Since there is no law which can guarantee that things will have 'one, true meaning', or that meanings won't change over time, work in this area in bound to be interpretative – a debate between, not who is 'right' and who is 'wrong', but between equally plausible, though sometimes competing and contested, meanings and interpretations. The best way to 'settle' such contested readings is to look again at the concrete example and to try to justify one's 'reading' in detail in relation to the actual practices and forms of signification used, and what meanings they seem to you to be producing.

One soon discovers that meaning is not straightforward or transparent, and does not survive intact the passage through representation. It is a slippery customer, changing and shifting with context, usage and historical circumstances. It is therefore never finally fixed. It is always putting off or 'deferring' its rendezvous with Absolute Truth. It is always being negotiated

only work if they are to some degree shared, at least to the extent that they make effective 'translation' between 'speakers' possible. We should perhaps learn to think of meaning less in terms of 'accuracy' and 'truth' and more in terms of effective exchange – a process of *translation*, which facilitates cultural communication while always recognizing the persistence of difference and power between different 'speakers' within the same cultural circuit.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE WORK OF REPRESENTATION

Stuart Hall

Contents

1 Representation, meaning and language

In this chapter we will be concentrating on one of the key processes in the 'cultural circuit' (see **du Gay, Hall et al.**, 1997, and the Introduction to this volume) – the practices of *representation*. The aim of this chapter is to introduce you to this topic, and to explain what it is about and why we give it such importance in cultural studies.

The concept of representation has come to occupy a new and important place in the study of culture. Representation connects meaning and language to culture. But what exactly do people mean by it? What does representation have to do with culture and meaning? One common-sense usage of the term is as follows: 'Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people.' You may well ask, 'Is that all?' Well, yes and no. Representation *is* an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It *does* involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things. But this is a far from simple or straightforward process, as you will soon discover.

How does the concept of representation connect meaning and language to culture? In order to explore this connection further, we will look at a number of different theories about how language is used to represent the world. Here we will be drawing a distinction between three different accounts or theories: the *reflective*, the *intentional* and the *constructionist* approaches to representation. Does language simply reflect a meaning which already exists out there in the world of objects, people and events (*reflective*)? Does language express only what the speaker or writer or painter wants to say, his or her personally intended meaning (*intentional*)? Or is meaning constructed in and through language (*constructionist*)? You will learn more in a moment about these three approaches.

Most of the chapter will be spent exploring the *constructionist* approach, because it is this perspective which has had the most significant impact on cultural studies in recent years. This chapter chooses to examine two major variants or models of the constructionist approach – the *semiotic* approach, greatly influenced by the great Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, and the *discursive* approach, associated with the French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault. Later chapters in this book will take up these two theories again, among others, so you will have an opportunity to consolidate your understanding of them, and to apply them to different areas of analysis. Other chapters will introduce theoretical paradigms which apply constructionist approaches in different ways to that of semiotics and Foucault. All, however, put in question the very nature of representation. We turn to this question first.