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Mark Dixon is an Eduqas A Level examiner and Head of Media and Film at Durham
ixth Form Centre. He is also a freelance author, and has written for *The Guardian*,
ES, *Media Magazine* and *Teach Secondary* as well as authoring a range of digital
esources for Eduqas Media.

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MEDIA STUDIES

Media Theory for A Level

The Essential Revision Guide

Media Theory for A Level

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6   Representation

Stuart Hall

When we talk about representation effects we are prompting discussion about the way the media makes us think about the world at large: the way, for instance, that the news reconstructs real world events or the processes that television and film adopt to tell us about the world beyond our screens.

Hall's contribution to our understanding of the representational processes used by the media cannot be underestimated. His academic work helped to construct an understanding of how the media industry and the routine production practices employed by the media shape our understanding of the world in subtle and not so subtle ways. Hall, too, shone a critical light on media's ability to manufacture and reinforce social inequalities through stereotyping practices and, more importantly, he articulated an understanding of how those representations might be subverted and resisted.

Concept 1: media representation processes

The 'reflective' school of thought

One view of the media is that television, print and online products reproduce the real world without distortion. According to this view, the media acts like a mirror – capturing and relaying a faithful version of the real world to audiences everywhere. The joy of consuming media, in this sense, is that it can take us to places we have never been to. The media provides a window to the world, a faithful and accurate means of reproducing information that we might ordinarily be unable to access. Accordingly, the job of media professionals – news journalists, documentary film-makers and so on – is to observe and record

these inaccessible wonders so that audiences at home can similarly bear witness.

Representations are built via codes

Stuart Hall acknowledges the imitative capacity of the media. The camera, he tells us, reflects the real world around us. If we record or photograph a countryside scene, a version of that scene is created in which the trees, grass and land are accurately depicted. But, Hall reminds us, professional media representations offer us more than just imitation. Media products, he tells us, are composed through the selection and ordering of visual, aural and linguistic elements. Media products, in this sense, do not offer us accurate or objective reflections of the world at large, but rather produce versions of reality that are shaped by the subjective viewpoints of their creators.

A news story, for example, might tell us about a real world event, but the way that story is relayed – through the use of linguistic effects or supporting imagery – produces an edited version of the event reported. News stories are encoded using stylised features – through the deployment of emotive headlines or edited imagery that audiences have learned to decode as a result of their previous exposure to similar imagery. In this sense, the media not only contributes to our understanding of the world, but also uses a shared symbolic language that audiences have internalised through their media experiences.

A portrait image that is photographically composed, for instance, tells us a great deal about the individual depicted – whether that subject is powerful or powerless or, indeed, whether we are meant to like that person at all. A fourth wall break can connote authority. A subject who directs their gaze to the left of the frame might infer regret or nostalgia, while a high angle composition might suggest vulnerability or helplessness. Importantly, Hall tells us, our ability to decode such imagery is not innate – we are not born with an innate knowledge of photographic composition. Our ability to decode the meanings of media imagery, Hall argues, is produced as a result of our continued exposure to media products. The media, therefore, both uses and shapes our shared understanding of the real world around us.

Box 6.1 Apply it: identify representational codes used in your newspaper set texts

News stories create representations of real world events through the careful selection of language, layout and design. These representations can:

*   Lead audiences to a predetermined opinion – so, perhaps, they form the same conclusions as those people who make the media.
*   Reflect the editorial viewpoint of the paper – offering a politically biased view of real world events.
*   Be sensationalised to create reader engagement.

Use the following questions to help you decode the representational effects constructed by the front pages of your set text newspapers:

Language analysis

*   Do headlines or copy use emotive language? What connotations do specific words convey?
*   Are stories constructed using emotive semantic fields? (A semantic field is a collection of words that are themed – for example, war, gun, enemy, destruction.)
*   Does the article use sibilance (repeated 's' sounds), cacophony (harsh or discordant sounds) or euphony (gentle sounding words – usually the letters 'f' or 'l')? What connotations are constructed as a result of these sounds?
*   Is the story reported from a specific point of view?
*   Who is the reader guided to empathise with in the story?
*   Who is the reader guided to blame?
*   Are statistics or facts used to create impact?
*   What kinds of sources are used to evidence the story and with what impact?

Image use

*   Why has the image used been chosen? What story does it tell?
*   How does the composition of the image assist in creating a specific effect? Think in terms of eyelines, tilt and camera distance.
*   What connotations are suggested through body language, setting, costuming and colour use?
*   How is the meaning of the image anchored by accompanying captions or headers? How does this secondary information guide the reader towards a predetermined conclusion?

Layout

*   Are keywords emboldened or underlined?
*   What colours dominate within the layout and with what connotative effect?
*   How does layout suggest the importance of the news event reported?

Concept 2: stereotypes and power

Hall tells us that media products do not just reflect reality; their meanings are shaped by media producers, and, in turn, those versions of reality have a profound influence on audience thinking. In this sense, Hall argues, we can say that media products have a discursive effect – that, in other words, they produce ideological inferences for their readers and viewers.

Hall was particularly interested in the media's portrayal of black masculinity, initially investigating newspaper reportage in the 1970s in which black mugging stories were a staple feature. He concluded that media stereotyping during the period firmly linked black masculinity with criminality and, moreover, that the media's reliance upon such stereotypes had a profound and complex effect on wider social attitudes.

Stereotypes, Hall tells us, are important for the following reasons:

*   **Media stereotypes reflect social attitudes.** Hall argues that media stereotypes reflect the wider views of society – by studying the media we can gain a sense of what wider society thinks about those groups that are routinely stereotyped. Hall's work looking at black youth culture identified, for instance, that the stereotypes associating black males with criminality reflected a deep-seated anxiety about real black crime. Journalists who reported black criminality were therefore reacting to the genuine fears of their audiences when writing and publishing these stories.
*   **The media contributes to the construction of stereotypes.** Media stereotyping, Hall further argues, significantly shapes social attitudes regarding specific groups. For example, he concluded that black youths internalised the criminal stereotypes constructed by the media in the 1970s and, as a result, engaged in real criminal

activities. The demonisation of black youths by newspapers also meant that white audiences were reluctant to trust young black males, significantly hampering their employment prospects and further channelling young black men to engage in criminal activities to survive.

- **Stereotypes can be reshaped or repurposed**. Hall also identifies that media stereotypes can be guided towards positive representations of key groups. Indeed, the changing nature of black representation within the news since the 1970s is testament to the idea that media stereotyping processes are highly fluid.

The essentialising, reductionist and naturalising effect of stereotypes

Hall suggests that stereotypes are incredibly powerful and that their widespread use guides audiences to associate specific groups with negative traits. Stereotypes, moreover, infer a symbolic social power, helping to position some groups as social outcasts or, as Hall suggests,

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Box 6.2 Know it: why are stereotypes used by the media?

Stereotypes are universally deployed by the media for the following reasons:

- **To help audiences to understand characters.** Using stereotypes provides a visual shortcut that enables audiences to instantly decode a character through their use of body language, costume, etc.
- **To help audiences build character relatability.** Stereotypes build audience empathy, sympathy or antipathy very quickly.
- **To signpost audiences.** Stereotypes help audiences gain a sense of the potential direction of a story – we understand that certain events will happen to certain characters: princesses will fall in love, the dumb blonde dies first in a horror movie, the action hero will probably triumph in spite of the adversity faced.
- **To reinforce genre expectations.** All genres contain stock characters – indeed an audience's enjoyment of a given genre might be driven by those characters.

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as social 'others' (Hall *et al.*, 2013, 215). Stereotyping is thus a form of symbolic violence for Hall – an efficient means to hold socially undesirable groups at bay without using actual physical action. Stereotypes, Hall argues, are an unusually effective means of social control because:

1   **They increase the visibility of key groups:** stereotypes usually depict groups by referencing a few key negative features – behaviours, physical appearance, etc. This highlights the undesirability or 'otherness' (Hall *et al.*, 2013, 215) of those groups and enables that sense of 'otherness' to be efficiently communicated to the rest of society.

2   **They infer that negative traits are natural:** the few key ingredients used to construct stereotypes are repeated so often by the media that those ingredients are interpreted by audiences to be fixed or natural qualities. So stereotypes infer that black males are *naturally* lawless or that dumb blondes will *always* lack intelligence.

Hall argued that stereotypes accordingly construct 'closure and exclusion' (Hall *et al.*, 2013, 248) – fixing the boundaries of what or who is socially acceptable, while excluding all other groups from that elite list. Criminalising stereotypes, for instance, exclude black males from the normal workings of society. And because social exclusion produces limited access to economic or cultural power, stereotyped groups find that they cannot fight the representations that are constructed on their behalf. This self-reinforcing process leads Hall to conclude that media stereotyping creates power 'circularity' (Hall *et al.*, 2013, 251): those groups with economic or cultural power get to create stereotypes, while the impact of those stereotypes makes it impossible for powerless groups to escape from their lowly social positions.

Box 6.3 Research it: identify common negative stereotypes used by the media

Work with your classmates to research how the following groups are represented by the media – use your own knowledge to supplement the list of areas suggested for study.

Ability-based stereotypes
Possible areas to investigate: groups with physical disabilities, representations based on mental health.

Age-based stereotypes
Possible areas to investigate: teen girls, teen boys, teen subcultures, representations of the elderly.

Class/region-based stereotypes
Possible areas to investigate: chavs, single mothers, northerners, southerners, working class representations.

Ethnic stereotype
Possible areas to investigate: black males, black women, Asian men, Asian women, Muslim groups.

Gender-based stereotypes
Possible areas to investigate: dumb blondes, the bitch boss, the nerd, fathers, mothers.

LGBTQ stereotypes
Possible areas to investigate: gay men, butch gays, lesbian stereotypes, transgender representations.

For each of the six clusters above:

- Identify the visual cues, costume codes and behaviours that are used by the media to construct the stereotypes within each group.
- Identify media products that contain examples of the stereotypes listed above.
- Create a collage for each of the groups above to help you identify the visual cues used to construct stereotypes.
- What ideas do stereotypes naturalise about the groups they represent?
- Which social groups are immune to media stereotyping?

Challenge question
- In what ways do the stereotypes uncovered help to maintain the economic powerlessness of the groups they represent?

Visit essentialmediatheory.com to explore the stereotypes listed above in more detail.

Box 6.4 Apply it: what are the effects of the stereotypes used in your set texts?

Identify stereotypes constructed of marginalised groups

- What stereotypes do your set texts create?
- What behaviours or physical traits are used to identify those stereotypes?
- What ideas about these groups are naturalised as a result of the use of stereotypes?
- How do the stereotypes used reinforce existing power structures or help to exclude key groups from mainstream society?

Diagnose the 'internalising' effect of stereotypes

- How might set texts lead marginalised groups/individuals to internalise attitudes or beliefs that are problematic?
- What particular moments in the set texts might lead to internalisation?

Challenge question

- In what ways might we apply Hall's idea of 'power circularity' to give further weight to arguments regarding the potentially negative impacts of media stereotyping?

Exemplar: *Humans* **(Eduqas).** Despite Channel 4's public service broadcasting oriented commitment to promote media diversity, we can clearly see that *Humans* uses stereotyped characters that Stuart Hall would highlight as problematic. Non-white characters are excluded from power in the show – for example, the robot prostitutes working alongside Niska are mostly black, while the Turkish gangster responsible for selling black market synth technology is depicted using an ethnically-oriented criminal stereotype. Of course, these characters are invoked to create instant visual cues for the audience and, while these moments might reflect wider social inequalities, they also exclude these groups

from hegemonic power. Hall points, too, to the potential for stereotyped behaviours (in this case, black prostitution and Turkish criminality) to be internalised by audiences in a way that reinforces those behaviours as ethnically appropriate social norms. Exclusion of those groups as 'others' by a white audience might also lead, Hall tells us, to their economic exclusion in the real world.

Further set text help is available for a range of products for all exam boards at www.essentialmediatheory.com

Transcoding and stereotypes

Despite the difficulties faced by socially excluded groups in combating negative stereotypes, Hall tells us that cultural representations are not fixed. The process of representation, he infers, can be thought of as a battleground with each articulation of a stereotype reaffirming or reseeding the suggestions of that stereotype. Representations can and do change as a result, their meanings slide or transform. Stereotypes, moreover, can be contested and their meanings subverted.

Hall also argues that media producers who want to challenge pre-existing negative stereotypes generally have to graft new meanings onto those existing presentations. He calls this process 'transcoding' and outlines three important strategies that makers can deploy to shift negative stereotypes:

1   **Appropriated representations:** by commandeering negative stereotypes, their meaning, Hall argues, can be devalued or subverted from within. Grime musicians, for instance, have purposefully appropriated the hyper-masculine stereotypes associated with black masculinity – repurposing this negative stereotype as iconic or powerful for black male audiences.

2   **Counter typical representations:** this process combats negative connotations by producing representations that reverse stereotypes. Butch gay representations, for instance, invert traditional gay representations of male homosexuality as weak or passive.

3   **Deconstructed representations:** stereotype contestation can be achieved by narratives that explain or lay bare the effects of stereotyping. Deconstructed stereotypes add contextual information that

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Box 6.5 Apply it: locate moments of transcoding in your set texts

Use the following questions to help you locate moments of transcoding in your set texts and to diagnose their effect on audiences:

*   Do any of your set texts appropriate stereotypes? Where is appropriation most visible and what effect might its use have on the product's audience?
*   Which products deploy countertypes? What stereotypical attributes are reversed by the countertype? What assumptions are challenged through the use of countertypes?
*   Which products explore stereotypes through deconstructions? Which moments in the text could you use to provide the examiner with relevant analysis?

Exemplar: Adbusters, Christian Louboutin Spoof advert (Eduqas). Adbusters contests mainstream ideologies through the use of deconstructed transcoding (Stuart Hall). The Louboutin parody, in many senses, conforms to conventional mainstream representations in its depiction of black Africa as poverty stricken. Yet the juxtaposition of that stereotype against symbols of first world privilege moves the reader beyond a simple analysis of black Africa as 'other' to white Europe – indeed, the superiority of those Western values is implicated as the cause of African poverty and immediately undercuts the standardised meanings of the stereotype used.

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helps audiences to forge a deeper understanding of the experiences of the group being stereotyped. In *I, Daniel Blake*, for instance, class-based stereotypes are relayed in the form of the single mothers, Geordies and chav-based representations. The film, however, humanises those characters through emotive backstory.

Table 6.1 Speak Stuart Hall

Closure and exclusion	Media products exclude groups from power through representation – often positioning marginalised groups as unworthy of social inclusion.
Internalisation	Internalisation occurs when marginalised groups or individuals assimilate the behaviours of negative media representations.
Naturalisation	The repeated messages of stereotypes can suggest that groups have a natural disposition towards certain types of behaviour.
Other	Hall suggest that those groups who are excluded from social power or mainstream culture are 'others'.
Power circularity	Stereotypes both reflect social attitudes and simultaneously reinforce them through processes such as internalisation.
Symbolic violence	Stereotypes that demonise groups offer us moments of symbolic violence in that they lead to the exclusion of those groups from social power.
Transcoding	Refers to representation strategies that contest stereotypical assumptions.

Table 6.2 Stuart Hall: ten minute revision

Concept 1: *media representation processes*

- The media does not mirror real world events but produces an edited version of the events depicted.
- Media representations are constructed through codes – through the use of language, imagery, layout, sound and editing.
- The media plays a vital role in shaping our views of the wider world.

Concept 2: *stereotypes and power*

- Stereotypes are used by media producers to create instant characterisation.
- Stereotypes reduce social groups to a few key traits or visual cues and suggest that those groups are naturally inclined towards a specific set of negative behaviours.
- Stereotypes are mostly found where there are huge social inequalities. They exclude and demonise groups in a manner that both reflects and reinforces social hierarchies.
- Social groups can internalise the behaviours inferred by stereotypes.
- Stereotypes can be contested through transcoding strategies.

Two theorists who might challenge Hall's thinking

- **Stuart Hall:** Strangely, Hall himself provides a substantial challenge to his own ideas. His reception theory model suggests that audiences can resist the effects of the media through the production of oppositional or negotiated readings.
- **Paul Gilroy:** In many senses, Gilroy's work picks up on many of the themes of Hall's arguments – his analysis, however, suggests that racial stereotypes are framed by the wider cultural/historical forces of Empire. This makes it much harder for the media to contest black stereotypes because they are so deeply entrenched within the British cultural psyche.