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Media, Culture and Society 1983 5, 179–197

The encoding/decoding model: criticisms and redevelopments for research on decoding

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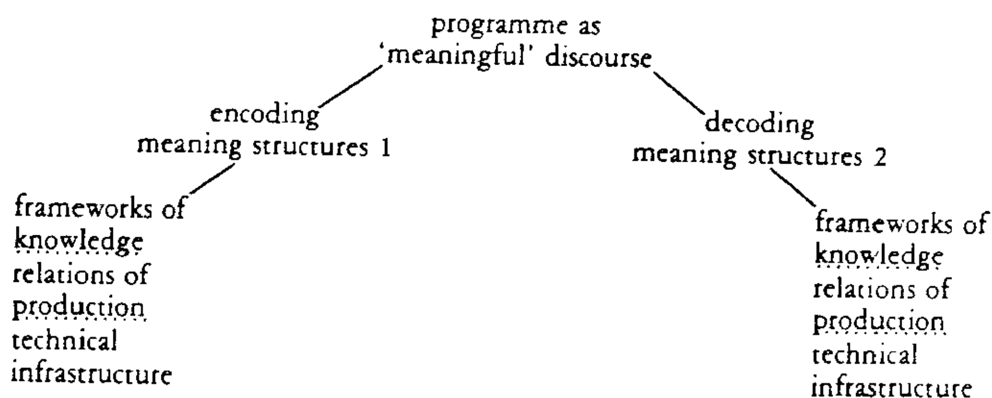
The development of the encoding/decoding model represents an important stage in the conceptualization of televisual communication. It is, above all, a semiological conception. It allows us to conceive of the TV programme not so much as a distortion/reproduction of the world, but as a stage in a process—a product of a specific set of signifying practices (encoding) whose meanings are ultimately fixed by a second set of signifying practices (decoding). Thus, in essence, we have:

signifier (event/object)→encoding→signifier (TV programme)→decoding

In what follows I shall investigate problems with recent formulations and adaptations of this conception of television, with particular regard to the analysis of decoding practices. David Morley's work as, perhaps, the most serious foray into this field, will come under special scrutiny (cf. Brunsdon and Morley, 1978; Morley, 1980; Morley, 1981). If, as Morley writes at the end of *The Nationwide Audience*, we are to move 'onwards, out of the swamp', this work, together with its theoretical forerunners, needs a solid reappraisal.

Before briefly considering the notion of encoding, the relative status of the two practices needs to be clarified. The encoding/decoding model is frequently represented as a thing of symmetry, decoding being seen as the mirror image of encoding. Stuart Hall's articulation of the model posits such an equivalence:



This equivalence is a theoretical/conceptual device, a golden mean against which the lack of fit between encoding and decoding can be measured. Although

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0163-4437/83/020197 + 19 $03.00/0

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'"meaning structures 1" and "meaning structures 2" may not be the same' and the 'codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical'. Hall argues that this 'depends upon the degrees of identity/non-identity between the codes which perfectly or imperfectly transmit or systematically distort what has been transmitted' (Hall, 1980: 131). Obviously, there will be a lack of fit, but this is *not* because of the nonidentity of the codes, for this is to deny the materiality of the TV programme, and, subsequently, the *different conditions* fundamental to the existence of the two practices. Encoding is a signifying practice selecting and interpreting a whole world of signifiers, while decoding negotiates with an exclusively televisual object. While that object may *signify* the world prior to encoding, its status (as a signifier) is very different. Encoding produces a signifying entity that cuts across two worlds—as Roger Silverstone puts it: 'These two worlds juxtapose at the screen, both a domestic nodal point and a frame for the display of the limited, vicarious and often crucial experiences that television makes constantly available' (Silverstone, 1981: 12). If we are to decode critically, in terms of the gap/contradiction between objects on the screen and objects elsewhere (between, for example, our knowledge of a gender positions in *Dallas*, and our knowledge outside *Dallas*), we must do so in relation to *two* distinct signifying systems. Encoding, on the other hand, is always prior to the televisual object (although, of course, encoding will be based upon previous televisual messages as part of the signifying world, but this is a different point). The TV programme links the two practices. It also marks the point of separation between them.

The encoder and the encoded

Hall, and others following him, conceives encoding as a specific form of cultural production in a world of culturally produced significations. This identifies two moments of signification:

(a) *Signification in general.* Hall describes this as follows:

> Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a dominant cultural order, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. . . . The different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organised into dominant or preferred meanings (Hall, 1980: 136).

(b) *Encoding as a signifying practice*, negotiating with the 'social and cultural world' to produce the programme as a meaningful discourse. The programme thus becomes a 'framework of . . . preferred structures of meaning which have been encoded' (Hall, 1976: 67).

This specifies two levels of 'preferred meanings'; a primary level produced by the signifying practices general to the social, cultural, political world: and a secondary level produced by the signifying practices of televisual encoding. This perspective enables Hall to conceive of what he calls the 'professional code' of television broadcasters, a code working 'to reproduce (via 'defining elites') the hegemonic signification of events' (Hall, 1980: 136). The second level of signifying practice—encoding—is therefore 'relatively autonomous', either working 'within the "hegemony" of the dominant code' outside it.

There is, before going any further, a fundamental problem with this model.

How can we represent it semiologically? It is all very well to postulate encoding as a practice operating upon an *already constituted* system of signs, but what binds these signs together? In other words, if the sign is constituted (i.e. the signifier is thought) prior to encoding, who does this constituting?

The *sign* has no material existence, since meaning is *brought to* words or objects, not *inscribed within* them. Only the signifier—the unit prior to meaning—exists as a material entity; the sign requires the presence of a (constituting) subject. What a society does is not to present the subject with ready made signs, but to offer a determinate structure of signifiers, a concrete series of associations (the object and the word, the object and the action, etc.) and differences, allowing the subject (as a sign producing agency) to operate within a specific set of limitations. In short, society is structured in a way that encourages certain meanings. The problem with understanding television as a *secondary* sign producing agency, operating upon the work done by primary agencies, is that it implies the existence of a set of *privileged* agencies, with privileged access to the signifier, without identifying them. As Morley has pointed out, in relation to the preferred meaning:

Hegemony has been treated as an abstract concept—referring rather widely to the whole field of cultural processes through which dominant meanings are constructed—without these particular processes being examined in any detail (Morley, 1981: 5).

To say that the 'professional code' works to reproduce dominant meanings by recruiting a specific set of 'primary definers', is to beg a number of questions. Do we define dominant meanings in relation to their authorship (out of the mouths of politicians and judges), and therefore in relation to the economic/social *position* of the authors? If so, where are these 'defining elites'—The trade union leader, the politician, the expert—signified as primary definers *prior* to their selection by television? What is the relation between 'dominant meanings' and those who articulate them? How much of the signifying world can be understood within the framework of a hegemonic meaning structure?

The problem here is not merely the abstract character of the 'whole field of cultural processes through which dominant meanings are constructed', but the implicit exclusion of televisual encoding from that field of cultural processes. Television is seen as *re*producing meanings (or not), rather than producing them. This is to accord television the same structural status as those communication models that see the TV message as a simple representation/misrepresentation of social reality (rather than an agency constructing and negotiating with social reality). While many versions of the encoding/decoding model certainly go beyond such a conception of television as a straightforward mediator, the formulation of two levels of signifying practice remains (the semiological problem aside) confused. Briefly, we need to identify the encoder and encoded.

This problem becomes more distinct when we consider the television fiction. Television fiction represented a suitable meeting point for a number of different forms of analysis: the exploration of specific determinations upon encoding have met up with the generic, narrational and textual approaches developed in relation to the cinema.[1] This broadening of theoretical horizons results, I would suggest, from a recognition that the TV fiction problematizes any simple divisions between a world prior to encoding, and the practices and conventions informing encoding. Because there is no real Hilda Ogden, we are unable to reduce analysis to measures of representation/misrepresentation. Hilda Ogden is the locus of a whole range of signifying practices, be they within the school, the family, the film, the novel or

the advertisement. Furthermore, Hilda Ogden's relationship to the *Coronation Street* narrative provides its own specific determinations.

Yet, many of the questions opened up by work on fiction can be addressed equally well to television news/current affairs. Practices of scheduling (based upon what Richard Paterson has called 'audience aggregation' and the consequent cultural location of the family audience), linguistic determinations:[2] narrative determinations,[3] generic determinations (such as the novel or the newspaper),[4] cultural stereotyping (as Brunsden and Morley showed, the whole concept of *Nationwide* relies upon references to cultural stereotypes), as well as the fluctuating ideologies of news value and professionalism, make the dividing line between signifying practices within, or prior to, encoding, rather difficult to locate. Trevor Pateman's study of the 1974 General Election solved (or avoided) this problem by conceiving of this news event as a 'television election' (Pateman, 1974: 2). Political representations and televisual representations were seen as part of the same signifying practice. Hall, Connell and Curti, on the other hand, do not accept such a conflation, arguing that 'If we accept that Television plays a mediating role, it follows that elections as *political events*, remain distinct from their presentation as *television events*. The two are related . . . but they are not immediately interchangeable' (Hall, 1976: 52). While as Pateman argues, political events and discourses are frequently formulated as media events, to suit the requirements of a televisual form (and, as such, are incorporated *within* the encoding process), it is correct to say that those political formulations *do* have their own conditions of existence. The problem of conceiving televisual signifying practice within/in relation to other forms of signifying practice is important, not merely for the sake of theoretical coherence, but in marking out areas of cultural and political struggle.

Encoding as signifying practice

To recapitulate, there are a number of problems with the model of television as a secondary sign-fixing practice.

(a) *A semiological problem* of conceiving TV as a mediator of preconstructed *meanings*. This gives the *sign* a material existence, and denies the activity of television as a sign producing agency (with access to the level of the signifier). This, in turn, subverts the essential semiological model with which we began. This point will be taken up again in relation to the 'preferred reading' of the TV message.

(b) This leads towards reducing television to a *medium*, either reproducing or not reproducing the dominant political/ideological meaning of the world it represents.

(c) A problem of identifying the *boundaries* of encoding practice—what constitutes encoding and the encoded?

(d) A problem of specifying the *relationship* between encoding and other signifying practices.

The solution to these difficulties is to reassert the status of television as a signifying practice, to rescue it from any positions that relegate that practice to a secondary stage in a communication process. Television, as a sign producing agency, is no longer seen as the passage from one dominant preferred meaning to another, from one set of significations to another, but as a signifying apparatus inscribed *within* the political/social/cultural world. Whether that apparatus reflects or subverts so-called 'preferred' or 'dominant' meanings within a society is not the point: the

televisual media are a *part* of the range of signifying practices that produce and reproduce meanings, that structure relations of dominance and hegemony. The world prior to encoding, from this position, is seen as a world of *signifiers* rather than *significations*. The task of critics is consequently to locate other discourses, practices and institutions outside encoding practices and therefore to:

(a) appropriate significations referring to signifiers ignored by televisual discourses—the absence of the signifier from encoding practice nullifying the possibility of signification. In short, talk about things TV ignores; and

(b) appropriate significations absent *within* media discourses, yet which refer to the same elements on the level of the signifier; in short, employ a process of reinterpreting the information signified on TV.

While these last points may seem pretty obvious, they avoid the mistake of seeing changes in television merely as consequences of changes within 'the dominant cultural order', or vice versa. Analysis can then be directed to the whole range of determinations upon television as a series of signifying practices. We can *then* analyse how these practices work reflexively with other practices (whether in the family, in Parliament, or in the cinema).

The TV text

Much has been written about the thing itself, the message, as a semiological object. The degree of fixity of meaning, or the power of the text to determine its own set of readings, are questions that lie at the very heart of any audience research. Consequently, practitioners of the encoding/decoding model have been aware of the need to avoid 'two equally unsatisfactory positions' (Morley, 1981: 5). They fluctuate between, for example, those developed in *Screen* that theorize 'the near total effectivity of the text' (Morley, 1980: 148), by positing the existence of an inscribed subject position into which the reader is placed to be manipulated (by the text), and those that grant the reader power to determine his/her own reading, a position commonly associated with the 'uses and gratifications' school. Decoding must be seen as a product of two determinations, the reader and the text, reducable to neither. The encoding/decoding formulation has attempted to steer a path between these positions in terms of the notion of a 'preferred reading'. The message is thus:

> a complex sign, in which a preferred reading has been inscribed, but which retains the potential, if decoded in a manner different from the way in which it has been encoded, of communicating a different meaning. The message is thus a structured polysemy . . . all meanings do not exist equally in the message; it has been structured in dominance, although its meaning can never be totally fixed or closed. (ibid.: 10).

This would appear to be a considerable step forward—a 'preferred reading' is inscribed within the message (as 'a complex sign'), although the decoder is not obliged to accept it. There are, however, a number of problems that cannot be overcome by merely differentiating between subjects within and outside the text. Clearly, any theoretical position must acknowledge the activity of the decoding subject in constituting significations; the problem lies in locating the boundaries upon that activity. The *Screen* position has rightly been attacked for conflating the textual subject and the real subject in history, for conceiving the subject as merely a textual production, and therefore failing to distinguish between '"real"

readers/authors and inscribed ones, constructed or marked in and by the text. Real readers are subjects of a single text. The two types of subject are not commensurate' (Willeman, 1978: 48). Morley uses this distinction in *The Nationwide Audience* to specify the status of the notion of the 'preferred reading'. So, while there exists 'an unbridgeable gap between 'real' readers/authors and 'inscribed ones', the former, being 'subjects in history, living on social formations' who 'always exceed the subject implied by the text', yet 'the social subject is also restricted by the positionality the text offers it' (Morley, 1980: 159). In other words, there exists an (encoded) inscribed positionality operational within the structured dominance of the preferring reading, which may or may not determine the reading and which may be accepted, negotiated or opposed by the 'subject in history'.

The textual subject—the subject positioned 'in and by the text'—is not a unitary category. It can refer to:

(a) the 'I' of the narrative, the position of the camera (point of view);

(b) the textual strategies which are said to construct (absent) subject positions in relation to a 'preferred' reading.

In endorsing the existence of both these levels of signifying practice, the critics of certain positions adopted in *Screen* have merely differentiated between the *Screen* position and the 'preferred reading' by distinguishing between textual subjects and 'real' subjects. To emphasize the existence of the decoding subject is, of course, vital. *However*, what is also crucial is this; simply to point to a distinction between an inscribed subject (in relation to a 'preferred' reading) and a real historical subject is not to deny the a priori *existence* of an inscribed positionality, merely to question its *effectivity*. This is to posit an essential preferred reading and a range of (dominant, negotiated, oppositional) responses in relation to it. This is effectively to reproduce the *Screen* position and, by implication, the functioning of the subject in constituting signification is *denied*.

Here we see the problem with the notion of the 'preferred reading' incorporated into the encoding/decoding model as part of the structure of the message *prior* to the act of reading. Morley, in his postscript to his work on the *Nationwide* audience, acknowledges this difficulty:

> Is the preferred reading a property *of* the text per se? Or is it something that can be generated *from* the text (by a 'skilled' reading) via certain specifiable procedures? Or is the preferred reading that reading which the analyst is predicting that most members of the audience will produce from the text? In short, is the preferred reading a property of the text, the analyst or the audience? (Morley, 1981: 6).

The answer must inevitably be: *the audience*. Any determinacy granted the text must acknowledge its status, before decoding, as a structure of *signifiers*, constituted as signs by decoding (as a signifying practice). The text is only 'a complex sign' once it has been read. Morley's first option does not exist, since a readerless text has no meaning at all, while the task of the analyst can only be, as Barthes puts it 'not to reduce the Text to a signified, whatever it may be . . . but to hold its significance fully open' (Barthes, 1977: 141). The fact that many decoders will come up with the same reading does not make that meaning an essential part of the text. The power of the text's signifiers to determine a specific set of readings will be constituted by historical subjects, whose place in society/history will enable them to form the same associations and differences, the same signifying patterns. We must therefore replace the 'preferred reading' model:

Constant	*Variable*
text/preferred meaning/inscribed subject	subject in history

with a semiological model of decoding practice:

Variable	*Variable*
text + subject in history	preferred readings/subject positions

Morley does, in fact, try to go beyond the 'preferred meaning' model in his postscript to the *Nationwide* study, in a number of ways. While these attempts strain the 'preferred reading' model to its limits, they do not, I would suggest, actually make the necessary fundamental shift towards a semiological model.

First, he identifies a problem with the *Nationwide* studies in conceptualizing the 'preferred reading' on a 'higher level of textual organisations' than the syntagmatic relations between monemes, referring exclusively to notions such as 'framing'. The syntagmatic and paradigmatic choices that arrange specific signifiers in a specific way are, as Morley points out, crucial in the organization of meaning (Morley also sees syntagmatic relationships precipitating textual closure—a point I shall take up later). While this is a move away from conceiving of the text as blocks of meaning it still retains a Saussurean conception of language, a natural language whose essential units are fixed, a world of denotative meanings where the sign is no longer negotiable. This problem is anticipated in Hall's seminal encoding/decoding essay, where the notion of denotation is retained for analytical use only, so that the distinction between a culture's 'deep semantic codes' (denotation) and its 'more active ideological dimensions' (connotation) can be drawn (Hall, 1980: 132-134). The danger of this analytical distinction is that, since it is made by the analyst (and not by the decoder) it might prove pre-emptive, although audience research cannot hope to avoid assuming a certain level of direct correspondence between the significations constituted by the analyst and by the decoder. A 'denotative' meaning of a word can never represent the totality of the thing it refers to, merely particular aspects of it. Since no object has any essentially definitive aspects, the cluster of aspects that are captured in the denotative meaning can never be fixed or permanent. The word can never be more than a symbol, and, as Peirce wrote: 'every symbol is a living thing. . . . The body of the symbol changes slowly, but its meaning inevitably grows, incorporates new elements and throws out old ones' (Eco, 1981: 186).

Second, Morley (1981: 12) attempts to go beyond the textual subject/historical subject division by adding a third term—'the addressee: the author's conception of whom s/he is addressing/will be read by'. While this is a vital consideration in analysing encoding, as explored by Richard Paterson (1980), it does not refer to practices of decoding.

Third, Morley redefines the notion of 'the reader inscribed within the text . . . in relation to different genres of texts, rather than in relation to individual texts' (Morley, 1981: 12), in an 'attempt to establish discursive connections which can account for the purchase of particular textual forms on particular categories of readers, under determinate socio-historical conditions' (ibid.: 11). This is a sophisticated approach, yet it (once again) presupposes the research necessary to establish generic unities between texts, particular categories of readers and the relationship between them. Such an approach would limit the scope of a decoding

study by predefining both genre and audience without providing the empirical evidence necessary to validate statements about the relationship between them (the problem of categorizing audiences is discussed below). The limitations imposed upon analysis of data by the 'preferred reading' concept become clearer in practice. It is therefore to Morley's analysis of *The Nationwide Audience* material that I now turn.

Preferring responses

To separate the text from the reader (by substituting the decoder with the researcher's decoding) is to run the risk of predefining the range of responses in the style of the 'effects' school of audience research. Now, while Morley rejects the 'effects' approach for its failure to explore 'the level at which decoding operates' (Morley, 1980: 30), there are points at which his own theoretical tools force him back into a sophisticated version of the 'effects' position. Just as 'effects' research inscribes the text with a meaning in order to categorize responses to that meaning, so the 'preferred reading' ignores 'the level at which decoding operates' in order to measure a response to the 'preferred' meaning (I use the term 'meaning' rather than 'reading', because meaning is inscribed before the act of reading).

It is symptomatic of this approach that it involves a theoretical exclusion of a specific 'socio-historical' determination upon the practice of decoding; what Paul Henry calls the 'discursive effect' (Henry, 1971: 91-95). This, briefly, identifies the difference in the conditions of the decoding context precipitated by each successive stage of the utterance/message. Henry argues that the difference between the generator of the message (Δ) and the representation of the message (*R*) is internally analysed (by the decoder) to produce a change in the (decoder's) conditions of production (Γ') of meaning. This gives us:

the utterance received $\Delta_i\ R_i \leftarrow \Gamma_i'$ (conditions of production)
$\rightarrow \Gamma_i' + 1$ (new conditions of production)

In other words, with each act of signification ($\Delta_i\ R_i$) the conditions of message reception change. Edward Branigan makes a similar point in relation to what he calls 'levels of narration' in the visual narrative. He demonstrates, in relation to shifting points of view in the succession of camera shots structuring the narrative, how 'each successive level of narration implicates a new subject'. He argues that reading is not so much a movement towards a final signified, but a constant process of reinterpretation, or (borrowing from Roland Barthes): 'reading is a process of 1 name, 1 unname, 1 rename?' Branigan, 1981: 58). Although these movements would be extremely difficult to locate in the difficult practice of audience research, the development of meaning that takes place during interviews with decoders involve more obvious manifestations of the 'discursive effect' (I shall take up this point again later, in relation to the social groupings of interviewees).

Although Morley moves beyond this model of responses used in *The Nationwide Audience*, in the *Critical Postscript*, I shall briefly detail the problems with that model. Having constructed a 'preferred reading' of the *Nationwide* text, Morley used a model developed from Parkin to identify three categories of response:

(a) where the audience interprets the message in terms of the same code employed by the transmitter, e.g. where both inhabit the dominant ideology, (i.e. where the 'preferred' reading is accepted).

(b) where the audience employs a negotiated version of the code employed by the transmitter [i.e. where the 'preferred' reading is partially accepted];
(c) where the audience employs an oppositional code to interpret the message and therefore interprets its meaning through a different code from that employed by the transmitter [i.e. where the 'preferred' meaning is rejected]; (Morley, 1980: 23).

In other words, there is only one 'preferred' reading, and three categories of response depending upon the decoder's willingness to inhabit that reading, rather than *three 'preferred' readings*. When, for example, Ralph Nader was given a devil's advocate interview on *Nationwide*, Morley felt the 'preferred reading' of Nader to be a negative one. In other words, in the discursive struggle between the interviewer (on behalf of *Nationwide*) and Mr Nader, Morley reads the encounter as a 'win' for *Nationwide*. Consequently, when a group of trainee telephone engineers endorse Ralph Nader's position, Morley asserts that they 'reject the preferred, negative reading of Nader' (ibid.: 48). Surely, what the trainee telephone engineers reveal is that Morley's reading amounted to a *premature closure* of the text. Quite simply, they prefer a different meaning to Morley's.

By privileging what he sees as the substantive ideological propositions framing the text, the 'oppositional' category unifies a range of responses that might otherwise bear witness to the text's multireferentiality. The group of European managment trainees who saw *Nationwide* as 'very pro-Labour' (ibid.: 123) constructed a 'preferred' reading of *Nationwide* very much opposed to Morley's preferred reading [the fact that 'the substance of their arguments pulls in precisely the same direction as . . . Nationwide' (ibid.: 126), does not make their *decoding of the programme* any less oppositional], while the group of shop stewards actually *confirm* the 'preferred' reading constructed by Morley (they 'see through' the programme in much the same way) only to reject 'the political line that runs under the whole thing' (ibid.: 116)—in much the same way that Morley would. Both groups construct 'oppositional' readings in entirely different ways, i.e. both rejected what they perceived as the text's preferred readings.

Morley's analysis of these two readings disguises the problems created by the privileging of substantive ideological propositions he sees *Nationwide* preferring. While the shop stewards are seen as rejecting the *Nationwide* discourse from an oppositional ideological position, the trainee managers are labelled as 'subjects out of position', 'only in a formal sense'. (ibid.: 126). This statement is based on Morley's ability to locate his preferred reading of *Nationwide* and the discourses of the trainee managers within a unified 'dominant ideology'. The problem is that this is done *not* by analysing their decoding practices, but *outside* those practices, in terms of 'the substance of their arguments'. The subsequent distinctions made between the 'formal' and 'ideological' levels (I shall consider the use of these kinds of concepts shortly) rely upon the preconstructed 'preferred reading', and tells us very little about the actual relationship between the textual signifiers and the pattern of significations brought to bear upon them. At worst, this position amounts to a double-sided use of the 'intentional fallacy'.[5] 'The code employed by the transmitter' is extrapolated from the text (as an 'ideological proposition') and is matched up to the codes employed by the receiver (extrapolated from *their* discourse), in order to measure the ideological harmony/disharmony *behind* both articulations. While this exercise is perfectly valid for the study of encoding, it is inappropriate as a means of investigating the construction of meaning (decoding).

Morley acknowledges this problem (of intentionality) in the *Critical Postscript*,

as well as the accepting the limitations imposed by three hypothetical 'overtly political' decoding positions. In doing so he attempts to move towards a more flexible, more widely applicable decoding model than the approach developed from Parkin. The Parkin model is replaced by the notion of 'genre' or 'Sets of rules for the production of meaning—rules governing the combinations of signs into specific patterns which regulate the production of texts by authors and the reading of texts by audiences' (Morley, 1981: 10). This is clarified in relation to notions of 'cultural competences', 'reading publics' and 'the organisation of diversity'. As such, it represents a considerable advance towards a semiological model, capable of explaining how and why specific meanings are constituted in specific socio-historical contexts. Needless to say, a great deal of work needs to be done to establish the analytical tools necessary for such a project. Moreover, before this stage is reached, two fundamental points need clarification: how do we conceive of the determinate structure of the text, and how do we conceptualize an audience before decoding comes into play? I shall develop these points in relation to perhaps the two most substantial problems revealed in Morley's work: the use of the form/content division undercut by a restricted use of the concept of signification; and the categorising of social groups based upon certain theoretical assumptions.

Signification: form and content

Most models of textual analysis tend to conceive two levels of textual organisation, using different (but not necessarily interchangeable) terms: syntagm/paradigm; the totality/ the exterior; narrative closure/polysemy. Despite the fact that these divisions are frequently appropriate analytical tools, I shall argue that the extension of these divisions to the broad generalities of form and content can lead to misleading conceptions of *how* signification actually works.

In *The Nationwide Audience* Morley conceives the TV message as a discourse constructed along two planes: ~~"the level~~ of the *ideological*' is the level of a subject's socio-cultural viewpoint 'at which particular problematics are reproduced and accepted or rejected', whereas 'the level of signification' is mechanistic and structural, determining the subject's position 'in the signifying chain' (Morley, 1980: 14). He explains this distinction in relation to Heath and Skirrow's piece on *World in Action*, which (he argues, quoting Alan O'Shea), in its exclusive concentration on the 'form of signification' leaves 'no place for the other "circuit", the viewer as bearer of a complex of interpellations, many of which are not constructed by the TV text'. Thus when the 'authors argue that Dudley Fiske—the 'expert' called in to sum up the problem of truancy—has the power that he does within the discourse by virtue of his formal position within the structure of the text and narrative' they are ignoring the 'what' of ideology, i.e. who he is—'his social position'—and 'what he says'. He consequently argues that we must 'pose the ideological field as the space within which signification operates', since 'signification always occurs in ideology' (ibid.: 153-155).

Morley, referring to Paul Hirst's work on Althusser's theory of ideology, criticizes that work for 'reducing ideology to signification' (ibid.: 151). This criticism reveals a common tendency to reduce the field identifiable as signification. The problem with Hirst's rearticulation of ideological relations as signifying relations is that it carries the Althusserian break with an orthodox Marxist theory of ideology to its logical conclusion, so that ideology defines *all* relations between subject and object.

between signifier and signified. This is hardly a reduction! Indeed, Hirst could be criticized here for giving the concept of ideology a massive level of generality.

What Morley does, effectively, is to reduce the concept of signification to specify a *formal* category. This, ironically enough, is to misrepresent a concept identifying the relation between the signifier and the signified. So, for example, the 'formal position' of Dudley Fiske within the *World in Action* narrative is certainly a function of signifying practice, but so is who he is and what he says. A system of signs does not position the subject in relation to the 'what' of ideology, it *is* the 'what' of ideology. The sign is a unit of meaning, not an empty vessel. To conceive an ideological problematic as 'constructed in its specific form through the process of signification', (ibid.: 156) is precisely to conceive of such an empty vessel 'filled' with ideology (content), while to pose 'the ideological field as the space within which signification operates' is a tautology—what this statement says is that we must understand the process of meaning (signification) within meaning systems.

To misconceive signification in this way is a considerable limitation for a decoding study to bear. What I propose to look at in more detail is the form/content model implicated by a division between what Morley usually refers to as 'mode of address' and 'ideological problematic'. Perhaps one of the clearest specifications of this kind of division is Barthes' formulation in *S/Z*. Consequently, if I move towards a Barthesian redefinition of Morley's position, it is in order to clarify and develop it (at the risk of misrepresenting Morley).

Just as, for Morley, the TV programme is a 'meaningful sign vehicle' operating on two levels, so for Barthes signification (or 'connotation') is determined

> by two spaces: a sequential space, a series of orders, a space subject to the successivity of sentences . . . and an agglomerative space, certain areas of the text correlating other meanings outside the material text and, with them, forming 'nebulae' of signifieds (Barthes, 1974: 8).

Barthes sees 'each connotation as the starting point of a code' (ibid.: 9), of which there are five types: 'only three establish permutable, reversible connections, outside the constraint of time (the semic, cultural and symbolic codes); the other two compose their terms according to an irreversible order (the hermeneutic and proairetic codes)' (ibid.: 30). What Morley calls the 'structural polysemy' of the text works in terms of two such spaces, the structure restricting its potential plurality. As he writes in the *Critical Postscript*: 'polysemy is already structured and limited by the syntagmatic relations established between the separate signs as they are organized in the text' (Morley, 1981: 6).

The difference between these two types of connotation can be reformulated thus:

(a) sets of significations which refer *within* the totality of the text's parameters to construct a chronological narrative;

(b) sets of significations which refer to significations formed *outside* the text.

In short, as Barthes puts it: 'the text must simultaneously be distinguished from its exterior and from its totality' (Barthes, 1974: 6). If we look at two units of meaning (what Barthes calls lexias) in the *Nationwide* text, it becomes apparent that this distinction is less helpful than it appears. The two examples I have chosen are from the *Nationwide* coverage of the Budget. The first lexia is spoken by Frank Bough at the beginning of the programme: 'And at 6.20, what this "some now, some later" Budget will mean to you'. (I shall concentrate upon the part of the sentence

signifying 'what will this Budget mean to you?') The second lexia is spoken by Mrs Tufnell, wife of personnel manager John Tufnell, during a three-part feature looking at how the budget affects a 'cross section' of families. Mrs Tufnell complains: 'We can't have avocadoes any more.'

At first glance the first statement signifies within the text's totality, establishing an enigma which the following programme attempts to solve (working in terms of the hermeneutic code, the code of enigma). It is part of the text's order, fixed within its chronology, part of its structure. The second statement, on the other hand, seems to revolve around a signifier—the avocado pear—whose connotations are located in signifying chains *outside* the *Nationwide* narrative, not dependent on that narrative to establish a reversible set of meanings. Its polysemy, so it follows, is subsequently restricted by its narrative context. The superficiality of such a first glance conceals three glaring problems.

First, while these two statements work in terms of different codes, both refer, in the first instance, to significations constructed *outside* the text. It is only in the second instance that the sign may be specified/altered to establish a new *layer* of meaning. This may be stating the obvious, but it needs stating. The former, for example, refers to significations, formed prior to the moment of reading, producing a 'nebulae of signifieds' around the signifier 'Budget'. Similarly, the second example also refers to the already signified ('avocadoes'). Meaning can only be *established* in the text:

(a) if the subject is unable to constitute some of its elements as meaningful, and s/he is therefore required to locate the meaning of those elements by establishing relations of association or difference *within* the text (a dictionary works in this way);
(b) in terms of certain linguistic categories—notably those designated by Benveniste as 'shifters', linguistic elements such as personel pronouns (I, you, us) and exophoric pronouns (here, now, then) dependent upon the context in which they are uttered/received for their meaning.

Furthermore, if 'form' has a pure sense prior to the comprehension of a text's elements, it is merely as what Umberto Eco calls (Eco, 1981: 15) a 'linear text manifestation', the most basic linear chronology fixed in space and time. As Eco demonstrates with a quotation from a pre-Dadaist experimental poem by Christian Margenstern, such a set of meaningless words, if one ignores the 'phonic connotations as well as the halo of "literariness" surrounding the poem, exist purely as 'a linear manifestation (expression) to which no content can be ordered'. The problem is, of course, that one *cannot* ignore the 'phonic connotations' or the 'halo of literariness' since it is precisely these things that constitute the meaning or significance of the poem, that gives a sense to the structuring of meaningless words into a poetic form. Once the one dimensionality—A, B, C, D . . . —of a text's linear manifestation is given meanings, it begins to form patterns. No signification can impose a form upon the text if it has not been established (by the reader) as meaningful.

Second, those elements (like 'avocadoes') working in terms of what Barthes refers to as the symbolic code, form part of and work within a narrative structure. The signifier 'avocado pear' is a component in the 'three families' narrative: the three-layered social structure with which we are presented is more than a simply defined series of incomes and occupations, it is a collection of symbols and images—of which the avocado pear is one. The *symbolic structure* will operate as a necessary structuration (limitation) closing the discourse within certain parameters.

In the same way as the enigma, 'What will this budget mean to you?' refers the decoder to the following narrative, Mrs Tufnall's remark about avocadoes works with other symbols (e.g. the company car) to signify a certain economic and cultural position—'the assumption that people over a certain level . . . in a certain job have a right to eat avocado pears and everybody else hasn't' (the group of trade union activists studying part-time in Labour Studies), 'middle class shoppers our buying their avocado pears' (the group of trade union officials on a TUC training course). These significations are engendered by the text, not independently of it. Indeed, one could go further to emphasize the greater dependence of the second lexia upon its narrational context (its position in the discourse). While the first functions (has its meaning) more or less as a self-contained unit, not substantially altered by the sequence it refers to, the second signifies contextually, whether as a symbol of a luxurious lifestyle ('a certain level') or the 'middle class' in general.

Third, if a distinction is made between codes working within or outside its narrative, it is incorrect to understand significations referring within the narrative as 'fixers', 'limits' to the text's polysemy, although most work using the notion of a 'preferred reading' invariably does make this assumption. The generalities 'polysemy'/'narrative context' impose a false set of divisions that distort the actuality of signifying practice. As Barthes himself writes in 'The Death of the Author': 'a text's unity is not in its origin but in its destination . . . ' (Barthes, 1977: 148). It is the reader, rather than the internal system of the text, that *ultimately* restricts its plurality. It is the combination of text and reader that is the eventual finite point of closure. The *structure* of signifiers, however, does not necessarily *reduce* the text's elements to a set of meanings. By a complex interplay of signification, the text *produces* meaning in the reader, or, to use an appropriate metaphor, each new text, each addition to the reader's consciousness, is *reproductive*, offering new traces of meaning with each association, each set of differences.

These 'two-level' models of textual analysis cannot be used to understand the practice of decoding, incorporating as they do divisions that do not correspond to the actuality of the processes involved. These divisions will invariably collapse if subjected to rigorous analysis, and, furthermore, will lead to the development of an invalid set of variables. This is clearly demonstrated by Morley's study, which, as I mentioned earlier, attempts to solve problems in the model of responses derived from Parkin by conceiving of two planes of textual organization.

The 'mode of address'/'ideological problematic' split is used to interpret two fairly 'oppositional' sets of responses; one from a group of bank managers, and one from a group of shop stewards. While the 'managers comment hardly at all on the substance of the ideological problematic embedded in the programme. Their attention focuses almost exclusively on the programmes mode of address'; the shop stewards 'can accept the programmes mode of address to some extent . . . what they reject is *Nationwide's* ideological formulation of the "issues"' (Morley, 1980: 145). This is certainly an interesting observation—but as I have argued, it would be misleading to draw conclusions based upon the placing of decodings into two distinct categories. The difference between the shop stewards and the bank managers are the *discourses available to them* with which to criticize the *Nationwide* discourse. The bank managers are able to do so in terms of the '*Daily Telegraph*, *Panorama* and the *Money Programme*' discourses, while the shop stewards 'watch as a group of people very committed to a certain thing', i.e. with

constant access to the political discourses of trade union activity. So, when *both* groups refer to absences in the text—'it wasn't sufficient, to be quite frank', 'he only shows what he wants to show'—they are referring to discourses *other* than *Nationwide*. The fact that one criticism is overtly political and the other not (while on one level quite significant) is not a function of the 'mode of address'/'ideological problematic' (form/content) split. It could equally well be argued—to use Morley's terms—that the bank managers' criticisms are not formal but ideological. They are rejecting a representation of themselves (the 'you'/'we' of *Nationwide's* discourse), and the *personalisation* of discourses that they are, as bank managers, all involved in. As Morley says, 'it is ideas, not people, which are important to them' (ibid.: 105).

The significations constructed by Morley's audiences can be differentiated in terms of the access the decoders have to discourses/other significations. What is crucial is that the complexity of this interplay is understood. While the text should not be forced into simple categories, neither should the audience. It is, therefore, to the problems involved in categorizing groups of decoders that I now turn.

Decoding classes

In the *Critical Postscript*, Morley attempts to rethink the nature and importance of 'class' as a variable with which to explain differential decodings. He suggests three revisions:

(a) That the importance of variables—like class—'cannot be resolved purely on theoretical grounds, but also has to take into account empirical evidence'. In other words (and this is the implication) there should be no *a priori* categorizing involved in decoding research, these categories should be established *by* the research.
(b) That the labels used to specify 'class' slide between Marxist and Weberian definitions.
(c) That the class-based variable used to divide the groups into groups gives those groups 'a representative status—they are taken to stand for segments of society'.

Now, the problem here is not that these revisions are wrong (they're not), but that they represent *more* than mere revisions. The *Nationwide* study is firmly cast within a (broadly Althusserian) epistemological/theoretical mould, giving rise to a privileging of the concept of class via a complex set of conflations. The revisions suggested in the *Postscript*, I shall argue, undermine a great deal of the theoretical work done in *The Nationwide Audience*.

Morley's epistemology is based upon a division between the real and the discursive. He quotes Neale's statement that, 'Having recognised the determining power of the real, the real is only and always grasped as reality . . . through discourse' (ibid.: 19). In other words, the discursive determines/allows our perception of the real, but the real determines our access/relation to the discursive. This distinction may seem commonsensical—or even a necessary basis for any epistemological position, but like many commonsensical notions it rests upon uninterrogated assumptions. Morley fails to define either the real or the discursive, or, crucially, what distinguishes one from the other. Rather, he assumes an equivalence between the discourse/real relations and other relations—juxtaposed with the above quotation, for example, is the 'equivalent' statement that 'audiences are determined economically, politically *and ideologically*'. Since Morley also fails (along with a host of others) to specify this tripartite distinction, the

conflation of the two statements veils any meaning it might have in a thick fog of ambiguity. In the comparative specificity of the *Nationwide* study, we can begin to identify what is actually meant by the category of 'the real' and the category of 'the discursive', and how these terms combine with the terms of the base/superstructure model of a social formation.

A large part of Morley's work attempts to understand decoding in terms of the relation between what he calls on the one hand 'social position' (p. 48), 'social structure' (p. 158), 'socio-economic structure' (p. 14), 'basic socio-demographic factors' (p. 26) and 'class structure' (p. 15) and on the other what he calls ideology, discourse or 'involvement in various forms of cultural frameworks and identifications' (p. 26). The realm of the real corresponds with a notion of socio-economic or class position, while the realm of the discursive exists in the apparently less concrete realms of ideology and signification. Any thorough examination of these terms as they occur in Morley's text would be theoretically fruitless, as they are used indiscriminately within different contexts.[6]

If the discourse/real relationship is composed of two mutually exclusive entities determining one another, it is consistent that the equivalent terms, ideology/social or class position, should also have this type of relationship—and so they do. Morley defines it in relation to the Althusserian notion of 'relative autonomy' (a vaguely defined relationship between two vaguely defined categories!) via a rejection of what he sees as the Paul Hirst position. Unfortunately, Morley (along with many others) misinterprets Hirst's critique of Althusser as the construction of a Hobson's choice—the 'absurd' polarization of 'either total determination or total autonomy' (Morley, 1980: 17). Hirst's (1979) critique demonstrates that the notions of 'Ideological State Apparatuses' and of 'Ideology as a Representation . . . ' are both incoherent expositions of a 'relative autonomy'. The consequence of Hirst's position is not necessarily to deny the existence of 'correlations and patterns' between 'class position' and 'ideological positions', but to reject the Althusserian formulation as a way of understanding those correlations and patterns. They must be explained in a different way (I shall return to this point). The notion of 'relative autonomy' encompasses so many relations between so many things that it has very little purchase as a form of explanation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that it is difficult to grasp how this relative autonomy operates. It allows Morley (1980) to say:

(a) 'the structure of access to different discourses is determined by social position' (p. 134) or 'the real determines to a large extent the encounter of/with discourses' (p. 19); and

(b) 'social position in no way directly correlates with decodings' (p. 137).

If these two statements are not to contradict one another, the first becomes meaningless. In short, if there is no correlations, then the determined 'structure of access to discourses' no longer has any effect. Yet, since Morley repeatedly states the *effective* determination of 'involvement in various forms of cultural frameworks and identifications' by 'basic socio-demographic factors', the source of this incoherency must be examined.

If we split existence into two categories so that we might understand it better, there is no reason why these categories should *causally* relate. Furthermore, we should be aware of the criteria used to calculate such a split. The problem with 'class' as a socio-economic category is that it necessarily refers (in Morley's and in most other sociological investigations) to occupational/economic unities, while

decoding refers to 'the range of discourses at the disposal of the audience' (ibid.: 55). In this sense, Morley has only thought the autonomy side of the relative autonomy problematic—differential decoding along class lines need not be explained, yet when he discovers differential decodings from groups with 'a common class position . . . their decodings are inflected in different directions by the influence of the discourses in which they are situated' (ibid.: 56). If this is so, it therefore follows that *to function as an explanation* of forms of decoding, class must be understood as a (limited) set of discursive unities.

A subject's class position does not determine her/his access to discourses, it is *itself* a set of (largely nonlinguistic) discourses. If this statement sounds contradictory, it is because of the way in which 'discourse' has been defined, *in opposition* to categories like 'the real', the object, the nonlinguistic.

To conflate the socio-economic with the real as Morley (following a well trodden path) does, implies that the discursive/ideological is somehow 'less real'—an epistemological absurdity Althusser attempted to theorize out of Marxist theory. Doubtless this is not his intention, but since the privileging of the socio-economic (class) is a *function* of an epistemology based upon this conflation, one cannot be rejected without the other. To redefine the discursive/ideological as real representations, with the same status as economic/social representations, is to go back to square one, to invalidate the whole theoretical field privileging the concept of class.

Since Morley is not prepared to do this, the epistemological problems remain, however silently. For example, he quite correctly points out the need to investigate 'the extent to which . . . individual readings are patterned into cultural structures and clusters' while (silently) assuming that this implies 'an approach which links differential interpretations back to the socio-economic structure of society' (ibid.: 15). Furthermore, we can theorize socio-economic determinations as much as we like, but in audience research the category of the subject must be understood within a specific set of signifying relations. To theorize a subject positioned within a set of social/historical/gender/class relations is, in the analysis of decoding practices, to grasp the wrong end of the problem. Unless these relations have conscious or unconscious determinations in constituting the subject in signification, they are not immediately relevant. The subject must be conceived within a set of subject/object relations—i.e. signifier/signified relations—be it in relation to the TV set, objects in the living room, her/his take home pay. To step outside these relations to theorize the relations between objects (signifiers) is to theorize something other than the practice of decoding.

This notion is necessarily semiological—it understands the signifier as more than a linguistic/imagistic category. The discourse/real distinction is not applicable in semiology, which does not privilege the nonlinguistic signifier (e.g. the word's nonlinguistic referent) over the word and the image. To wear the blinkers of this division is to see the TV programme as a set of signifiers and the objects surrounding the TV screen as not, to see the political discourse as signifying and the practices of bank managership as not.

Apart from the problems Morley's approach creates in analysing the data, the data itself is weighted by the organization of groups in terms of socio-economic variables. Morley acknowledges these problems in the *Postscript* (see above). There is, however, a related difficulty that emanates from his decision to work with groups (of decoders) rather than individuals. This choice, he writes 'was made on

the grounds that much individually based interview research is flawed by a focus on individuals as social atoms divorced from their social context' (ibid.: 33). This may well be true, but it is no reason for interviewing the decoders in groups. Morley is quite right to suggest that an individual's meaning-systems develop through a whole series of social interactions (if that is what is being suggested). He is, however, quite wrong to imply that an 'individually placed interview' necessitates the exclusion of 'social context' while a group based interview does not. This implication assumes (again) a conflation between 'the conditions in which actual opinions are formed, held and modified' (ibid.: 34), and the socio-economic unities defining each group.

Since the first stage of decoding television usually takes place on an individual basis or familial basis, it is appropriate to interview audiences on that basis. While it would be even more revealing to trace the decoding subject's path through 'the conditions in which actual opinions are formed, held and modified' this is—apart from being incredibly difficult—emphatically *not* what Morley does. If the members of a decoding group move towards a unifiable position, it is difficult to gauge how much this is an effect of group dynamics. Do, for example, certain dominant members of the group structure the readings of the group as a whole? The individually based interview circumvents this problem.

Moreover, there is no reason why individually based interviews should be psychologistic enterprises. Indeed, it is only by interviewing each subject (as a product of a whole range of societal variables) individually that analysis can establish societal variables within decoding practice. Such research would be able to examine, as Roger Silverstone puts it, 'the question of whether the structures really exist, or whether they are only the products of the analyst's imagination' (Silverstone, 1981: 106).

'Out of the swamp'

Given the wealth of material using semiological tools for the analysis of film and television, it is remarkable that so little work has been done on the practice of decoding. Obviously, empirical work on audiences is difficult to organise, but this is no excuse for failing even to consider how such a project should be approached. Morley's work is inevitably confusing, moving as it does from an overtheorized area (encoding/textual analysis) to an undertheoretical one (decoding), a confusion acknowledged at the end of *The Nationwide Audience*. We are left thinking, like an audience at the end of *King Lear*, what does it all mean? Where do we go from here? We can do no worse than restate some of the questions that decoding research may provide answers to: what are the dominant variables determining readings of television?; to what extent are these variables inscribed within the TV text; how much scope do the variety of forms of television allow for differential decodings, and what limits these differences? Can we identify determinant moments in the TV text? If we are to answer these questions, the following points should be observed:

(a) The analysts task is to construct a series of 'preferred readings' from the material gathered *after* interviewing has taken place. This will enable her/him to gauge the scope of possible readings the text allows (scope limited only by the range of decoders), and to identify the points at which the text allows/limits plurality. At this point, textual analysis will be necessary in the quest to identify the textual aspects/forms that determine certain meanings at certain points.

(b) Textual analysis, by itself, can only reveal the narrative forms/devices that engender particular kinds of purchase within the decoder's cultural parameters. The decoding subjects should, as far as possible, be understood as products of specific socially determined biographies, so that we might be able to construct a list of determinant societal variables that explain differences/similarities in the range of readings. This will best be achieved by interviewing each decoder individually.
(c) Obviously, no research project will be able to avoid obscuring these points by unconsciously ignoring or privileging certain variables before, during or after interviews. One problem, for example, will be the decoder's awareness of her/his involvement in a research project. This will inevitably lead, as the 'uses and gratifications' theorists could tell us, to the tendency for decoders to construct a more critical reading than they might do otherwise. Most of Morley's decoding groups try and present a critical face towards *Nationwide*, even if this only involves them stating a preference for the programme on the other channel. This problem will be almost impossible to circumvent. Other problems, however, are less likely to crop up if the interview revolves around the decoders *reconstruction* of the TV programme, i.e. the first question should be: what happened?
(d) As Morley, following Richard Dyer, suggests in the *Critical Postscript*, attention should be placed upon the concept of pleasure. Which bits did the decoders enjoy? Why? How did this affect their readings?

Such research would not only answer questions. It would offer considerable political ammunition to critics of various forms of television output.

Notes

1. See, for example, Dyer *et al.*, (1981) containing a series of essays spanning these approaches.
2. See, for example, Trew, (1979) on the linguistic basis of the development of a news story in *The Sun* and *The Morning Star*
3. See for example, Wren-Lewis, 1981/1982, on the narrative determinations upon the TV coverage of the 1981 riots.
4. As indicated by Heath and Skirrow, (1977).
5. There is nothing inherently wrong about the investigation of intention—applied to encoding, for example, it is a valid area of consideration.
6. For example, towards the end of the study Morley attempts to re-establish the importance of class in decoding. He thereby refers to 'ideological class relations' in which 'every discursive process is inscribed' (p. 157), having previously distinguished between ideology and class (as relatively autonomous). To subsequently lump them both together in relation to 'every discursive process' is, to say the least, a little difficult to decode.
7. These points are based upon lessons learned during my own pilot study, as well as upon what has already been said.

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