

## Questions on Stuart Hall “Encoding/Decoding” (ca. 1976)

Some quick background: In this essay, Hall uses a number of terms in a technical manner. Here are some thumbnail definitions for those of you new to cultural theory. Make sure you have a handle on these terms.

“Articulation”: can be taken to mean “connection.” In British parlance, an 18-wheeler is an “articulated lorry” because it’s a truck that has a cab and a trailer. Many cabs can be hitched to the same trailer and vice-versa. Consider the metaphor as you read his use of the word.

“Ideology” or “ideological”: whole courses can be taught about these words. Conventionally, ideology refers to the official doctrine of a religion or political party. Marx used the term to refer to the whole set of beliefs that characterize a society. Hall uses it to refer to unstated conceptions about how the world should be that lie behind what audiences might see on television. We’ll talk about this in class.

“Sign” “code” “language” polysemy”: all these terms are related and come from a field called “semiotics.” A sign is something like a word, sound or image that refers to something else. For instance, as Hall points out, the word “cow” is meant to refer to a ruminant with four legs. But a “sign” can also be an image or a sound: the Nike “swoosh” is a sign, as is the “bang” one hears in a TV show or film when a person fires a gun. In both cases, the sign actually has no necessary relationship to what it represents: Nike could have chosen a different logo and if you have actually heard a gun go off, it’s nothing like the sound one hears in action movies. These sets of conventions for connecting signs to their meanings make up a code, which Hall will use somewhat interchangeably with “language.” Finally, “polysemy” refers to the ability of signs to mean different things to different people, especially at the connotative level. For instance, the Nike swoosh can connote “those cool shoes” “Just Do It” or “those sweatshop-using bastards” depending on the code you use to interpret it.

---

### And now your questions:

1. What’s wrong with the standard sender-message-receiver model of communication theory?
2. What does he mean that moments of encoding and decoding are organized by a code?
3. Why are the “moments” of encoding and decoding so important?
4. How and why are production and reception related? What does this mean for the analysis of communication in a context like TV?
5. What’s wrong with “behaviorist” approaches to media?

6. Discuss the distinction between “denotation” and “connotation”: what do these two terms usually mean, how does Hall use them differently, and why is he so concerned about connotation?
  
7. Discuss the three different “codes” or reading strategies: dominant-hegemonic or preferred, negotiated and oppositional. Where do the professional values of TV production fit in, and where do ideas like “misinterpretation” fit into Hall’s scheme?