Oblique Strategies and Counter-Hegemonic Struggles: Decoding in the Birmingham Tradition (Part Two)

Halls (Re)articulated Model of Communication Continued

Hall retains the denotation/connotation distinction simply for its analytic value in spite of himself, it seems, and the acknowledgement that it is not how signs are taken in their combined sense in real language communities. The connotative level of language becomes, then, the privileged but not exclusive window of mobile ideology through which passes already coded signs and these latter engage deep cultural codes. Codes give direction to televisual signs and reveal maps in which the whole range of social meanings, practices, and usages, power and interest [are] written. (134) It is interesting to note here that Halls sense of mapping is strictly representational and even though it is tied to the work of interpretation of media audiences, it is not productive of the territory. This puts a limit on work. More on this later.

Hall seizes upon inequality among connotative codes to expose hierarchical arrangements, specifically those ordered under dominant or preferred meanings that is, sense-giving constructs that assign and integrate the new, problematic or troubling. Maps of capture are dominant but not determined because the emphasis is on preference (pre-fer) in advance that may shift, but more generally, remains open. Halls sense of this process is presented by invoking active rules of competence whose job it is to enforce or pre-fer one semantic domain over another and rule items into and out of their appropriate meaning sets. The interpretive work

involved in the communicative process has been neglected, according to Hall. By dominant Hall signals the means of enforcing, convincing, commanding and legitimating a particular decoding. The tendency in communicational processes such as broadcasting is for simple pluralism and polysemy to break down upon closer inspection into the influence of the dominant cultural order; indeed, specific political regimes are imprinted into preferred meanings. For Barthes, for instance, in The Man in the Street on Strike, preferred meaning is imprinted by the bourgeoisie as the social class that does not want to be named, and it ex-nominates itself by naturalizing and universalizing its particularly, contingent status, spreading its brand of common sense over everything. Mythologies of the labour action, especially strikes, are cases in point. In the preferred code of bourgeois maxims, print images of striking workers walking a picket line (his reference is to Le Figaro) are an affront to good sense because their actions negatively affect those outside of the management group with which they are in disagreement. The preferred meaning is enforced by discourses in which representatives from related industries speak of economic doom, and people in the community explain how they are managing to cope with disruptions in their everyday routines. Strikes are in this way scandalous because bourgeois reason figures workers and ordinary taxpayers as solitudinous characters, thus preserv[ing] the essentialist separation of social cells, which we know was the first ideological principle of the bourgeois revolution. ((Barthes, The Man in the Street on Strike, in *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1979, p. 100.)) Barthes continues: By protesting that a strike is a disturbance to those it does not concern, the bourgeoisie testifies to a cohesion of social functions which it is the very goal of the strike to manifest: the paradox is that the petit bourgeois invokes the naturalness of his isolation at the very moment when the strike overwhelms him with the obviousness of his subordination. ((*Ibid*., p. 102.))

Halls Barthesean vision of connotation as an open medium through which culture, knowledge and history may travel and speak, while remaining open to active transformations, especially those that are ideologically driven, is also tinged with Volosinovs critique of abstract objectivist formalism. This allows Hall to escape from a slavish objectivist vision of codes and introduce interpretive work into the mix. This emphasis on work does not lead into an appreciation of the creative, subjective, individualist, perhaps even private matter of getting or understanding a televisual message. Rather, Hall is interested in the way that television producers and broadcasters phrase the problems with reference to failed messages (audiences that dont grasp their intentions):what they really mean to say – [and clearly Hall thinks he understands their intentions as well as they do] is that the viewers are not operating within the dominant or preferred code. Their ideal is perfectly transparent communication. (135) The polar opposite of transparency is opacity or distorted communication.

Pre-ference is a modality of encoding; it is neither deterministic nor prescriptive. It is a question of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate. (135) Formal semiology cannot ignore the work of decoding, the management of the semiotic scaffolding it receives. Encoding pre-fers; decoding is constrained by the parameters of encoding. Some degree of correspondence exists between encoding and decoding, but it is constructed and not guaranteed. But it is not totally open, either. While acknowledging wildly aberrant decodings, decodings more often than not have some degree of reciprocity with encodings. (136) Hall does not investigate the concept of openness in detail. He frames it between aberrant misunderstandings and perfect transparency: between unlimited drift and arbitrariness and the sempiternal glance of angels. Yet Halls language of constraints, construction, degrees of reciprocity, limits and parameters is central to all semiotic theorizations of openness: a message is not open to any decoding whatsoever, even when

it is a so-called open work, to use a musical example, like graphic notation (Sylvano Bussotti) or grouped notes (Karlheinz Stockhausen). ((See my discussion of openness in Deleuze and Guattari and Eco in *Undisciplined Theory*, London: Sage, 1998, pp. 73-96.)) Admittedly, intentionally open works of the avant-grade are not very much like most television broadcasts, but the conceptual language of limits, relations, tendencies, even the sobriety of decoding practices, circumscribes freedom. Hall pursues a line of thought that cannot be captured by the intentionalist-deconstructive polarity; still, Hall does attempt to deconstruct misunderstanding in order to show that it is systematically distorted communication. (136)

Arguably, the most well-known part of Halls essay follows. He turns to the first of three hypothetical positions of decoding, the dominant-hegemonic position. In this position, the mode of reception of the televisual message is full and straight. It corresponds to an ideal type of transparent reciprocity between encoding and decoding in which the decoder works inside the dominant code. (136) Here Hall deploys hegemonic in the sense of dominant map of meaning or mythology that is inhabited and used to navigate everyday life. He shows his readers the inside of this position in relation the professional code of television shared by broadcasters and producers. This description of encoding pragmatics assumes that the message upon which the broadcasters work has already been signified in a hegemonic manner. (136) Operating within the dominant code, but relatively independent from it, the professional code works by displacement and bracketing of the hegemonic quality of the interpretations of the dominant code. Professional broadcasters wrap ideology in technicality. They receive, invite and frame hegemonic interpretations of public affairs principally generated by political and military elites. [Halls examples are of Northern Ireland, Chile, and certain governement legislation in England] The dependency of the professional broadcasters on already coded material should be obvious; to this reproduction of the hidden conventions

of those in power, the professionals select occasions, formats, talking heads, clips, debates, a roster of experts, etc. Although Hall is somewhat unclear on this point: professional broadcasters, it seems, reproduce reproductions, already coded readings of events sometimes, Hall admits, this creates conflict and contradiction and as an institution, broadcasting enjoys a certain degree of privileged access to the coded messages of power elites. Broadcasting is linked to the defining elites, but Hall does not pursue this point. The reproduction of already coded, hegemonic interpretations (i.e., whether in the form of press releases, press summaries, pre-selected questions at press conferences, managed interviews, media liaison teams, spin doctors, etc.) is, Hall observes, accomplished in a manner that is not obviously biased; rather, ideological reproduction therefore takes places inadvertently… . (137)

Examining the Social Contract of the late 1970s in England and the transition from Labour to Thatcherism, Ian Connell provides a partial empirical proof for Halls first hypothetical position (the very thing that Hall thought needed to be done) through the reproduction of an already given political ideology, of an already-always-there interpretation. ((Connell, Television news and the Social Contract, *in Culture, Media, Language*, p. 155.)) But Connell is concerned with encoding. Our question is this: how much work is decoding the message full and straight? Hall answers this question indirectly as he presents his three hypothetical positions: work increases toward the third position and as it takes on the character of resistance. Work is defined as resistance (informed dissent), but not to the medium as such, as in the tradition of formal analyses of everything from priming time and videoframing through jolts-per-minute and felt-meaning, to taping and zapping. ((See Derrick de Kerckhove, *Brainframes*, Utrecht: BSO Origin, 1991, pp. 42ff.))

The second position is the negotiated code. If one of the defining characteristics of the dominant position was the globality, grandness, totality, largeness of its interpretive horizon dominant definitions … take large views of issues: they relate events to the national interest or the level of geo-politics (137) –

this position may de defined by contrast by its reserving of the right to refocus the global in terms of local conditions. The negotiated code operates by the exceptions of situated logics, its work involves making its own ground rules. Hall uses this position to rethink the meaning of what counts as a misunderstanding the contradictions that arise from the adaptive and oppositional elements put to work on negotiating dominant encodings (i.e., one may acknowledge, in the politics of neo-liberal deficit management, the dominant-hegemonic economic message at the level of a nations accounts, trade balances, etc., as long as this does not entail closing ones local hospital).

It is in the midst of this second position that Hall defines the hegemonic viewpoint: it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings … it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy it appears coterminous with what is natural, inevitable, taken for granted about the social order. (137) A mental horizon stamped with legitimacy and naturalness is essentially what is meant by consent in discussions of hegemonic dominance it is the space in which acceptance and contestation take place. This horizon is a container, a frame that doesnt appear to have any particular interests. Halls second position nicely clarifies a significant feature of dominant-hegemonic meaning: it is actually won and requires care, cultivation and defense (technically, it is temporary and conjunctural) since the consensus it has achieved threatens to shift and slide apart in the moving social, political and moral field of relations. In this way Halls positions two and three, as we will shortly see, trace a vector of progressive

dissent as consent fractures into dissensus, the first glimmer of which is exposed in the disjuncture of translating the global into the local and, finally, with an explicit decoding against the global.

In the third position, the decoding audience understands the global meaning and grasps the connotative inflection of the message but decode[s] [it] in a globally contrary way. (137-38) The work involved takes place through the deployment of what Hall calls an oppositional code and features two closely related moves: messages are detotalized so as to be retotalized and in this manner lifted from a preferred code to an alternative code. Halls example is listening to a debate on wage limits and recoding national interests as class interests. (138) Decoding entails recoding every time I hear economic statements about the need to pay down a public debt (national or otherwise) I recode this as a call to erode the public sector, union-bust, punch holes in the social safety net, scapegoat the poor, etc. Or, to borrow as example from the social studies of the counterculture in Policing the Crisis, oppositional, countercultural decoding circa the late 1960s saw consensus as coercive and redefined tolerance as repressive. ((Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, London: Macmillan, 1978, p. 257.)) The transition from negotiated to oppositional (re)coding is for Hall one of the most significant political moments. (138)

Halls sensitivity to the indeterminacy of decoding ((Colin Sparks, Stuart Hall, cultural studies and marxism, in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, London: Routledge, 1996), p. 87.)) certainly provided impetus to the ethnographic studies of media audiences in cultural studies. This willingness to probe indeterminacy was an innovation and the decoding practices of audiences were sought on this basis without desperation. Many have turned to some version of articulation ((Many of the contributors to *Stuart Hall: Critical*

Dialogues in Cultural Studies make this point, particularly Jennifer Daryl Slack, Dick Hebdige, and Lawrence Grossberg.)) to explain this innovation, demonstrating that it enabled communication to be conceived as something other than correspondence, agreement, guarantee, without sliding over to the side of complete disagreement and free decoding. The non-deterministic links between encoding and decoding were plotted by Hall along a continuum from global (dominant) to local (negotiated) to counter-global (oppositional); thus Hall presented communication as a problem like hegemony itself because the unity of the process was constructed and shaped by complex institutional forces, overlapping codes, competing and shifting accents, inflections and, as such, the meaning of messages need to be continuously (re)articulated because they are without guarantees.

Finally, Halls contribution to the study of models of communication has been called into question by those such as Lawrence Grossberg. He has remarked that: Articulation transforms cultural studies from a model of communication (production-text-consumption; encoding-decoding) to a theory of contexts. ((Lawrence Grossberg, Cultural Studies and/in New Worlds, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10 (1993): 4.)) It is only by caricaturing models of communication that such a claim may be advanced because as such models are developed they become more and more context sensitive and, indeed, the attempt to theorize context becomes one of their greatest challenges. And this, I believe, is what Hall contributed to the model of communication. Articulation may be a transformative concept that pushes cultural studies beyond, as Grossberg put it, the practice of critical interpretation, but its very context of theorization, the readymade scaffolding up which it clambered, was the model of communication inherited from the mathematical and linguistic traditions.