

# Media Studies

## Key Concepts

# REPRESENTATION

By Steve Baker

Adapted for Sandringham by David Allison and Simon Wallace

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# Representing reality

## Mediation

Every time we encounter a media text, we are not seeing reality, but someone's version of it. This may seem like an obvious point, but it is something that is easily forgotten when we get caught up in enjoying a text. If you see a picture of a celebrity kissing her boyfriend, you may find it unsurprising that the picture has been altered and does not show the reality of the situation, but in fact we should bear this in mind whatever we encounter in the media. The media place us at one remove from reality: they take something that is real, a person or an event and they change its form to produce whatever text we end up with. This is called mediation. You should be looking for this with any media text.

Think about a new album by your favourite group, for example: this is not just the sound of a few musicians playing together in a studio. Instead, the reality of the sound that they might make has been mediated before it reaches you. Engineers and producers have re-modelled the sound and artists have packaged the album. Newspapers and magazines have reported the group and created a context for the album so that most people probably had an opinion about it before it came out. Once again, whatever sound the group made in the studio has been highly mediated before it gets to you.

If you ever go to see a comedy show recorded for the television, you will see the process of mediation in action. What might end up as a half hour broadcast, will be recorded over an entire evening — jokes that might seem spontaneous when watched on the TV will have been endlessly repeated until “just right”. The studio audience will have been trained into laughing in exactly the right way by warm up men and the text that finally reaches the public will also be given context by use of soundtrack music and computer graphics. The whole experience of hearing a few jokes will have been mediated.



ITV's *The Bill* is one representation of the police

Of course, most of us are aware of this — we know that what we are seeing in a film or a Soap isn't real — we just allow ourselves to forget for the time that the programme is on that it is a fiction. At the same time, we all have ideas in our heads of some kinds of texts which might be somehow less mediated — it is obvious that a fictional programme isn't real, but when we encounter something like the television news, we are more likely to believe in the straightforward nature of the “truth” we are receiving. In fact, the News is just as sure to be mediated as anything else — someone has decided that these are the few news items that are the most “newsworthy” and has chosen the shots that are used to tell the stories, the graphics that will go with them and the tie that the presenter will be wearing which will distract you so much while you are watching. Whatever version you get of what has gone on will end up being highly mediated — very different from the experience of someone who was at the scene — as you will know if you have ever seen a news event taking place.

## Mediation – three things to look for

**1. Selection:** Whatever ends up on the screen or in the paper, much more will have been left out — any news story has been selected from hundreds of others which the producers decided for you were less interesting, any picture has been chosen from an enormous number of alternatives.

**2. Organisation:** The various elements will be organised carefully in ways that real life is not: in visual media this involves mise-en-scene and the organisation of narrative, in the recording of an album the production might involve re-mixing a track. Any medium you can think of will have an equivalent to these. This organisation of the material will result in ...

**3. Focusing:** mediation always ends up with us, the audience being encouraged towards concentrating on one aspect of the text and ignoring others. If you are watching a film the camera will pan towards an important character, in a tabloid the headlines will scream, for your attention. It can be easy to ignore how different from our everyday lives this is. If you are walking through a field, you are unlikely to see a sign saying “look at this amazing tree.” You make your own decisions about what is worth our attention. The media text, through mediation, tries to do this for us.

This kind of task is actually very important because in the hands of experienced media professionals the practice of mediation can be transparent — we do not notice it happen and are fooled into thinking that we are experiencing some kind of reality. Once again remember:

**All media texts involve mediation which you should train yourself to look for.**

## Representation

The result of this process of mediation is that we are given a version of reality which is altered: those are never the real people that we are seeing but representations of them which have somehow been created. It is time now to look at this idea of representation and how it happens.

### What is representation?

The Oxford English Dictionary gives two definitions of the word:

- 1. To represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal.....; to place a likeness of it before us in our mind.*
- 2. To represent also means to symbolise, stand for, to be a specimen of or to substitute for; as in the sentence, “In Christianity, the cross represents the suffering and crucifixion of Christ.”*

It is worth thinking about each of these for a moment: the first one is the more straightforward — the media are in the business of describing things to us — they represent people and types of people to us so that we end up feeling that we know what they are like.

## TASK

What, if anything, are the following people used as symbols of?

**Nelson Mandela**

**Britney Spears**

**Madonna**

**David Beckham**

Can you think of any other examples of people who have become symbols?

## TASK

What is your opinion of any of the following

**Paris Hilton**

**Jennifer Lopez**

**The Duchess of Cornwall\***

**Star Trek fans**

**Immigrants**

In most of these cases it is unlikely that you know these people personally — what impression that you have of them must come from the media. They have given us descriptions that have affected our views of these people. The second of the two dictionary definitions is slightly more difficult but also useful. A representation is something that symbolises something else.

The example the dictionary gives of the cross is an obvious one, but in the media you can find plenty of others. David Beckham, as he is represented in the media is not just a football player, but also a symbol of many things which some in the media think is positive and negative: fashion icon, adulterer etc.

*\* aka the former Camilla Parker-Bowles, second wife of Prince Charles.*

## **Society, the individual and representation**

Of course it is too simple to talk just about the media mediating reality and creating representations; we need a more subtle understanding of the process. To get this I will look briefly at some different ideas people have had about how representation works. You could broadly separate these into three:

### **The Reflective view of representing**

According to this view, when we represent something, we are taking its true meaning and trying to create a replica of it in the mind of our audience — like a reflection. This is the view that many people have of how news works — the news producers take the truth of news events and simply present it to us as accurately as possible.

## The Intentional view

This is the opposite of the Reflective idea. This time the most important thing in the process of representation is the person doing the representing — they are presenting their view of the thing they are representing and the words or images that they use mean what they intend them to mean. According to this theory, if you see a picture of an attractive person drinking a can of Coke in an advert, it will have the same meaning to you as the advertiser intended — go away and buy some!

## The Constructionist view

This is really a response to what have been seen a weakness in the other two theories — constructionists feel that a representation can never just be the truth or the version of the truth that someone wants you to hear since that is ignoring your ability as an individual to make up your own mind and the influences of the society that you live in on the way that you do so. This booklet will broadly be taking a Constructionist approach to representation so it is worth me spelling out this idea again.

**Any representation is a mixture of:**

- 1. The thing itself.**
- 2. The opinions of the people doing the representation**
- 3. The reaction of the individual to the representation**
- 4. The context of the society in which the representation is taking place.**

**Here's an example of how this works:**

If you've seen the film Independence Day, you may have been amused or annoyed at the way that British People were represented as upper class idiots. If you consider the different parts of the Constructionist approach to representation, they would work like this:

1. There must be some British people who the producers either encountered in reality or in other media texts.
2. They formed an opinion of them that they were stuck up idiots which they used as the basis of their representation.
3. As an individual watching this, you chose whether to believe the representation was valid or not.
4. In doing this, you were influenced by the fact that you are yourself British — an American watching the film would probably have come to a different conclusion.





## Society?

The last two parts of this equation — the individual and society are an enormously difficult area which you will cover in more detail later in the course. You may find that you end up covering them in your other subjects as well — the study of personality and the individual is Psychology and the study of Society is Sociology and you should feel free to try to apply anything that you learn in these subjects to the media.

For now it is worth thinking about the influence of society on what representations we receive. If you think of one of someone like the Duchess of Cornwall, you can see that the idea of *society* having a view of her is obviously a simplification. In society there are ardent royalists and committed republicans, people who hate anyone involved in the collapse of a marriage and those who believe that relationships are complicated and personal to the people involved — a multitude of views — so how can we say that society has an influence on our views of someone?

The truth is that amid all this confusion of opinions, some kinds of ideas dominate and are shared by a majority of people. We call views about how things should be and how people should behave an ideology and if an ideology is shared by the majority of people in a culture it is called the dominant ideology.

The group of ideas that make up the dominant ideology in Britain are not something that remains static — they change as new ideas are encountered and people discuss them. For example the dominant ideology in Britain used to be opposed to homosexual practises. Over time, however, opposition has changed to tolerance and then to acceptance for the majority, allowing openly gay men to present news and entertainment programmes and enter civil partnerships with one another.

Here are some things that are generally agreed to be part of the dominant ideology in Britain:

- *People should put their families first.*
- *People should work for their money and not show off too much about how much they have.*
- *Women should behave modestly.*
- *Women should look after their appearance.*

You may not agree with all of these morals, but if I am right that they are part of the dominant ideology, the chances are that they are the feelings of most people.

Let's relate this back to the Constructionist view of representation. If you see an article in one of the tabloids about David Beckham having an affair with another woman behind Victoria's back, you may be shocked and disappointed because his behaviour goes against what the dominant ideology suggests married men and fathers should do. Also because representations often act as symbols of other things, you will also be likely to think that his behaviour shows exactly what is wrong with celebrity culture / footballers' egos etc.

Many constructionists believe that this itself has an effect on what the dominant ideology actually is — after all the dominant ideology is only the belief of the majority of people so if you and others like you end up even more sure that rich people shouldn't flaunt their wealth as a result of seeing the article, then the dominant ideology has become a bit stronger. You could see the whole process that the constructionists describe as being a kind of negotiation. Over the years representations are accepted or rejected by the majority of people and the dominant ideology is gradually changed.

## Stereotypes

It's worth now looking in more detail at what is going on in the other parts of the process — the individuals and the media and their relationship with what is being represented. This brings us on to the question of stereotypes — another word which is maybe worth a dictionary definition:

***A standardised, often simplified, mental picture or attitude that is held in common by members of a group.***

A stereotype is a simplification that we use to make sense of a real person or group which is much more complicated. In reality there are many different kinds of Germans who are all individuals, but it is much easier to fool ourselves into believing that all Germans cheat with beach towels and eat strange sausages. The example that I have just given may seem harmless, but in fact it is arguably racist. Stereotypes are potentially highly dangerous but stereotyping itself is impossible to avoid — it is a natural function of the human mind — something that we all do in order to survive mentally in the confusing world around us. The following theory explains how it works.

### **Representation — How we stereotype:**

The fact that we naturally see the world in this kind of shorthand way, with connections between different character traits, allows the media to create simplistic representations which we find believable. Implicit personality theory explains this process.

- As humans we use our own unique storehouse of knowledge about people when we judge them.
- Our past experience is more important than the true features of the actual personality that we are judging — traits exist more in the eye of the beholder than in reality.
- We have each a system of rules that tells us which characteristics go with other characteristics.
- We categorise people into types (e.g. workaholic, feminist etc.) to simplify the task of person perception.
- Once we have in our minds a set of linked traits which seem to us to go together, they form a pattern of connections that can be called a prototype. In other words the mix of traits that we may consider “typical” of feminists are a prototype of what a feminist is like to us.
- If we encounter someone in reality or in the media who seems to fit neatly into a prototype, we feel reassured. It confirms our stereotyped view — we do not need to think further.
- Also once a few of the traits seem to fit our prototype, we will immediately bundle onto the person the rest of the traits from the prototype even if we do not know if they fit them in reality.
- Research has shown that if we find people who do not fit into our prototypes, we will form very strong often impressions of them — it is surprising to us and disconcerting — it forces us to think more deeply.
- On the other hand, if it is at all possible, we will try to twist the truth to fit in with our prototype, often ignoring traits which do not fit into our neatly imagined pattern of characteristics. This will particularly happen as time passes and we have time to forget

things that do not fit in. This can lead to enormous differences between our perceptions of people and the reality.

- All of this distortion happens naturally in our minds before the media have had their chance to simplify and distort. We do a lot of the business of stereotyping ourselves. It is almost as if we conspire with the media to misunderstand the world

So stereotyping is something that we all do — a natural part of the way our minds work and not in itself necessarily a bad thing. If, for example, you were a teacher attempting to plan out a course which would be suitable for your class, you would need to work from the basis of a kind of stereotype of the needs of “typical” students. Having said this, even in cases where stereotypes are valuable like this, the good teacher would have then tried to go beyond the stereotype and looked for exceptions.

This is probably something we should all do when we encounter stereotypes — be aware that just as with the process of mediation the stereotypes involve selection, organisation and focusing of the complicated reality.

### **The four parts of a media stereotype**

How can the media build a stereotype? With any group of people, there will obviously be an enormous number of things that can be used in a stereotype, but because stereotyping is a form of simplification, normally the most obvious things are used. These are:

- 1. Appearance — this can include, physical appearance and clothing as well as the sound of the voice. e.g. “all teachers wear dreadful old clothes”**
- 2. Behaviour — typical things that people in this group might do. “Grannies like to knit”**

These first two features of media stereotypes are the same when we make our own stereotypes. They simply involve us thinking of something that may be true of some of the group in question and applying it to all.

The third feature of media stereotyping is peculiar to the media:

- 3. The stereotype is constructed in ways that fit the particular medium.**

This is more difficult to understand but it is crucial for you to look for it. If you watch a film such as *Silence of the Lambs* and then look at the tabloid coverage of Fred West, you are seeing the same stereotype (the typical Serial Killer) being used, but there are obviously big differences which will depend on the specifics of the media used:

The film will use close ups of the killer’s leering face, soundtrack music and reaction shots of terrified victims to create their version of the stereotype.

The newspaper will use emotive headlines, blurred pictures of victims and police mug-shots of the killer along with shocking text and interviews with survivors.

In each case the text will create a stereotype which it’s audience will find familiar, but it will do it in very different ways.

- 4 There will always be a comparison whether real or imaginary with “normal” behaviour.**

The features which make up a stereotype are always those which seem somehow different from every-day behaviour. In fact you could almost start any stereotyped description by saying: “this group are different because they...”

Of course the idea of what is normal in any society is an absurdity and therefore in order to make it clear to us that the stereotyped characters are not behaving “normally” there will fre-

quently be “normal” people used to act as a contrast to them. So, in a film like *Silence of the Lambs*, Jodie Foster is used to give the audience someone to compare Lecter’s behaviour with. On the news, tales of striking workers (another stereotype) are always contrasted with interviews with “normal” people who are suffering as a result of their actions.

The ‘normal’ person will act as a representative of us in the text — at the same time reflecting what we might feel, or telling us what to feel depending on your point of view.

<b>TASK</b>			
Create your own chart of stereotypes based on those that you have encountered in two or more different media (for example, television and newspapers)			
<b>Stereotype</b>	<b>Appearance</b>	<b>Behaviour</b>	<b>Media example</b>

**Changing representations – Countertypes**



You may have seen the blockbuster film *Independence Day*. In this film there is a character played by Will Smith who is clearly intended to be a positive and strong hero. As such, he goes against many of the previous negative stereotypes of black people in American films. In one crucial scene from the film we see him responding to the danger of an alien’s attack by simply kicking it.

You may also have seen another film released around the same time: *Mars Attacks*. In this there is also a black hero who also responds to the attack of a bunch

*Independence Day*: To what extent does Jeff Goldblum’s character also represent a countertype?

of aliens by punching one of them. Both of these films were made virtually simultaneously: how can we explain the fact that they end up containing what are almost identical scenes? In both cases, the representation of black people in these films has probably resulted from the very best of intentions. The films' producers were probably tired of years of negative stereotyping of black people in the movies and wanted to create a new representation. So, instead of showing black people as criminals or as animals they have represented them as noble heroes who get straight to the point and take no nonsense. They have also emphasised the humour of these characters and have made sure that they are attractive enough to act as macho role models.

One analysis of this would be to say that they have created a new kind of stereotype — a positive stereotype which could be called a **countertype**. In the same way as a traditional stereotype was made by selecting the negative behaviour of some members of the group, the countertype homes in on some features which are positive. However the countertype is still very much a stereotype — it is still a simplification of the enormous diversity that must exist in the population of black Americans. As such, although it is an improvement on a negative stereotype, it is still not the whole truth and many black people would probably still find it very annoying in the way that it limits their behaviour.

### **Can we ever avoid stereotypes?**

You will probably be able to find Countertypes whenever there is a group being represented positively for the first time by the media. It seems as if the media find it difficult to adapt to change and will always use the old techniques of simplification even if they're trying to be nice about someone. This has led some people to question whether it is ever possible to create a representation that is free of stereotypes. If you think back to implicit personality theory, it should be clear how natural the process of stereotyping is to us and how attractive we find this simplified view of the world. However, if we are aware of this tendency in our own minds, we must be able to at least try to avoid it and to recognise it in the media texts that we are presented with.

## ***Hegemony versus Pluralism***

There are few 'facts' in Media Studies. The more you read, the more you will discover that academics from different ideological starting points draw different conclusions about the way the media works, and its relationship with its audience. Representation can be considered from two very different ideological standpoints.

### **Hegemony**

The hegemonic model says that the ruling classes maintain their power through control of ideas and culture rather than force. In hegemony, the ruling classes govern by consensus: they control the way the media represents the world so as to influence the way people think about the world, and the ruling classes. This can become a running battle between rivals.

A more sophisticated approach to hegemony argues that the mass media adopt a consensus of what is normal; a commonsense which is actually an ideology. The very nature of common sense means that the audience does not question it. You might think of it as a kind of civil religion: a set of values that the majority of people subscribe to without thinking about it.

An Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, developed the idea of Hegemony, suggesting that the power that lies at its heart is constantly being negotiated, rather than enforced.

## **Pluralism**

The pluralistic model comes from the opposite perspective to Marxism. Pluralism says that the media is diverse, with a wide range of available choices for consumers. Rather than the media influencing consensus, consensus values influence media representations. If particular representations are dominant, pluralists argue, it is because they are popular among the audience, not because powerful media institutions are 'pushing' a particular ideology.

After all, the main function of the mass media is to entertain – to please – their audience: to provide representations that meet audience expectations. This is where stereotypes come in: they pander to the views of the audience. The more media institutions pander to their audiences, the more money they can make.

**Steve Baker** (with additional material by Simon Wallace and David Allison)