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Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse

Two themes have been cited for this colloquy on the significance of television: the highly focused theme concerning the nature of the “televisual language,” and the very general and diffused concern with “cultural policies and programs.” At first sight, these concerns seem to lead in opposite directions: the first toward formal, the second toward societal and policy questions. My aim, however, is to try to hold both concerns within a single framework. My purpose is to suggest that, in the analysis of culture, the interconnection between societal structures and processes and formal or symbolic structures is absolutely pivotal. I propose to organize my reflections around the question of the encoding/decoding moments in the communicative process: and, from this base, to argue that, in societies like ours, communication between the production elites in broadcasting and their audiences is necessarily a form of “systematically distorted communication.” This argument then has a direct bearing on cultural policies, especially those policies of education and so on which might be directed toward “helping the audience to receive the television communication better, more effectively.” I therefore want, for the moment, to retain a base in the semiotic/linguistic approach to “televisual language”: to suggest, however, that this perspective properly intersects, on one side, with social and economic structures, on the other side with what Umberto Eco has recently called “the logic of cultures.”¹ This means that, though I shall adopt a semiotic perspective, I do not regard this as indexing a closed, formal concern with the immanent organization of the television

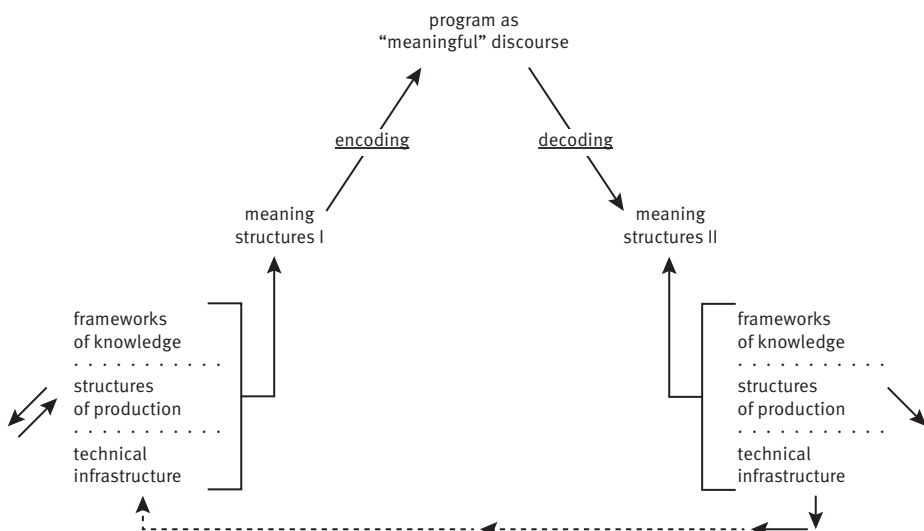
discourse alone. It must also include a concern with the “social relations” of the communicative process, and especially with the various kinds of “competences” (at the production and receiving end) in the use of that language.²

IN HIS PAPER Professor Halloran has properly raised the question of studying “the whole mass communication process,” from the structure of the production of the message at one end to audience perception and “use” at the other.³ This emphasis on “the whole communicative process” is a comprehensive, proper, and timely one. However, it is worth reminding ourselves that there is something distinctive about the product and the practices of production and circulation in communications which distinguishes this from other types of production. The “object” of production practices and structures in television is the production of a message: that is, a sign-vehicle, or rather sign-vehicles of a specific kind, organized, like any other form of communication or language, through the operation of codes, within the syntagmatic chains of a discourse. The apparatus and structures of production issue, at a certain moment, in the form of a symbolic vehicle constituted within the rules of “language.” It is in this “phenomenal form” that the circulation of the “product” takes place. Of course, even the transmission of this symbolic vehicle requires its material substratum: videotape, film, the transmitting and receiving apparatus, etc. It is also in this symbolic form that the reception of the “product,” and its distribution between different segments of the audience, take place. Once accomplished, the translation of that message into societal structures must be made again for the circuit to be completed. Thus, while in no way wanting to limit research “to following only those leads which emerge from content analysis,” we must recognize that the symbolic form of the message has a privileged position in the communicative exchange: and that the moments of “encoding” and “decoding,” though only “relatively autonomous” in relation to the communicative process as a whole, are determinate moments.⁴ The raw historical event cannot in that form be transmitted by, say, a television newscast. It can only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual language. In the moment when the historical event passes under the sign of language, it is subject to all the complex formal “rules” by which language signifies. To put it paradoxically, the event must become a “story” before it can become a communicative event. In that moment, the formal sub-rules of language are “in dominance,” without, of course, subordinating out of existence the his-

torical event so signified, or the historical consequences of the event having been signified in this way. The “message-form” is the necessary form of the appearance of the event in its passage from source to receiver. Thus the transposition into and out of the “message-form” or the meaning-dimension (or mode of exchange of the message) is not a random “moment,” which we can take up or ignore for the sake of convenience or simplicity. The “message-form” is a determinate moment, though, at another level, it comprises the surface-movements of the communications system only, and requires, at another stage, to be integrated into the essential relations of communication of which it forms only a part.

From this general perspective, we may crudely characterize the communicative exchange as follows. The institutional structures of broadcasting, with their networks of production, their organized routines and technical infrastructures, are required to produce the program. Production, here, initiates the message: in one sense, then, the circuit begins here. Of course, the production process is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about audience, etc. frame the passage of the program through this production structure. However, though the production structures of television originate the television message, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, “definitions of the situation” from the wider sociocultural political system of which they are only a differentiated part. Philip Elliott has expressed this point succinctly in his discussion of the way in which the audience is both the source and receiver of the television message.⁵ Thus circulation and reception are, indeed, “moments” of the production process in television, and are incorporated, via a number of skewed and structured “feed-backs,” back into the production process itself. The consumption or reception of the television message is thus itself a “moment” of the production process, though the latter is “predominant” because it is the “point of departure for the realization” of the message. Production and reception of the television message are, not, therefore, identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the communicative process as a whole.

At a certain point, however, the broadcasting structures must yield an encoded message in the form of a meaningful discourse. The institution-societal relations of production must pass into and through the modes of a language for its product to be “realized.” This initiates a further differentiated



moment, in which the formal rules of discourse and language operate. Before this message can have an “effect” (however defined), or satisfy a “need” or be put to a “use,” it must first be perceived as a meaningful discourse and meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which “have an effect,” influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological, or behavioral consequences. In a determinate moment, the structure employs a code and yields a “message”: at another determinate moment, the “message,” via its decodings, issues into a structure. We are now fully aware that this reentry into the structures of audience reception and “use” cannot be understood in simple behavioral terms. Effects, uses, “gratifications” are themselves framed by structures of understanding, as well as social and economic structures which shape its “realization” at the reception end of the chain, and which permit the meanings signified in language to be transposed into conduct or consciousness.

Clearly, what we have called Meanings I and Meanings II—as we see in the diagram above—may not be the same. They do not constitute an “immediate identity.” The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry—that is, the degrees of “understanding” and “misunderstanding” in the communicative exchange depend both on the degrees of symmetry/a-symmetry between the position of encoder-producer and that of the decoder-receiver: and also on the degrees of identity/

non-identity between the codes which perfectly or imperfectly transmit, interrupt, or systematically distort what has been transmitted. The lack of “fit” between the codes has a great deal to do with the structural differences between broadcasters and audiences, but it also has something to do with the a-symmetry between source and receiver at the moment of transformation into and out of the “message-form.” What is called “distortion” or “misunderstandings” arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange. Once again, this defines the “relative autonomy” but “determinateness” of the entry and exit of the message in its linguistic/meaning form.

The application of this rudimentary paradigm has already begun to transform our understanding of television “content”: and we are just beginning to see how it might also transform our understanding of audience reception and response as well. Beginnings and endings have been announced in communications research before, so we must be cautious. But there seems some ground for thinking that a new and exciting phase in audience research, of a quite new kind, may be opening up. At either end of the communicative chain, the use of the semiotic paradigm promises to dispel the lingering behaviorism which has dogged mass media research for so long. Though we know the television program is not a behavioral input, like a tap on the kneecap, it seems to have been almost impossible for researchers to conceptualize the communicative process without lapsing back into one or other variant of low-flying behaviorism. We know, as Gerbner has remarked, that representations of violence on the TV screen “are not violence but messages about violence”: but we have continued to research the question of violence as if we were unable to comprehend the epistemological distinction.⁶

Let us take an example from the drama-entertainment area in television and try to show how the recognition that television is *a discourse*, a communicative—not simply a behavioral—event, has an effect on one traditional research area, the television/violence relation.⁷ Take the simple-structure, early (and now children’s) TV Western, modeled on the early Hollywood B-feature *genre* Western: with its clear-cut, good/bad Manichaeian moral universe, its clear social and moral designation of villain and hero, the clarity of its narrative line and development, its iconographical features, its clearly registered climax in the violent shoot-out, chase, personal showdown, street or barroom duel. For long, on both British and American TV, this form constituted the predominant drama-entertainment genre. In quantitative terms, such films/programs contained a high ratio of violent

incidents, deaths, woundings. Whole gangs of men, whole troops of Indians, went down, nightly, to their deaths. Researchers, Hilde Himmelweit among others, have, however, suggested that the structure of the early TV/B-feature Western was so clear-cut, its action so conventionalized and stylized, that most children (boys rather earlier than girls, an interesting finding in itself) soon learned to recognize and “read” it like a “game”: a “cowboys-and-Injuns” game.⁸ It was therefore further hypothesized that Westerns with this clarified structure were less likely to trigger the aggressive imitation of violent behavior or other types of aggressive “acting-out” than other types of programs with a high violence ratio which were not so stylized. But it is worth asking what this recognition of the Western as a “symbolic game” means or implies.

It means that a set of extremely tightly coded rules exist whereby stories of a certain recognizable type, content, and structure can be easily encoded within the Western form. What is more, these “rules of encoding” were so diffused, so symmetrically shared as between producer and audience, that the “message” was likely to be decoded in a manner highly symmetrical to that in which it had been encoded. This reciprocity of codes is, indeed, precisely what is entailed in the notion of stylization or “conventionalization,” and the presence of such reciprocal codes is, of course, what defines or makes possible the existence of a genre. Such an account, then, takes the encoding/decoding moments properly into account, and the case appears an unproblematic one.

But let us take the argument a little further. Why and how do areas of conventionalization arise (and disappear)? The Western tale, of course, arose out of—though it quickly ceased to conform to—the real historical circumstances of the opening up of the American West. In part, what the production of the Western genre codes achieved was the transformation of a real historical West, selectively, into the symbolic or mythical “West.” But why did this transformation of history into myth, by the intervention of a stylized set of codes, occur, for our societies and times, in relation to just this historical situation? This process, whereby the rules of language and discourse intervene, at a certain moment, to transform and “naturalize” a specific set of historical circumstances, is one of the most important test cases for any semiology which seeks to ground itself in historical realities. We know, and can begin to sketch, the elements which defined the operation of codes on history. This is *the* archetypal American story, America of the frontier, of the expanding and unsettled West, the “virgin land” before law and society fully settle in, still closer to Nature than to Law and Order.

It is the land of *men*, of independent men, isolated in their confrontations with Nature or Evil: and thus stories of masculine prowess, skill, power, and destiny: of men “in the open air,” driven to their destinies by inner compulsion and by external necessity—by Fate, or by “the things a man just has to do”: and thus a land where morality is inner-centered, and clarified, i.e., fully objectivated not in speech but in the facticities of gesture, gait, dress, “gear,” appearance. A land where women are either subordinate (whether as “little home-bodies” or ladies from “back East”): or, if somewhat more liberated—e.g., good/bad saloon girls—destined to be inadvertently and conveniently shot or otherwise disposed of in the penultimate reel. If we wanted to make a strict semiological analysis, we could trace the specific codes which were used to signify these elements within the surface-structures of particular films, plots, programs. What is clear is that, from this deep-structured set of codes, extremely limited in its elements, a great number of surface events and transformations were accomplished: for a time, in film and television, this deep-structure provided the taken-for-granted story-of-all-stories, the paradigm action-narrative, the perfect myth.

In the semiotic perspective, of course, it is just this surface variety on the basis of limited transformations which would define the Western as an object of study. Nor would the transformations which we have witnessed since the early days be at all surprising. We can see and follow at least the basic methods which would be required for us to account for the transformation of this simple-structure Western into the psychological Western, the baroque Western (*The Left Handed Gun?*), the “end-of-the-West” Western, the comic Western, the “spaghetti” Western, even the Japanese and Hong Kong Western, the “parody” Western (*Butch Cassidy?*), paradoxically, the return-of-violence Western (*The Wild Bunch*), or the domestic, soap-opera Western (the TV series the *Virginian*), or the Latin American revolution Western. The opening sequence of a film like *Hud*—one of the moments when the “heroic” West begins to pass into the “decline of the West,” in which the “hero” appears driving through that familiar landscape in a Cadillac, or where the horse appears in the back of an Oldsmobile truck—far from indexing the breakup of the code, shows precisely how an opposite meaning can be achieved by the reversal of a limited number of “lexical items” in the code, in order to achieve a transformation in the meaning.

From this perspective, the prolonged preoccupation of mass media researchers with the issue of violence in relation to the Western film appears more and more arbitrary and bizarre. If we refuse, for a moment, to bracket

and isolate the issue of violence, or the violent episode from its matrix in the complex codes governing the genre, how many other, crucial kinds of meaning were in fact transmitted while researchers were busy counting the bodies? This is not to say that violence was not an element in the TV Western, nor to suggest that there were not quite complex codes regulating the ways in which violence could be signified. It is to insist that what audiences were receiving was not “violence” but messages about violence. Once this intervening term has been applied, certain consequences for research and analysis follow: ones which irrevocably break up the smooth line of continuity offering itself as a sort of “natural logic,” whereby connections could be traced between shoot-outs at the OK Corral and delinquents knocking over old ladies in the street in Scunthorpe.

The violent element in the narrative structure of the basic Western—shoot-out, brawl, ambush, bank raid, fistfight, wounding, duel, or massacre—like any other semantic unit in a structured discourse cannot signify anything on its own. It can only signify in terms of the structured meanings of the message as a whole. Further, its signification depends on its relation—or the sum of the relations of similarity and difference—with other elements or units. Olivier Burgelin has long ago, and definitively, reminded us that the violent or wicked acts of a villain only mean something in relation to the presence/absence of good acts:

We clearly cannot draw any valid inferences from a simple enumeration of his vicious acts (it makes no difference whether there are ten or twenty of them) for the crux of the matter obviously is: what meaning is conferred on the vicious acts by the fact of their juxtaposition with the single good action? . . . One could say that the meaning of what is frequent is only revealed by opposition to what is rare. . . . The whole problem is therefore to identify this rare or missing item. Structural analysis provides a way of approaching this problem which traditional content analysis does not.⁹

Indeed, so tightly constructed was the rule-governed moral economy of the simple-structure Western that one good act by a “villain” not only could, but apparently *had to*, lead to some modification or transformation of his end. Thus, the presence of numerous bad-violent acts (marked)/absence of any good-redeeming act (unmarked) = unrepentant villain; this in turns means that he can be shot down, without excuse, in the final episode and makes a brief and “bad” or undistinguished death, provided that the

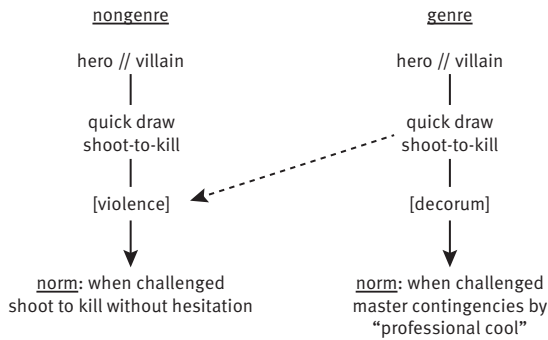
hero does not shoot the villain in the back, or unawares, and does not draw first. *But*, the presence of bad-violent acts (marked)/presence of single good-redeeming act (marked) also can = possible salvation or regeneration of the villain, deathbed reconciliation with hero or former cronies, restitution to wronged community, at the very least, lingering and “good” death. What, we may now ask, is the meaning of “violence” when it only appears and signifies anything within the tightly organized moral economy of the Western?

We have been arguing (a) the violent act or episode in a Western cannot signify in isolation, outside the structured field of meanings which is the film or program; (b) it signifies only in relation to the other elements, and in terms of the rules and conventions which govern their combination. We must now add (c) that the meaning of such a violent act or episode cannot be fixed, single, and unalterable but must be capable of signifying different values depending on how and with what it is articulated. As the signifying element, among other elements, in a discourse, it remains polysemic. Indeed, the way it is structured in its combination with other elements serves to delimit its meanings within that specified field, and effects a “closure,” so that a preferred meaning is suggested. There can never be only one, single, univocal, and determined meaning for such a lexical item, but, depending on how its integration within the code has been accomplished, its possible meanings will be organized within a scale which runs from dominant to subordinate. And this of course has consequences for the other, the reception end of the communicative chain: there can be no law to ensure that the receiver will take the preferred or dominant meaning of an episode of violence in precisely the way in which it has been encoded by the producer.

Typically, the isolation of the “violent” elements from the Western by researchers was made on the presumption that all the other elements—setting, action, characters, iconography, movement, conduct and appearance, moral structure, and so on—were present as so many inert supports for the violence: in order to warrant or endorse the violent act. It is now perfectly clear that the violence might be present only in order to warrant or endorse the character. We can thus sketch out more than one possible path of meaning through the way in which the so-called “content” is organized by the codes. Take that ubiquitous semantic item of the simple Western: hero draws his gun, faster than anyone else (he seems always to have known how), and shoots the villain with bull’s-eye aim. To use Gerbner’s term, what norm, proposition, or cultural signification is here signified?¹⁰ It is possible to

decode this item thus: “The hero figure knows how to draw his gun faster, and shoot better than his enemy: when confronted by the villain, he shoots him dead with a single shot.” This might be called a “behavioral” or “instrumental” interpretation. But—research suggests—this directly behavioral “message” has been stylized and conventionalized by the intervention of a highly organized set of codes and genre-conventions (a code-of-codes, or meta-code). The intervention of the codes appears to have the effect of neutralizing one set of meanings, while setting another in motion. Or, to put it better, the codes effect a transformation and displacement of the same denotative content-unit from one reference-code to another, thereby effecting a transformation in the signification. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have argued that “habitualization” or “sedimentation” serves to routinize certain actions or meanings, so as to free the foreground for new, innovative meanings.¹¹ Turner and others have shown how ritual conventions redistribute the focus of ritual performances from one domain (e.g., the emotional or personal) to another (e.g., the cognitive, cosmological, or social) domain.¹² Freud, both in his analysis of ritualization in symptom-formation and in the dreamwork, has shown the pivotal position of condensation and displacement in the encoding of latent materials and meanings through manifest symbolizations.¹³ Bearing this in mind, we may speculatively formulate an alternative connotative “reading” for the item. “To be a certain kind of man (hero) means the ability to master all contingencies by the demonstration of a practiced and professional ‘cool.’” This reading transposes the same (denotative) content from its instrumental-behavioral connotative reference to that of decorum, conduct, the idiom and style of (masculine) action. The “message” or the “proposition,” now, would be understood, not as a message about “violence” but as a message about conduct, or even about professionalism, or perhaps even about the relation of professionalism to character. And here we recall Robert Warshow’s intuitive observation that, fundamentally, the Western is not “about” violence but about codes of conduct.¹⁴

I have been trying to suggest—without being able to take the example very far—how an attention to the symbolic/linguistic/coded nature of communications, far from boxing us into the closed and formal universe of signs, precisely opens out into the area where cultural content, of the most resonant but “latent” kind, is transmitted: and especially the manner in which the interplay of codes and content serves to displace meanings from one frame to another, and thus to bring to the surface in “disguised” forms the repressed content of a culture. It is worth, in this connection, bearing in



mind Eco's observation that "semiology shows us the universe of ideologies arranged in codes and sub-codes within the universe of 'signs.'"¹⁵ My own view is that, if the insights won by the advances in a semiotic perspective are not to be lost within a new kind of formalism, it is increasingly in this direction that it must be pushed.¹⁶

Let us turn, now, to a different area of programming, and a different aspect of the operation of codes. The televisual sign is a peculiarly complex one, as we know. It is a visual sign with strong, supplementary aural-verbal support. It is one of the iconic signs, in Peirce's sense, that, whereas the form of the written sign is arbitrary in relation to its signified, the iconic sign reproduces certain elements of the signified in the form of the signifier. As Peirce says, it "possesses some of the properties of the thing or object represented."¹⁷ Actually, since the iconic sign translates a three-dimensional world into two representational planes, its "naturalism" with respect to the referent lies not so much at the encoding side of the chain, but rather in terms of the learned perceptions with which the viewer decodes the sign. Thus, as Eco has convincingly argued, iconic signs "look like objects in the real world," to put it crudely (e.g., the photograph or drawing of a cow, and the animal cow), because they "reproduce the conditions of perception in the receiver."¹⁸ These conditions of "recognition" in the viewer constitute some of the most fundamental perceptual codes which all culture-members share. How? Because these perceptual codes are so widely shared, denotative visual signs probably give rise to fewer "misunderstandings" than linguistic ones. A lexical inventory of the English language would throw up thousands of words which the ordinary speaker could not denotatively comprehend: but provided enough "information" is given, culture-members would be able or

competent to decode, denotatively, a much wider range of visual signifiers. In this sense, and at the denotative level, the visual sign is probably a more universal one than the linguistic sign. Whereas, in societies like ours, linguistic competence is very unequally distributed as between different classes and segments of the population (predominantly, by the family and the education system): what we might call “visual competence,” at the denotative level, is more universally diffused. (It is worth reminding ourselves of course, that it is not, in fact, “universal,” and that we are dealing with a spectrum: there are kinds of visual representation, short of the “purely abstract,” which create all kinds of visual puzzles for ordinary viewers: e.g., cartoons, certain kinds of diagrammatic representation, representations which employ unfamiliar conventions, types of photographic or cinematic cutting and editing, etc.) It is also true that the iconic sign may support “mis-readings” simply because it is so “natural,” so “transparent.” Mistakes may arise here, not because we as viewers cannot literally decode the sign (it is perfectly obvious what it is a picture of), but because we are tempted, by its very “naturalization” to “misread” the image for the thing it signifies.¹⁹ With this important proviso, however, we would be surprised to find that the majority of the television audience had much difficulty in literally or denotatively identifying what the visual signs they see on the screen refer to or signify. Whereas most people require a lengthy process of education in order to become relatively competent users of the language of their speech community, they seem to pick up its visual-perceptual codes at a very early age, without formal training, and are quickly competent in its use.

The visual sign is, however, also a connotative sign. And it is so preeminently within the discourses of modern mass communication. The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference, of its position in the various associative fields of meanings, is, precisely the point where the denoted sign intersects with the deep semantic structures of a culture, and takes on an ideological dimension. In the advertising discourse, for example, we might say that there is almost no “purely denotative” communication. Every visual sign in advertising “connotes” a quality: a situation, value, or inference which is present as an implication or implied meaning, depending on the connotational reference. We are all probably familiar with Barthes’s example of the sweater, which, in the rhetoric of advertising and fashion, always connotes, at least, “a warm garment” or “keeping warm,” and thus by farther elaboration, “the coming of winter” or “a cold day.” In the specialized sub-codes of fashion, sweater may connote “a fashionable style of *haute*

couture” or, alternatively, “an informal style of dress.” But set against the right background, and positioned in the romantic sub-code, it may connote “long autumn walk in the woods.”²⁰ Connotational codes of this order are, clearly, structured enough to signify, but they are more “open” or “open-ended” than denotative codes. What is more, they clearly contract relations with the universe of ideologies in a culture, and with history and ethnography. These connotative codes are the “linguistic” means by which the domains of social life—the segmentations of culture, power, and ideology—are made to signify. They refer to the “maps of meaning” into which any culture is organized, and those “maps of social reality” have the whole range of social meanings, practices and usages, power and interest, “written in” to them. Connotted signifiers, Barthes has reminded us, “have a close communication with culture, knowledge and history; and it is through them, so to speak, that the environmental world invades the linguistic and semantic system. They are, if you like, the ‘fragments of ideology.’”²¹

The denotative level of the televisual sign may be bounded within certain, very complex but limited or “closed” codes. But its connotative level, though bounded, remains open, subject to the formation, transformation, and decay of history and fundamentally polysemic: any such sign is potentially mappable into more than one connotative configuration. “Polysemy” must not, however, be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are not equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its segmentations, its classifications of the social, cultural, and political world, upon its members. There remains a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. This question of the “structure of dominance” in a culture is an absolutely crucial point. We may say, then, that the different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into connotative domains of *dominant or preferred meanings*. New, problematic, or troubling things and events, which breach our expectancies and run counter to our “common-sense constructs,” to our “taken-for-granted” knowledge of social structures, must be assigned to their connotational domains before they can be said to “make sense”: and the most common way of “mapping them” is to assign the new within some domain or other of the existing “maps of problematic social reality.” We say “dominant,” not “determined,” because it is always possible to order, classify, assign, and decode an event within more than one “mapping.” But we say “dominant” because there exists a pattern of “preferred readings,” and these mappings both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized.²² The

domains of “preferred mappings” have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings: practices and beliefs, the everyday knowledge of social structures, of “how things work for all practical purposes in this culture,” the rank order of power and interest, and a structure of legitimations and sanctions. Thus, to clarify a “misunderstanding” at the denotative level, we need primarily to refer to the immanent world of the sign and its codes. But to clarify and resolve “misunderstandings” at the level of connotation, we must refer, *through* the codes, to the rules of social life, of history and life situation, or of economic and political power, and, ultimately, of ideology. Further, since these connotational mappings are “structured in dominance” but not closed, the communicative process consists, not in the unproblematic assignment of every visual item to its position within a set of prearranged codes, but in *performative rules*: rules of competence and use, of logics-in-use, which seek to *enforce* or *prefer* one semantic domain over another; and which rule items into and out of their appropriate meaning-sets. Formal semiology has too often neglected this level of interpretive work, though this forms in fact the deep-structure of a great deal of broadcast time in television, especially in the political and other “sensitive areas” of programming. In speaking of dominant meanings, then, we are not simply talking about a one-sided process, which governs how any event will be signified. (We might think, for example, of the recent coup in Chile.) It also consists of the “work” required to enforce, win plausibility for, and command as legitimate a decoding of the event within the dominant definition in which it has been connotatively signified. Dr. Terni remarked, in his paper, that “by the word reading we mean not only the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into a creative relation between themselves and with other signs: a capacity which is, by itself, the condition for a complete awareness of one’s total environment.”²³

Our only quarrel here is with the notion of “subjective capacity,” as if the denotative reference of the televisual sign is an objective process, but the connotational and connective level is an individualized and private matter. Quite the opposite seems to us to be the case. The televisual process takes “objective” (i.e., systemic) responsibility precisely for the relations which disparate signs contract with one another, and thus continually delimits and prescribes into what “awareness of one’s total environment” these items are arranged.

This brings us, then, to the key question of “misunderstandings” between the encoders and decoders of the television message: and thus, by a long but

necessary detour, to the matter of “cultural policies” designed to “facilitate better communication,” to “make communication more effective.” Television producers or “encoders,” who find their message failing to “get across,” are frequently concerned to straighten out the kinks in the communicative chain, and thus to facilitate the “effectiveness” of their messages. A great deal of research has been devoted to trying to discover how much of the message the audience retains or recalls. At the denotative level (if we can make the analytic distinction for the moment), there is no doubt that some “misunderstandings” exist, though we have no real idea how widespread this is. And we can see possible explanations for it. The viewer does not “speak the language,” figuratively if not literally: he or she cannot follow the complex logic of argument or exposition; or the concepts are too alien; or the editing (which arranges items within an expository logic or “narrative,” and thus in itself proposes connections between discrete things) is too swift, truncated, or sophisticated, etc. And so on. At another level, encoders also mean that their audience has “made sense” of the message in a way different from that intended. What they really mean is that viewers are not operating within the dominant or preferred code. This ideally is the perfectly transparent communication. Instead, what they have to confront is the fact of “systematically distorted communication.”

In recent years, discrepancies of this kind are usually accounted for in terms of individually “aberrant” readings, attributed to “selective perception.” “Selective perception” is the door via which, in recent research, a residual pluralism is reserved within the sphere of a highly structured, a-symmetrical cultural operation. Of course, there will always be individual, private, variant readings. But my own tentative view is that “selective perception” is almost never as selective, random, or privatized as the concept suggests. The patterns exhibit more structuring and clustering than is normally assumed. Any new approach to audience studies via the concept of “decoding” would have to begin with a critique of “selective perception” theory.

Umberto Eco has recently pointed to another, intermediary, level of structuration, between competence in the dominant code and “aberrant” individual readings: that level provided by subcultural formations. But, since subcultures are, by definition, differentiated articulations within a culture, it is more useful to specify this mediation within a somewhat different framework.²⁴

The very general typology sketched below is an attempt to reinterpret the notion of “misunderstandings” (which we find inadequate) in terms of certain broadly defined societal perspectives which audiences might adopt

toward the televisual message. It attempts to apply Gramsci's work on "hegemonic" and "corporate" ideological formations and Frank Parkin's recent work on types of meaning systems.²⁵ I should like now (adapting Parkin's schema) to put into discussion four "ideal-type" positions from which decodings of mass communications by the audience can be made: and thus to re-present the commonsense notion of "misunderstandings" in terms of a theory of "systematically distorted communications."²⁶

Literal or denotative "errors" are relatively unproblematic. They represent a kind of noise in the channel. But "misreadings" of a message at the connotative or contextual level are a different matter. They have, fundamentally, a societal, not a communicative, basis. They signify, at the "message" level the structural conflicts, contradictions, and negotiations of economic, political, and cultural life.

The first position we want to identify is that of the dominant or hegemonic code. (There are, of course, many different codes and sub-codes required to produce an event within the dominant code.) When the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say, a television newscast or current affairs program, full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference-code in which it has been coded, we might say that the viewer is operating inside the dominant code. This is the ideal-typical case of "perfectly transparent communication," or as close as we are likely to come to it for all practical purposes.

Next (here we are amplifying Parkin's model), we would want to identify the professional code. This is the code (or set of codes, for we are here dealing with what might be better called meta-codes) which the professional broadcasters employ when transmitting a message which has already been signified in a hegemonic manner. The professional code is "relatively independent" of the dominant code, in that it applies criteria and operations of its own, especially those of a technico-practical nature. The professional code, however, operates within the "hegemony" of the dominant code. Indeed, it serves to reproduce the dominant definitions precisely by bracketing the hegemonic quality, and operating with professional codings which relate to such questions as visual quality, news and presentational values, televisual quality, "professionalism," etc. The hegemonic interpretation of the politics of Northern Ireland, or the Chilean coup, or the Industrial Relations Bill are given by political elites: the particular choice of presentational occasions and formats, the selection of personnel, the choice of images, the "staging" of debates, etc. are selected by the operation of the professional code.²⁷ How the

broadcasting professionals are able both to operate with “relatively autonomous” codes of their own, while acting in such a way as to reproduce (not without contradiction) the hegemonic signification of events is a complex matter which cannot be further spelled out here. It must suffice to say that the professionals are linked with the defining elites not only by the institutional position of broadcasting itself as an “ideological apparatus,” but more intimately by the structure of *access* (i.e., the systematic “over-accessing” of elite personnel and “definitions of the situation” in television).²⁸ It may even be said that the professional codes serve to reproduce hegemonic definitions specifically by not overtly biasing their operations in their direction: ideological reproduction therefore takes place here inadvertently, unconsciously, “behind men’s backs.” Of course, conflicts, contradictions, and even “misunderstandings” regularly take place between the dominant and the professional significations and their signifying agencies.

The third position we would identify is that of the *negotiated code* or position. Majority audiences probably understand quite adequately what has been dominantly defined and professionally signified. The dominant definitions, however, are hegemonic precisely because they represent definitions situations and events which are “in dominance,” and which are *global*. Dominant definitions connect events, implicitly or explicitly, to grand totalizations, to the great syntagmatic views-of-the-world: they take “large views” of issues; they relate events to “the national interest” or to the level of geopolitics, even if they make these connections in truncated, inverted, or mystified ways. The definition of a “hegemonic” viewpoint is (a) that it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe of possible meanings of a whole society or culture; and (b) that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy—it appears coterminous with what is “natural,” “inevitable,” and “taken for granted” about the social order. Decoding within the *negotiated version* contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations, while, at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground rules, operating with “exceptions” to the rule. It accords the privileged position to the dominant definition of events, while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to “local conditions,” to its own more *corporate* positions. This negotiated version of the dominant ideology is thus shot through with contradictions, though these are only on certain occasions brought to full visibility. Negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics arise from the differential position of

those who occupy this position in the spectrum, and from their differential and unequal relation to power. The simplest example of a negotiated code is that which governs the response of a worker to the notion of an Industrial Relations Bill limiting the right to strike, or to arguments for a wages freeze. At the level of the national-interest economic debate, he may adopt the hegemonic definition, agreeing that "we must all pay ourselves less in order to combat inflation," etc. This, however, may have little or no relation to his willingness to go on strike for better pay and conditions, or to oppose the Industrial Relations Bill at the level of his shop floor or union organization. We suspect that the great majority of so-called "misunderstandings" arise from the disjunctures between hegemonic-dominant encodings and negotiated-corporate decodings. It is just these mismatches in the levels which most provoke defining elites and professionals to identify a "failure in communications."

Finally, it is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and connotative inflection given to an event, but to determine to decode the message in a globally contrary way. He detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference. This is the case of viewer who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages, but who "reads" every mention of "the national interest" as "class interest." He is operating with what we must call an *oppositional code*. One of the most significant political moments (they also coincide with crisis-points within the broadcasting organizations themselves for obvious reasons) is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading.

The question of cultural policies now falls, awkwardly, into place. When dealing with social communications, it is extremely difficult to identify as a neutral, educational goal the task of "improving communications" or of "making communications more effective," at any rate once one has passed beyond the strictly denotative level of the message. The educator or cultural policy maker is performing one of his most partisan acts when he colludes with the re-signification of real conflicts and contradictions as if they were simply kinks in the communicative chain. Denotative mistakes are not structurally significant. But connotative and contextual "misunderstandings" are, or can be, of the highest significance. To interpret what are in fact essential elements in the systematic distortions of a socio-communications system as if they are technical faults in transmission is to misread a deep-structure process for a surface phenomenon. The decision to intervene in

order to make the hegemonic codes of dominant elites more effective and transparent for the majority audience is not a technically neutral but a political one. To “misread” a political choice as a technical one represents a type of unconscious collusion with the dominant interests, a form of collusion to which social science researchers are all too prone. Though the sources of such mystification are both social and structural, the actual process is greatly facilitated by the operation of discrepant codes. It would not be the first time that scientific researchers had “unconsciously” played a part in the reproduction of hegemony, not by openly submitting to it, but simply by operating the “professional bracket.”

NOTES

- 1 Umberto Eco, “Does the Public Harm Television?,” paper for Italia Prize Seminar, Venice, 1973.
- 2 See Dell Hymes’s critique of transformational approaches to language, via concepts of “performance” and “competence”: “On Communicative Competence,” in *Sociolinguistics*, ed. J. B. Pride and Janet Holmes (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972).
- 3 J. D. Halloran, “Understanding Television,” paper for the Council of Europe Colloquy on “Understanding Television,” University of Leicester, 1973.
- 4 Halloran, “Understanding Television.”
- 5 Philip Elliott, “Uses and Gratifications: A Critique and a Sociological Alternative,” unpublished paper, Centre for Mass Communications Research, University of Leicester, 1973.
- 6 George Gerbner et al., *Violence in Drama: A Study of Trends and Symbolic Functions* (Philadelphia: Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 1970).
- 7 This example is more fully discussed in part 2, Alan Shuttleworth, Marina Carmargo, Angela Lloyd, and Stuart Hall, “New Approaches to Content,” in *Violence in the TV Drama-Series*, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies: Report to Home Office Inquiry into TV Violence, forthcoming.
- 8 Hilde Himmelweit, “TV and the Child,” *Universities and Left Review* 6 (1959).
- 9 Olivier Burgelin, “Structural Analysis and Mass Communications,” *Studies in Broadcasting* [Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai] 6 (1968).
- 10 For “proposition-analysis,” George Gerbner, “Ideological Perspectives and Political Tendencies in News Reporting,” *Journalism Quarterly* 41 (1964); Evelyne Sullerot, “Etude de Presse . . .,” *Les Temps modernes* 20, no. 226 (1965); and for “norm-analysis,” George Gerbner in *Violence Mass the Media*, Task Force Report to Eisenhower Commission on Causes and Prevention of Violence, US Printing Office, 1969.
- 11 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1971).

- 12 V. W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).
- 13 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 4, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* (London: Hogarth Press, 1952).
- 14 Robert Warshow, *Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1962).
- 15 Umberto Eco, "Articulations of the Cinematic Code," *Cinemantics* 1 (1970).
- 16 For developments of this argument, Stuart Hall, "Determinations of News Photographs," *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 3 (1972); and Hall, "Open and Closed Uses of Structuralism," Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies Occasional Paper, 1973.
- 17 C. S. Peirce, *Speculative Grammar*, bk. 2, vol. 3 of Peirce's *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1932).
- 18 Eco, "Articulations of the Cinematic Code."
- 19 Hall, "Determinations of News Photographs."
- 20 Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 1 (1971).
- 21 Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967).
- 22 Hall, "Determinations of News Photographs," and more generally Stuart Hall, "Deviance, Politics and the Media," in Mary McIntosh and Paul Rock (eds.), *Deviance and Social Control* (London: Tavistock, 1974).
- 23 P. Terni, "Memorandum," Council of Europe Colloquy on "Understanding Television," University of Leicester, 1973.
- 24 Eco, "Does the Public Harm Television?"
- 25 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971); and Frank Parkin, *Class Inequality and Political Order* (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1971).
- 26 See Jürgen Habermas, "Systematically Distorted Communications," in *Recent Sociology* 2, ed. H. P. Dretzel (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1970).
- 27 "External Influences on Broadcasting: The External/Internal Dialectic in Broadcasting—Television's Double-Bind," in this volume.
- 28 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in his *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971).