Media, Culture & Society

Codes and cultural analysis

John Corner

The online version of this article can be found at:

Additional services and information for **Media, Culture & Society** can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://mcs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://mcs.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/2/1/73.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Jan 1, 1980

What is This?

Codes and cultural analysis

JOHN CORNER*

> 'We mean by code, for instance, a verbal language such as
> English, Italian or German; visual systems, such as traffic
> signals, road signals, card games, etc; and so on.'
>
> Umberto Eco.

Introduction

One of the most ambitious projects to be undertaken in the still disputed academic area of 'cultural studies' has been the connecting of the study of linguistic forms with the study of social structure, processes and behaviour.[1] The relationship between society and language or, more broadly, symbolic structures, has long been an important element of social and anthropological research, but the new emphasis is one which seeks to obtain a precision of socio-cultural analysis in keeping both with the 'scientific' levels of systematic investigation achieved by modern linguistics and, quite often, the 'scientific' ambitions of much radical social theory. The system of a particular language and the system of the particular society which uses it are seen to be in an important, mutually determining relationship—such that linguistic study of a certain kind offers inroads into an understanding of a society and its characteristic processes. Linguistic paradigms have also been used in the study of a whole range of cultural phenomena, including those not previously thought of as having directly linguistic dimensions, such as photography, dress and aspects of social behaviour and organisation. A widened meaning of 'language' has emerged.

Many of the researchers who have addressed themselves to this broadly socio-linguistic enterprise (as well as work in sociolinguistics from a social science base there has been a range of structuralist, semiotic and literary critical influences) have had resort at some point or other to the notion of 'code', which they have used with varying degrees of emphasis and according to a number of definitions. In this article I propose to examine some of the problems of these usages, concentrating on dominant tendencies within the area of cultural studies/communication studies.

Codes

Although 'code' is widely used in general speech and writing to indicate levels of rule-system ranging from the closure of the morse-code (a tight set of correlations) to the relative openness and generality of a code of norms or of conduct (which might at times be describable as the unspoken and implicitly organised tendencies of behavioural propriety) in the area of linguistic social research something close to the idea of a set of rule-governed operations is usually indicated by the term. That is to say, the usage points towards something closer to the morse-code than to the normal

---

* Centre for Communication Studies, Liverpool University.

[1] Many examples could be given of the centrality of the approach but perhaps Hall (1973) is most illustrative:

> 'My purpose is to suggest that, in the analysis of culture, the inter-connection between societal structures and processes and formal or symbolic structures is absolutely pivotal.'

uses of code of manners, where an altogether more loosely-arranged set of guiding conventions, a lower level of determinations, is suggested.

It is worth noting here that as well as different levels of *systemic organisation* being involved, there is also a matter of *transformation* to be considered. The morse-code allows one, by precise equivalents, to transmit language in the form of a broken audio tone or light beam; a code of manners, whilst it certainly exerts some systematic pressure on behavioural choice, does not strictly speaking *encode* anything at all. It may give a socially determined coherence and a regulated means of expression to areas of social experience but expression is not synonymous with *transformation across systems*. On this count, many contemporary uses of code in cultural analysis appear to be closer to code of manners than to morse code, though there is frequently assumed to be a high level of systemic inter-connection at work, as I shall discuss later.

A number of introductory texts in the area slide around this issue rather confidently, as if code suggested a spectrum of relatively unproblematic systemic states and that the shift from semaphore to social behaviour was purely one of degree. It is true that matters of degree enter into the question of how the production of human and social meanings is variously organised and controlled but that is not to say that they are 'mere' matters of degree or that they do not require careful differentiation. In fact, most confusions in cultural code theory seem to be due less to the researchers artfully abusing the term as to their falling victims to its general imprecision when on its own and its wide range of meanings in specialised contexts.

The concept 'code' has entered communications and cultural studies in Britain through three rather distinct lines of research:

(1) The technological paradigms of much early work on 'communication theory', paradigms in which the terms 'encoding' and 'decoding' are borrowed from information theory and telecommunications and indicate the conversion of 'message' into 'signal' and the reverse (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). This usage is still operative in many models and perspectives seeking a unified (and therefore often highly abstract) general theory of communication. Combined with genetic and psychological perspectives, it is present also in the influential work of Bateson (1951) and Wilden (1972).

(2) The class-specific, sociolinguist theories of Basil Bernstein and his fellow researchers, notably those at the University of London Institute of Education. Here code is defined as 'frame of consistency' and 'social structuring of meanings' (Bernstein, 1971). In a development of the concept (Hasan, 1973), codes are seen to be related to the 'semantic structure of a message' both as this is determined by 'social relationships' and as it, in turn, determines those 'varieties of language' which are in fact the 'verbal realizations' of the codes, here described primarily as 'codes of behaviour'. The categories 'restricted' and 'elaborated' are, of course, the code forms most often referred to in this research tradition. Widely influential in education, the theory has been used elsewhere, including political sociology.

(3) The developing project of semiotics as a general approach to the study of social meaning linked to a structuralist cultural analysis. In this perspective, the location of individual meaning elements within rule-governed wholes—signifying systems— is a fundamental proposition, quite often extended to all social meaning. The particular level of closure indicated by the use of the term code is frequently clear if implicit in the various and detailed theoretical and analytic treatments, treatments which usually involve the identification of separate codes at work in a given text or piece of

social action. Here, Barthes (1971, 1972), Eco (1972, 1976) Burgelin (1968) and Hall (1973) have been key influential texts, whilst Levi-Strauss (1963) provided, quite early on, a structuralist, anthropological version of socio-textual analysis. (See also Geertz, 1973 and Leach, 1976.)

Although research in communication studies has produced what appears at times to be a conflation of these three broad uses of 'code', any points of convergence must be considered in the light of the rather different implications, both in terms of the notion 'systemic organisation' and that of 'transformation', which the approaches carry. We must also note the location of these approaches within differing social or political theories. Furthermore, although 'code' is most often used as a 'language-society' bridging concept, usage varies in the emphasis placed on social or linguistic characteristics—to the extent, that in some cases, the notion hardly seems to be 'bridging' at all but to be conceptualised as lying almost entirely within the distinctive territories of either the linguistician (language form, dialect, register) or the sociologist (socialisation, belief-system, social structure). Nevertheless, perspectives (2) and (3) above can be related (and both distinguished from perspective (1)) insofar as they both address themselves, if at times only implicitly, to one of the central issues in modern 'cultural studies' and, indeed, a central one in much political and social research—ideology, variously and problematically related to consciousness and language. Here, the relation of (3) above to media analysis is my prime concern.

It is the development of research in this area, stemming from a resurgence in Marxist work on social knowledge, which has helped to promote the use of linguistic paradigms in social research (in combination with other influences like the 'new' anthropology), although the emphasis on textual analysis and the 'reading' of ideological formulations has not gone unchallenged in Marxist media research.[2]

Bernstein's concern with 'the structures of cultural transmission' thus connects with Umberto Eco's more formalistically ambitious belief that 'Semiology shows us the universe of ideologies arranged in codes and sub-codes within the universe of signs' (Eco, 1972).

It has been claimed that, at one level, 'an ideology may be defined as a system of semantic rules to generate messages' (Eliseo Veron quoted in Camargo, 1974) so that the appropriateness of the concept code to ideological analysis is apparent. It offers the possibility of plotting 'cultural transmission' and its constitutive language-systems with a gratifying sense of precision. Though less important, it also seems to be the case that its connotation of covert dealings has won for the term an extra, if improper, allure in the eyes of some critical researchers investigating political and social knowledge as perpetrated 'myth'.

One final point I would make by way of preliminary observation is that the theoretical and definitional problem of the 'tightness' of internal correlations within a specific 'code' and also the problem of the precise character of the transformations (if any) being worked are often compounded by the notion of a plurality of codes or code systems at work in the same text, artefact or communicative behaviour. That is to say, the relationship of these systems, codes and subcodes (see Eco above) to one another—as alternative or jointly contributory factors in the production of social meaning (and the latter in ways involving varying degrees of overlap, superimposition

---

[2] Murdock and Golding (1977) are quite emphatic in opposing what they see as a dangerous bias towards 'readings' of media artifacts and their ideological structures which are insufficiently grounded in social and economic analysis. Semiotics and socio-literary approaches (including work in cultural studies) come in for particular criticism.

or what Barthes calls 'imbrication')—further troubles the theory of codes in cultural analysis.

Code and media texts

The 'Unity' of Current Affairs Television (Hall, 1976) illustrates some of the difficulties in using 'code' in an analysis of media texts and professional media practices. In a theoretical forward to the case-study of an edition of *Panorama* which forms the centrepiece of the paper, it is argued that

Several different codes are required to construct the meaning of a message; it is the product of several meaning systems in combination.

Initially, these different 'meaning systems' appear to be identified as the sound and visual tracks of a television programme, tracks which operate both independently (horizontally) and in combination (vertically). Later in the piece, however, code is used in a broader, richer sense

Connotational and ideological codes are therefore at work, organising the elements of the message, as well as those codes which enable the broadcaster, literally to 'get a meaning across'.

The distinction indicated here, between denotational and connotational coding, suggests important differences within the range of relationships possible between codes and a primary language system, differences to which I shall return later.

Even further into the main *Panorama* study, which is concerned with, among other things, the strategic, rhetorical control over 'discussion' exerted by James Callaghan in a 1974 Election Special, code appears to signal a still more general and yet apparently more categorisable and discrete system of meaning. Referring to Callaghan's undermining of some previous comments made by William Whitelaw, the authors note

Callaghan accomplishes this by explicitly signalling, and then openly playing with, the fact that two codes are at work—the political code (hard opposition and attack) and the 'Parliamentary Debate' code (rudeness is a sort of polite game).

Callaghan is later said to block the intervention of the studio chairman by resorting to a gambit invoking the idea of the responsibilities of the politician—a ploy which the researchers see as an appeal 'in the name of a 'higher duty'—(a more powerful code)'.

It is clear, I think, from these examples alone that the linguistic levels, the degrees of systematicity and the kinds of organising influence of the 'codes' variously indicated in the paper are difficult to subsume within a single, unifying concept of codification. From the extract above, it is hard to judge the status of the parenthesized glosses—are they elements of, or summaries of, the respective codes? If the latter, just how useful is it to call 'hard opposition and attack' the 'political code'? If the former, what are the codic relationships involved and on what specific political set of generating principles do they systematically depend? Although initially the term seems to promise the mapping of highly structured and socially determined systems of linguistic behaviour it quite soon becomes used to denote the inflection of any utterance in the televised discussion towards this or that rhetorical strategy and to denote, too, the principles and policies which the strategies are used to articulate and uphold (the 'code' of the broadcaster consisting presumably of arguments adducing professional broadcasting values, the 'codes' of the politician being variously grounded in notions of public responsibility and representative authority as these are interpreted through party perspectives).

This inadequately theorised shift away from natural language equivalents ('getting meaning across') towards the social inflections and implications of specific utterances (where the notions of register and rhetoric would seem equally useful *given the levels of system evidenced*) is a slide observable in a number of cultural studies' analyses making central use of 'code'. The employment of the term to describe almost any discernible cultural convention or behavioural pattern, whether notions of transformation or of a discernible systemic invariance are appropriate or not offers an obstacle to clarity of analysis and I shall return to this aspect of the problem later.

In the case of *The 'Unity' of Current Affairs Television*, even if one allows the argument that there is a plurality of very different *kinds* of code at work at varying levels in the total discourse of the programme analysed, there is considerable difficulty in relating these codes to each other within a notion of the total discourse's *determination*. In the latter part of the analysis of the *Panorama* programme Callaghan is seen to 'break the rules' by taking over a chairmanship role, thus securing a sizeable 'win' in terms of the televised contest of arguments. Nevertheless, the authors of the paper go on to remark that 'we think it can be established that, within the rules and codes of the programme, a "Callaghan win" is the reading which this programme prefers.' The notion of the 'preferring' of one reading of a text rather than others by mechanisms *within the text* which weight possible interpretations in one direction is central to much of the research at the Birmingham Centre. It has led to subtle studies of the reading act as one involving the realization of meanings through the complex negotiation of differing interpretative frames with textual devices, some of which tend to close-off the apparent choice of interpretation in a number of ingeniously ingenuous ways—for instance, the variety of naturalistic techniques used in film and television programme construction. Such textual 'work' is identified by the cultural studies researcher and used as a sort of constellation of clues which permits a tracing-back to, and reconstruction of, the ideological formations ('fields of force' of meaning and value) within which the text was produced.

Yet to return to the *Panorama* example, it is unclear how this process of 'preferring', if it is to be theorised as a function of the 'codes of the programme', relates to those other codes mentioned earlier by the researchers—the codes contributing to the *transmission* of visual and verbal meanings; those involved in 'getting the meaning across'. What we apparently have is a situation in which Callaghan breaks a code only to have that breach registered as a 'win' within the 'codes of the programme' and transmitted as such through what were earlier called 'the several different codes required to construct the meaning of a message'. It is not made clear how these 'metacodes' of the programme somehow negate the codes at work in the debate which forms the programme's subject or how the various verbal and kinesic codes combine with the visual codes of television discourse to augment or lessen the 'dominance' achieved at other levels. One has the impression that code is being used quite frequently in lieu of 'inflection', 'register' or even 'principle' and is therefore giving to the analysis a far tighter sense of traced and inter-connected configurations of determined meaning than is actually evidenced. At the point in the paper where the authors develop their notion of 'preferred reading' they remark

However, *it is in the nature of all linguistic systems which employ codes*, that more than one reading can potentially be produced: that more than one message-structure can be constructed (my italics).

It would be useful to know, here, just what sort of linguistic systems do *not* employ codes and through that knowledge to find out what the conditions of employment are as understood by the researchers.

Codes and determinations

In an earlier, influential article on *The Determinations of Newsphotographs*, Hall (1972*b*) follows Barthes and Eco by setting out to show how various levels of coding operate to constitute the meaning (in its structured complexity) of a specific photograph. He theorises the notion of code level used in the '*Unity*' paper with the comment

Thus, whereas the codes which 'cover' the signifying function of the linguistic sign at the denotative level are relatively closed 'sets', from which quite tightly constructed rules of transformation can be generated: codes of connotation, constructed over and above the denoted sign, are necessarily cultural, conventionalised, historical.

Hall, again following Barthes (1972) refers to the latter area as one of 'second-order' meanings. A few pages later, he notes in a partial re-working of the same point, that

. . . denotative codes are relatively 'closed', connotative codes are relatively 'open'. Connotative codes are tight enough to generate meanings of their own, but these codes do not produce one invariant meaning—they tend to delimit meanings *within a preferred range or horizon*.

However, in a rather confusing way, Hall then goes on to see the preferred *range* of the connotational level, which he calls 'this polysemy', as the field *within which* a further preferring operation (operated by codes of preferencing within the text?) secures a narrower 'dominant reading among the variants'—a closure of the (apparent) openness or polysemy.

To what extent these further codes operate with an invariance of internal relationships Hall does not say, nor does he question the suitability of the term 'coding' to describe the variety of levels of meaning-producing activity which his paper details. He focuses on the question of what happens when a reader/viewer does not take the 'preferred reading' but either produces some modified version of this through 'negotiation' or else 'takes' a radically different meaning from that 'preferred'. The question is dealt with by Hall in terms of his theory of 'coding' and exposes, I think, some further problems in that theory.

The primary issue which Hall wants to address is that of differentiated readings of the same text; the way in which different meanings are constructed on the same 'site' and from the same textual system exerting its 'cueing' pressures. If the argument is that 'it is in the nature of all linguistic systems which employ a code, that more than one reading can potentially be produced' then Hall is intent here on giving that position a detailed theoretical grounding. To do this, he refers to a paper by Eco (1972) in which a typology of codification is developed in the context of a semiological argument and a detailed definition is offered of the concept 'code'.

By code we mean a system of communicative conventions paradigmatically coupling term to term, a series of sign vehicles to a series of semantic units (or 'meanings') and establishing the structural organisation of both systems, each of them being governed by combinatorial rules, establishing the way in which the elements (sign-vehicles and semantic units) are syntagmatically concatenated.

After giving a number of examples of different sorts of code Eco suggests, importantly it seems to me, that

After these definitions let us restrict the concept of code to the basic conventional systems, it is in fact with these elements that it is possible to then work out 'secondary codes'; or 'sub codes' more or less systematized, which furnish new lexical elements or give a different connotation to lexical elements contained in the basic code.

So it is argued that the 'more or less systematized' clusterings do not qualify for the term 'code'—a notion which is reserved for the 'basic conventional systems' from which the 'subcodes' operate as a sort of fine-tuning of meaning, related to social contexts and specific areas of discourse (Eco discusses, among other subcodes, the aesthetic subcode, the erotic subcode and the montage subcode). Nevertheless, Eco is still tempted to use 'code' in ways which seem to conflict with his earlier definition, suggesting at one point that 'the conventions at the basis of gastronomic choices . . . form a code' without specifying just how these satisfy the definitional criteria previously argued for. Moreover, it is clear that his offered distinction is not directly parallel to connotation/denotation nor to Hall's comments on 'second-order' (and, by implication) 'first-order' meaning.

In the course of his initial discussion, Eco also refers to what he terms 'aberrant decoding'. The example he offers of this process rather exotically involves the manner in which the Achean conquerors of Crete would interpret the stucco relief in the Palace of Knossos. The iconography of these paintings, their use of certain conventional correlations in artistic representation (e.g. stick—sceptre, brown face—youth) constituted a code which was culturally specific to the artist's community and therefore one which, it is argued, was not available as part of cultural experience to the new, invading culture. Insofar as the invaders understood or 'made sense' of the paintings, Eco continues, they did so in an *aberrant* way—one not in alignment with the moment of encoding.

It is this idea which Hall develops in his discussion of the 'preferred reading' of newsphotographs (although he is anxious to remove the pejorative idea of 'aberrance' from what he wants to see as the progressive possibilities of the differential reading—an approach actually advocated by Eco himself in a *post scriptum* comment to the English translation of his paper). Hall re-works the idea of 'aberrant decoding' in terms of political and class-related behaviour in contemporary society; in terms of a theory of ideological reproduction. Using a terminology taken from Frank Parkin's work on social meaning systems (Parkin, 1971), work which suggests how it is that differing versions of the same behaviour or communication can be 'read' as a result of differing interpretative frames generated by differing socio-economic locations, Hall suggests that

It is possible for the reader to decode the message of the photo in a wholly contrary way, either because he does not know the sender's code or because he recognises the code in use but *chooses to employ a different code* (italics in original).

In Eco's illustration there was a disjunction of geographical culture (and to some extent of historical time) between the encoding conventions and whatever interpretative frames interested Acheans chose to use on the Knossos reliefs. Moreover, the convention system itself was squarely founded upon one-for-one correlations—at its lowest level therefore (for there were presumably more nuanced levels of expressive convention) it was tightly systemic. One wonders how the modern 'oppositional' (aberrant) reader/decoder of a newsphotograph manages to achieve anything like the codic ignorance of someone from 'another culture' or the related degree of codic independence when he or she 'chooses to employ a different code'. In fact, this second

case, the willed employment of a code *known to be different* from the one 'preferred', seems to be more a case of 'double decoding' than anything close to Eco's idea of aberrance, since a conscious, cognitive shift follows the recognition, by the reader, of 'preferred codes' at work and this shift involves a meta-level of interpretation—an active, aware reading *against* the rhetorical grain of the text as that grain is 'realized' at the lower level of reading. There are problems, in both cases, concerning the nature of meaning production/transmission and the levels of *consciousness* involved—and these problems are rather blurred over by the manner in which 'code' is used.

If, to use Hall's illustration, a newspaper reader chooses to interpret the photograph (of a policeman being kicked in the face by an anti-Vietnam-war demonstrator) within an interpretative framing developed from the belief, say, that 'the cause of anti-Vietnam war demonstrators is a just and legitimate one in our society; the forces of law and order are performing here a repressive political function', how does this interpretation get made? How does the general attitude (a political code?) determine or combine with the lower-level interpretative procedures by which such things as facial expressions, aggressive postures, the 'civic' resonances of the confrontation (regardless of the particular attitudinal versions of these) get 'read off'? What is critical here is the degree of variation and independence of specific interpretative processes, their reliance on common cultural ground at certain levels of operation, including much denotative work, and their differences—as interpretative procedures—at 'higher' levels of cultural connotation. One should not exclude the possibility that middle-range variations may in some cases be subsumed within the same higher level interpretative frame (thus, for instance, a general deploring of violence against the agency of civil 'law and order' could be mediated through a variety of different positions on, say, the role of the police in public demonstrations, the legitimacy of such demonstrations and the legitimacy of the United States's operations in Vietnam).

Hall's complex typology, a treatment of the successive levels of signification at which a cultural text is 'worked' or 'inscribed', perhaps commits him to an ambitiously wide range of reference for the idea of 'coding'. It refers at one level to the photograph as 'iconic sign', one employing 'formal-denotative codes' and moves through a number of levels of more or less technical/professional 'work' (news production, retouching, cropping, page composition etc.) until it makes contact with the culturally expressive meaning-systems at the 'ideological level'—the level at which Parkin's typology is taken up to aid the mapping of differentially realized ('taken') meaning.

This layering of the analysis upwards to the ideological level does not mean that culturally informed decisions are not taking place at the more fundamental levels of 'working the sign' however, as Hall reminds us. Nevertheless, the overall structuration which Hall suggests by his notion of determining 'codes' is not brought out in the analysis with the degree of systemic inter-relatedness which the theoretical preface to his article promises.

The photograph: code (or analogue? or analogic code?)

I have traced Hall's use of code in cultural analysis, both as a theory and as an analytic tool in specific research, in relation to the work of Eco. In choosing to discuss work on the photograph I hope to have provided a context in which the consideration of 'codes' can be pushed one stage further back to primary concepts, since the question of whether the photograph is a 'coded' form at all has been examined, with differing

conclusions, both by Roland Barthes, perhaps the most influential of the continental semioticians, and, in a critical commentary on Barthes, by Hall.

One of the difficulties of talking about a 'visual language' in respect of photography is the lack of anything equivalent to the denotative vocabulary and regularised syntax of natural language. Before discussing the arguments of Barthes and Hall in this respect, it might be useful to offer an example of the sort of problems that can arise as a result of this difficulty. Such an example is afforded by Camargo (1974) in which there is developed an 'ideological analysis' of a *Daily Telegraph* magazine cover. The cover shows an expensively but conservatively dressed man and woman standing some distance apart with two identically dressed children, a child on the right-hand side of each adult. Moreover, symmetry is further emphasised in that each adult holds a child by the left hand. At the left 'heel' of the man sits a dog. Behind them is a terraced pathway and behind that, dominating the upper half of the frame, is a castle. Having earlier told us, as a general point, that 'denotative meanings are given by the code whilst the connotative meanings are given by subcodes' (here, following Eco) Camargo argues that 'The denotative meaning of this picture is: the couple, their children and their castle (home).' As many of my students have pointed out, there is some difficulty in finding 'denotative' evidence of the possessive ('their children', 'their home') in the photograph. Anyway, what would such evidence look like? What seems to have happened is that Camargo has 'read off' possession at the 'connotative level' (and I would certainly not wish to argue against this particular visual registering of the culturally 'obvious') and then incorporated (rendered back) these significations into her theorisation of the denotative. The use of denotative/ connotative differentiation in the cultural analysis of visual texts needs perhaps to retain some flexibility and sense of dialectical relation if it is to avoid problems such as this; problems which frequently follow from too rigid an attempt at applying a natural language model. This returns us to some of the more provocative theoretical considerations on photography of Barthes.

In a widely-cited though quite often misunderstood paper, *Rhetoric of The Image* (1971), Barthes refers to the 'absolutely analogic' nature of the photographic com-ponent of an advertisement for *Panzani* pasta. What he has to say about this has a general relation to much of my earlier discussion of codification

The photograph implies, without doubt, a certain arrangement of the scene (framing, reduction, flattening) but this event is not a *transformation* (as a coding might be). The equivalence appropriate to a true system of signs is lost and a quasi-identity is posed. In other words, the sign of this message is no longer drawn into an established reserve i.e. it is not coded, and we are dealing with the paradox (to which we will return) of a *message without code*.

Barthes' use of the ideas of rule-governed transformation and an 'established reserve' is here deployed against the notion of the coded photograph, although clearly he is aware of a certain level of intervention, of a 'worked' discontinuity between, in his terms, signifier and signified. Nevertheless, for him the photograph is 'analogic' since its relationship to what it represents is one of direct resemblance in contrast to the arbitrary ('digital') codings of, say, natural language.

Since Barthes' position has produced much comment it is worth quoting a later passage in the same paper where he develops the argument.

In the photo—at least at the level of the literal message, the relationship of signifieds to signi-fiers is not one of 'transformation' but of 'recording', and the absence of a code clearly re-inforces the myth of the 'natural' photograph; the scene is there, captured mechanically, but not humanly (the mechanical is here the guarantee of objectivity). Man's intervention in the

6

photograph (framing, distance, lighting, focus, filter etc.) all belong in effect to the plane of connotation; everything happens as if there was at the beginning (even Utopian) a brute photo (frontal and clear) on which man disposed, thanks to certain techniques, signs drawn from a cultural code.

So Barthes here distinguishes between cultural codes and the special case of the photograph's denotative method, which he earlier contrasts to the culturally constituted, transformative activity of drawing.

It is understandable that the passage has raised a few problems. The less than satisfactory remark, given the main thesis concerning 'objectivity', about the absence of the codes 'reinforcing the *myth*' of photographic naturalism (is Barthes arguing here that such naturalism is an illusion?) and the shift to flourishingly dramatic hyperbole at the end are characteristic of a style which frequently cultivates enigma at just those moments when the diligent reader is seeking to follow the argument between the insights. There is also the question—it may be one of translation—of the relationship of 'analogue' to 'analogic code', since Barthes talks of the latter at one stage in his paper and it would be difficult to argue that the photograph's 'message without a code' was, in fact, the product of an 'analogic code' without being perversely unhelpful even by the standards of Barthesian playfulness.

Just how 'natural' Barthes thinks photographic denotation to be, allowing for his decidedly whimsical phrasings, has worried some commentators on his paper. Trevor Millum, in an introduction to the Birmingham Centre translation of the piece, remarks:

surely the pictorial message is coded in the photograph no less than in the sketch? Does not the camera *itself* carry out the coding? Otherwise why is it that children, and members of cultures unfamiliar with photography, have to *learn* to interpret photos?

Millum goes on to comment that a refusal of the notion of the uncoded photograph allows 'the photo (to) be replaced within the mainstream of semiological thought.' However, he hardly engages with the argument (nor perhaps has space to do so) in the detail needed to refute Barthes' claims. The suggestion that the 'camera itself' carries out the coding is not sufficiently clear as a proposition to do more than its immediate function of rhetorical questioning—in fact, if anything it tends to suggest that 'mechanical' level of operations referred to by Barthes himself. Similarly, though the point about 'learning to interpret' photographs is clearly relevant, the central factors to be borne in mind here are, I imagine, precisely 'reduction', 'flattening' and 'framing' together with other, related qualities—characteristics which Barthes allows as interventionary moments in the production of the 'resemblance' but which he disallows as grounds for talking of 'codification'. Moreover Barthes himself, in the course of his paper, draws our attention to the child's learning to 'read' that something is a picture.

Stuart Hall, in an essay on documentary journalism, *The Social Eye of Picture Post* (1972a), takes issue at greater length with Barthes' line of argument (as well as Barthes, he cites Metz, Pasolini and Bazin as being at least half-supporters of 'indexical' theories). Like Millum, Hall stresses the importance of regarding the photograph as a product of codes, if unique and complex ones. Hall is concerned specifically with the components of the 'rhetoric of visual exposition' employed by the *Picture Post*, noting particularly layout, captioning and characteristic content. He contrasts the modern colour supplement (photographic romanticism) with the *Post's* use of 'realist' black and white and notes that we are not dealing 'with "natural" versus "conventional" photography but with *two different codes*' (italics in original). Yet

apart from these remarks on the socially constructed connotations of photographic tones, Hall, again rather like Millum, does not actually introduce any more social factors into a theory of photographic production than did Barthes in the paper under criticism.

At times, it seems as if Barthes' mistake is seen to be that of placing the analysis of photography at least partially into some enclave of 'innocent denotation'. Phrases in Barthes' arguments like 'guarantee of objectivity' serve to cause anxiety in this respect, although such usages are nearly always specific and qualified, as well as often having more than a touch of stylish irony about them. Overall, it is hard to see Barthes' approach as one promoting a theory of pre-cultural signification; for Barthes the photograph is a thoroughly cultural form though he wishes to retain a recognition of its distinctive method of sign production. Although imperfectly argued, his comments still constitute a necessary object of address for those researchers who wish to develop a visual semiotics.

Throughout my discussion I have illustrated a central premise at work in the use of 'code' in cultural analysis—that cultural conventions and their variants operate with a degree of internal coherence and regularity comparable to that found in natural language. This premise, which is a very important structuralist thesis, usefully de-naturalises the operation of meaning-systems in society and allows an emphasis (though one not often developed in detail) on their historical and social origins and their rôle in constituting the configurations of social reality. In doing so, however, it often fails to monitor the implications of the linguistic paradigm at each level of application and in terms of each specific piece of analysis. When Hall, in '*Determinations*', remarks that 'in language, there is no message without a code' two questions are prompted—what is to count as 'language' and is the 'code' here synonymous with language or is it a secondary system acting upon it? It is worth noting, too, that the above quotation seems out of alignment with that reference made in the later '*Unity*' piece to 'linguistic systems which employ codes' as if to suggest that some such systems did *not* employ them.

Many studies informed by semiotics consider natural language to be, as it were, the 'primary code', though the extent to which it is its levels of systemic determinacy or its 'transformative' work within perception and experience (experience as a codification of reality) that gain it this title is often unclear. Hawkes (1977) summarises the underlying postulates of much work in social semiotics thus

> In short, a culture comes to terms with nature by means of 'encoding', through language. And it requires only a slight extension of this view to produce the implication that perhaps the entire field of social behaviour which constitutes the culture might in fact also represent an act of 'encoding' on the model of language. In fact, it might itself be a language.

This is perhaps a more qualified position on the issue of 'society as discourse' than many researchers in the field would adopt—the shift from 'on the model of' to 'itself be' is crucial and is not always signalled quite so clearly.

Conclusions

I have suggested throughout this paper that many researchers have been unclear in their use of the term 'code' in studies of human communication and that, whether deriving from a positivistic technological model or from the hypotheses of semiology (sometimes less hypotheses than presumptions), the term often seems to offer more

6*

than is actually rendered in the aiding of our understanding of human signification and of the social construction of meaning. Paramount here is its taking-for-granted, without adequate research, of high levels of systemic organisation among cultural phenomena, levels often involving a fixity of relationships. This is theorised in forms often derived from structuralist linguistics and leads too often to a rigidity of analysis similar to many functionalist explanations in social science; systems being inferred from 'typical' transformations and correlates which in fact only constitute a very small number of actually observed and plotted relationships.

A further problem is that of the relations within and between cultural codes and subcodes, since in many cases the choice of system-title used in a piece of research (the journalistic code, the code of the programme, the erotic subcode etc.) seems quite abitrary and does not facilitate either referral 'downwards' to primary signification nor 'upwards' into a theory of ideological reproduction (how the 'structures' are put 'in dominance').

The precise *nature* of the inter-relationships proposed between different levels of signifying practice is often only minimally suggested, even where some notion of 'levels' informs a classificatory system. The problem of codetermining and conflicting codes frequently remains unaddressed.

A recent piece of published research (Brunsdon and Morley, 1978) stemming from Birmingham Centre work evinces these continuing difficulties whilst offering detailed analysis of the BBC's *Nationwide*. In discussion of the use of personal pronouns in the programme, reference is made to certain characteristics which become, it is argued, 'at the level of the code, the site of complex ideological work'. However, this 'level', its relation to other linguistic or cultural levels and its possible internal differentiation are not issues taken up further in the research, although there are two or three subsequent references to various moments of encoding and decoding which do *suggest* a degree of differentiation.

Researchers have continued to tackle the problems of a general theory of codes in a number of ways, attempting to distinguish between code as system (s-code) and code as correlation (code) (Eco, 1976); between code as 'system of explicit social conventions' and hermeneutics as 'system of implicit, latent and purely contingent signs' (Guiraud, 1975) and endeavouring to redefine code in 'tighter' or 'looser' terms.[3] Guiraud suggests a process by which 'looser' sign patterns acquire a consensual legitimacy and directness of reference to the point where they have 'the status of a technical code'.

Many uses of the term are almost metaphorical in that, rather than positing configurations at some linguistic level of organisation with attendant and important ideas of *predictability*, they suggest a conventional ordering 'of some sort' and serve to emphasise the fact that cultural meanings are achieved in relation to other cultural

---

[3] One recent move towards a 'loosening' can be discerned in Eco (1979). In an argument concerning the educational use of television, Eco notes that

> One is led to assume that under the umbrella term of codes and sub-codes, one is not only gathering something similar to the verbal, lexical or grammatical competence but also something more akin to rhetorical competence (p. 19).

He goes on to argue that 'rhetorical competence'

> cannot be made explicit in the format of a set of grammatical rules but resides rather in the format of a storage of previous texts (p. 19).

From the context, it is clear that this is more an argument about the *acquisition* of competence than one about the possibilities for its *analysis* and I refer the reader to the article as a whole for an understanding of Eco's notion of the 'textual' as distinct from the 'grammatical'.

meanings as well as in relation to that which they express or refer to (a difficult area of theory, this) and therefore are not self-contained pairings of signifier and signified. Such a useful emphasis is, however, some way from the tenor of many research conclusions in semiotics, which do not show the hesitancy stemming from a sense of the limitations of the notion but instead imply regularised, plottable and predictable operations occurring with a considerable precision. In contrast to this, certain work exploring a general cultural semantics has made only guarded or limited use of the concept 'code'. In his early work, Barthes himself develops the idea of 'rhetoric' far more centrally and this, I think, permits him greater sublety if also denying him the neat 'scientific' accuracies sought by others.

Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974) has an interesting footnote in which he refers to some diverse uses and connotations of 'code' in the course of discussing his choice of the not quite synonymous 'key'—on the whole, I believe, a more successful concept, if avowedly metaphoric in that it is a conscious *approximation* by reference to another, more fully known and grasped, condition or phenomenon. Work developing from Voloshinov's (1973) recently rediscovered notion of 'multi-accentuality' (the intersection, in signs, of differently oriented semantic inflections stemming from different social positions of use) also seems to offer a valuable theorisation of differential social meaning, linking to some extent the problematics of semiology to those of one kind of sociolinguistics.

It is not, finally, the intention of this discussion paper to advocate the rejection of 'code' as a concept in cultural studies. It cannot be denied that the term has been used most frequently in some of the most exciting and suggestive work to be carried out in that broad area of inquiry. Here, Hall's papers over the past ten years constitute an outstanding example. What I think can be concluded is that many instances of its present use do not deliver what is promised and sometimes obscure what it is a prime intention of any cultural research to make clear—that is, how social meanings get made.

Bibliography

BARTHES, R. (1971). The rhetoric of the image, *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, no. 1, C.C.C.S., University of Birmingham. Translated by Brian Trench

BARTHES, R. (1972). *Mythologies*, Jonathan Cape, London. Translated by Annette Lavers

BATESON, G. (1951). *Communication: the Social Matrix of Psychiatry*, The Norton Library, New York

BERNSTEIN, B. (1971). Social class, language and socialisation, *Current Trends in Linguistics*, vol. 12, Mouton, The Hague

BRUNSDON, C. and MORLEY, D. (1978) *Everyday Television: Nationwide*, B.F.I. monograph no. 10, London

BURGELIN, O. (1972). Structural analysis and mass communications, in D. McQuail (ed.), *Sociology of Mass Communications*, Penguin, London

CAMARGO, M. DE (1974). *The Ideological Dimension of Media Messages*, Stencilled occasional paper, C.C.C.S., University of Birmingham

ECO, U. (1972). Towards a semiotic inquiry into the television message, *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, no. 6, C.C.C.S., University of Birmingham

ECO, U. (1976). *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, Indiana, USA

ECO, U. (1979). Can television teach? *Screen Education* no. 31, B.F.I., London

GOFFMAN, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis*, Harper and Row, New York

GUIRAUD, P. (1975). *Semiology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London

HALL, S. (1972a). The social eye of *Picture Post*, *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, no. 2, C.C.C.S., University of Birmingham

HALL, S. (1972b). The determinations of newsphotographs, *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, no. 3, C.C.C.S., University of Birmingham

HALL, S. (1973). Encoding and decoding in the television discourse, Stencilled occasional paper, C.C.C.S., University of Birmingham

HALL, S. (1976). The 'unity' of current affairs television, *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, no. 9, C.C.C.S., University of Birmingham (with I. Connell and L. Curti)

HASAN, R. (1973). Code, register and social dialect, in B. Bernstein (ed.), *Class, Codes and Control*, vol. 2, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London

HAWKES, T. (1977). *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen, London

LEACH, E. (1976). *Culture and Communication*, Cambridge University Press

MURDOCK, G. and GOLDING, P. (1977). Capitalism, Communication and Class Relations, in (J. Curran *et al.*, eds), *Mass Communication and Society*, Edward Arnold, London

PARKIN, F. (1971). *Class Inequality and Political Order*, MacGibbon and Kee, London

SHANNON, C. and WEAVER, W. (1966). *Communication and Culture*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York

VOLOSHINOV, V. N. (1973). *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Seminar Press, New York

WILDEN, A. (1972). *System and Structure*, Tavistock, London