Dismantle Magazine's Understanding Culture Toolbox

Why #Representation Matters

How Cultural Representations Work
Part One

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What is the Understanding Culture Toolbox?

How do we know if we’re reading something from a reliable source?

Is sustainable fashion actually possible?

How can we figure out if a story is biased or has a particular agenda?

How do we assess who it benefits and who it leaves out?

Why does representation matter so much?

What is cultural appropriation really?

Why is fashion associated with femininity?

These are the kinds of questions Sara and Elise address everyday in classrooms and on Dismantle Magazine. With the Understanding Culture Toolbox we don’t just supply answers — we share the tools we use so you can find them for yourself.

Our goal is to show how concepts like “hegemony” or “representation” or “cultural myth” aren’t just ideas or theories to read about. They’re actual tools that you can use to make sense of the world. But a tool is useless if you don’t know how it works. We might know what a tablesaw is and what it does, but if nobody shows us how to plug it in and cut wood with it, it’s just a hunk of metal with a lot of pointy parts. It won’t help us make furniture. What’s more, even if you learn how to use the saw, it’s still not very useful if what you need is a hammer.

The same is true with cultural theory. That’s why we’re calling this a toolbox. The more tools you know how to use, the better you’ll become at being able to understand, engage with, and, yes, change culture in a way that could make the world even just a little more livable for everyone.
Why Focus on Representation?

It seems like every day some new debate comes up around this subject. On one side you might have #OscarsSoWhite or other calls for more inclusive movies, television, or political representatives. On the other, many people are asking why we need to look at race (or gender or class or ability or any kind of difference) at all. Isn't it just causing more divisions? Or maybe you see a controversial viral video and are sure you understand what’s happening. Then you find out millions of other people are watching the same video and drawing completely different conclusions. It’s the same footage, though! How is that possible?!

We're not going to tell you who is "right" in these cases. Instead, we want to help you understand what representation is and how it can help us understand the world we live in. In fact, it's already helping you understand the world you live in. You might not even be aware of it, but you're always reading and interpreting different kinds of representations. Understanding how representation works can help you do this in a more informed way.

Part One will just cover the basics: What is representation? Why does it matter? How can I use it?

In Part Two we'll put it together with related concepts to show some more nuanced ways that representation works.

In This Toolbox You'll Find:

- A definition of "representation" as a cultural concept and method
- A brief history of how this definition was developed
- A discussion of why representation matters
- Exercises and questions to help you apply your understanding
- Links to slideshows, playlists, and more resources!
What Exactly Is Representation?

The concept of representation both refers to a theory and a method of analysis formulated in cultural studies and related academic fields. We want to emphasize that it's a theory: we're not trying to say that it's the only right way to understand images and texts we engage with, but we are hoping that you find it to be a useful approach that can inform how you think about the issue.

In its common sense usages, representation has two related meanings: it can be about ‘standing in’ for something (i.e., a political representative) or ‘reflecting’ (i.e., a painting of a banana that depicts a ‘real life’ banana). In cultural studies, the concept developed as a framework for studying these processes, with a focus especially on representational diversity and the messages that we receive (or don’t receive) from media. Importantly, cultural studies helps to answer the question of why we might want more diverse images and perspectives in our cultural representations - and how that could actually bring about social change.

While our focus will largely be on media and other popular representations, it's important to know that generally, representation is about a system: a system of communication. It is our shared language in its broadest sense: the words, symbols, images, objects and other ‘signs’ that we use to communicate. These can be anything from colors and shapes to words and sounds and photographs, to clothing and gestures, to complex, thousand page texts and feature films. We use this language to represent our world to one another and ourselves: it’s what allows us, as human beings, to have a culture, or a collective understanding of reality.
When we are born into a society, we learn the system of language that allows us to (eventually) communicate with others. English speakers learn that the letters (and sounds) of t-r-e-e mean a tree, and not a flower. We also learn that the color green on a traffic light means “go.” Why? Well, some might argue that the color green, due to its association with the outdoors and spring/summer, “naturally” conveys ideas like “move forward.” But keep in mind: green doesn’t just mean “go.” In many cultures it also means “gender neutral” and “Christmas” — which wouldn’t be very meaningful concepts for a traffic light.

What’s important here is that we begin to see that this shared system of letters, sounds, images, objects, etc., is formed on social agreements. There is no natural reason that pink means “baby girl” and green means “gender neutral.” While pink just seems to many of us in the Western world to be a naturally soft, feminine color, this association only began to form around 100 years ago. Furthermore, before this connection was solidified pink was sometimes recommended as a more “manly” color to dress little boys in.

Ultimately, what all of this tells us is that representation matters because it is central to how we come to understand the world. And it matters because even though representation is based on shared social agreements, not everyone has the same amount of social power in shaping representations. Cultural meanings are organized by the same principles that shape social inequalities: things like race, gender, class, sexuality, bodily ability, age…. A straight male director is more likely to represent his own perspective in the movies he makes, and that is a huge reason why today, the majority of women in movies are beautiful, fashionably dressed and in emotional support roles: a fantasy of what “woman” means that reflects a particular idealization.

This example helps us see that there is no single or inherent meaning for ‘woman’ — although our popular representations often suggest that there is. It is here that we can begin to see the stakes of representation: often the most commonly understood definition of something — like womanhood — reflects the understanding of those who have the power to ‘fix’ the meaning. Importantly, though, seeing how language and culture work unveils the fact that meaning is never fixed. In fact, the appearance of a singular meaning is often the product of a power struggle that has resulted in the dominant definition being presented and interpreted as the only ‘true’ meaning.
Note: For a thorough genealogy, see our recommended resources list. For now we'll just cover some broad strokes.

The study of cultural representations grew out of several overlapping fields in the 19th and 20th centuries that were essentially interested in how people use symbols to make meaning and social structures. The concept is most closely connected with cultural studies through the work of Stuart Hall: a Jamaican-born British scholar who, among many other things (including being one of the greatest humans to ever live), was a director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in the 1970s.

In the most basic terms, Hall and other cultural studies scholars were interested in the role of language (representation) in the social construction of reality. They were responding to debates that raged in the 1980s and 90s, in which many critics of cultural and media studies argued that these academic fields reduced our understanding of everything to language, as if nothing were ‘real’ (i.e., material). The critics believed that these ivory tower academics, with their postmodern anthem that “everything is a text,” were saying the world is all language and no substance.

*The Matrix* (1999) is probably the most famous popular response to this cultural and academic moment. The film alludes to the idea that reality is all in our heads, and shaped by language (i.e., computer programming) - rather than a material realm of bodies and life (i.e., the underground world where the “real” people lived). It even includes direct quotes and references to postmodern philosophers, like Jean Baudrillard (“The desert of the real” comes from his 1981 treatise *Simulacra and Simulation*).
But importantly, both this film and the critics we mentioned above misread the idea of social constructionism, believing it to be a populist notion suggesting that anyone could decide what anything means (i.e., that all of us, like our hero Keanu, can just think our own version of reality into existence). But Hall and his contemporaries reminded us that social constructionism isn’t saying that we have total control over the material world. Instead, this concept simply acknowledges that the only way we come to have a shared reality — a culture — is by representing it to ourselves and sharing our collective concepts about the world.

So of course there is a material world outside of language/culture. However, we only can access and share this reality because of our system(s) of representation. A table doesn’t become a table until we give it a name, a purpose, function, etc. The material is there — there’s wood and it’s organized into a particular shape — but it isn’t meaningful. It it doesn’t have a cultural meaning. In Hall’s words, it’s useful to say that “nothing meaningful exists outside of language,” which is different from saying “nothing exists outside of language.”

This distinction is important to stand against the more celebratory position of postmodernism, which suggests that meaning construction is a democratic, kind of ‘anything goes’ process whereby everyone gets his/her own interpretive fun. In essence, with this distinction, scholars like Hall wanted to bring power back to the front of this conversation, and the understanding that in an unequally structured society, meaning production is rarely so equitable.

"It is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from the politics of representation, and we cannot wield 'how life really is out there' as a kind of text against which the political rightness or wrongness of a particular cultural strategy or text can be measured."

- Stuart Hall
WHY
#REPRESENTATIONMATTERS

Even after everything we’ve just covered, we still get one question a lot — and it’s a fair one to ask: Why doesn’t this mean anything can mean anything? Doesn’t it just depend on my perspective? And the answer is...kind of.

It’s true, you can personally decide S-P-O-O-N means a small metal object with pointy tongs if you want to. Your fork won’t stop working if you call it a spoon. But you might run into trouble when you’re at a restaurant and ask a server for something to eat your salad with. You can also decide that *Star Wars* is a series of movies about a heroic Empire trying to bring order to the galaxy and fighting a pesky, immoral band of rebels, but you’ll spend your life battling nerds if you try to talk about it.

This is because, as Hall tells us, while many interpretations are possible, there’s usually a *privileged meaning* that comes to be collectively understood as the “right” or “normal” way to think about something. With visual representations, meaning can be especially ambiguous. That’s why advertisements often include some text to make sure you immediately see the privileged meaning, and “read” the image the right way.

Meaning doesn’t reside in objects or events themselves — and it’s always shifting and being negotiated. That negotiation happens through representation. So, when more perspectives have access to tools for making representations, meanings are bound to change. To continue the earlier example, when more women make movies, it expands our ideas about what “woman” means. And those ideas expand even more the more different kinds of women — women of color, trans women, disabled women, and so on — make those movies.

Meaning has to be somewhat stable in order to communicate (a purple traffic light at a US intersection would cause a lot of accidents). The trouble is, a lot of what we’ve learned to be “true” was defined by people with the most social power. Changing those meanings might result in that group having to share power with more folks. You can see why that would be really threatening — and why those powerful classes work so hard to maintain the status quo. It’s been working out pretty well for them. Challenging dominant representations is challenging truth and power at the same time. That’s why we created *Dismantle Magazine*! We think representation is powerful!

So let's get to work!
For people just beginning to examine representations, the first impulse is often to decide whether something is “good” or “bad”. This is a fine place to start. Sometimes the best revelations start with a vague feeling that a TV show or fashion style or news article is “bad.” But stopping there doesn’t tell us very much. It also assumes that the representation should be reflecting some kind of objective reality (in essence, an authentically real and morally superior “truth” that is being masked by a bad representation). By now you should be starting to understand that representation isn’t quite so straightforward. As Hall tells us, because we need language to access the material world, it is always filtered through the cultural work of representation, so there is nothing accessible without using this system.

So the question moves from “what is hidden by this representation?” to “what perspective does this image or text depict?” And most importantly, “how does this perspective fit into the organization of power that maintains real, material hierarchies?”

How do we do answer this? Stuart Hall suggests that our work is to “interrogate the image.” In other words, we need to start asking it hard questions, such as:

- What is the image/text telling us? What is the message?
- Whose views or values does this image represent?
- Who does it leave out?
- In what cultural or historical context was it produced?
- What does it assume we already know?
- What is maintained - and/or challenged - by this representation?

And so on...
Exercise 1

What would the image/object/media look like if it reflected a different perspective? For instance, think of all those movies where some terrorist wants to blow up the White House. What would it look like from the perspective of the “enemy”? Watch the clips in the links below (Be aware, they're action films that do depict some violence). When you're done, imagine the following:

- How do you know who the "heroes" are? How are they dressed? What kind of lighting and camera angles are used to display them? What kind of bodies, movement, and dialogue are associated with them?
- What if they were actually the "villains" and the movie was about rebelling against a corrupt government? How would that change your interpretation of the film?

Clip One: White House Down (Sony 2013)

Clip Two: Olympus Has Fallen (LionsGate 2013)

Clip Three: Designated Survivor (ABC 2016)

Screenshot from Designated Survivor. Even never having seen the show, you can probably guess who the "hero" is. Why? What does that tell you about what values American television assumes we associate with a leader?
Exercise 2

Compare the images and clip below.

The problems with this older advertisement are probably pretty obvious. What are they? What stereotypes are being represented? What is the privileged meaning of the ad? Whose values does it reinforce?

This clip from *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Netflix 2015) on the other hand might be more complicated because it challenges some of our norms at the same time that it reproduces others. How is it representing a dominant/stereotypical view? How is it challenging those views? (Click on the image and skip to minute 3:25)
This has been a sneak peek at a work in progress!

Stay tuned as we complete the third exercise, and the links to extra resources!

In the meantime, we'd love your feedback.

What was helpful?
What was confusing?
What would you like to see more of?

Let us know by visiting the Contact Us page on our website

Or leave a comment on our Facebook page!