

MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
TRANSCRIPT



Challenging media

STUART HALL

REPRESENTATION & THE MEDIA

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Representation & the Media

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INTRODUCTION

[Text on Screen]

*Do media images help us understand how the world works?
What kinds of images of Black people are we presented with?*

[Movie: Hollywood Shuffle]

I don't know why we's leaving massa's house. He's been good to us. He feed us on Saturday, clothes us on Sunday, and then beat us on Monday, or was it Tuesday? I don't know.

-- Jasper, I doesn't wants to go! I's a house nigger, Jasper!

-- Jasper, don't you wants freedom? We goin' to the promised land, the promised land.

The Promised Land? Cleveland?

-- No Jasper.

Baltimore?

-- No Jasper, the Promised Land!

Oh, the Promised Land...Minnesota? And cut.

[Text on Screen] *Who creates stereotypical representations of Black people?*

[Movie: Hollywood Shuffle]

Hi. My name is Robert Taylor, and I'm a Black Actor. I had to learn to play these slave parts, and now you can, too, in Hollywood's first Black Acting School. It teaches you everything: Learn Jive Talk 101.

-- (student 1) You motherfuckin' jive turkey, motherfucker.

-- (teacher) Alright, that's good. That's good, good work. All right, you try it.

-- (student 2) You fucking mother's fucking turkey...jive...

-- (teacher) No, no, no, that's wrong, that's wrong. Watch me, man, just be cool. Jive, turkey motherfucker!

Good work, good work. That's only the beginning. You too can learn "walk Black"

-- (teacher) No, no, no, no. No rhythm. Observe.

You, too, can be a Black street hood, but this class is for dark-skinned Blacks only. Light-skinned or yellow Blacks don't make good crooks. It's Hollywood's first Black Acting School; it teaches you everything.

-- (tv ad voice) Classes are enrolling now. Learn to play TV pimps, movie muggers, street punks. Courses include Jive Talk 101, Shuffling 200, Epic Slaves 400. Dial 1-800-555-COON.

SUT JHALLY: As we head toward the 21st century, the role of the mass media in society is being hotly debated. The term, "The Politics of the Image" refers to this contestation and struggle over what is represented in the media. This program examines this debate by focusing on the work of one of the world's leading experts on media issues.

Stuart Hall is Professor of Sociology at the Open University in England and, for the last thirty years, has been at the forefront of work concerning the media's role in society. Hall is very closely identified in media studies with an approach known as "cultural studies," and he starts with one of its central concepts: representation. The usual meaning of this term is connected with whether the depiction of something is an accurate or distorted reflection. In contrast to this, Hall argues for a new view that gives the concept of representation a much more active and creative role in relation to the way people think about the world and their place within it. This new view of representation is central to thinking about communication in much more complex ways. Hall shows that an image can have many different meanings and that there is no guarantee that images will work in the way we think they will when we create them.

Now, sometimes Hall's concern with drawing attention to the complexity of communication is seen as downplaying the idea that the media have real and strong effects on the world. Nothing could be further from the truth. Hall understands that communication is always linked with power and that those groups who wield power in a society influence what gets represented through the media. Hall wants to hold both these ideas: that messages work in complex ways, and that they are always connected with the way that power operates in any society, together at the same time. He examines our everyday world where knowledge and power intersect.

One way he does that is through what he calls interrogation of the image. The idea of interrogation normally brings to mind asking hard questions of a suspect. But how do we interrogate an image? By examining it, asking the hard questions about it rather than just accepting it at face value. Just as a good interrogator looks behind the suspect's story or alibi, so must we probe inside and behind the image.

Why should we think this way about images? Marshall McLuhan once said he wasn't sure who discovered water, but he was pretty sure it wasn't the fish. In other words, when we are immersed in something, surrounded by it the way we are by images from the media, we may come to accept them as just part of the real and natural world. We just swim through them, unthinkingly absorbing them as fish in water. What cultural studies would like us to do is step out of the water in a sense and look at it, see how it shapes our existence, and even critically examine the content of the water.

What follows is a talk that Stuart Hall gave at the University of Westminster in London. I hope your response mirrors my own when I first heard him lecture. I was an undergraduate student in England in the 1970s, and Stuart came to speak at the university I was attending. Through his energy, his passion, his modesty, he convinced me of the value of what he calls the "intellectual vocation," the notion that ideas matter, that they are worth struggling over, that they have something to tell us about and can influence the world out there

beyond the academy. In this way, he insists on the role that intellectual work can play in helping to regain control of an image-dominated world that has drifted beyond the democratic reach of ordinary people.

VISUAL REPRESENTATION & THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

STUART HALL: First let me say what the main theme of what I'm going to say today is. I'm going to talk about the notion of representation, which is a very common concept in cultural studies and in media studies kinds of work, but I wanted to explore the idea a little bit. And I want to try and say something about how I understand representation working and why it's a more difficult and more complex subject than it appears to begin with. I'm talking about largely visual representation, or the examples I'm going to try to cite are from visual representation. But I think what I'm going to say has a bearing on the practices of representation in general.

I choose visual representation because it's a kind of cliché to say that in the modern world our culture is saturated by the image in a variety of different forms. The image itself – whether moving or still and whether transmitted by a variety of different media – seems to be, or to have become, the prevalent sign of late-modern culture. Late-modern culture is not only that culture which one finds in the advanced, industrial, post-industrial societies of the western world. But *because* of the global explosion in communication systems, it is also the saturating medium, the saturating idiom, of communication worldwide. So I think to try and take the idea of representation to the image is an important question. Cultural studies has paid a tremendous amount of attention in one way or another to the centrality of representations and of the practice of representation. And media studies itself is, in an obvious sense, concerned in part with the variety of different texts, in my instance, visual texts: representations which are transmitted by the media. But I'm going to stand back from that a bit to begin with and try and look at the process of representation itself.

AN OLD VIEW – Representation as Reflection/Distortion of Reality

STUART HALL: Now, the word has a kind of double meaning, even in its common-sense understanding. It does mean “to present,” “to image,” “to depict” – to offer a depiction of something else. And the word *representation* or *representation* does sort of carry with it the notion that something was there already and, through the media, has been *represented*.

Nevertheless, this notion that somehow *representation* represents a meaning which is already there is a very common idea and, on the other hand, one of the ideas that I’m going to try to subvert. So I give you the common-sense meaning to try to take it back a little bit in what I’m going to say. But then there’s another understanding of the word *representation*, which also plays a role in what we bring to this topic because we speak of political figures as representing us in some way. We probably don’t say that very often these days; you may not think they represent us very well, but they’re sort of *supposed* to represent us, and in that sense, they *stand in* for us. They are our representatives, and where we can’t be, they can be. So the notion of something which images and depicts, and that which *stands in for* something else, both of those ideas are kind of brought together in the notion of *representation*.

Now, what this idea that media practices, among other things, represent topics, represent types of people, represent events, represent situations; what we’re talking about is the fact that in the notion of *representations* is the idea of *giving meaning*. So the *representation* is the way in which meaning is somehow given to the things which are depicted through the images or whatever it is, on screens or the words on a page which *stand for* what we’re talking about.

And if you think that the meaning that it is giving is very different from or a kind of distortion of what it *really* means, then your work on *representation* would be in measuring that gap between what one might think of as the true meaning of an event (or an object) and how it is presented in the media. And there’s a lot of very good work in media studies, which is exactly like this.

A NEW VIEW – Representation as Constitutive

STUART HALL: I think the truth is that in cultural studies now and in a great deal of media studies work, that notion of representation is regarded as too literal and too straightforward; and the reason for that is because we want to ask the question of whether events – the meaning of people, groups, and what they're doing, etc. – whether these things do have any one essential, fixed or true meaning against which we could measure, as it were, the level of distortion in the way in which they're represented.

Suppose one says, "Yes, I can see that people are meeting now in Northern Ireland to discuss the Northern Ireland situation." But what it *means*, what is the *meaning* of that meeting, is a very complicated thing to decide. You'd have to know not only the whole history of what led up to it, you'd have to know what each of the participants wants out of it, you'd have to know some assessment of what the consequences of that event are likely to be before you could say, "What is the meaning?" And we all know absolutely clearly the one thing you could be certain of is that there will *never* be one interpretation of what is going on in Northern Ireland today, absolutely! It will *always* be a contested question. There will never be a finally settled, fixed meaning. The one thing you can say about those events is that there is no one true, fixed meaning about it.

Well, now, this is a different situation. In a way, what we are saying now is that representation doesn't really capture the process at all, because there was nothing absolutely fixed there in the first place to represent. Of course, there was something: people are meeting, they're talking, they're arguing with one another, they're going to make decisions, consequences will follow, so...not that nothing is happening in the world, but what is dubious is what is the true meaning of it, and the true meaning of it will depend on what meaning people make of it; and the meanings that they make of it depends on how it is represented.

The meaning of an event in Northern Ireland does not exist until it has been represented, and that's a very different process. Now, we're talking about representation, not as an after-the-event activity; it means something and then the presentation might change or distort the meaning. We're talking about the fact that it has no fixed meaning, no real meaning in the obvious sense, *until* it has been represented. And the representations – since they're likely to be very different as you move from one person to another, one group or another, one part of society or another, one historical moment and another – just as those forms of representation will change, so the meaning of the event will change.

Now what this means is in fact the process of representation has *entered into* the event itself. In a way, it doesn't exist meaningfully *until* it has been represented, and to put that in a more high-falutin way is to say that representation doesn't occur *after* the event; representation is *constitutive* of the

event. It enters into the constitution of the object that we are talking about. It is part of the object itself; it is constitutive of it. It is one of its conditions of existence, and therefore representation is not *outside* the event, not *after* the event, but *within* the event itself; it is constitutive of it.

CULTURE AS PRIMARY

STUART HALL: If cultural studies were simply about trying to understand the distortions which the media make of a meaning whose truth we could somehow find independently of the media, it would be a very different kind of study from, what it is in fact, which is trying to find out how the meanings enter into the event themselves and how they have to constitute the event. What we're talking about is really why, in culture and media studies of this kind, at any rate, the notion of culture becomes a primary force. It's not a secondary element; it is a primary element. Culture is a way in which we make sense of or give meaning to things of one sort or another. It's true, of course, that we all don't make sense of things in the same way and therefore that each of us has a little kind of conceptual world of our own, or rather we have our own sort of take on the conceptual world. But if we shared no concepts together with other folks, we literally could not make sense of the world today, we could not build a social world together, unless we were able to make sense of the world in, broadly speaking, the same ways. Cultures consist of the maps of meaning, the frameworks of intelligibility, the things which allow us to make sense of a world which exists, but is ambiguous as to its meaning until we've made sense of it. So, meaning arises because of the shared conceptual maps which groups or members of a culture or society share together. That's a very important kind of way of coming to an understanding of why, in cultural studies, if you privilege the notion of representation as giving meaning, you are making culture very central; you're giving it a kind of central role. It's not just sort of the values and things which we happen to have been born into. It literally is the way without which we would find the world unintelligible.

CONCEPTUAL MAPS – Classifying the World

STUART HALL: Okay, what then is the sort of the basis of a culture, consequently of cultural studies is to try to begin with what are the shared conceptual maps, so as to put it another way, to give you another way into this notion: what are the ways in which we classify and organize the world? Classification is not the only way but one of the principal ways in which we go about giving meaning to things until we know roughly what class of things it is, roughly what it belongs with, and roughly what it's different from. Chairs are like stools because you sit on them, and both of them are different from tables, which you put things on, although you can sit on tables at the doctor. Our systems of classification are very complex, but without some notion of "this belongs with that, that is different from this," we wouldn't be able to have a conceptual map, we wouldn't be able to map out the world in some intelligible way.

Now, where do we get that from? Well, the one thing you can be certain is that, though the capacity to use concepts and to classify concepts in this way is a biological, genetic phenomenon, it is a feature of how we are constituted as human beings. The particular classifications that we use to classify out the world meaningfully is not printed in anybody's genes; it is something that is learned. It may not be learned in didactic ways at school or in colleges, or through formal instruction. But, to become a human subject is precisely somehow to learn or internalize the shared maps of meaning with other people in your culture. To become a cultured subject, rather than a biological individual, rather than just a blob of genetic material, is to move from there, to internalize, how within oneself, is kind of the beginnings of the grid of one's culture.

Okay, one could say then that the conceptual maps in our heads, which allow us to come to a sense of what is going on in the world, is itself a system of representation: our concepts, our way of representing the world. You can think of that in a very simple way. Bear in mind an object which you cannot see. Unless you had a concept of it, it would disappear the moment that the object had gone from sight. But concepts allow us to store and indeed to refer to and to think about, have quite complicated thoughts about, objects which are no longer accessible to our perceptual apparatus. So the concepts allow us also to think about a wide range of things, which are not, in any simple sense, "out there in the world." That's a very rich notion. Our fantasy life is full of things which are absolutely real to us, which are probably real if you can only find a language to express them – and lots of other people – which no one has ever seen. So we're beginning to dissolve any simple-minded notion that our concepts are just mirror images of the world out there. Those are mirror images of worlds that don't exist.

LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION

STUART HALL: So our concepts operate as a system of representation, but we haven't finished the circle yet because, supposed we all shared the same conceptual map, that's to say we made sense of the world in roughly the same system of classification in our head. How would I know that you are making sense of the world in anything remotely like the way in which I am? I could only that, if you could in some way express or communicate the sense you are making to somebody else. And that second move requires that the concepts find their way through language into communication. We have not talked about communication yet, but you see, the question of communication and language completes the circle of representation. First of all, there's the shared conceptual maps or cultures that we inhabit. But very closely associated with that are the ways in which different languages, and by language here, of course, I mean a very wide range of things – I mean the language that we speak and the language that we write, I mean electronic languages, digital languages, languages communicated by musical instrument, languages communicated by facial gesture, languages communicated by facial expression, the use of the body to communicate meaning, the use of clothes to express meaning – anything in the sense in which I'm talking about can be a language. By that I mean it gives sign to the meaning that we have in a form which can be communicated to other people. Language *externalizes* – it makes available and accessible as a social fact, a social process – the meanings that we are making of the world and of events. And it's at that point that representation really begins to take off, to close the circle of representation.

REALITY & DISCOURSE

STUART HALL: One of the things which people, who have gotten to this point without understanding where they are going, suddenly want to say is, “oh my goodness, are you telling me that there is *nothing* but language, *nothing* but discourse? The only thing exists is *meaning*? And this is a very common complaint. It sort of occurs, for those of you who teach media studies, in about the middle of the second term. (Laughs). It’s my view. That’s about the point where students suddenly shake their heads and wake up and say, “It’s nonsense, you know. There are lot of things in the world apart from meaning and language. How do you trap me into this sort of language box, this language circle? You know, how do you get me into this circle anyway?”

Let me try and make a very simple distinction about two statements which sound as if they’re exactly the same, which in my view are absolutely different. The first statement is, “Nothing meaningful exists outside of discourse.” I think that statement is true. On the other hand, “Nothing exists outside of discourse,” in my view, that statement is wrong. The statement, “Nothing exists outside of discourse,” is a sort of claim that, as it were, there is no material existence, no material world form, no objects out there, and that is patently not the case. But to say that “Nothing *meaningful* exists outside of discourse” is a way of summing up what I think I’ve been trying to say to you. As far as *meaning* is concerned, you need discourse, i.e., the frameworks of understanding and interpretation to make meaningful sense of it.

Now I’ll try to give you an example. Round, spherical, rubber or leather object is a ball. Is it a football? Well, you need a round, spherical object to play football. It is only football in the context of a set of rules about what you can and can’t do with the ball, which the ball didn’t make up. You have to make up. So the ball, which is a physical object, only becomes meaningful as a *football* within the context of the rules of the game. The only way you play is to develop a game or a language game about football: “You can put it there; You can’t put it there. You can’t touch it; You can’t kick it, etc.” Within the rules, it becomes a football. So it’s meaningful as a football only within the context of the use and the meanings with which it is invested. The notion that meaning is important doesn’t require us to deny that human beings have physical existence, that objects have a physical existence, that we live in a material world which is governed by the laws of the physical world and so on – doesn’t require any of that. The question of discourse and the framework of intelligibility is about how people give meaning to those things and how they become meaningful, not whether they exist or not. And there has been, I think, in a lot of cultural studies work, a kind of slippage around this question of, “If meaning is constitutive, does it mean that nothing exists except language?” You do hear a lot of objections to the position I’m putting forth by saying, “Oh, You’ve sort of absorbed the whole world into language.” That is not what I’m saying, but I am saying though that without language, meaning could not be exchanged in the world. That is the

position that I would take. Without language – and I use language here in the broad sense, I remind you, different media using different sign systems, etc., but nevertheless without language, no representation; without language, no meaning.

THE PRACTICES OF SIGNIFICATION

STUART HALL: I want to take an example in which some of the ways in which people in cultural studies and media studies have tried to explore this process of making, or the production, of meaning, how they've tried to get into what we call the "practices that produce meaning." That idea coincidentally is a very important one: the notion that the production of meaning is not therefore something that just happens because the word is already fixed out in its meanings which don't change. The production of meaning means that there is a kind of symbolic work, an activity, a practice, which has to go on in *giving* meaning to things and in communicating that meaning to someone else. It is that practice of the production of meaning, practice of what I call "signifying practices" – practices that are involved in the production of meaning – that media studies is concentrated on. It's concentrated on the effects and the products of signifying practices, practices with a carrying meaning, and that in our world happen to be widely circulated by the media, the media being one of the most powerful and extensive systems for the circulation of meaning, although one ought to always remind oneself, especially in media studies, that the media are, by no means, the only means by which meaning is circulated in our society. I mean you know, the most obvious way is in actual talk and conversation with other people in personal communication. That is the medium in which the exchange of meaning absolutely saturates the world. But, of course, we are right noticing that to see what happens when systems – complicated, institutional systems with complicated technologies – then intervene and take the place of face-to-face, person-to-person communication and exchange. And the means of circulating those meanings become very widespread because, of course, the question of the circulation of meaning almost immediately involves the question of power. *Who* has the power, in *what* channels, to circulate *which* meanings to *whom*? Which is why the issue of power can never be bracketed out from the question of representation.

MEANING & ABSENCE

STUART HALL: I want to remind you of an image which I think many people may have seen both on television and in the press and in magazines: A picture of Linford Christie at the end of the Olympics with the Union Jack around his shoulders after his victory in the 100 meters. What would you say is the meaning of this image? The captain of the British Olympic team is Black, but he's British because he's got the Union Jack. And if there's any signifier left apart from John Burke and British Beef, the Union Jack is "it" as a signifier of what being British is. So Somehow this person who isn't what one thinks of normally as the majority cultural identity and ethnic identity – racial identity of the majority of British people – because the majority of British people, though the word "British" doesn't carry with it any specific reference at all to questions of race or color, one assumes that the British Olympic team might be full of white British people, and here is somebody who is obviously not.

Now, I'm sure you can see what I'm going to say about this. So this meaning – although it may not have been the first thing you thought about – this meaning manifestly has to do with the relationship between what you expected to find in the first place, which is nowhere visible in the image, contrasted with what actually is in the image. This is the complicated way – this is a simple way of saying what is sometimes expressed in a very complicated form: that *absence* means something and signifies as much as presence. But what's signified is, of course, what is marked – what is in some way visibly there and has been drawn attention to: the fact that he's Black, the fact that he's a winning athlete, the fact that he's carrying the British flag, all those things are marked. But the *meaning* is not simply in those things, but it's in them insofar as they subvert our expectations, the expectations we brought to them which nobody has said anything about at all, nobody has marked this at all. But nevertheless, as if in this empty open field, the very *marking* of him as Black and British has invoked that which is not said. But what is not said is as important to what is said as the things that are actually in the picture. Every image that we see is being read in part against what isn't there.

IDENTITY, IDENTIFICATION & THE VIEWER

STUART HALL: But a second interesting thing might be the question, “Well, there is Linford Christie. He is the captain of the British Olympic team; he is a winner. And you don’t see all that many Blacks in a winning situation. He is claiming something about being British because he’s wearing the flag, but he doesn’t look like what you would expect the majority of British athletes to look like. What is going on here?” Well, part of what is going on is the second thing, which is a kind of claim – a kind of identity claim, a claim of who the thing is or to what does it belong – is made in the way in which it is invested in the practice of representation itself. So without – Linford Christie may not know anything at all about identity politics but nevertheless for the whole thing to make sense, there is a kind of claim on recognition as a certain kind of person. And, you know, you may think that this is far-fetched because this is a very special example, but just think about advertising. No advertising image could work without being associated with it a kind of claim on identity. This is the sort of object which varied sorts of people, in that kind of setting or in that sort of mood, are likely to use and wear. So the whole range of visual imagery does come with a kind of identification tag linked to it.

Now I moved, you may notice, from the word “identity” or “identity claim,” to “identification.” What I’m asking, in the case of an advertisement, say, is: “What is the degree to which, in some way, you can project yourself into the image so that you can place yourself within the field of what is being represented to you?” Most advertising works by attempting to win identification. If there’s no identification going on at all and you say, “I don’t know what it would be like to feel like that person. I’ve never seen anybody like that. I can’t imagine myself ever being like that, etc., even in my fantasies,” there’s no identification at all. It’s very difficult to – you can get the meaning in a kind of abstract way, but the meaning doesn’t begin to register. It doesn’t begin to make the kind of claim on you. It is trying to construct a position of knowledge or identification for the viewer in relation to what has been depicted in the image.

Now we know that about advertising, it may be more difficult to see in terms of illustrations in the newspapers about events of faraway places. But even there, unless there’s something in the picture with which you can even imaginatively or imaginarily identify, it’s very difficult for the meaning to pass. But insofar as you pause, you know, and that you don’t do what most of you do with our daily newspaper such as that, and you stop and look, it has arrested you, it has said, “something for you here, something for you here,” what can you then get out of the image? You can only get something out of the image if you position yourself in relation to what it’s telling you. What we’ve only gradually come to see is the way in which the viewer is himself or herself implicated – especially where the visual image is concerned in the mode of looking, implicated through the look at the image – in the production of meaning through the image. It is not that the image *has* a meaning. It is, as it were, in the relations of looking at the image,

which the image constructs for us that that meaning is completed. And I'd say the image has a whole range of potential meanings. But the meaning that you as a spectator take, depends on that engagement – psychic, imaginary engagement – through the look with an investment in the image or involvement in what the image is saying or doing. So then, whereas we have a notion in the way in which we talk about images that images flood us and barrage us with meanings; as if we can stand outside of them and allow them to be there. The fact is that, if we are concerned about the proliferation of images in our culture, it is because they constantly construct us, through our fantasy relationship to the image, in a way which implicates us in the meaning. And that is what is, in a sense, bothering us. We're not bothered because we are barraged by something which means nothing to us. We are bothered precisely by the fact that we are caught. We do have an investment, in the meaning which is being taken from it.

MEANING IS INTERPRETATION

STUART HALL: Suppose you said, “I look at this athlete, but I don’t see any of the meanings that you are telling me that I should see,” What can be the answer to that? One potential answer is, “Well, of course, you’re not looking right. You need a course in cultural studies, you know, how to look at it properly, then you’d be saturated by images and meanings.” But that’s not, I’m not going to retreat to that dodge. I’m going to say that, “that is because the image has no fixed meaning.” It has potentially a wide range of meanings, and consequently, the task that we are involved in is a task which many methodologies in cultural studies, like formal semiotics, for instance, did try to make into a kind of scientific study. There would be some way of proving that this was the meaning of the image, which everybody would take. If only we could have got as scientific as that, the question of meaning would have been resolved. That was impossible because there is no escape from the fact that meaning is, in the end, interpretation. It always shifts from one historical setting to another. It is always contextual. Only within a certain context can you say, “That seems to me to be a stronger meaning than that.” We can have a debate about meaning and representation, but it is a debate about which is more or less plausible reading of an interpretation of an image. But we cannot say, “That is true and your reading is wrong.” And if, in this field, one succumbs to the illusion of believing that one can climb out of the circle of meaning and somehow reach for the final scientific proof which will hold the image still, you have only to wait five days, two days, three days, talk to somebody else; or go out of the room and come back in and the meaning is “on the slide,” it has shifted onward. The things that you thought were important don’t seem to be the things that are marking anymore. The things that you thought you hadn’t seen, you now see. Someone else will say, “Oh, I see it differently.” There is absolutely no escape from that contestation over meaning.

IDEOLOGY & POWER FIX MEANING

STUART HALL: Let me put that around another way: does that mean that all of the meanings just float around, everything means a thousand different things, and you would get into a proliferation, a wonderful, formal, what the French call *jouissance* – a kind of quasi-orgasm of meaning – just more of it, as much of it as you can get, a kind of pleasure of the image? Well, yes and no, yes and no! The meaning can never be fixed, but if you want to say, even provisionally, “Well, I sort of think it means this,” you’ve got to stop it. You’ve got to fix it, you’ve got to privilege that meaning for the time being; it may not be forever. You may take it back tomorrow. But *meaning* depends on a certain kind of fixing. On the other hand, meaning can never be finally fixed. So what we’re looking at is a practice, which is always going to be subverted; and, you know, the purpose of power, when it intervenes in language, is precisely to absolutely fix. That is what we used to call “ideology” tries to do. It tries to say, “I can tell you what the meaning in Northern Ireland today means. That is what it means; it doesn’t mean anything else. It’s not going to change. Tomorrow, it’s going to mean the same thing. It aims to fix the one true meaning and the only hope you have about power in representations is that it’s not going to be true and that tomorrow it is, in some way, going to make a slightly different sense of it, meaning is going to come out of the fixing and begin to loosen and fray. And therefore it’s not a sort of post-modern playfulness which insists on the relative openness of the meaning. It is absolutely central to a historical notion that meaning *can* be changed. It can only be changed if it cannot finally be fixed, because you bet your life that the *attempt* to fix it is why power intervenes in representation at all. That is what they are trying to do. They want, as it were, a relationship between the image and a powerful definition of it to become naturalized so that *that* is the only meaning it can possibly carry. Whenever you see that, you will think that whenever you see that, you will think that whenever you see those people, you will assume that they have those characteristics. Whenever you see that event, you will assume it has that political consequence. That’s what ideology tries to do, that’s what power in signification is intended to do: to close language, to close meaning, to stop the flow.

CONTESTING STEREOTYPES – Positive Images

STUART HALL: If you think of an area in which an enormous amount of work has been done in media studies, which is the area of stereotyping – gender stereotypes, class stereotypes, racial and ethnic stereotypes – you will see the way in which stereotyping is exactly an attempt to fix. Every time you see this kind of image, these are the limited range of characteristics, which one assumes is going to be implicated in the image. It's how a stereotype functions. People have assumed that therefore what this is doing is a powerful way of circulating in the world a very limited range of definitions of who people can be, of what they can do, what are the possibilities in life, what are the natures of the constraints on them. I mean, the image is producing not only identification, which I talked about before, it's actually producing knowledge; what we know about the world is how we see it represented. So the struggle to open up stereotypes is often a struggle to increase the diversity of things which subjects can be of – the possibilities of identities which people have not seen represented before – it is very important; that is “the politics of the image.”

Now, as you may know, there have been a number of different strategies with respect to this. The most common strategy is what is sometimes called “positive representation,” where you have a negative field of stereotypes, and you try to intervene in it to represent the negative group in a more positive way; you try to reverse the stereotypes. But I want to say to you that there is a problem in attempts to *reverse* stereotypes in this way because it's as if you could guarantee that, having put positive images of Black men and women in the place where negative images existed before, you could somehow maintain a positive regime of representation in the place of the stereotyped representation that you had before. But the actual practice suggests to us that, just as unfortunately, you can't fix, I mean, just as impossible for them to fix *bad* representation, so it's almost impossible for us to fix *good* ones.

CONTESTING STEREOTYPES – Taking Images Apart

STUART HALL: The strategies of the politics of the image has to take a very different and much less guaranteed route, in my view. It has to go *inside* the image itself – inside the image – because stereotypes themselves are really actually very complex things. It has somehow to occupy the very terrain which has been saturated by fixed and closed representation and to try to use the stereotypes and turn the stereotypes in a sense against themselves; to open up, in other words, the very practice of representation itself – as a practice – because what closure in representation does most of all is it naturalizes the representation to the point where you cannot see that anybody ever produced it. It seems to be just what the world is. It's just how it looks; that is just what reality is. The very act of opening up the practice by which these closures of imagery have been presented requires one to go into the power of the stereotype itself and begin to, as it were, subvert, open and expose it from inside. And that has, I think, a much more profound effect in shifting the disposition of images which circulate, for instance, in the media, although I want to remind you that there's no way that that's guaranteed either. There's no guarantee in meaning; there's no way in which you can prevent a stereotype from being pulled back to some of its more stereotypical forms. But you can engage in a way which begins to open the stereotypes up in such a way that they become uninhabitable for very long.

Well, one could push this very much further. For instance, if you wanted to take the point which I was just making, you might ask – or you might think about a trope of representation, for example, like fetishism. The fetishism which one finds – the fixing of particularly sexual imagery in relation both to race and to gender, which has been such a feature of a lot of negative stereotyping – you might ask yourself whether, if you were trying to intervene in this field, maybe the best thing to do would be to leave the fetishism alone, abandon it, to give it up, never go near it because it's so contaminated by the stereotypical uses to which it has been put. However, quite the opposite: you would go exactly *into* the nature of fetishism itself because of the secret power which it has. I mean, it has operated to stabilize stereotypes for a reason – not just for a joke – because it has very powerful powers of identification in fantasy. If you want to begin to *change* the relationship of the viewer to the image, you have to intervene in exactly that powerful exchange between the image and its psychic meaning, the depths of the fantasy, the collective and social fantasies with which we invest images, in order to, as it were, expose and deconstruct the work of representation which the stereotypes are doing.

WHAT IS AT STAKE IN REPRESENTATION? – New Knowledges, New Identities, New Meanings

STUART HALL: I've talked about the way in which the image operates through the marking of presence and absence. I've talked about the importance of difference; it is what is different from what is expected. The marking of what is different from what is expected, as it were, allows meaning to begin to operate. I've talked about the importance of the way in which the image implicates us in the production of meaning. And I've talked about the question of power and of closure in representation, what that closure is about, that is, as it were, how symbolic power operates in representation, an attempt to naturalize the meaning so that we can't have, you don't have, any other way of thinking, any other access to knowledge, about what is being told us about the world but the way in which it is being interpreted and why therefore an attempt to keep representation open is a way of constantly wanting new kinds of knowledges to be produced in the world, new kinds of subjectivities to be explored, and new dimensions of meaning which have not been foreclosed by the systems of power which are in operation.