

have the capacity to shape or influence the political economy of a broadcasting system, and hence influence the range and style of programmes available (see *Policy*). In each case, these trends have been influenced by government's withdrawing from public service commitments and viewing broadcasting primarily in terms of economic development rather than as a cultural resource. This has been exacerbated by the rescinding of power over trade from national governments to international pro-business institutions like the World Trade Organisation. The political economy of broadcasting therefore has an increasingly international focus in response to the globalisation of production, markets and institutions.

See also: Cultural imperialism; Globalisation; Marxism; Ownership

Further reading: McChesney (2000); Mosco (1996); Murdock and Golding (1995)

POLYSEMY

Polysemy refers to words, images or *texts* that have a number of different meanings. The notion of polysemy comes from *semiotics*. Indeed, one of the founding principles of semiotics is that the meaning of something is never permanently fixed. This assumption of polysemy is, for many, counter-intuitive: we are so used to assuming what familiar words, images or objects 'mean' that their meaning seems almost inevitable or natural.

In language, polysemy can refer to the realms of connotation (an implied or symbolic meaning) and denotation (a more literal, definitional meaning). In language, for example, the word 'strike' can be defined in several different ways – as an industrial action by workers; the lighting of a match; a turn in baseball; to hit something or someone; to adopt an attitude (to 'strike a pose'); to instil (as in 'to strike fear'); or to occur to ('it strikes me that'). Words may also have a range of connotative meanings: the word 'rain', for example, might connote misery, refreshment, dreariness, cold winter nights or relief from summer heat. To a farmer it may connote food for crops, to the inhabitant of a damp low-lying area it may connote danger.

Images and objects can also be polysemic. A picture of Che Guevara might signify within a wide range of *discourses*, connoting: the 1960s; rebellion; youth; socialism; Latin America; revolution; T-shirts; heroism; coolness, and so on. While we tend to think of physical

objects themselves as being more straightforward, they are also polysemic: even a natural object like a mountain might be regarded as something to be climbed, a scenic backdrop or a source of food for sheep grazing, while it might be a metaphor for a challenge, a sense of mystery, an obstacle or the grandeur of nature.

The French semiologist Roland Barthes used the concept of polysemy to distinguish between what he described as ‘open’ or ‘closed’ texts. An open text is one in which the reader or audience is encouraged or able to construct a wide range of meanings. A poem or an abstract painting, for example, encourages the reader or viewer to ‘play’ with meaning, to search for symbols and metaphors which might add layers of significance to the text, to appreciate its polysemy. The ‘open’ text can be read in a variety of ways: audiences may interpret it, for example, within a psychoanalytic framework; a *Marxist* framework; a *historical* framework; a *postmodernist* framework; a religious framework; or an existentialist framework. The open text will resist attempts by a single discourse to narrow its meaning, to restrict its polysemy.

While all texts are potentially polysemic, ‘closed’ texts will be structured to limit ambiguity and to privilege one set of meanings over others (much like the ‘preferred meaning’ in the *encoding/decoding* model). A propaganda campaign, a television commercial, a political drama or a textbook, for example, will often attempt to close meaning down and push the audience to adopt a particular interpretation. Barthes, writing from the perspective of literary criticism, saw open texts as much richer, more interesting and, ultimately, a more sublime form of pleasure than the closed text. In other contexts we might see the ability to limit polysemy, to produce a closed text, as advantageous: a list of instructions or a policy document, for example, will attempt to limit the range of interpretations.

There is no such thing as a completely open or closed text – they are ‘ideal types’, two ends of a continuum in which most texts fall somewhere in between. The degree of polysemy or closure in a text will also depend upon its context. One of the functions of modern art, for example, is to create a context in which polysemy thrives. An artist may take a commonplace domestic object, such as a can of soup or a toilet bowl. By painting it or simply by removing it from a domestic context and exhibiting it in a gallery, the artist encourages the viewer to play with meaning, to consider the range of connotations that might give it meaning and significance. In a typing manual, the meaning of the sentence ‘the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog’ is closed – its significance is only that it requires the use of

every letter of the alphabet. In a poem, the same line might become polysemic, the fox and the dog becoming metaphors with a range of possible meanings.

The degree of polysemy or closure will also depend upon the *audience*. What appears to be closed text to one person may take on an entirely different meaning to another. Audience research suggests that television shows can be given new meanings in different cultural contexts. Research by Hodge and Tripp (1986), for example, found that Australian schoolchildren interpreted a popular prison drama (*Prisoner Cell Block H*) as an allegory of school life, while a study of *The Cosby Show* by Jhally and Lewis (1992) found that the show meant different things to black and white viewers.

Both polysemy and closure are therefore dependent upon the 'cultural competence' of the viewer, reader or listener. The scholar of Shakespearean criticism, having read a range of interpretations of *Hamlet* (psychoanalytic, Marxist, existentialist, etc.) will be in a better position than most to appreciate the polysemy of the text than someone who is struggling to make sense of the play (and who is therefore trying to close down its meaning). Conversely, someone well versed in current affairs might be more receptive to the reporter's attempts to 'close' the meaning of a story.

In the same vein, levels of polysemy also depend upon the notion of *intertextuality* (the way we understand one text in relation to another text). A show like *The Simpsons*, for example, often makes a number of comic references to other films and TV shows, creating another layer of meaning for those audience members who are aware of those references; a sequence in *The Simpsons* can therefore be read both in its own terms or as a parody.

See also: Audiences; Intertextuality; Semiology/semiotics; Sign; Text

Further reading: Barthes (1974); Eco (1979); Fiske (1987)

POSTMODERNISM

The term 'postmodernism' has become a buzzword in both popular argot and academic debate (Hebdige 1988). It has been used to describe everything from the dawning of a new cultural or aesthetic era to the unusual mix-and-match concoction that is a chicken tikka pizza. Many of us, even if we are not attuned to the theoretical origins of the concept, may have heard it used or may tentatively make