

CHAPTER 3

Representation

Introduction

Stuart Hall, one of the founders of cultural studies in Britain and a leading contributor to many of the debates in cultural studies since the 1970s, argues that culture

is not so much a set of *things* – novels and paintings or TV programmes and comics – as a process, a set of *practices*. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings – ‘the giving and taking of meaning’ – between the members of a society or group. (Hall, 1997, p. 2)

Representation is one of the key practices by which meanings are produced. By the end of this chapter we hope you will have begun to understand what we mean by ‘representation’ and something of how it functions. Working through the readings and activities that follow this introduction will enable you to recognize the often complex ways in which meanings are produced through systems of representation – primarily, in this chapter, written language, visual images and objects. We begin by considering what is meant by the term ‘representation’, and then move on to consider how the links between meanings, representation and culture might be explained.



3.1

Spend a few minutes thinking about what is meant by the word ‘represent’. You might find it helpful to use a dictionary.

There are three possible senses to the word ‘represent’.

- To ‘represent’ meaning to stand in for, as in the case of a country’s flag, which when flown at a sporting event, for example, signals that country’s presence at the event. The flag stands for or symbolizes a nation, distinguishing France from China or Ireland from the USA. In Britain, the Royal Standard rep-

resents/symbolizes the royal family and the institution of monarchy.

- To 'represent' meaning to speak or act on behalf of, as in the sentence 'A spokesperson on behalf of lesbian mothers' voiced the concerns of the group on television.' Members of Parliament represent the concerns of their constituents. A person who represents a group in this sense may also serve a symbolic function. An example might be the Pope, who speaks and acts on behalf of the Roman Catholic community but might also stand as a symbol of Roman Catholicism.
- To 'represent' meaning to re-present. In this sense, a biography or historical writing re-presents the events of the past. Equally, a photograph re-presents a moment or event which has already occurred – it presents the occasion again. A photograph or painting can also, of course, represent someone or something in the sense of standing in for. Posters of rock stars, religious paintings and public statues all fulfil this function. Images that function in this way are said to be **iconic**.

In practice the three meanings we have identified frequently overlap and merge. None the less, it is worth spending a few moments thinking about further examples of each meaning from your own experience. In which sense is a photograph of a child's birthday party working? What about road signs? What about the red 'M' sign used by the hamburger chain McDonalds? In what sense is a written autobiography a representation? Is a novel or a TV soap opera a representation and, if so, of what?

Language and representation

Language is an arbitrary system of **signs** in which we tacitly agree to accept, for example, that the letters/sounds d.o.g. will represent (stand in for) those animals we wish to classify as different from, say, elephants or mice. It is only at the moment when we agree that the **signifier** d.o.g. equals a mental concept of a certain animal (the **signified**) that an animal known to us as 'dog' and therefore not 'elephant' or 'mouse' exists. Signifier plus signified produce the sign, dog. Furthermore, we understand d.o.g. as dog because it is not the letters or sounds c.a.t. nor l.o.g. rather than because there are physical differences between cats and dogs that fall into naturally pre-existent categories of what constitutes a dog or a cat. Language works through a system of differentiation 'readily experienced as natural, given, but in reality constructed by the language itself' (Belsey, 1980, pp. 39–40). Prior to its constitution in language (the sounds/letters d.o.g.) we do not possess a *shared* conception of dog that can be socially communicated. This does not mean that we are unable to see or think about certain animals with certain characteristics, but that such animals are not known specifically as dogs or cats or elephants or mice that can be talked, thought and spoken about as different, until language constitutes them as such. Now read this extract from Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice*, which expands the ideas that we have just glossed.



3.1

We use signifiers to mark off areas of a continuum. The [colour] spectrum again illustrates this point. It is not that I cannot distinguish between shades of blue but that the language insists on a difference, which readily comes to seem fundamental, *natural*, between blue and green. The world, which without signification would be experienced as a continuum, is divided up by language into entities which then readily come to be experienced as essentially distinct. The way in which we use signifiers to create differences appears in the labelling of otherwise identical toothmugs, 'his' and 'hers' . . .

Only a social group can generate signs. Noises which have no meaning may be purely individual, but meaning intelligibility, cannot by definition be produced in isolation. The sign is in an important sense arbitrary – the sound *dog* has not more necessary or natural connection with the concept *dog* than has *chien* or *Hund*. Even onomatopoeic words, which seem to imitate the sounds they signify, are by no means international: French dogs say *ouaoua*; to splash in French is *éclabousser*. And it is the arbitrariness of the sign which points to the fact that language is a matter of convention. The linguistic community 'agrees' to attach a specific signified to a specific signifier, though in reality, of course, its agreement is not explicitly sought but merely manifested in the fact that certain linguistic units are used and understood. 'The arbitrary nature of the sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up' (Saussure, 1974, p. 113). And conversely, of course, a community needs a signifying system: social organization and social exchange, the ordering of the processes of producing the means of subsistence, is impossible without the existence of a signifying system. Language therefore comes into being at the same time as society . . .

Language is not, of course, the only signifying system. Images, gestures, social behaviour, clothes are all socially invested with meaning, are all elements of the symbolic order: language is simply the most flexible and perhaps the most complex of the signifying systems. Thought, if not exclusively dependent on language, is inconceivable without the symbolic order in general. 'Thought is nothing other than the power to construct representations of things and to operate on these representations. It is in essence symbolic' [Benveniste, 1971, p. 25]. (Belsey, 1980, pp. 39–45)



Activity 3.2

- Look up the word 'nice' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Look in particular at its etymology – the way its meaning has changed over time. (This information is given in square brackets at the end of the entry).
- Can you think of examples of language marking differences that have social meaning? For example, the forms of address, Miss, Ms, Mr, Dr, Reverend.
- Think about the concept of 'race'. Is this an instance where 'the language insists on a difference, which readily comes to seem fundamental, *natural*'? Is 'race' a form of linguistic differentiation and classification rather than a natural phenomenon?

Communicating meaning

You should now read the following passage by Stuart Hall.

3.2



Members of the same culture must share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world, and thus to interpret the world, in roughly similar ways. They must share, broadly speaking, the same 'cultural codes'. In this sense, thinking and feeling are themselves 'systems of representation', in which our concepts, images and emotions 'stand for' or represent, in our mental life, things which are or may be 'out there' in the world. Similarly, in order to *communicate* these meanings to other people, the participants to any meaningful exchange must also be able to use the same linguistic codes – they must, in a very broad sense, 'speak the same language' . . . They must also be able to read visual images in roughly similar ways. They must be familiar with broadly the same ways of producing sounds to make what they would both recognize as 'music'. They must all interpret body language and facial expressions in broadly similar ways. And they must know how to translate their feelings and ideas into these various languages. Meaning is a dialogue – always only partially understood, always an unequal exchange.

Why do we refer to all these different ways of producing and communicating meaning as 'languages' or as 'working like languages'? How do languages work? The simple answer is that languages work *through representation*. They are 'systems' of representations'. Essentially, we can say that all these practices 'work like languages', *not* because they are all written or spoken (they are not), but because they all use some element to stand for or represent what we want to say, to express or communicate a thought, concept, idea or feeling. Spoken language uses sounds, written language uses words, musical language uses notes on a scale, the 'language of the body' uses physical gesture, the fashion industry uses items of clothing, the language of facial expression uses ways of arranging one's features, television uses digitally or electronically produced dots on a screen, traffic lights use red, green and amber to 'say something'. These elements – sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes – are part of our natural and material world, but their importance for language is not what they are but what they *do*, their function. They construct meaning and transmit it. They signify. They don't have any clear meaning *in themselves*. Rather, they are the vehicles or media which *carry meaning* because they operate as *symbols*, which stand for or represent (i.e. symbolize) the meanings we wish to communicate. To use another metaphor, they function as *signs*. Signs stand for or *represent* our concepts, ideas and feelings in such a way as to enable others to 'read', decode or interpret their meaning in roughly the same way that we do. (Hall, 1997, pp. 4–5)

In order to explore what Hall is saying more fully, let us take a simple example. The word 'star' can mean, among other things, an extra-terrestrial form in the galaxy, a celebrity, an award for good work or behaviour, an architectural formation. It all depends on the meaning attributed to the sign 'star' in a particular

context. The letters s.t.a.r. have no intrinsic meaning in themselves – as Hall says, words are important not for what *they are* but what they *do*, their function'. They are a symbol or sign to which we tacitly agree to attach certain meanings. Taking the first meaning, until a group or society 'agrees' to use the letters s.t.a.r. to signify the shiny dots that can be seen in the sky at night, the word star has no meaning. The letters s.t.a.r. represent (stand in for) the physical objects we can see in the night sky, and allow us to communicate this meaning to others who use the same language. To use the word 'star' to represent (symbolize) a particular kind of celebrity is to understand 'star' as a metaphor – it suggests a connection or likeness between a star in the firmament and certain 'brilliant' people. Stars are also physical shapes used for buildings, decorations, swimming or dancing formations. Here, they are being used as a visual sign, rather than a verbal one, but one which works through shared ways of seeing: we recognize a particular shape as 'star' because we share the same codes of communication. A star used as a reward can function as both a visual and a verbal symbol – a symbol of, or a way of representing, special achievement. The point to grasp is that the concept 'star' has no fixed or single meaning for all time. What it means will depend upon the context in which it is used, how it is represented and the codes which govern that representation. For example, schoolchildren do not believe that the award of a gold star will mean being presented with a star from the galaxy; they understand the meaning of star within the context of its use and the codes of representation in the British education system, which designate stars as symbols of excellence. Again, if asked to form a star in a dance class they would not confuse this with the award for achievement. In summary, meaning is produced via **signifying practices**, in which signs are assembled according to sets of codes in order to represent, in material form (speech, the written word, visual images, music, body language, clothing, the environments we live and work in), the mental conceptualizations shared by a particular grouping of people.



3.3

- List as many meanings for the sign 'star' as you can think of.
- Collect some visual images of stars (in any of the senses used). Do they connect with the words and stories used about stars?
- Can you think of physical gestures that function as signs in the particular body language you recognize? For example, in Britain a nod of the head signifies assent, but it might signify differently in another culture.

In order to interpret the world we inhabit, we need a framework of meanings that will enable us to place people, objects and events in ways that make sense for us. Think back to chapter 1, where we made the point that it was possible to know what a cathedral was without actually being in or looking at one. We have a mental concept of 'cathedral' that we can access even when we are nowhere near an actual, bricks and mortar cathedral. The same is true of objects like tables, chairs or computers. It is also true of less tangible things, like love, loyalty, justice or cruelty, and even of things that we have never experienced or seen, such as drag-

ons, fairies or prehistoric cavemen. This ability to conceptualize mentally even abstract things allows us to represent the world to ourselves in ways which are meaningful, and to communicate those meanings to others who share broadly similar systems of representation. Try explaining Father Christmas to someone from a culture in which this figure does not exist. In order to understand Father Christmas we need a shared concept and a way of communicating this or, if we belong to a culture which does not have Father Christmas, we will try to relate the concept of Father Christmas to something similar in our own culture in order to classify it as 'similar to'/'different from'. The concepts we use to make sense of the world are arrived at by a process of **categorization** and **classification**. Signs only operate to produce meaning within a system of other signs that signify along chains of similarity and difference. For example, night means not-day, a dark room means not-night because it is created by artificial means – no electric light, drawn curtains – whereas night signifies a natural state, but a dark room is like night in that both a dark room and night are unlike a lighted room or daytime. In this way we are able to form complex meanings that can be communicated to others through systems of representation that are constituted in:

- the signs we use, such as s.t.a.r., a nod of the head;
- the categorization and classification of signs according to similarity or difference, e.g. the sign w.o.m.a.n. signifies in relation to other signs, such as m.a.n. or a.n.i.m.a.l. or h.u.m.a.n.;
- the codes that govern how we assemble the signs to produce meaning, e.g. the context in which 'star' means a heavenly body or a symbol of achievement;
- the signifying practices through which meanings are communicated, e.g. sounds, writing, visual images, musical notation, physical gestures, clothing.

So far this may seem somewhat abstract. Let us demonstrate what we have been saying with a practical example. Look carefully at figure 3.1 and try to follow the discussion that follows. For your information, the background is a deep red, blurring into a yellowy orange, with the doormat a lighter shade of yellowy orange, blurring into yellowy gold along its fold. The writing is black on the doormat and white elsewhere, with the yellowy orange colour used for the bullet points.

3.4

Figure 3.1 is a picture of the cover of one of the booklets produced by the Midland Bank (now renamed the HSBC) to provide information for customers. What is this cover 'saying'? Don't simply offer an overall impression. Try to analyse precisely how the various signs are assembled in order to signify a particular meaning. What does the sign 'doormat' signify here? What about the use of colour? What does the word 'home' signify?



The cover is promoting Midland's range of mortgages, loans and insurance. It suggests that Midland ('the listening bank') welcomes the opportunity to help



Figure 3.1 The cover of a booklet produced by Midland Bank plc

and advise potential home owners to find the right financial services. The doormat, which occupies the centre of the cover and draws our eyes, is intended to signify as an invitation: 'come on in', in the sense of both reading the booklet and entering a home. The word 'welcome' confirms the intended meaning of the doormat: in another context a doormat can signify someone who is willing to be walked all over. Using words or a caption to ensure the meaning of a visual image is referred to as **anchoring** the meaning. On this cover the words 'welcome' and 'home' ensure that a certain meaning is secured. It is worth noting that the caption says 'Buying a home' rather than 'Buying a house'. Home has certain **connotations** that are not present in concepts of 'house': safety, family, place of origin, comfort, haven, not-work etc. The use of the colours red and gold confirms these meanings: red and gold in this context suggest warmth, even firelight, and this links directly to the idea of home that the cover is promoting. Midland, 'the listening bank', becomes associated with the values of security, warmth and welcome that are represented by the particular assemblage of signs used here.

This booklet is one of a series providing information on the services offered by Midland. Each booklet cover represents a different set of services and the values or meanings attached to these. Yet the series has a whole is held together by a certain housestyle – the graphics use the same font and are placed in the same position on each cover. Different colours are used for each booklet in order to signify certain ideas, but also to distinguish each booklet. Taken together, the series of booklets represents in visual and written form the range of services offered by Midland. The signs used here are **encoded** so as to suggest particular meanings. By encoding we mean using them in certain ways and in particular relations to other signs so as to convey a specific meaning or ‘message’. A doormat could be encoded in ways that signify ‘to be walked over’ or ‘to wipe your feet on’. The colours red and gold can signify pomp and majesty in other contexts. Red, in the sequence of traffic lights, represents stop. Used with other signs and encoded differently, red can suggest passion.

Activity 3.5

- Search through magazines, brochures and advertisements to try to find examples of representations that encode red and/or gold in different ways from the Midland booklet cover.
- What signs might you use in conjunction with a doormat to suggest meanings other than ‘welcome home’? Think about objects, colours, words, context etc.



By now you may be thinking that it is all very well to encode a meaning by placing signs in particular relation to each other, but how can we know that this encoded meaning will be received (decoded) in precisely the form intended, given the range of possible meanings of even an apparently straightforward sign such as ‘star’. In his essay ‘Encoding/decoding in television discourse’, Hall argues that ‘decodings do not follow inevitably from encodings’, that there is no natural symmetry between encoders and decoders (Hall, 1990, p. 100). TV news producers, for example, may encode events in ways that point to an intended or preferred meaning, but these encodings may be decoded or ‘read’ differently. The Midland Bank cover, for example, encodes a ‘preferred’ meaning but the producers of the cover can only attempt to persuade us into reading the meaning they intend. As ‘readers’ we bring our own histories, understandings, place in the world to our reading of the cover, and therefore possibly produce meanings from it which were not intended by the cover designers. Hall uses the word **articulation** to suggest the point at which encoding and decoding meet. This is a useful word to convey the process he is attempting to describe. To articulate means two things: to express something and to link two things in a way which retains the independence of each. Think of an articulated lorry in which the cab and container are interdependent but not permanently joined; each can be articulated to another vehicle if needed. Now read the extract from Jacqueline Bobo’s study of black women’s readings of the Steven Spielberg film of Alice Walker’s book *The Color Purple*.

3.3



From political sociology, the encoding/decoding model was drawn from the work of Frank Parkin, who developed a theory of meaning systems [Morley, 1989, p. 4]. This theory delineates three potential responses to a media message: dominant, negotiated or oppositional. A dominant (or preferred) reading of a text accepts the content of the cultural product without question. A negotiated reading questions parts of the content of the text but does not question the dominant ideology which underlies the production of the text. An oppositional response to a cultural product is one in which the recipient of the text understands that the system that produced the text is one with which she/he is fundamentally at odds [Grossberg, 1984, p. 403].

A viewer of a film (reader of a text) comes to the moment of engagement with the work with a knowledge of the world and a knowledge of other texts or media products. What this means is that when a person comes to view a film, she/he does not leave her/his histories, whether social, cultural, economic, racial, or sexual at the door. An audience member from a marginalized group (people of colour, women, the poor, and so on) has an oppositional stance as they participate in mainstream media. The motivation for this counter-reception is that we understand that mainstream media has never rendered our segment of the population faithfully. We have as evidence our years of watching films and television programmes and reading plays and books. Out of habit, as readers of mainstream texts, we have learned to ferret out the beneficial and put up blinders against the rest.

From this wary viewing standpoint, a subversive reading of a text can occur. This alternative reading comes from something in the work that strikes the viewer as amiss, that appears 'strange'. Behind the idea of subversion lies a reader-oriented notion of 'making strange' [Gledhill, 1984]. When things appear strange to the viewer, she/he may then bring other viewpoints to bear on the watching of the film and may see things other than what the film-makers intended. The viewer, that is, will read 'against the grain' of the film. (Bobo, 1988, p. 55).

Bobo's interviews with black women who saw *The Color Purple* demonstrate the ways in which these women read the film 'against the grain' of dominant critical readings that condemned the film for its negative representation of black people. She suggests that, rather than finding the portrayal of the black community stereotypical and negative, as argued by numerous critics, these women 'discovered something progressive and useful in the film' (Bobo, 1988, p. 54).

A further example: advertising that uses images of white, young, slim, attractive and healthy females to sell a product is encoding a particular version of femininity. In these adverts femininity equals whiteness, youth, beauty, slenderness and health. A reader who straightforwardly accepts that whiteness, youth, beauty and a slender, healthy body connote femininity can be said to be reading from within the dominant code in which this image is encoded. An unquestioning acceptance of these **dominant** codes of femininity may lead to a continuing quest for youth, beauty and slenderness and, if one is non-white, possible attempts to 'pass as white'. A **negotiated** decoding may accept the encoded definition of femininity

at the level of the advertisement, possibly as an unattainable ideal or fantasy, but this meaning of femininity may have minimum impact on or bear little relation to everyday experience. A woman who decodes from a negotiated position may enjoy looking at the femininity offered in advertisements and magazines but may, quite happily, spend very little time or money in her daily life attempting to emulate these. Neither, however, is she likely to question the underlying structures that posit femininity in these terms – as Bobo writes, she ‘does not question the dominant ideology which underlies the production of the text’. Someone who decodes the images of femininity from an **oppositional** position would read such images as harmful to women, in that they render women of colour, older women, large women, poor women and women with disabilities invisible and promote a dominant ideology of heterosexuality. They might actively seek to change the ways in which advertisements represent women through the politics of feminism and black rights movements (see chapter 2; Betterton, 1987; Bonner *et al.*, 1992; McCracken, 1993; Dines and Humez, 1995).

3.6

- Collect a variety of brochures, booklets, pamphlets etc. from a range of sources (banks, travel agents, museums, publishers etc.). Have a go at analysing these as we did the Midland booklet cover above.
- Select an advertisement or series of advertisements. Try to work out how the advert might be read from: (a) a dominant decoding position; (b) a negotiated decoding position; and (c) an oppositional position.
- Watch a film with friends, family or fellow students. Try to identify the preferred meanings that are being conveyed. Discuss the film with the other viewers. Does the discussion demonstrate examples of dominant, negotiated or oppositional positionings? Dominant and oppositional will probably be the easiest to identify, but have a go at identifying negotiated decoding positions both in the discussion and in your everyday life.



Representation and discourse

You may have begun to wonder how and why dominant meanings are sustained, often consistently over a long period, when it is possible for people to produce alternative and oppositional meanings that may be subversive. In order to think about this we need to turn our attention to how meanings ‘circulate’, and the way we have chosen to explore this is through the concept of discourse developed by Michel Foucault. Discourse moves the focus from an examination of the relation of signs within a signifying system to asking questions about how certain ways of thinking about an area of knowledge acquire authority, how certain meanings attach themselves to certain signs in specific historical periods and how meaning and knowledge produce and sustain power relations. Discourse is a social act, in that it links systems of representation with the real world in which people experience social relations. Foucault argues that how human beings understand

themselves in relation to the social world is not fixed or universal, but that this knowledge is produced differently at different historical moments. Such knowledge, he claims, is produced through discourse, and is inextricably linked with the ways in which power operates,

power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (Foucault, 1975, 27)

Before we go on to think about discourse, let us consider what is meant by 'there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge'.



3.7

Look back to the extract from Said in chapter 1, in which he writes of imperialism's need to differentiate 'us' from 'them' (reading 1.7). What particular knowledges or way of seeing the world are connected with the power relations of imperialism?

In order for one area of the globe to colonize and rule another it is necessary for the colonizers and colonized to know and represent the world in certain ways. For example, in the nineteenth century, British imperialists understood Africa as 'the dark continent', a primitive and unknowable place, to be 'civilized' by Christianity, science and the 'forces of reason'. Such knowledge constructed oppositions in which Europe represented enlightenment, reason and civilization, while Africa was the scene of ignorance, irrationality and savagery. This 'knowledge' legitimated the practice of slavery in the southern states of North America, the slave trade that operated in a triangle comprising Africa, North America and Britain, and the European colonization of Africa. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries power relations between black and white people, in which black signified subordination and servitude, while white signified superiority and ownership, were represented as the 'natural' order of things, thus closing off any discussion of these relations. Blacks were 'by nature' lazy, 'primitive' and childish, and this legitimated the subjection of their bodies, as well as their work, homes, leisure and environment, to white authority. This 'knowledge', often validated by scientific findings about the 'true nature' of Black Africans, was crucial to the white imperialist project. Once black inferiority was accepted as 'true', certain practices – economic and social – could be carried out in the name of that 'truth' (Mackenzie, 1986; Gates, 1988; hooks, 1992; McClintock, 1995; Hall, 1997). And we might also ask how the colonized saw *themselves* in the education system. The next extract is taken from a collection of life stories by Jamaican girls published in 1986, and describes the feelings of a creole woman when she read *Jane Eyre* as a schoolgirl receiving a British education in Kingston, Jamaica.

3.4



In third form, they gave us *Jane Eyre* to read. It was the only piece of literature in which there was any mention of the Caribbean. It was also the only book by a woman which they had given us to read. We liked the bits about school and then we came upon the mad heiress from Spanish Town locked up in the attic. At first we giggled, knowing that it was Jane we were supposed to identify with and her quest for independence and dignity. Then we got to the part where this masterpiece of English Literature describes Bertha Mason as 'inferior, blue skinned . . . etc.' Someone was reading it out loud in the class as was the custom. Gradually the mumbling and whispering in the class room crescendoed into an open revolt with loud choruses of 'It's not fair, Miss!' Miss admitted it seemed unfair but she went on to do nothing with that insight . . . I couldn't put it down . . . anxiously looking for a chapter, a paragraph or a sentence that might redeem the insane animal inferiority of the Caribbean. It was a women's novel and I had liked so much of the earlier part, but I couldn't stomach the way I had been relegated to the attic. I felt betrayed. (Cited in Duncker, 1992, p. 26)

Novels, like *Jane Eyre*, are one of the ways in which 'truth' and knowledge are circulated. So 'naturalized' are these 'truths' that we often fail to see the power relations they uphold until someone, like this Jamaican schoolgirl, reading from a different position makes these visible. White European students reading *Jane Eyre* are often shocked and sometimes resistant when they first encounter the passage above.

3.8



- Whether or not you have read *Jane Eyre*, what was your reaction to the idea expressed above that this 'masterpiece of English Literature' represented the Caribbean, through the figure of Bertha Mason, as 'insane', 'animal' and inferior. If you were shocked, try to work out **why**. If you were resistant to the idea that a writer like Charlotte Brontë could express racist sentiments, ask yourself **why** you find it hard to believe.
- Can you think of other cultural forms (novels, paintings, films, TV programmes etc.) in which the non-European is represented as different, 'abnormal' or 'deviant'? These could be contemporary or from another historical period.

Constructing, sustaining and reproducing 'truths' is essential to the maintenance of power. Until recently, women's 'natural destiny' was seen as motherhood: this was a 'truth' that required no comment (although, of course, in any age, such ideas have been challenged, as the schoolgirl above challenges the norm that allows the Caribbean to be represented as 'other' and inferior). The 'truth', that a woman's 'destiny' was motherhood, validated the exclusion of women from many spheres of public activity, at the same time making it difficult for those excluded to question publicly the knowledge on which their exclusion was based.

Thus certain knowledges about women could be maintained and reproduced by those whose interest was best served by such 'truths'.

According to Foucault, knowledge and 'truth' are produced through discourses. There are no pre-existent 'truths' that representations simply reflect. The numerous representations of mother and child in Western art, in advertising, in newspapers, are not a mirror reflection of an already existing 'fact' – that is, that women's highest destiny is motherhood – but are one element of the system of representation that constructs women as primarily mothers. Discourse is the term used to describe the network of statements, images, stories and practices by which certain beliefs or a set of ideas about a particular topic are circulated and sustained in order to **naturalize** these as self-evident or common sense. Thus, we could speak of a patriarchal discourse of gender in which it is perceived as 'natural' that women should exhibit a predisposition to mothering as a result of their biology (see also, in this connection, our references in chapter 2 to essentialism). We could equally refer to a feminist discourse of gender that has contested what were perceived as common-sense beliefs about the 'nature' of women. Now read the extract by John Fiske.



3.5

Discourse is a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area. These meanings serve the interests of that section of society within which the discourse originates and which works ideologically to naturalize those meanings into common sense. 'Discourses are power relations' (O'Sullivan et al. 1983: 74). Discourse is thus a social act which may promote or oppose the dominant ideology, and is thus often referred to as a 'discursive practice'. Any account of a discourse or a discursive practice must include its topic area, its social origin, and its ideological work: we should not, therefore, think about a discourse of economics, or of gender, but of a capitalist (or socialist) discourse of economics, or the patriarchal (or feminist) discourse of gender. Such discourses frequently become institutionalized, particularly by the media industries in so far as they are structured by a socially produced set of conventions that are tacitly accepted by both industry and consumers.

Discourses function not only in the production and reading of texts, but also in making sense of social experience. A particular discourse of gender, for example, works not only to make sense of a television program . . . but also to make a particular pattern of sense of gender in the family, in the workplace, in school, in social clubs – in fact, in our general social relations. (Fiske, 1987, pp. 14–15)



3.9

Try to think of some specific examples of how and where discourses of gender, either feminist or patriarchal, are produced. We have started you off; you carry on and add to our examples.

How	Where
• By making statements	In parliament, in the newspapers, in studies of gender
• Through representations	In novels, advertisements
• By teaching	In schools and in the family
• By social practices	Marriage, parenting, jobs
•	
•	
•	

Looking at your list, select those examples which, you think, would be most likely to authorize the patriarchal discourse of gender. Why? Are there any examples that might offer a space in which the patriarchal discourse could be challenged?

A discourse operates across a range of diverse practices, texts and the institutions in which these are located. Discourse, as a way of understanding representation, extends the **semiotic** concern with signs and symbols beyond systems of language by linking representation to the ways in which power operates in specific social situations and historical periods. Although Foucault recognizes that language is the medium through which discourses produce knowledge, he is also concerned to stress that since 'all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect' (Hall, 1992, p. 291). Hence, it is not language alone that produces discourse, but also behaviours and practices. For example, the star-shaped piece of gold paper kept in the teacher's desk or stationery cupboard becomes 'a gold star for achievement' not only when it is named as such but also when it is awarded to a pupil. The meaning of 'gold stars' is produced through specific social acts, as well as linguistic naming and visual objects. Gold stars take on a particular meaning within a child-centred discourse of education, which includes, *inter alia*: statements about the value of schooling and the importance of achievement; authorization of the practice of rewards and encouragements by psychologists and other 'experts'; and rules that prescribe when and how such awards will be made.

Let us look at another example. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed widespread persecution and punishment of those people, mostly women, 'known' to be witches. If you have seen Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*, watched the film adaptation or studied American history, you will know that in the seventeenth century, Salem, Massachusetts, experienced a ferocious witch-hunt. In order for this to occur, certain elements had to come together to produce a context in which witchcraft had particular meanings that legitimated the identification and punishment of some people as witches. For example:

- 1 Statements about the practices and customs of witches, providing the community with certain kinds of knowledge about what constituted witchcraft.
- 2 Rules which made it possible to say some things but not others about witchcraft. For example, it was not possible in the seventeenth century to understand or talk about so-called witches as wise, rational or moral beings.

- 3 Actual people – ‘subjects’ – who, because their behaviour, attributes or habits fitted the period’s knowledge of witches, constructed in 1 and 2 above, could be identified as ‘witch’.
- 4 Institutional frameworks which allowed the knowledges produced by 1, 2 and 3 to acquire authority and thus come to constitute the ‘truth’ at a specific historical moment: for example religious communities, the legal system, schooling and education.

Now read the following extract from Elaine Showalter’s *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture*.



3.6

Preconditions of a witch-hunt were consistent, whether the events took place in Scotland or Salem. The community had to know something about the practices of witches and to be convinced of their habits. Lawyers and judges also had to believe in witchcraft, since they controlled the judicial process and could halt the hunts. For successful prosecutions, specific antiwitchcraft legislation and the establishment of jurisdiction were necessary. Witch-hunts were smaller where inquisitional procedures and torture were prohibited, as in seventeenth-century England.

In addition, witch-hunts required an emotional atmosphere stirred up by sermons, discussions and rumors. They often began with individual denunciations stemming from personal grudges. Sometimes malice played a role. Sometimes disturbed individuals confessed. In England, witch-hunts were usually limited to those originally accused. In Switzerland, Germany and Scotland, medium-sized witch-hunts . . . prevailed: the accused were tortured and implicated a group of accomplices. These panics burned themselves out when the local group of suspicious persons had been exhausted.

Large witch-hunts, ‘characterized by a high degree of panic or hysteria’ [Levack, 1995, p. 174] took place in France, Sweden, and of course in Salem. These were driven by both the clinical conversion hysteria of the demoniacs and the collective hysteria of the community. (Showalter, 1997, p. 25)

This passage not only suggests how witch-hunts gathered momentum in the past but also makes statements about how they can be understood in the present. Witchcraft in the seventeenth century was understood within the discourses of religion and the law, so that we can speak of the religious discourse of witchcraft or the legal discourse of witchcraft. In the late twentieth century, the same events and facts are given meaning by Showalter within the discourses of psychology, sociology and medicine – witch-hunts are now to be understood as ‘collective hysteria’. It is also possible to construct a feminist discourse of witchcraft in opposition to the patriarchal discourse in which ‘a witch’ is a specifically gendered identity.

Let us try another example. Figure 3.2 makes a neat point about the ways in which meanings about children and childhood change over time. Take each of the elements listed above (1 to 4) and apply them to the ways your culture defines

children and childhood. Our examples are taken from British culture because that is what we know best, but you should use the culture with which you are most familiar.

3.10



Where might you expect to find 'official' statements about children and childhood? 'Official' here means those statements that are generally available, carry authority and/or are ratified by 'expert' knowledge. We have started you off; you carry on.

- Dictionary definitions.
- Legal definitions of childhood, as, for example, in the age of consent for sexual activity.
- Medical textbooks.
- Books about the psychological development of children.
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Where might you find 'unofficial' statements?

- Conversations between mothers.
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-
-
-
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Where might you find visual and/or imaginative representations of children and childhood?

- TV programmes for children.
-
-
-
-
-

Do these visual/imaginative representations carry the same meanings as official statements, or do they offer different meanings of children and childhood? Or both? For example, do TV programmes about children adhere to the legal statements about the age of consent for sexual activity?

Are there things it would be unacceptable or 'unthinkable' to say about children and childhood? For example, to suggest that children might work in factories or sweep chimneys would be unthinkable nowadays in British culture, although these were common practices in the nineteenth century, and in some less industrialized countries today children work alongside their parents in the fields. (For example, see the extracts from nineteenth-century reports below.) What is it about our understanding

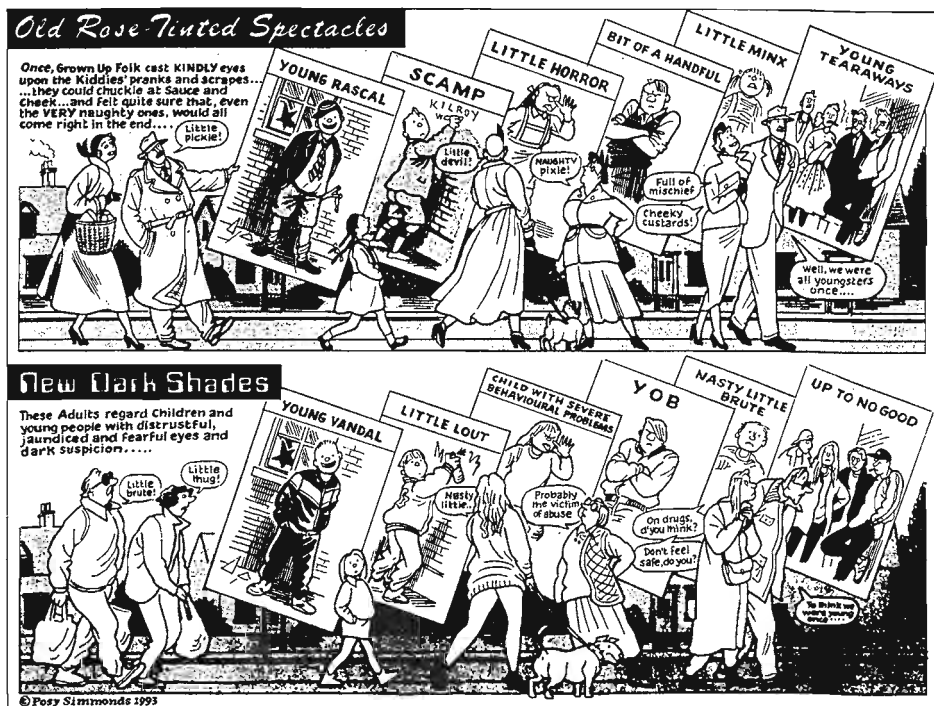


Figure 3.2 Old rose-tinted spectacles/New dark shades, by Posy Simmonds

of childhood that makes such an idea unacceptable? In this context you might also think about childhood and sexuality.

Who are 'children'? How do we recognize and define certain people as 'children'? Think about physical attributes. What other attributes define someone as a child? (For example, see the extract from Susan Isaacs below.) What do we mean when we say of a grown man, 'He's still such a child'?

Can you identify social practices or institutions in which the statements, visual images and stories that represent children and childhood are acted out? For example, the education system authorizes an ending to childhood, as do social practices such as eighteenth birthday parties. In relation to this question, think about the part played by the family in constructing the meaning of children and childhood.

If you already have, or think one day you might have, children, where have your ideas come from about how you will bring them up?

As result of working through the above, can you identify some of the meanings that are represented by the words 'children' and 'childhood' in the late twentieth century? As you worked through the questions did your answers reveal any contradictory or conflicting meanings?

If you wanted to challenge the generally accepted meaning of children and childhood in your culture, would any of the elements above offer a potential space for doing so? Where would you begin? Try to plan a strategy that would enable new meanings to emerge.

We hope this exercise has demonstrated how the production of meaning is dispersed across a range of sites where representation occurs (statements, visual images, what can and cannot be said, the physical bodies of human beings, institutions and practices). Each element both takes from and contributes to the accepted meanings of children and childhood in a particular historical period. Taken together, the elements constitute a discourse, and each element is meaningful only within the discourse of which it is a part. The readings that follow may suggest to you how the meaning of childhood has changed over time. They offer examples of historically specific discourses of childhood.

3.7

From a report by a Factory Inspector to the Home Secretary in 1852



In my last report I gave an account of the vast increase of factories during the two preceding years, and there is no cessation, for new mills are going up everywhere. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that I should hear of a great scarcity of hands, of much machinery standing idle from the want of people to work it, and of a rise of wages. This scarcity of hands has led to a considerable increase in the number of children employed in my district which indeed has been going on, happily, for a long time; I say 'happily' without hesitation, for now that children are restricted to half a day's work and are required to attend school, I know no description of work so advantageous for them as that in a factory . . . (Golby, 1986, p. 9).

From the Second Report (1864) of the Children's Employment Commission

The introduction of the machine has necessitated the employment, on the whole, of older children and girls, the usual age for commencing being about 14, one consequence of which is that in these factories the great majority of the employed being above 13 are either adults or 'young persons' as defined by the Factory Act, and therefore entitled to work full time, thus facilitating the introduction of legislative measures. (Golby, 1986, p. 15).

From a paper given to the British Psychological Society: 'The Mental Hygiene of the Pre-School Child' by Susan Isaacs (1928)

[M]any of the ways of behaviour in a very young child which would at once suggest the possibility or even the certainty of neurosis to the more experienced observer are actually welcomed by the parent and educator as signs of moral development, or chuckled over as evidences of childish quaintness and precocity. A pleasing docility, the absence of open defiance and hostility, particular tidiness, a precise care in folding and arranging the clothes at bed-time, careful effort not to spill water when drinking or washing, anxious dislike of soiled hands or mouth or meticulous kindness and sensitive dislike of cruelty to other children or pet animals, ritual attention to the saying of prayers, frequent endearments and shows of affection, waiting always until one is spoken to before speaking, the offering of gifts to older and stronger children, an ardent desire to be good or clever, an intense ambition not to have to be helped, docility to punishment, drawing-room politeness, the quiet voice and controlled movements – most of these things either please or amuse the parent. Yet any one of them, and particularly several of them found together, may be and often are effects of a deep neurotic guilt and anxiety (Isaacs, 1948, pp. 3–4)

In summary, meanings are encoded in representations by the assembly of a particular set of signs in a particular context which may be decoded from a number of positions. However, there is no guarantee that the meanings encoded will be directly and unambiguously decoded. In order to communicate there must be some shared meanings that are tacitly accepted by encoder and decoder, but this process is always mediated by the possibility that the decoder will bring alternative or oppositional understandings to the exchange. Furthermore, representations only become meaningful within discourse. Discourse is all those statements, images, practices and institutions which represent a particular body of knowledge. One of the tasks of the cultural analyst is to explore how discourses are formed, how they function to constitute and sustain power relations and how and where dominant discourses have been, and are, challenged.



3.11

- We have briefly examined the concept of discourse in relation to witchhunts and to childhood. In order to extend your understanding of discourse you could explore either of these two examples further or you could look at other discursive formations. Foucault was particularly interested in 'madness', 'punishment' and 'sexuality'. You could usefully read more widely from the suggested list for this chapter.
- You might select a topic and trace how it is constructed within discourse, drawing on a range of texts, practices and institutions. Examples might be 'home', 'royalty', 'homeopathy', 'motherhood', 'Third World', 'education', 'woman' – but there are many more you could choose.

Representation, discourse and resistance

In the previous section we saw how a Jamaican schoolgirl resisted the representation of the Caribbean as 'animal' and 'insane'. Charlotte Brontë's representation of the Caribbean, for this reader, was a misrepresentation not only of her country but also of personal identity. Discourse and representation are profoundly implicated in the construction of personal identities as well as group identities, as you will recall from chapter 2, where we discussed autobiography and personal life narratives. *In the previous section we discussed how producing and sustaining 'truths' was crucial to the maintenance and reproduction of power relations. Once something becomes established as 'truth' or 'common sense' it becomes naturalized and difficult to challenge. As the Jamaican black woman said, 'Miss admitted it seemed unfair, but she went on to do nothing with that insight.'* Our focus in this section is on the ways in which groups who believe themselves to be consistently misrepresented have resisted or challenged the 'truths' embedded in certain discourses. Now read this extract from an article by Richard Dyer, entitled 'Seen to be believed: some problems in the representation of gay people as typical'.

3.8

'Homosexual' and 'lesbian' have been negative sexual categories, at best to be viewed pathologically, at worst as moral degeneracy, and in either case calling forth images in which such features as skin pallor, hooded eyes, and genital deformity have been used as visual correlatives of sickness and sin. Such views of lesbianism and (male) homosexuality have been challenged above all by those people who found themselves designated by the categories. There have been two predominant forms of challenge.



One has attempted to alter the object of the categories, to change the terms of what they refer to by shifting from persons to acts. The most familiar form that this argument takes is that people who perform homosexual acts are in every other respect just like everyone else: their sexuality does not imply anything else about their personality. This has been a major plank in the arguments of homosexual civil rights and law reform movements, and it is in the logic of this position that all typification is anathema. The problem was and is that the arguments about homosexuality are very hard to make on the terrain of existing definitions, which do inexorably imply categories and types. Thus a statement like 'homosexuals are just like anyone else' already reproduces the notion that there are persons designated homosexuals. Moreover, the development of gay sub-cultures meant that many homosexual people did participate in a lifestyle, a set of tastes, a language and so on that meant that their lives were, in more respects than the sexual, different from that of most heterosexual people.

The sub-cultural activity was itself a form of resistance to the negative implications of the lesbian/homosexual categories, in that it took the categories as a basis for a way of life rather than as something to be overcome or cured. From this sub-culture emerged the politics of the late 1960s gay movement, with its stress on accepting

oneself as lesbian/homosexual, identifying oneself with other homosexual people under the term 'gay' and coming out, openly declaring and showing oneself as gay to society as a whole. These strategies of identifying and coming out immediately raise the problem of visibility, of being seen to be gay. Wearing badges, kissing in the streets were means of being visible, but so equally were behaving and dressing in recognizably gay ways – they brought you together in an act of sharing and they made you obvious on the streets. Typification (visually recognizable images and self-presentations) is not just something wished on gay people but produced by them, both in the pre-political gay sub-cultures and in the radical gay movement since 1968. (Dyer, 1993, pp. 20–1)

Dyer is concerned to demonstrate the difficulties involved in attempts by gay people to change the ways in which they represent themselves. Since the 1960s the gay movement has openly resisted and challenged the dominant representations of homosexuality that were produced through the discourses of medicine and religion. Homosexuality, according to these discourses, is either pathological (caused by physical or mental sickness) or a symptom of moral depravity. Both views imply that a solution to the state of homosexuality is necessary. Depending on which view is taken, this will be either cure or punishment. In the article from which the extract is taken, Dyer's focus is on the representation of homosexuality in film, and he is very much concerned with visual typification. However, he argues that, in the case of homosexuality, visual representation is all-important.

A major fact about being gay is that it doesn't show. There is nothing about gay people's physiognomy that declares them gay, no equivalents to the biological markers of sex and race. There are signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expressions, stances, clothing, and even environments that bespeak gayness, but these are cultural forms designed to show what the person's person alone does not show: that he or she is gay. (Dyer, 1993, p. 19)

Within a discourse in which homosexuality is 'sickness or sin', those who are charged with cure or punishment need to be able to recognize homosexuality in order to be able to 'solve' it. Recall from the previous section that one of the elements of a discourse is that there should be people (subjects) who can be recognized as personifying the attributes assigned to them by the particular 'truth' constructed in discourse. The physical bodies of women, black people, those with disabilities and the old declare their categorization. As Dyer points out, this is not the case for gay people. As a result, a repertoire of images emerged (men dressed and acting in a feminine way, women wearing men's suits, women who make no concessions to femininity, among others) that signalled homosexuality in the way skin colour or anatomy signalled 'race' or sex. Dyer argues that there have been two strategies which the gay movement has adopted in order to challenge these visual typifications.

3.12

- Can you identify the two strategies to which Dyer is referring?
- What is problematic about each strategy?
- What do you think?



Whatever your own views, the point to note is that the gay movement has not simply rejected conventional representations of homosexuality as misrepresentations. Instead, it has attempted to rework the coding of those visual typifications that produced negative meanings so as to signify dignity, pride in one's gayness and solidarity with other gay people. In this way gay people have challenged how they are represented, not by producing new representations, but by insisting on the revaluation of previously negative images. Through self-representation they are re-presenting homosexuality as a positive category. In doing so they have attempted to take control of the meanings produced, rather than allowing themselves to remain invisible and/or represented by others. Black people have used the same strategy – the word 'negro' has been appropriated as a positive term by some black people (see reading 8.6, for example).

3.13

- How far do you think these strategies can counter the negative discourses of homosexuality and the discriminatory treatment of gay people in society?



We end this chapter with an extract from the work of Jo Spence. Jo Spence (1934–92) was a photographer and educator who used her photography to challenge radically, among other things, conventional representations of class, illness and women's bodies. Photography, along with TV and film, is the source of much of the visual imagery we consume now. As a consequence it has enormous power to construct 'truthful' and 'normative' ways of seeing ourselves and the world we inhabit. Photographic journalism, documentary photography, advertising and fashion photography 'make sense' of the world by representing it to us visually. As students of culture you need to remain aware of the ways in which such representations are encoded, the discourses within which they acquire meaning and the possibilities for resistance and challenge.



3.9

[C]ommercial photography . . . is still dominated by incredibly narrow definitions of photography which are straddled by news and advertising and a multitude of state uses of photography many of which employ the window-on-the-world documentary mode of representation. Often these are a thinly disguised form of surveillance, a way of offering phoney evidence of surface phenomena, or of defining individual or group cultural identities which appear to be grounded in the 'real world' but are in fact total fictions offered up for consumption. We must never forget that all this is the background to any kind of radical professionalism in which we are engaged. Such images as we produce which we feel challenge the dominant ideology, even if they initially attempt to show something which has never been seen before, will soon be sucked up by the industrial machine of the mass media. We must expect this and have strategies for dealing with ways in which work is appropriated.

Equally fictitious are the fantasies (apparently more pleasurable, often engaging with our unconscious desires and traumas) offered to us by advertising. Some of us are also offered images of the fragmented female body, which are often called pornography. These images appear to present men with a kind of pseudo control over women in which they can day-dream of being dominant whilst in fact they continue to occupy a kind of childlike notion of omnipotence. This is often in contradiction to the economic and political impotence of many men. These interconnected spheres of image-making create regimes of desire in which we are always flattered into assuming positions which are difficult to escape in imagination – even if our daily lives totally differ. (Spence, 1995, p. 103)

Spence goes on to suggest that it is 'only by having a theory of what it is possible to speak about or to represent visually that we can begin to understand what is absent from all these agendas' (Spence, 1995, p. 104). This connects to our previous discussion about discourse: that which is absent, that which cannot be said, remains outside discourse. Representations have no meaning until they are made sense of through a particular discourse – even where these representations are resisting or challenging dominant knowledge. For example, Spence's photograph of an adult man sucking at a woman's breast (figure 3.3) can only be understood as challenging normative assumptions about breastfeeding, mothering and adult sexuality once we know what those normative assumptions are. And it is within discourse that these assumptions are constructed as 'the norm'.



3.14

Try to work out precisely what assumptions about breasts, sexuality and motherhood figure 3.3 is challenging. Where do these assumptions come from? Try to identify the discourses which produce these assumptions. For example:

- Breasts are erotic playthings for men: patriarchal discourse of gender.
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Figure 3.3 *Madonna and Child*, 1982, by Jo Spence and Terry Dennett (from the series *The History Lesson*)

Conclusions

In order to summarize the material covered in this chapter we have chosen to quote from Richard Dyer's introduction to *The Matter of Images: Essays on*

Representation, in which he argues that the cultural representation of social groups raises political questions about oppression and dominance. Who represents whom, where and how determines the representations available for us to look at and read, but people do not necessarily make sense of these representations in terms of the preferred or intended meaning. We bring to our viewing and reading a range of codes and conventions in order to make sense of the material offered: the codes used will depend upon the position we occupy in the social world and the ways in which we understand that world. However, despite the impossibility of single, predetermined meanings, we are limited as to the range of meanings we can bring to any text – representations do refer to realities at the same time as they affect reality. To understand a picture of a horse as representing a motor car is an error of seeing which could result in being seen as insane or visually impaired. Furthermore, as Dyer points out,

The prestige of high culture, the centralization of mass cultural production, the literal poverty of marginal cultural production: these are aspects of the power relations of representation that put the weight of control over representation on the side of the rich, the white, the male, the heterosexual. Acknowledging the complexity of viewing/reading practices in relation to representation does not entail the claim that there is equality and freedom in the regime of representation. (Dyer, 1993, p. 2)

The relation of representation to the lives and experiences of people in the real social world is complicated, but representations do ‘have real consequences for real people’. As Dyer insists,

how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life, that poverty, harassment, self-hate and discrimination (in housing, jobs, educational opportunity and so on) are shored up and instituted by representation. The resonances of the term ‘representation’ suggest as much. How a group is represented, presented over again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of spoken for and on behalf of (whether they represent, speak for themselves or not), these all have to do with how members of groups see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens. Equally re-presentation, representativeness, representing have to do also with how others see members of a group and their place and rights, others who have the power to affect that place and those rights. How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation. (Dyer, 1993, p. 1)

You could usefully link your work on representation with that on identity and difference by re-reading Rashid Araeen’s account of his meeting with the professor of fine art (reading 2.1) in the light of Dyer’s comments about the politics of representation.