

# **The Profanity of the Media**

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## **Media Anthropology**

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How should we best imagine the relationship of anthropology and media studies? Will this be a fruitful union? Arguably anthropology and media studies are at their best when they are critical, in the double sense not only of interrogating and seeking to understand the conditions of possibility of their subjects' thinking, but also of their own criteria and practices of inquiry. So I will consider how critical reflection on revered anthropological tenets has surprising implications for the presuppositions of media studies. I will start with a critical analysis of an anthropological venture into media studies then show how it invites a radical (i.e. critical presuppositional) rethinking of a 'hegemonic text' of media studies, Stuart Hall's *Encoding/Decoding*.

### **Ships passing in the night?**

Speaking as an anthropologist, a brief critical reading suggests there is a curious sense of something lacking in media studies itself, which has inspired hope among some critical media scholars of finding the missing bits in anthropology. For example, discontent with the inadequacies of the quantitative and macro studies of media has led to interest in qualitative, or ethnographic, approaches. David Morley, noting the problems inherent in ethnographic description (1992: 186-197), and Ien Ang, commenting on its potentially infinite contextualism (1996: 66-81), both deferred to the work of the totemic figure of Clifford Geertz.

Significantly media scholars invoke anthropology at precisely the point where scientific approaches to society prove manifestly inadequate. The appeal to intensive participatory ethnography complicates naturalism and scientism beautifully, because it highlights the dialogic relationship between the ethnographer's and the subjects' practices of knowing, explaining, justifying etc. Johannes Fabian has argued that ethnography is best thought of as a performance interpolated into the other performances that constitute social life (1990). However recourse to practice dismantles totalizing accounts of cultures, which, despite their protestations to the contrary, leaves most anthropologists and cultural studies' specialists without an object of study.

Choosing Geertz as the representative anthropologist is not fortuitous, as he is widely imagined as a proponent of strong culturalism, an antidote to naturalist or economistic reductivism. Close study of Geertz's work shows his culturalism to be supplementary. Culture is strapped onto 'hard...political, economic, stratificatory realities' and 'biological and physical necessities' (1973: 30). Culture is the gunk that plugs the holes in existing theories, the while proclaiming itself new and different. Geertz's model of culture is in fact a conventional account of articulation that allows interpretive freedom without challenging the ontological status of the elements it articulates. But this account of culture has a long pedigree in German Idealism (Hobart 2000), which leaves media studies awkwardly embracing a murky transcendentalism.

Anthropology's obvious critical contribution to media studies is recognizing the problems of ethnocentrism, which pervades cultural, communication and media studies. Anthropologists' denunciations of others' ethnocentrism however verge on the disingenuous; as it is questionable how satisfactorily anthropologists have addressed the issue.

On a stronger reading of culture however, the anthropologists' task is not just to inquire into different ways of thought and action. It is to understand the presuppositions that motivate such thinking and acting, and so to appreciate how other people explain, represent and mediate events and actions. Anthropologists here are poised between non-commensurate discourses, the disjunctures between which gives rise to many of our critical dilemmas.<sup>1</sup> Taken seriously, this deprives anthropologists of a critical turn of mind of the possibility of closure, of epistemological grounding or certainty (Fabian 1991). The anthropologist as unitary knowing subject emerges as an impossible fiction, as we are obliged to participate in an open unfinalizable dialogue. Such a radical account of critical understanding invites anthropology and media studies to interrogate one another in a dialogic engagement which problematizes the discursive unity of inquiry, the subjects and objects of study and the nature of representation and mediation.

### **Anthropology meets the modern world**

Quite apart from their long-standing interest in visual anthropology and ethnographic film, anthropologists, who often resemble the predatory acephalous lineages they study, have engaged in their favourite pastime of ragbag colonizing or liberating of other disciplines through direct nomenclature assault – frequently by declaring a new sub-field, 'the anthropology of...x', 'x' in this instance being media (e.g. Askew & Wilk 2002; Ginsburg *et. al.* 2002). While many such works have the modest and useful aim of ethnographic inquiry, others are more intellectually expansionist and determined to claim the contemporary relevance of anthropology in new fields. One such piece appeared recently in *Anthropology today*, a magazine aimed at popularizing anthropology. I wish to consider it carefully for several reasons. Its author is a seasoned anthropologist, writing in a publication of the Royal Anthropological Institute, which represents the august and authoritative voice of British anthropology.<sup>2</sup> Finally, in its enthusiasm to show just what anthropology can do for – and to – cultural and media studies, revealingly it displays its intellectual underwear.

In *Born a Lady, became a Princess, died a Saint*, Bill Watson, asked pertinently what exactly was going on in the aftermath of the death of Princess Diana. Goaded by the absence of anthropological enunciation on these events, his aim was to demonstrate anthropology's contemporary relevance to the study of mass media and popular culture. To do so he had to come up with a distinctive explanation. It turned upon two trusty – indeed rusty – anthropological standbys: the essentially sacred nature of royalty, and the significance of sacrifice. Both are captured in a single truth: 'Diana is for British society the royal sacrificial victim' (1997: 6). Quite apart from the rather quaint notion that there is such a unitary thing as British society to which anthropologists mysteriously have privileged access, the whole gamut of events surrounding Princess Diana's death, and apparently their refraction in distant parts of the globe, can be

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Ron Inden and Richard Fox, who gave invaluable comments on the first and final drafts of this chapter respectively.

<sup>2</sup> I trust Bill Watson, who is an old colleague and a cherished sparring-partner, will forgive my use of his work as a good example of contemporary British anthropological thinking.

reduced to the formula '*royal = sacred = died for our [the nation's] sins*' (1997: 6; unless indicated otherwise all italics and parentheses are in the original). It was this cultural formula that articulated the 'collective emotion' (1997: 4). As with most grand anthropological pronouncements, it enshrines a certain magnificent universality and timelessness, of which history tends to make a mockery. Subsequent media coverage of Diana's death raised questions not only about the grimy politics of Diana's apotheosis, but why all the dissenting voices felt they had to keep quiet.

What concerns me is not so much Watson's explanation of events after Diana's death as what his argument presupposes. Like the dog that did not bark in the Sherlock Holmes' story, the piece is significant for what it does not say – especially about the importance of the media in anthropological analyses.

### **The death of an argument**

Watson's article is important because, almost in the strict Derridean sense, it deconstructs itself to reveal familiar presuppositions about agency, media, ontology and the nature of anthropological argument itself.

Royalty, it transpired, was not just sacred in 1990s Britain, but its sacredness rises above history, place and culture. Commenting on Diana's brother's remarks at her funeral, Watson argued:

anthropologists can surely not fail to see here an instance of the much documented phenomenon of a challenge being made to the legitimacy and sacred status of the monarch by a principle which would, formulaically at least, carry equal weight to the principle of divine kingship, namely the claim that *vox populi, vox dei*. This republican cry in terms of British history may be of relatively recent date, but it reflects an institution well documented in anthropological and historical scholarship. When the Chinese emperor loses the mandate of heaven or when the Shilluk king loses his strength, then the people and the people's spokesman must intervene for the sake of the nation to ensure a proper succession (1997: 6).

While the image of Shilluk kings and Chinese emperors rubbing shoulders with the Windsors and their affines is charmingly ecumenical, invoking scholarly authority to impose contemporary, contested and arguably vacuous European categories (the nation, the people, republicanism) on the whole history and diversity of the world is problematic: as if power and social divisions everywhere lined up conveniently.

Anthropologists dwell much upon authority. However, to accept uncritically that royalty everywhere is always sacred rather begs the question: we know how to identify sacredness and royalty unambiguously, uncontroversially and universally by applying the categories that were handed down to us! In place of critical dialogue, Watson has imposed a stultifying monologue in the name of anthropological authority.

Of Princess Diana's death, Watson states

there can be little doubt that what we witnessed at the time, pace the cynical interpretations of Common Room philosophers, was the articulation of collective emotion (1997: 4).

Leaving aside how you would determine that the same emotion was shared by millions of people, Watson used 'articulation' as a synonym for 'expression', as if there were some abstract collective mind that seeks instantiation in the world. Surprisingly he ignored, or was ignorant of, an alternative to this dualistic ontology. In cultural studies 'articulation' has come to have the double sense of 'to utter' and 'to link'. So structures, far from being unitary, non-contradictory, stable, transcendent entities as in Watson's fixed conjunctions, are treated as moments of arbitrary closure, the partial, incomplete products of acts of articulatory practices. According to Hall, articulation emerges as

the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made? The so-called 'unity' of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness' ([1986] 1996a: 141).

There are at least two readings. Structure is not necessarily engraved in stone, but is open to a degree of rearticulation, under circumstances that remain, however, unspecified. On a strong reading however, articulation replaces structure with an account of action as situated, underdetermined and so partly contingent. And subjects are those moments of lack of structural determination (Laclau 1990a). The difference is significant.

The problem of analyses like *Born a Lady* is that what is articulated to what is blissfully unclear, as is how collectivities are constituted, according to whom and under what circumstances? (Now, done well, such carefully situated analyses are precisely what anthropology can bring to media studies.) The appeal of such arguments lies partly in the way they sweep a whole pile of awkward questions under the carpet, so saving our sense of mastery over explanation, if not over events, from seeming in tatters. What counts as evidence and what constitutes an explanation, when you have the actions, contradictory utterances and commentaries of many different people and groups with different interests? There is the classical hermeneutic question of how to avoid the 'self-confirmability', and assess the relative validity, of different interpretations. Then there are the far less considered issues of how you arrive at – let alone rethink, if need be – the criteria for assessing validity itself in the first place.

## **Ultimate interpretations**

What sort of activity are contemporary commentators like Watson engaged in when they interpret? At one stage he appears to be establishing global resemblances, but later he appears to try to divine a deeper meaning, some previously hidden truth beneath appearances. The first begs questions of how you establish the resemblances to begin with. In the second, interpretation involves revealing the depth that emerges – like the revelation that royalty is sacred and Diana a sacrifice – 'as an absolutely

superficial secret' (Foucault 1990: 62). If, however, the modern world is distinguished by the endlessness of interpretation,

it is simply because there is nothing to interpret. There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, because at bottom everything is already interpretation' (1990: 64).

Watson regarded superficiality and the failure to ground representations in an absolute truth as properties of the media (1997: 5). However, not only are media representations inextricable from the conditions of contemporary interpretation, but there is no unitary essence 'the media', as media practitioners endlessly complain of media studies' generalizations.

Behind this interpretive morass is a problem of representation. To represent (in whatever sense) something or someone presupposes that they are in some way absent. The possibility of 'absolute representation, the total transparency between the representative and the represented, means the extinction of the relationship of representation' (Laclau 1990a: 38). Effective representation therefore depends upon the imperfection of the relationship in practice. Put another way, as Nelson Goodman pointed out, you can never represent something as itself (1968). You can only represent it as something else. Representing is an act that transforms what it addresses, while appearing to underwrite its originality and authenticity. Summing up the life and death in 1997 of Princess Diana as 'ritual, collective behaviour, the force of symbols, death and mortuary rituals' (Watson 1997: 3) conjures up a reverse Philosopher's Stone. The complexities of contemporary lifestyles are transmuted with a nostalgic flourish into tribalized trivia.

### **The unmediated truth**

This brings us to a crucial point in Watson's article, which raises important issues for media studies more generally. Diana's death had to be different from other famous media-celebrated deaths, whether Marilyn Monroe's or James Dean's. The answer was neat.

The celebrity of pop-idols is artificial. Like Presidents they are man-made, created by their fans. They are in this respect false idols, creations of cults and sects, powerful images, but *in the last resort unsupported by any transcendental ideology or theology and hence unreal and inauthentic*. Diana however belongs to a very different category: she is very much real and authentic precisely because she is perceived as not being created by the media or the public (1997: 5, my italics).

I assure you, I did not make this up. Let me single out two themes: 1) media celebrity is artificial, 'man-made' and so 'inauthentic'; 2) reality and authenticity is a function of some transcendental template.

Watson touched with unerring aim on two widespread presuppositions about the media. They involve artifice, dissemblance, lack of groundable truth – features, as I noted, of interpretation itself. They are the noise, distortion and pollution that obscure, suppress or poison authentic communication. The media are, in short, profane: the locus, medium or even the source of profanity. Only what is not made, what is not touched by this profanity, but is set apart (sacred) under transcendental guarantee is real

and authentic. In order to rescue what is of lasting value from the transient, the essential from the accidental, reality from appearance, the 'influence' of the media must be exorcized.

The profane world is not simply dirt, turpitude and sin, or even everyday life in all its ordinariness and banality. It is a competitive, rootless, alienated world. On the one hand stands unity, in the form of community, communion and genuine human communication, on the other a world as imagined by Hobbes and Durkheim in harness. Less obviously, but more importantly, the profane is imagined as a world of difference and diversity as against a world where difference is finally transcended and unity prevails.

At this point the reason for the pervasive use of dichotomy in such accounts becomes apparent. It is necessary to sustain the incoherences of the constitutive idealism. Try imagining a world without difference. It would, on almost any account, be a world without language, signification or culture. At best, sacred beings would be reduced to indifferent mumblings – a point nicely appreciated by mediums in many parts of the world. What bearing though does this divagation have on media studies? Quite simply, historically the idea of communication in European thinking has been linked to ideas of community and communion – in other words, as Victor Turner pointed out (1969), of *communitas*, of an ideal and unsustainable sharing and unity – not a good theoretical basis for a theory of everyday human interaction. In the world of the 'pure', unmediated object, would you have to avoid books, newspapers, television, Internet, speech? Indeed you would not learn of the death of Princess Diana at all. This is less longing for a cloistered world *au recherche du temps perdu*, than for a world that never existed.

### Getting down to business

Anthropology, rubicund with age, might be excused its excesses. So can we turn to lean, mean media studies born in the cauldron of post-Gramscian Marxist sociology and political economy for a thoroughly modern analysis of the issues? Central to the emergence of media studies as a discipline are several works by Stuart Hall, including notably *Encoding/Decoding* (1980) and *The rediscovery of ideology* (1982), in which Hall distinguished and distanced critical media studies from 'mainstream' American mass communication's research. Arguing against these behavioural models and drawing upon television as the example, Hall tried to temper communication as the transmission of referential messages by framing it through

a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction...a 'complex structure in dominance' sustained through the articulation of connected practices... The 'object' of these practices is meanings and messages in the form of sign-vehicles of a specific kind organized, like any form of communication through the operation of codes within the syntagmatic chain of a discourse (1980: 128)

The presupposition that communication rests upon transmission of messages containing meaning remains intact. The social circumstances of its working are simply added. Two interesting words make their appearance, 'discourse' and 'practice', which suggest a possible serious revision of otherwise conventional concepts. Discourse, however, is

used in a weak linguistic sense, not a stronger sociologically constitutive manner, which is surprising in a work that sets out to socialize communication. The role of practice in this account will emerge shortly.

How does meaning, and so ideology, get into the messages and get extracted?

The discursive form of the message has a privileged position in the communicative exchange...[and] the moments of 'encoding' and 'decoding', through 'relatively autonomous' in relation to the communicative process as a whole, are *determinate* moments (1980: 129, my parentheses).

The model not only links structure to practice and explains how discursive closure works on the messages, but it can also account for degrees of understanding or misunderstanding, which

depend on the degrees of identity/non-identity between the codes which perfectly or imperfectly transmit, interrupt or systematically distort what has been transmitted... What are called 'distortions' or 'misunderstandings' arise precisely from the *lack of equivalence* between the two sides of the communicative exchange (1980: 131).

This lack of equivalence enables different subject positions from which viewers may notionally decode programmes. That is, they may accept the meaning that the producers desire (the *dominant-hegemonic* position), adapt such meanings according to one's own position (using a *negotiated* code) or engage in systematic critical reading (using an *oppositional* code, 1980: 136-38).

The importance of Hall's work has been justly recognized as offering a critical alternative to positivistic and normative sociology. But is Hall's argument quite as radical as is often assumed? And what are its theoretical assumptions?

While *Encoding/Decoding* highlights how communication is structured, what is the status of transmission models and their messages? They still provide the transcendental guarantee of communicability, but with new, added imperfection. Including structure compensates for the shortcomings of the old models in several ways.<sup>3</sup> Noise – the dreaded distortion that plagues dreams of near perfect communication – now ceases to be a technical problem and is attributable to society, class or capital working themselves out through media practices. Practice, it turns out, has the task of specifying how structure instantiates itself in process.

The entire apparatus of basic transmission models remains in place however. Codes still transmit messages 'perfectly or imperfectly'. Communication still works through 'symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of "language"' (1980: 128). Rather more interestingly, Hall clings onto 'the conduit metaphor of language' (Reddy 1979), according to which speech and images are containers of meanings, an account that presupposes the classical idealist dichotomy between message (form, appearance) and meaning (essence). Strapped onto bog standard seventies' semiology, we have schoolboy 'commonsense' semantics, the 'good sense' behind which dropped off some

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<sup>3</sup> The 'object' remains meanings and messages (see above). 'A "raw" historical event cannot, *in that form*, be transmitted by, say, a television newscast. Events can only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual discourse (Hall 1980: 129).



time after Classical Greece. Hall has carefully to tiptoe around the critical thinking coming out of France at the time. And his account of practice is simply how structure manages to affect action. At no point does he consider the radical alternative sense of pragmatic, namely that humans engage in all sorts of practices of asserting, denying, questioning, deceiving and so forth where communication and understanding are at once partial and underdetermined judgements on moments in the histories of such practices, and contestable claims within such histories.

In order to distinguish a critical media from a communications studies' approach, Hall needs to frame the referential function of televisual language and images, which foregrounds issues of accuracy and bias in representation. In order to show deep structure at work through underlying ideological closure, Hall seizes upon another dichotomy:

it is at the connotative *level* of the sign that situational ideologies alter and transform signification...The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where *already coded* signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture (1980: 133).

Oddly, Hall insists on trying to analyze complex discursive practices using the notion of signs. It is like trying to build a space rocket out of matchsticks. As Ricoeur noted, signs are so primitive as to be unable even to deal with the relation of predication on which sentences are based, let alone more complex utterances like texts. Both these, being of different, logically more complex, orders, require quite different kinds of analysis (1976).<sup>4</sup> Textuality, famously, introduces context, through the hermeneutic circle (Ricoeur 1981). And we have not yet even broached the question of intertextuality, of the pre-understandings and learned practices of reading and interpretation required to understand a text in the first place. Or why the literary notion of 'text' should be applied to the social analysis of television programmes? We start to see why Hall fights shy of theory. It would make life distinctly more complicated. Perhaps he was wise to stick to signs with easily decipherable meanings that enable him to emasculate context and keep the show on the road.

A notion crucial to Hall's argument, as his title suggests, is 'code'. It has to fulfil several tasks at once. It must mobilize structure and bring it to bear on media production and reception, while 'concealing the practices of coding that are present' (1980: 132). It must recreate reality, now naturalized, so that ideology is made invisible, and so easily insertable into messages, which are therefore easily swallowable. To do so, it must simplify the vast diversity of human textuality and visuality into apprehensible and easily analyzable form. It must encompass a bewildering range of possible contexts of reference and situations of use. What is more it must have a classical hermeneutic structure, in other words a surface appearance, which deceives ordinary mortals, must yield at the hands of the initiated expert to reveal hidden depths which motivate the whole. Fortunately initiates – in the guise of media studies' specialists – are at hand, summoned into life by *Encoding/Decoding*.

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<sup>4</sup> Matters are more complicated still, both because of the issues surrounding how you analyze images and the relationship between images and text. Using connotation and denotation to address relations of predication, textuality and imagery is slightly like using a tin opener and strawberry jam as tools to engineer the space rocket.

So what is the remarkable intellectual apparatus through which this is all achieved? It turns out to be none other than a highly conventional and rigid notion worked out by structuralist semiologists for signs, which has precious little to do with textual or discursive analyses that you might have expected for such complex textual and discursive processes. At this point Hall's interesting attempt to introduce practice into the study of media collides with, and is defeated by, his structuralist inclinations. Bakhtin, developing Volosinov's trenchant critique of structural theories of speech and language, located a significant part of the problem in how the inevitably open, contestable and partly contingent nature of context is reified and fixed.

Context and code. A context is potentially unfinalized; a code must be finalized. A code is only a technical means of transmitting information; it does not have cognitive, creative significance. A code is a deliberately established, killed context (Bakhtin 1986: 147).

A code is not a fact of nature, culture or language, but an act of power by an analyst. Earlier, in claiming to know the meaning of Diana's death, Watson was less deciphering a code, than reifying and overinterpreting a situationally labile context in the name of reality.

The issue is not trivial. In eliminating the gamut of possible contexts and situations of use, Hall adopts a distinctive epistemological position of imagining society as

a *founding totality* which presents itself as an intelligible object of 'knowledge' [*cognitio*] conceived as a process or re-cognition... Against this essentialist vision we tend nowadays to accept the *infinitude of the social*, that is, the fact that any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an excess of meaning which it is unable to master (Laclau [1983] 1990b: 90).

Hall reiterates the essentialist proposition that the object of knowledge is not just conveniently finite, but that it is in principle fully accessible to the expert knowing subject. So, far from being radical, Hall has to fly in the face of his own main intellectual sources, which argue that the knower does not transcend the known, in order to reassert the epistemological hierarchy of the knower over the known. He also quietly presupposes the idea of a founding totality – the return of the repressed sacred, which the initiated mind can recognize behind appearances and circumstances.

Hall needs codes to get to his central object of study – ideology. The kind of codes he is interested in

clearly contract relations for the sign with the wider universe of ideologies in a society. These codes are means by which power and ideology are made to signify in particular discourses... They are, if you like, the fragments of ideology (1980: 134).

Ideology is the means through which Hall claims to be able to determine which are the 'preferred readings' of the 'dominant cultural order' (1980: 134) and to identify the pollutant afflicting the masses that intellectuals have to scrub off. Writing specifically about this use of ideology in Marxist writings, Laclau notes that such

order – or structure – no longer takes the form of an underlying essence of the social; rather it is an attempt – by definition unstable and precarious – to act over that 'social', to *hegemonize* it (1990b: 91).

In contrast to Hall's massive structures of power and meaning encoded in dominant-hegemonic positions, the social always threatens to elude such structuration – to 'seduce' it, in Baudrillard's terms (1990). It is slightly tricky for someone who positioned himself (or has been positioned) as the key theoretical figure in two related disciplines, cultural and media studies, to turn a blind eye to what does not suit him as 'excesses of theory'. It would seem to require something close to hubris airily to dismiss the sustained and carefully argued critique of your position by the philosopher whose ideas you admit were constitutive of those disciplines (e.g. 1996a: 142-46).

Hall's account of the working of ideology in the media presupposes false consciousness. Viewers are imagined as liable to lapse into false consciousness or wallow benightedly in it as their default state. Nor are producers immune, as there are 'professional codes' to keep them 'within the hegemony of the dominant code', 1980: 136). Laclau's second argument against such accounts of ideology is that

the notion of false consciousness only makes sense if the identity of the social agent can be fixed. It is only on the basis of recognizing its true identity that we can assert that the consciousness of the subject is 'false' (1990b: 91).

Hall's argument leaves him in the arrogant – and untenable – position of being able to determine accurately the status of everyone else's consciousness because, standing outside and above the slough of codes, ideology and the entire apparatus of the profane, he can judge clearly and dispassionately.

The alternative to such epistemological omniscience is to address the difficult implications of acknowledging that

the identity and homogeneity of social agents was an illusion, that any social subject is essentially decentred, that his/her identity is nothing but the articulation of constantly changing positionalities. But, if any social agent is a decentred subject...in what sense can we say that subjects misrecognize themselves? The theoretical ground that made sense of the concept of 'false consciousness' has evidently dissolved (Laclau 1990b: 92).

Nor is Hall in a position to dismiss this as so much highfalutin post-structuralist theory (see Chen 1996) of little relevance to the stern realities of contemporary politics, because he himself recognized the impossibility of treating subjects as unitary and centred (1996b).

Finally, ideology is a double-edged sword. For, it follows that

the ideological would be the will to 'totality' of any totalizing discourse. And insofar as the social is impossible without some fixation of meaning, without the discourse of closure, the ideological must be seen as constitutive of the social. The social only exists as the vain attempt to institute that impossible object: society. Utopia is the essence of any communication and social practice (Laclau 1990b: 92).

Laclau unerringly puts his finger on the transcendentalism latent in both the concepts of communication and Marxist accounts of social practice. More prosaically, Hall's revelation of ideology and hegemony at work in the media itself turns out to be ideological and hegemonic! His analysis of the mass media also involves a totalizing discourse, which, thanks to Watson, we can now appreciate as presupposing a transcendental sacred space occupied by the superior knowing subject of the university

academic. Viewed from anthropology, Hall's argument emerges as a sustained fugue about the profanity of the media, enshrined in the contrapunct of ideology. Even so spankingly modern a discipline as media studies, for all 'its sometimes dazzling internal theoretical development' (Hall 1996c: 272) has not managed to exorcize the profane, it just changed its name.

### **Future engagement?**

So what is the theoretical ground of cultural studies on Hall's account? It turns out to be a thing of sheds and patches. But what is the price of this theoretical incoherence – indeed incontinence? Hall's disdain for the excesses of theory is well known, if slightly surprising for someone widely considered the theoretical godfather of cultural and media studies. But what are the implications of this disdain? Hall is hoist on his own ideological petard: he turns out to be as much part of the problem as the solution. Hall may lay claim to political radicality; on the analysis of *Encoding/Decoding* any claim to intellectual radicality is vacuous. Especially considering the theoretically revolutionary times he was writing in, Hall occupies not just a conservative, but even a fairly reactionary, epistemological position. It requires an act of will not to wonder whether it is precisely these drawbacks that have him such a luminary in the Anglo-Saxon intellectual world.

My point is not that there is something peculiarly wrong with either anthropology or media studies. By standards, they are rather more coherent than most academic disciplines. My aim is to show that a critical analysis of scholarly presuppositions can yield surprising results that fly in the face of, and undermine, disciplinary orthodoxies. What excites me is the possible unpredictability in the outcome of any engagement of media studies and anthropology. In the meantime, the lesson for ambitious young scholars to draw would seem to be: theoretical incoherence and incontinence pay. Just please do not bother to project any resulting profanity onto the media.

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