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# The Politics of Representation

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### Introduction

The central goal of this chapter is to explore how constructions of criminality are produced and contested through practices of representation. For most people in Canada, knowledge about “criminals” will be based on mediated information. As such, messages about the nature of criminality are mediated through some source of data, for example, media articles, online blogs, television shows, or cinematic renditions. Even our own experiences can be filtered by these external narratives because they provide a context and a language that shape how we interpret our perceptions. This chapter will provide theoretical frameworks and tools to help you learn how to critique representations of crime by addressing how such mediated information informs the **politics of representation**.

What exactly do we mean by *politics of representation*? To answer this question, we will analyze how power, privilege, and identity are interconnected with dominant explanations of crime. There are political stakes involved in representational practices that address core questions: What is deemed a crime? Who commits crime? Where does crime take place? When does crime take place? Why does crime take place? How do we stop crime? Furthermore, this chapter will provide insight into how particular criminal labels attach to certain marginalized identities and personalities, as well as how such representations can be resignified and contested. An analysis of the politics of representation is crucial to challenging our assumptions about crime and criminality.

We will address two main strategies for challenging the truth-value of a particular representation of crime: empirical challenges and constructionist challenges. Empirical challenges use factual data to contest the implicit or explicit truth-claims of a dominant representation of crime. Such data will be based on social science evidence, which can include quantitative data like statistical reports or qualitative data like interview transcripts. Constructionists, on the other hand, reject the notion that there are discernable and objective social facts that exist outside of a cultural context. The constructionist strategy, pioneered by cultural studies critic Stuart Hall, seeks to understand

how language—broadly defined—constitutes meaning. Language is thus not a neutral descriptor of reality, but rather a generative enterprise that shapes how we make sense of the material world, both factually and normatively. The task of the cultural critic is to deconstruct the language in a particular area and expose its underlying political and regulatory agenda. While this chapter will focus primarily on the constructionist strategy, it will also provide direction on critical methodology, enabling you to draw on both empirical and constructionist approaches in discerning and challenging the meaning of a criminal representation.

Before we address the politics of criminal representation, it will be helpful to step back and learn some background information about cultural studies and the key theorist who informs this chapter, Stuart Hall.

### Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies

Stuart Hall (1932–2014) was a central thinker in the development of **cultural studies**, an interdisciplinary approach that began to flourish in England in the 1960s and has since been adopted by scholars from other regions, including the United States and Canada. Hall’s highly influential and prolific scholarship focuses on the political significance of representations as sites of both indoctrination and contestation. Hall argues that through cultural representations, people can be seduced into adopting and supporting policies that are often against their own interests.<sup>1</sup> He has provided ground-breaking analysis on the ways in which racial representations are used in the media and in cultural practices to associate Black and immigrant identity with crime and anti-social behaviour.<sup>2</sup> While much of Hall’s work seeks to expose how media representations render particular racialized identities as dangerous and tending toward criminality, he also believes that audience members are not necessarily passive recipients of these racist constructions. People can read representations differently and can exercise agency through oppositional interpretations.

While rooted in both literary theory and sociology, cultural studies stands in contrast to traditional literary hermeneutics and **positivist approaches** to social science. Instead of seeking to define the authentic meaning of a cultural text or to map out universal dynamics in society, cultural studies questions and challenges accepted truths about culture and social processes. The field overlaps with and draws from other critical approaches that concentrate

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

on different axes of identity and injustice. For example, cultural studies is heavily influenced by **Marxist** critiques of unequal class relations, **Black studies**' critiques of racial oppression, and feminist critiques of sex inequality. In addition, because of its rejection of stable truths and fixed meanings, cultural studies is associated with **postmodern** and poststructuralist theory, in particular Foucauldian critiques of knowledge regimes.

It is important to understand that despite its dismissal of the possibility of essential truths, cultural studies does not take a "neutral" stance toward culture. Its affiliation with the aforementioned critical strands—Marxism, Black studies, and feminist theory—positions cultural studies in tension with conventional disciplines because of its unabashedly political agenda. Moreover, in its most radical manifestations, cultural studies is committed to both intellectual inquiry and concrete action. Indeed, Hall denounces what he perceives to be a "liberal" tendency to divorce analysis from action.<sup>3</sup> As an analytical project, cultural studies interrogates cultural artifacts within their sociopolitical context and seeks to uncover how cultural practices, processes, and knowledge systems are related to power and oppression. As a practical project, cultural studies seeks to apply these analyses to restructure and change relations of dominance and subordination.

## Semiotics, Discourse, Ideology, and Hegemony

### *Language and Semiotics*

To fully understand cultural studies theory and methodology as it applies to criminology, it is helpful to understand how certain terms are used within the field. The first important term is **language**. In its standard meaning, language refers to a system of words and grammatical structures shared by a group of people within a particular cultural tradition or geographic area. For example, the French language denotes the words used primarily by those living in France and in areas colonized by France after 1500. For cultural critics, however, language refers to any communicative system. Language encompasses not only written and spoken words, but also imagery, fashion, music, body gestures, advertisements, and so on. This broad definition of language is based on **semiotics**, the study of communication through signs.

Rooted in the field of linguistics, semiotics is a variegated, complex, and sometimes controversial theory and interpretive methodology with many different branches. For the purposes of this chapter, we will focus on its

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<sup>3</sup> Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, ix.

implications for the study of representation through a constructionist model. The origin of semiotics lies with Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), who investigated the nature of language as a system of signs.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, as with the expansive understanding of *language* cited above, basically anything can be a sign (a word, an image, an odour, a flavour, a texture, a musical note, etc.) so long as it expresses an idea or conveys information and refers to something other than itself.

A rich resource for considering the semiotic understanding of signs is the database of clip art graphics, the images offered by word processing programs for possible insertion into documents. Microsoft Office offers one such online library of images,<sup>5</sup> which provides a search box for those needing a visual sign to represent something (such as an idea, feeling, person, object, or concept). If you type the word “justice” in this search box this graphic appears on the first page of images:

**Figure 3.1** Scales of justice



<sup>4</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure et al., *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

<sup>5</sup> “Images: Clip Art, Photos, Sound, & Animations,” Office.com, <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/images/results.aspx?qu=justice&ex=2> (accessed December 22, 2013).

The title of this image expresses the ideas that the sign is meant to convey: “Lawyer holding a briefcase and scales of justice.” The tagged keywords provide further information about the ideas the creators believe the image encapsulates: “government, justice, lawyers, men, occupations, scales, symbols, people.” Both the title and the keywords tell us the explicit and intentional meaning of this sign.

But signs can also have implicit, inadvertent, or latent meanings. A semiotic scholar might interpret the implicit meaning of the clip art sign as suggesting that only a professional lawyer can deliver justice. A feminist scholar might further decipher the latent meaning of this sign as indicative of the patriarchal nature of the legal system and the ways that justice is associated with masculine subjectivity. This scholar might then turn to empirical work to support her analysis. For example, content-analysis research has found that clip art graphics more frequently depict white males overall, and also depict white males in more active and desirable roles than members of any other identity group.<sup>6</sup> And yet an opposing scholar might point out that the figure holding the scales of justice is usually gendered female, and because of this the image of a male in this role should be understood as iconoclastic. Indeed, out of the eight images of a person holding the scales of justice provided by Microsoft Office’s clip art gallery, five are clearly gendered female, two are ambiguous, and only one, the image shown above, depicts a male figure. This scholar might thus argue that the image of a male figure holding the scales of justice offers a modest counterbalance to the dominant association of justice with femininity.

Yet our original feminist scholar might respond that while feminine figures may act as metaphors for justice, this does not translate into an equitable representation of real women alongside men in higher positions within the legal profession.<sup>7</sup> Signs are thus not only open to different semantic interpretations, but also different political interpretations.

To further nuance an analysis of the nature of signs, Saussure breaks down the components that make up a sign into two parts. The form of the sign, like the cartoon image of the lawyer in [Figure 3.1](#), is called the **signifier**. The actual idea or concept to which the signifier refers, like the concept of justice or the idea of a male lawyer, is called the **signified**.

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<sup>6</sup> Sharon Seidman Milburn, Dana R. Carney, and Aaron M. Ramirez, “Even in Modern Media, the Picture Is Still the Same: A Content Analysis of Clip Art Images,” *Sex Roles* 44, no. 5 (2001): 277–94.

<sup>7</sup> Fiona M. Kay and Joan Brockman, “Barriers to Gender Equality in the Canadian Legal Establishment,” *Feminist Legal Studies* 8, no. 2 (2000): 169–98. Also excerpted in U. Schultz and G. Shaw, *Women in the World’s Legal Professions* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2003).



While both signifier and signified are integral to the process of representation, there is usually an arbitrary relationship between these two elements. As observed by Juliet Capulet, Shakespeare's famous star-crossed lover, "What's in a name? that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet; So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd, / Retain that dear perfection which he owes / Without that title . . ."<sup>8</sup> Juliet aptly describes how the word *rose* and the title *Romeo* have no direct connection to the notion of a rose's sweet smell or the perception of Romeo's dear perfection. This arbitrary relationship is further evidenced by the way different languages have different signifiers for the same signified concept. For example, *dog* in English and *chien* in French are different signifiers for the same signified canine animal. In this way, meaning does not reside in the form of the signifier, but rather in the shared codes of a culture.

The signification process thus allows human subjects to classify and categorize in order to create meaning and communicate ideas. A social space where people are intelligible to one another requires some representational system that makes sense of the infinite number of things in our world—from material objects that we can perceive with our senses to the most rarefied philosophical ideas that exist only in the abstract plane. From the perspective of traditional linguistics then, representation operates through the arbitrary, but culturally specific, connection between signifier and signified, which produces signs that reference the "real" world in some way.<sup>9</sup>

In the context of critical analysis and cultural studies, representation challenges the notion of the "real" world. Etymologically, if we parse the term *represent* into its two main component parts—*re* and *present*—it denotes a sign or a stand-in of an original phenomenon, whether it is a material object, an event, a feeling, or an idea. From this conventional perspective, representation must occur after the phenomenon and can either be a faithful or an inaccurate representation of the original. Hall makes an important intervention here that challenges this simplistic view of representation. He urges us to move away from the idea of an essential truth or a fixed reality that representation can either reflect authentically or distortedly. Instead, we must understand that representation itself constitutes the phenomenon it seeks to stand in for.<sup>10</sup> In this way, it does not exist outside of reality, but rather constructs reality. For example, consider how the label *sex trafficking* in today's political climate conjures up images

<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation and the Media* (audiovisual) (1997; Massachusetts: Media Education Foundation at Transcript), 7.

of enslaved women and children, brutal traffickers, and rapacious “johns.” Such sensationalist and reductionist representations prevent, or at the very least make difficult, any consideration that some forms of cross-border sex work might instead be framed within the context of labour and migrant rights.<sup>11</sup> Representations structure and frame how we are meant to think about a phenomenon. Hall does not deny that a material world exists, but rather emphasizes that we cannot access the meaning of the material world without recourse to language, which necessitates participating in symbolic codes and discourses.

### *Discourse*

Within cultural studies, **discourse**, like *language*, holds a more complex and theoretical meaning than its standard dictionary definition. In common usage, discourse denotes communication through words that are used in a conversation, debate, or formal treatment of a subject in speech or writing. Within the linguistic field and at its most basic level, discourse refers to language that extends beyond a sentence or clause.<sup>12</sup> Critical discourse analysis expands this approach to consider how language is used in relation to social, cultural, and political forces.

As you have learned in preceding chapters, Michel Foucault understood discourse as an ideological practice that systematically organizes knowledge into truth regimes. Those endowed with “expertise” are often at the forefront of producing discourse. For example, from a Foucauldian perspective, psychiatrists do not “discover” pathologies or disorders, but rather construct and catalogue knowledge of mental illness into coherent discourses. In this way, discourse refers to clusters of ideas and representations that do more than delineate a subject. Discourse structures how one should evaluate the subject under study and often suppresses alternative ways of making sense of an issue.

Another example is classic criminological discourse, which structures its theories and findings to construct lawbreakers as deviants who violate fair and just social norms and laws. It follows that the solution toward such deviants is to “fix” the problem, either through punishment, rehabilitation, and deterrent measures or by incapacitation through imprisonment or the death penalty. The notion that the legal and criminal justice system may be

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<sup>11</sup> Laura Maria Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry* (London: Zed Books, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland, eds., *The Discourse Reader* (London: Routledge, 1999).

biased or unfair is rendered unthinkable within this criminological discourse. Discourse is thus linked to wielding the power to create reality.

Foucault's theories of power also help us understand how power works through representations. The standard definition of power denotes control over an individual or groups (e.g., the power of a judge to sentence convicted criminals to prison). While recognizing this blatant form of power, Foucault introduced the notion of more subtle and insidious forms of power, including the idea of power through governmentality. As you learned in [Chapter One](#), the word *governmentality* is a hybrid word that combines *government* with *mentality*. In this sense, it addresses how the process and practice of governing can become a state of mind. Foucault theorized that not only is power exercised explicitly through laws, police enforcement, and military threats, but that governance works most effectively when it is naturalized, internalized, and reproduced. For example, consider how the gender binary of "male" and "female" governs our lives through multiple circuits of power. Explicit government laws and policies demand individuals to fit within this binary through birth certificates, driver's licences, or prison structures. In addition to these governmental processes, signifying practices like popular culture or scientific authority also assume, enforce, and perpetuate the gender binary. In dynamic relationship to these meaning-making arenas, individuals govern themselves in conformity to the gender binary. Gender becomes naturalized and embodied on the micro level as individuals express their male and female identities through dress, grooming, conduct, and even desire. Those who fail to govern themselves in accordance with their assigned gender can be labelled as deviant and even criminalized.

### *Ideology and Hegemony*

To challenge this construction of reality, let's consider how a cultural theorist might engage in a discourse analysis using a Foucauldian and Marxist lens. Such a methodology might seek to expose how the label *deviant* does not objectively signify a category of people, but rather reflects and perpetuates unequal power relations, for example, between the rich and the poor or between gender-conforming and gender-nonconforming individuals. This unequal power issues from blatant sources, such as the ability to incarcerate a transgendered woman in a male prison, and from governmental sources, such as the ability to induce shame of one's deviant status through moral or psychiatric discourse. Yet a conventional theorist might argue that if crime is not deviant, why do most people, including poor and working-class people, fear and despise the criminalized class? And if gender is not natural, then why do most people gladly conform to their assigned gender? Cultural studies



uses two intertwining concepts to explain how the populace might be pacified in this regard: ideology and hegemony.

French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836) is usually credited with coining the term **ideology** to convey the idea that a “science of ideas” would help to expose latent biases.<sup>13</sup> Within the field of sociology, the term ideology originates from the philosophy of Karl Marx (1818–83), a historian and social theorist whose highly influential and ground-breaking work provided a radical critique of capitalism and class relations. In classical Marxist theory, ideology denotes the way the ruling class uses doctrines to distort reality and naturalize, justify, and legitimate the subordination of the working class. But recall that cultural theorists generally do not subscribe to this essentialist view of a knowable and describable reality that is falsified through ideological articulations. Instead, ideology—from a nonessentialist perspective—refers to a group of attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, values, moral stances, and political philosophies that frame one’s understanding of the world and of humanity. For example, as you will see in some of the chapters that follow, laws that punish street crime more heavily than corporate crime reflect a classist ideology that views poor criminals as more culpable and more dangerous than rich ones.

When the ideological perspective of those who are most privileged is adopted by the majority, including those who are most marginalized, the resulting situation is one of **hegemony**. In cultural studies, the concept of hegemony stems mainly from the work of Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), an Italian Marxist and political activist. Gramsci theorized that an oppressive state must not rely solely or even primarily on explicit force to ensure social order, but rather must manipulate the population so that the interests of the ruling class will be understood as universal interests. Gramsci highlighted the role culture plays in ensuring this manipulation. The ruling class controls the dominant modes of meaning-making: for example, judicial decisions, mainstream news reports, and popular culture. Through these mediums, those who benefit from the social order foster ways of thinking and interpreting that support the status quo and categorize dissenters as deviants. Hegemony cultivates the population’s consent so that force becomes unnecessary. But unlike a strict model of ideological indoctrination, Gramsci insisted that securing hegemonic consent was not a seamless top-down process, but rather a back-and-forth negotiation or struggle between contrasting ideas, understandings, and social forces. To put it another way, people are not robots that can be perfectly programmed and governed, but rather complex agents who can resist and negotiate, as well as internalize, dominant ideologies.

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<sup>13</sup> Antoine Destutt de Tracy and Henri Gouhier, *Éléments D'idéologie* (Paris: J.Vrin, 1970).

## Methods of Interpretation

### *Reception Theories and Their Effects*

Let's now consider how media theorists have taken up the concepts of ideology and hegemony. One of the most influential theorists on mass media effects was a communications theorist named George Gerbner (1919–2005) who founded **cultivation theory**. Beginning in the 1960s, Gerbner began to research how television influences viewers' perceptions of social reality, paying specific attention to the ways in which heavy doses of violent television tended to inculcate a negative and fearful impression of the world—a phenomenon dubbed the “Mean World Syndrome.”<sup>14</sup> A television viewer who repeatedly watches depictions of extreme violence, whether it be terrorists on the nail-biting *24*, pedophiles on the sensationalist *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, or serial killers on the graphically violent *Criminal Minds*, is susceptible to this syndrome, which manifests in a tacit belief that the world is fraught with monstrous figures and that danger lurks behind every bush.

Media and crime research has extended cultivation theory beyond television shows to include other discursive products, most notably the role played by the news media in exaggerating audience perceptions of the current crime rate and in associating certain ethnic identities with crime.<sup>15</sup> One possible impact of this hegemonic construction of a “mean world” is that the viewer is led to support politicians who advance “tough on crime” bills and anti-immigrant policies while sacrificing the due process rights of suspects or accused persons in the name of a safer society.

Beyond the perception-shaping effect of the media, behavioural theorists have examined the imitative impact of media exposure, particularly with regard to violent representations. Numerous studies have been carried out that explore the connection between watching aggression or violence and subsequent behaviour.<sup>16</sup> Often the focus has been on children, who are constructed as more impressionable than adults.<sup>17</sup> The early research in the 1970s targeted television, but more recent studies are concerned with newer forms

<sup>14</sup> George Gerbner and Michael Morgan, *Against the Mainstream* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Ray Surette, *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice: Images, Realities, and Policies* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Brad J. Bushman and L. Rowell Huesmann, “Short-Term and Long-Term Effects of Violent Media on Aggression in Children and Adults,” *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 160, no. 4 (2006): 348–52.

<sup>17</sup> John P. Murray, “Media Violence,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 8 (2008): 1212–30.

of media like video games.<sup>18</sup> Although many of these studies have established some connection, it is important to distinguish between *correlation* and *causation*.<sup>19</sup> While some scientists insist there is strong evidence that video games cause aggressive or violent behaviour,<sup>20</sup> others counter that the studies only establish correlation, which can have other explanations (e.g., that children who are already violent or aggressive are attracted to such games).<sup>21</sup> From a critical perspective, the “monkey see, monkey do” hypothesis can foster a “moral panic,” or more precisely a “media panic”—an intense fear that a new media form threatens core cultural values and societal safety.<sup>22</sup> Thus, while the behavioural impact of representations can be a source of critical insight, you should also be on the lookout for media panics that say more about cultural fears than empirical facts.

In addition to cultivation and imitation theories, some scholars have turned their attention to the relationship media consumers can have (or imagine they have) with a particular figure in a narrative representation. Media theorist Jonathan Cohen provides an overview of the literature, helpfully distinguishing between imitation, the behavioural concept we have just examined, with the more relational concepts of liking, parasocial interaction, and identification.<sup>23</sup>

When a consumer experiences positive feelings toward a character, for example, if she likes the character, she will usually judge the character’s actions and feelings as reasonable and understandable. Likewise, if a character is disliked, then his or her actions will generally be condemned. When considering the politics of representation, notice how a narrative can construct a character in ways that elicit such feelings as admiration or disgust within the audience member, and how this might affect one’s understanding of crime. For example, if a television cop show depicts the police officer as a likeable, relatable character and the criminal as a bloodthirsty monster, this might

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18 Douglas A. Gentile, Paul J. Lynch, Jennifer Ruh Linder, and David A. Walsh, “The Effects of Violent Video Game Habits on Adolescent Hostility, Aggressive Behaviors, and School Performance,” *Journal of Adolescence* 27, no. 1 (2004): 5–22.

19 Cheryl K. Olson, Lawrence Kutner, and Eugene V. Beresin, “Children and Video Games: How Much Do We Know?” *Psychiatric Times* 24, no. 12 (2007): 1.

20 Craig A. Anderson, “An Update on the Effects of Playing Violent Video Games,” *Journal of Adolescence* 27, no. 1 (2004): 113–22.

21 John Grohol, “The Link between Video Games and Violence,” *Psych Central* (2008), <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2008/05/17/the-link-between-video-games-and-violence/> (accessed September 6, 2012).

22 Kirsten Drotner, “Dangerous Media? Panic Discourses and Dilemmas of Modernity,” *Paedagogica Historica* 35, no. 3 (1999): 593–619.

23 Jonathan Cohen, “Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters,” *Mass Communication & Society* 4, no. 3 (2001): 245–64.

cultivate punitive attitudes toward such criminalized people in real life while generating approval for police forces.

Another relational site that should be on the critical scholar's radar is parasocial interaction. The concept refers to a consumer subjectively experiencing friendship or connection with a character or actor. A good example of parasocial interaction is when a media consumer becomes a devoted fan of a particular actor, not only watching all of the movies she stars in, but also following her life's events through celebrity gossip publications. Such a fan may feel intimately connected to the actor and have strong affection for her, but the affective experience is not based on mutuality—it is an entirely one-sided attachment. What might be relevant for the politics of representation are the ways this star appeal can have hegemonic ramifications. For example, when an adored actor stars in a film that supports military solutions to global conflict, the fan may be more likely to support the film's ideology. Furthermore, many actors wield their star power to directly intervene in public debates by supporting political candidates or causes. Such strategies bank on the power of parasocial relationships to convince fans to get on board with the celebrity's political agenda.

Liking a character, or interacting parasocially with a character or actor, both involve external relationships. When this sense of affection or connection gets extended such that the consumer “loses” herself in the character, the result has been described as the most powerful form of positive affect: **identification**. Cohen defines identification as not only liking a character, but also adopting the identity, perspectives, desires, and fears of the character. For the duration of narrative consumption, the reader becomes decreasingly self-aware as she becomes increasingly connected to the character on cognitive and emotional levels.<sup>24</sup> Consider how horror movies can make some people fearful or even scream when the killer jumps out from a hiding place. In this moment the audience member is not merely sympathizing with the character, he is empathizing with her. Identification thus facilitates vicarious experiences through a process of psychological merging.<sup>25</sup> In your analysis of a criminal representation, you may want to investigate if and how a narrative encourages identification with figures like the lawyer, the police officer, the lone vigilante, the victim, or the “bad guy” and theorize what hegemonic or counterhegemonic agenda may be advanced by this identification.

While cultivation, impact, and affect theories provide important frameworks to understand the politics of representation, they should be viewed

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, “Defining Identification,” 251.

<sup>25</sup> Keith Oatley, “Meetings of Minds: Dialogue, Sympathy, and Identification in Reading Fiction,” *Poetics* 26, no. 5 (1999): 439–54.



as partial theories. After all, if representations could completely structure audience perceptions of social reality or trigger predictable behaviour, there would be no political debate or struggle over meaning. As Gramsci argued, this is clearly not the case: Hegemonic constructions never fully achieve a closure in meaning. Cultural theorists like Stuart Hall have thus further nuanced this perspective by highlighting the semiotic instability of representations. Hall argues that an image does not have a fixed meaning, but rather can support a wide range of meanings, including contradictory meanings. When we seek to determine the meaning of a cultural text, our analysis is always contextualized by our political understandings and our sociohistorical position, as demonstrated by the different ways one can read the clip art image of a male lawyer holding the scales of justice shown in [Figure 3.1](#). This anti-essentialist perspective, which refuses an inherent meaning to a representation, can be described as a poststructuralist approach to the cultural study of crime.

Critics of this poststructuralist perspective have argued that if there is no inherent meaning in a cultural artifact, then how can we convincingly analyze or deconstruct it? And more importantly, how do we mobilize people to resist hegemonic constructions if we reject the notion of an essential truth or a fixed reality? In order to understand Hall's response to these objections, recall his position that there is no way to access the "true" meaning of an event that is outside of discourse. Even those trying to "fight the power" cannot escape the limits of language, nor can they step outside of their own sociohistorical context. Because of this, Hall suggests that when we attempt to analyze a text we do so "without guarantees"—that is, we can never guarantee that we have accessed the ultimate truth. Instead, we make contingent arguments that privilege a particular interpretation for the purpose of political contestation. We put forward the best analysis we can craft to challenge dominant representations and lay bare their ideological underpinnings. However, while doing so, we also remember that interpretation is always open to challenge and reinterpretation. This does not weaken political resistance, but rather dismantles ideological claims of certainty. In this way, a cultural studies refashioning of the activist slogan "speak truth to power" might be "deconstruct truth-claims to expose power."

But is it only academics, with their sophisticated analytical tools, who are capable of deconstructing and thereby resisting hegemonic representations? Is the average media consumer doomed to be subject to ideological indoctrination? Hall's answer is no. In his essay, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," Hall outlines the ways that hegemonic representation can both indoctrinate particular messages and incite consumers of



representation to negotiate and resist those messages.<sup>26</sup> Using the example of television programming, Hall breaks down different moments in the production and interpretation of meaning. He argues that while television producers may encode particular messages based on institutional and ideological factors, the audience could decode these messages in a variety of ways.

Hall delineates three reading practices, or interpretive processes, to emphasize the ways that audience members actively participate in making sense of the meaning of the program. When an audience member internalizes the dominant and intended ideological message of the text—that is, the message that has been encoded by the producers of the program—Hall calls this the *preferred reading*. In this reading, the consumer and the creator are in semiotic alliance. When an audience member accepts the broad, abstract, hegemonic message of the program, but updates, adapts, or modifies its implications for his or her own particular context, this is referred to as a *negotiated reading*. This reading entails contradiction and ambivalence toward the text. Finally, when a viewer decodes the hegemonic message as ideology and interprets the implicit truth-claims and identity constructions as reflecting dominant interests rather than reality, this is understood as an *oppositional reading*. Here, the reader goes against the normative grain of the text, for example, by identifying with the villain of a story and disdaining the hero.

Hall's emphasis on diverse interpretative trajectories and the contradictory possibilities of reception thus challenges an overly deterministic understanding of audience reception. Such a semiotic model offers the exciting possibility of resistance and change by recognizing active decodings that range from total agreement with to complete rejection of a text's latent ideological message.

Of course when a scholar is analyzing a text to determine what constitutes the dominant encoding and what is entailed by a preferred, negotiated, or oppositional reading, there are no easy answers. Indeed, some critics have interpreted Hall's schema as overly reductionist in both the decoding and the encoding stages. The suggestion that a program contains a singular discernable dominant code ignores the possibility that the text can contain multiple and even conflicting ideologies.<sup>27</sup> The idea that readers can be roughly broken down into three categories that range from passive acceptors to active resisters further reduces the complexity of reading practices. However, such objections tend to ignore Hall's guiding principle: "without guarantees." As we have discussed above, Hall's theory of media representation is that

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<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," *CCCS Stencilled Paper 7* (1973).

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Chandler, "Semiotics for Beginners," <http://www.Aber.Ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B> (accessed December 22, 2013).

deconstruction and analysis can never guarantee access to the truth of the text. At its best, the encoding/decoding framework offers analytical tools to open up the complexity of a text and its effects, not to foreclose a plurality of interpretations.

Hall's theory that meaning is made through an interactive process of construction, representation, and variable interpretation advances the notion that signification is not static but dynamic. To convey this multistaged and multilayered process, Hall uses the concept of **signifying practices**, which refers to the meaning-making behaviours that constitute the interconnected relationship between creation and reception. In this way, the consumer of the text plays just as vital a role as the designer of the text in the production of meaning.<sup>28</sup>

### *Stereotyping*

When analyzing a signifying practice from a critical perspective, Hall asks us to interrogate the text—that is, go beyond the surface meaning and consider what underlying elements support the logic of the story. Let's consider some interrogative tools and methodologies that can help us decode, deconstruct, and expose the ideological agenda of a representation, and recognize the oppositional or counterhegemonic elements that may reside within. While not all of the following analytical tools will be relevant to a final analysis of the text you are seeking to decode, it may be useful to try them all at first to see what ideas come forth. The following examples will focus on narrative texts, as opposed to nonverbal or purely visual productions.

When you seek to decode a text, a crucial step is to engage with one of the most insidious signifying practices: **stereotyping**. Whether in fiction or nonfiction, stereotypical representation is a knowledge claim that characterizes a social identity to a fixed and limited set of characteristics. While stereotypes need not be pejorative on their face (e.g., the stereotype that Asian people are good at math), they are reductionist and deny the full range of human diversity and complexity of particular groups. At their worst, stereotypes legitimate the stigmatization of such groups and naturalize the socioeconomic, political, and racial status quo. Stereotyping is accordingly a divisive practice. As Hall states,

It sets up a symbolic frontier between the “normal” and the “deviant,” the “normal” and the “pathological,” the “acceptable” and

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<sup>28</sup> Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 33.

the “unacceptable,” what “belongs” and what does not is “**Other**,” between “insiders” and “outsiders,” Us and Them. It facilitates the “binding” or bonding together of all of Us who are “normal” into one “imagined community”; and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them—“the Others”—who are in some way different—“beyond the pale.”<sup>29</sup>

Hall’s description helps to highlight the many guises that stereotyping can take. Stereotypical judgments can be justified by sociological, medical, moral, and political discourse. Hall also draws attention to the social bonding and community building that stereotyping can achieve: Those deemed “normal” connect to one another and reaffirm their normality through the process of exiling Others. Stereotypes are also a key source of governmentality because individuals may seek to distance themselves from stereotyped groups. For example, a person from a community that has been subject to negative stereotyping may choose not to dress in what might be considered “ethnic” garb, in order to dissociate him or herself from this stigmatized identity.<sup>30</sup>

But how can we contest stereotypes? Perhaps the first step is simply to notice them. When you read a narrative text, consider which characteristics seem to cluster around the most negative, the most silent, or the most ridiculed figures. Questions you might want to consider include, What types of people are portrayed as multidimensional characters, and what types are rendered in a one-dimensional way? Do the one-dimensional characters tend to be members of a certain race, class, age, gender, sexuality, or other identifiable group? How is their body marked through dress, hairstyles, accessories, tattoos, piercings, and so on? What personality traits do they possess, and how does this compare to the main characters? Identifying particular figures as stereotypes and interrogating how they are stereotyped contests the implicit truth-claims embedded in the representation. Such deconstructions can work to expose and denaturalize the oversimplification, objectification, animalization, or demonization of otherized groups.

While deconstructing stereotypes in this way is one important counterhegemonic practice, constructing and recognizing alternatives can be equally effective. You may want to seek out and analyze signifying practices that portray a marginalized group in multidimensional, contextualized or positive ways. Often, such counterhegemonic representations are found in alternative (as opposed to popular) mediums. Take the representation of

<sup>29</sup> Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 258.

<sup>30</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

prisoners, for example. In popular culture, like the hit HBO television show *Oz* (1997–2003), inmates are generally represented as sadistic, monstrous, and unrepentant savages who must be kept behind bars for the safety of good, normal, law-abiding citizens.<sup>31</sup> Black inmates are represented as particularly brutal.<sup>32</sup> But in the alternative publication “Prisoners of the War on Drugs,” the systemic factors that keep members of poor communities vulnerable to criminalization and incarceration are explored (see [Figure 3.2](#)).<sup>33</sup>

Despite the fact that the text is in comic form, it still manages to represent how social and economic factors perpetuate the criminalization cycle. It further combats stereotyping by humanizing those caught in the criminal justice system while depicting the devastating ripple effects that prisons can have on inmates’ families and communities.

Satire is another contesting strategy that undermines the power of stereotypes. But unlike positive, humanizing, and contextual representations, satire does not reject stereotypes—it works with them, or better put, it reworks them. A good starting point to consider the significance of satire is the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, which defines the term as “the use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people’s stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.”<sup>34</sup> To recognize satire, one must be able to read a text on multiple levels. Consider the popular satirical film *Team America: World Police* (2004), which, on a surface reading, depicted Arabs as maniacal terrorists and Americans as glorious champions. However, a deeper analysis of the satirical tone of the film suggests that the caricaturing of evil Arabs actually subverts stereotyping and xenophobia. As Jeremy C. Fox states, “The terrorists in the film speak the kind of gibberish Arabic you could imagine coming from the mouths of patriotic adolescents in study halls across the country.”<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, the American “heroes” are portrayed as monomaniacal zealots, unconcerned, for example, that they have demolished Paris or destroyed the pyramids in Egypt in their bid to keep the world “safe.” Satire thus takes

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<sup>31</sup> Bill Youssman, “Inside Oz: Hyperviolence, Race and Class Nightmares, and the Engrossing Spectacle of Terror,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (2009): 265–84.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>33</sup> Sabrina Jones, Ellen Miller-Mack, and Lois Ahrens, “Prisoners of the War on Drugs,” *The Real Cost of Prisons Project* (2005), [http://www.realcostofprisons.org/war\\_on\\_drugs.pdf](http://www.realcostofprisons.org/war_on_drugs.pdf) (accessed December 22, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed., s.v. “satire.”

<sup>35</sup> Jeremy C. Fox, “Marionettes Doing the Dirty: *Team America: World Police*,” film review (May 13, 2006), [http://www.pajiba.com/film\\_reviews/team-america-world-police.php](http://www.pajiba.com/film_reviews/team-america-world-police.php) (accessed April 5, 2014).



**Figure 3.2** Cycles of exile



These ideas are based on the work of Dina R. Rosa and Todd R. Clear: "Incarceration, Reentry and Social Capital: Social Networks in the Balance," 12/01  
 Prisoners of the War on Drugs by Sabrina Jones • © 2005 The Real Cost of Prisons Project • [www.realcostofprisons.org](http://www.realcostofprisons.org)



stereotypes to a comical extreme to critique and make visible their ideological underpinnings.

### *Semiotic Tools*

The next two analytical tools to consider are an extension of semiotic theory. We have already discussed how the signified and the signifier work together to make a sign intelligible within a set of cultural codes. Another important aspect of the way signs work to communicate meaning is their relationship to other signs, both similar and different. To understand the sign *criminal*, one must have a sense of the sign *law*. After all, how else can one signify a criminal without first having an understanding that there are laws that can be broken? Signs are further defined by negation and binary opposition. For example, the sign *criminal* is partly signified by its constructed binary opposite: *victim*. One way that critical criminologists might challenge this dichotomy is to argue that most people designated as *criminals* are also victims of poverty, social marginalization, and overpolicing, as you will find in [Chapter 9: Crime and Social Classes: Regulating and Representing Public Disorder](#).

Hall suggests that we must pay attention not just to what is present in a text, but also to what is absent. When scrutinizing a representation, we have already discussed how we should look to background characters as possible conveyers of stereotypes. Sometimes, however, the most pernicious signifying practice doesn't work through explicit stereotyping, but instead through conspicuous absence. As Hall explains, "Every image that we see is being read in part against what isn't there."<sup>36</sup> For example, consider a climactic scene in the blockbuster movie *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). Toward the end of the film, the city of Gotham has been appropriated by violent anti-capitalist anarchists who have managed to keep the police force at bay for five months. When the police are freed, they clash with the anarchists in a ferocious street fight. Out of narrative context, such a scene might invoke fear of police brutality, or at least excessive force. Yet through the plot structure of the film, the preferred reading is that you cheer for the cops who are "liberating" the streets. In part, this message works through absence. Earlier scenes in the film depict ordinary citizens in full support of the anarchist takeover. But as scholar-blogger Aaron Bady observes, in this scene, "the people we see the cops beating up are not citizens, but a hyper organized criminal conspiracy."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Hall, *Representation and the Media*, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Aaron Bady, "Do Not Go Gentle into that Dark Knight," *The New Inquiry*, July 25, 2012, <http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/zunguzungu/do-not-go-gentle-into-that-dark-knight/> (accessed April 5, 2014).

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<sup>37</sup> Aaron Bady, "Do Not Go Gentle into that Dark Knight," *The New Inquiry*, July 25, 2012, <http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/zunguzungu/do-not-go-gentle-into-that-dark-knight/> (accessed April 5, 2014).

They are objectified. Absent are the ordinary citizens who previously sympathized with the anti-capitalist cause. Moreover, the movie audience does not witness the aftermath of dead and mutilated bodies—the inevitable result from such a violent confrontation.

Further, it is possible to interpret *The Dark Knight Rises* as invoking current political events without expressly referring to them—another kind of “absence” that speaks volumes. While Gotham is, of course, not a real city, and the exact plot details are fictional, numerous critical thinkers have read the 2012 film in the context of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement. Both the demonstrators in New York City and the anarchists in Gotham City are engaging in direct action to protest the staggering gap between the rich and the poor. In addition, one of the most patent cinematic invocations of the Occupy movement is when the fictional anarchists literally take over Gotham’s stock exchange. In light of this striking parallel, and regardless of the director’s personal intentions, the film’s depiction of the anarchists as unjust, homicidal, and fanatical can thus be interpreted as an indictment of the Occupy movement, or at least a warning that anti-capitalist protestors are brainwashed thugs.<sup>38</sup> Absence can thus be a way to hide the ramifications of an adrenaline-pumping action scene as well as a way to intervene in political debates under the guise of entertainment.

### *Emotions, Identities, and Privilege*

The final source of insight to consider is your own subjective experience. When you seek to decode a signifying practice, observe your own emotional interaction with the text. If you know you are going to analyze a particular film, for example, try not to intellectualize your viewing the first time you watch it, but rather allow your feelings to be swayed by the narrative. For many students, such an exercise may feel “biased” or “anti-intellectual”; most likely, teachers and professors have taught you that your personal opinion of a text is irrelevant or misleading. Perhaps you have been instructed that an “objective” analysis of a text looks for evidence within the text or cites recognized scholarly perspectives from secondary material. This is sound advice. But what is being suggested here is not that you base your entire analysis on your emotional reaction, but rather that you simply take notice of it because it may have significance for your final evaluation. For example,

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<sup>38</sup> “Christopher Nolan: *Dark Knight Rises* Isn’t Political: Despite Echoes of Occupy Wall Street in Finale of Nolan’s Batman Trilogy, Director Argues He Has No Particular Message,” *Rolling Stone*, July 20, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/christopher-nolan-dark-knight-rises-isn-t-political-20120720> (accessed April 5, 2014).

if you believe your identity or your personal experiences have had an impact on your emotional reception of the text, then note this down. Whether the text made you feel angry or affirmed, excited or indifferent, this has value and may prove relevant in your decoding.

One reason that a text may elicit a particular affective experience could be based on your identity. For example, my roots stem from India and Pakistan, and my religious background is Islamic. When I watch depictions of Muslims or South Asians, I feel implicated by the text. This reaction is, of course, heightened by the current post-9/11 geopolitical moment that has brought Islam, and by extension all people racialized as “brown,” into the spotlight. But understanding the nexus between identity and analysis is tricky. It should be noted that while I may find a text like the movie *Ironman* (2008) Islamophobic, another person with a similar background might judge the movie as properly distinguishing between “lawful” and “criminal” Muslims, thereby countering the racist homogenization and demonization of all Muslims.

An absolute claim about how people of certain backgrounds will or should experience a text is a form of **identity politics** grounded in essentialism. Absolutism should be avoided because it ignores the diversity of perspective that exists within all categories of people. Again, as Stuart Hall reminds us, when analyzing a particular representation there are no guarantees that we have accessed the most persuasive or relevant interpretation. Nonetheless, it is still an important exercise to consider how identity may influence the reception and decoding of a text, particularly for those whose identities have been subject to stereotyping.

An inquiry into how identity may inform our assessment of a representation includes taking into account not just the characteristics that make us vulnerable, but also those that bring us privilege. As you analyze a signifying practice, take a moment to consider how elements in the text may naturalize or legitimize your own privileges or sense of self. For example, a white, middle-class person with liberal leanings may rejoice in reading *The Help* (2011) because, while it addresses some aspects of race and class oppression in the 1960s, it features and centralizes the heroic actions of a white protagonist fighting to expose racial injustice. Indeed, the Association of Black Women Historians says of *The Help*, it “distorts, ignores, and trivializes the experiences of black domestic workers” while narrating a “... coming-of-age story of a white protagonist, who uses myths about the lives of black women to make sense of her own.”<sup>39</sup> Whether you agree with this critique or not,

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<sup>39</sup> “An Open Statement to the Fans of *The Help*,” Association of Black Women Historians, [http://www.abwh.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2%3Aopen-statement-the-help](http://www.abwh.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2%3Aopen-statement-the-help) (accessed April 5, 2014).



the self-reflective exercise is important because it can help you recognize whether you might have personal investments in a narrative's ideology.

Another place to consider privilege is within the text itself. Students who analyze signifying practices often target representations of otherized characters (e.g., racialized or queer characters) to expose pejorative stereotyping. But to challenge privilege, it is just as important to scrutinize representations of those who are not marked as other. This is because one of the ways that privilege sustains itself is by flying under the radar. The characteristics that come with unearned privilege pass as normal, generic, and universal. As Michael Kimmel says, "To be white, or straight, or male, or middle class is to be simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible. You're everywhere you look, you're the standard against which everyone else is measured."<sup>40</sup> It is those who deviate from this "normal" who become particularized, who must be named. Think about how movies associated with feminine interests and targeted toward female audiences are labelled, often in a derogatory fashion, as "chick flicks." Compare that to movies associated with masculine interests and targeted toward male audiences, which are typically referred to in nongendered terms, for example, as "action films." When we seek to execute a full interrogation of a signifying practice, it is thus important to consider not only the ways our own privilege may structure our enjoyment or distaste, but also how privileged characters, characteristics, and perspectives are valorized and maintained.

## Conclusion

This chapter has sought to introduce you to the cultural studies approach to analysis and to methodological tools that engage with the politics of representation and criminalization. While we considered the views of many different scholars, of most relevance was Stuart Hall's approach, which challenges the conception of representation as a mimetic practice that simply reflects reality. You were asked to think about representation as a signifying practice, where both the creator and the consumer of a text play roles in producing meaning and constructing reality. Our review of semiotics invited you to consider how language and discourse can perpetuate ideologies and hegemonic constructions of criminality.

But what is the effect of a text, and how do we decode it? We theorized about how a text may be received, what behavioural impact it might have, and what relationships and identifications it might evoke. Stereotyping was

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<sup>40</sup> Michael S. Kimmel and A.L. Ferber, *Privilege: A Reader* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003), xiv. See also Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997).



Figure 3.3 The power of white privilege



highlighted as a particularly powerful and insidious signifying practice that deserves interrogation. Semiotic interpretive frames further help to open up a text by considering how signs work through similarity, opposition, and absence. We ended by considering how our emotions can be a source of insight and how the identity and privilege of both readers and represented figures might be relevant in understanding the political significance of a text.

Finally, as we have stated throughout the chapter, we must remember that the constructivist approach to cultural studies rejects any guarantees of the “truth” of an interpretation. We must acknowledge that our arguments and our interpretations are influenced by our sociocultural and historical position, and thus are open to reinterpretation and contestation. This acknowledgment should not cause you to throw up your hands and abandon the project

of representational analysis. Rather, this is cause to be optimistic. It is the very contestation of meaning—the meaning of a sign, a representation, a thing, an idea—that opens up space for both struggle and social transformation.

### Study Questions

Consider [Figure 3.3](#) by political cartoonist Keith Knight. What is of particular relevance to this chapter is that the comic depicts a representation of three audience members responding to a representation, and in this way helps us to analyze the politics of representation at two levels.

1. In what way does the comic itself engage in the politics of representation?
2. How does the comic subvert hegemonic constructions of crime?
3. How are stereotypes, identities, and emotions addressed in the comic?
4. What is your emotional response to this comic?
5. What concepts have we studied in this chapter that would explain why the three audience members are responding to the newscast in different ways?

### Exercise

Identify a crime drama television show that is current and popular. Watch a random episode and consider the three types of readings outlined by Stuart Hall: preferred, negotiated, and oppositional. In a paragraph, write down what you believe to be the preferred reading of the show. When doing this, consider the ideological underpinnings of the narrative, the characters who are most likeable and unlikeable, and what you perceive to be the normative conclusion of the story. In a second paragraph, discuss what might be a negotiated reading of the show. When doing this, consider how someone might accept the broader ideological message or moral of the show, while adapting or modifying elements to suit a different set of circumstances. In the final paragraph, imagine what might constitute an oppositional reading of the show. When doing this, consider how the viewer might reject the underlying message of the narrative, sympathize with an “unlikeable” character, or identify the ways broader socioeconomic, political, or racial hierarchies are naturalized.

Remember that viewers may interpret the show in different ways, and that there are no strict rules regarding what constitutes a preferred, negotiated, or oppositional reading. Rather, this exercise is meant to cultivate your own analytical skills in engaging with the politics of criminal representation.

## Keywords

politics of representation; cultural studies; Marxist; language; semiotics; signifier; signified; signifying practices; discourse; power; governmentality; ideology; hegemony; cultivation theory; parasocial interaction; identification; stereotyping; Other; identity politics

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