

Representation & Cultural Memory

Vicki Allen

You may have noticed the term *representation* which has popped up a number of times in this introductory course to Cultural Studies. For Stuart Hall, representation “is one of the central practices which produce culture”.¹ Yet, what exactly do we understand by this term? In principle, representation is a practice of cultural meaning making:

we give things meaning by the way we *represent* them, and the principal means of representation in culture is *language*. By language, we do not only mean language in the strict sense of written or spoken words. We mean *any* system of representation – photography, painting, speech, writing, imaging through technology, drawing – which allows us to use signs and symbols to represent or *re-present* whatever exists in the world in terms of a meaningful concept, image or idea.²

It is important to note the emphasis on the prefix of ‘re-’ in *re-presenting* here, which accentuates a sense of repetition, *as if* what is represented is simply a doubling, a mirroring of what was there before. In such an understanding, “the word *representation* or *representation* does sort of carry with it the notion that something was there already and, through the media, has been *represented*”. According to Stuart Hall, “this notion that somehow representation *represents* a meaning which is already there is a very common idea”,³ but it is precisely this common understanding of representation that Hall aims to subvert. Instead, Cultural Studies insists that “meaning is constructed – given, produced – through cultural practices; it is not simply ‘found’ in things”.⁴

For Cultural Studies, (media) representations, more than mechanically mirroring something already existing in the ‘real’ world, present the event on the basis and in the context of previous representations. In the case of an evening news report on, say, the 2022 Midterm Elections or the on-going post-Brexit negotiations, the news report we get to see that covers

these topics is a presentation of events which already have a long history and, to varying degrees, may have already been relayed through various forms of previous media *discourses*. The presented version of events depends on the political perspective the news channel has developed, it depends on the respective editing and communication efforts of the reporters who build their representation of the events on a selection of earlier interviews and accounts of the events leading up to the news program, prior existing media memos, governmental and think tank reports, to name but a few. As a consequence, every representation is formed by a wider, pre-existing discourse:

A discourse is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed.⁵

This is not to say, however, that representation through media is a mere *distortion* of reality. Rather, Cultural Studies' concept of representation draws attention to the fact, that despite our efforts to search for the 'true meaning', there exists no one true fixed meaning beforehand that representations could then distort. This does not mean that things do not exist outside of discourse, outside representations. Of course they do. And neither does it mean that events are not influenced by various factors that have little to do with representation; biological or physical forces, for example. It is merely to say that they do not exist *meaningfully*, until they are represented, imagined, talked about.⁶

The study of representations combines the understanding of the practices and processes of semiotics, myth-making and discourse formation in order to determine the processes of meaning construction. In this sense, Cultural Studies does not concentrate on the truthfulness of a depiction, but on the conditions of its construction. And we as Cultural Studies analysts thus focus on how representations and their understandings change and are shaped according to their history, background, context, and the respective positions of the creators and receivers of representations.

There is a second, more political dimension to the term 'representation', however, beyond questions of a truthful depiction. To represent, in a

political, legal, or even sporting context, is to *stand (in) for*, as in being (officially) present for someone else or a group of people. Legal, political and social representatives speak and act on behalf of others: sportspeople can represent teams, towns, clubs and countries; MPs (are supposed to) represent their constituency in a representative democracy; trade unions represent the interests of workers. The important question in this context is: does someone who is supposed to *stand (in) for you* represent you well, do they further your interests? Do you feel *represented* by that flag, that person, that object, that report? For example: if a football player represents England, is she then representative, i.e. typical for England, and can you identify with her? In this second sense, Cultural Studies does not ask for the conditions of the construction of meaning, but for its social effects.

Cultural Studies highlights the “overlap between representative and representation in their political and artistic senses”.⁷ Is the meaning ascribed to a thing or person in a movie or a novel representative of such a thing or a person? Will we meet such a thing or person in real life with such attributions in mind? Who would benefit from this, and who would not? To answer such questions, it is important to also consider the parties invested and interested in creating and fixing meanings. Which is why

the question of the circulation of meaning almost immediately involves the question of power. *Who* has the power, in *what* channels, to circulate *which* meanings to *whom*? Which is why the issue of power can never be bracketed out from the question of representation.⁸

By studying representations, we look at the relevance of meaning creation and the way in which meaning is produced and transmitted in and through media such as: television news reports and newspaper articles; films and novels; memes and TikTok videos; the flags of countries and regions, or the wearing of replica football jerseys. Cultural Studies concentrates on how, exactly, representations contribute to the constitution of an event, person or thing: which terms, images and stereotypes are employed to represent something, which qualities, values and social roles are ascribed to the represented, which “narratives, stories - and fantasies - (are woven) around them”⁹. Cultural Studies asks who or what exerts pressure and sets limits on what is presented (presences), and what not (absences); and it inquires into the subject positions that representations create for readers, listeners or viewers.

An example of such practices is the representation of fandom, as in belonging to and supporting a football club. In the context of a football event, the group of people gathering at the stadium, or sitting in a pub with a pint to watch the match on TV, wearing a t-shirt depicting red and white stripes (*signifier*) shows the wearers' support (*signified*) for the football club whose colors are also red and white and whose players are kitted out in the same colors. Wearing the replica shirt represents their support of the club whose team is playing. As football fans, the shirt colors represent the team and wearing the team's colors represents their fandom and belonging to the club.

However, despite their shared love for the club they support, not all fans wear the same shirt. They might have different player names printed on the back of the shirt, they might wear shirts from previous seasons sporting different sponsors or earlier club crest designs, they might wear a club hoody instead of a replica shirt, as the fans of FC St. Pauli Hamburg often do. With this, the fans can express different shades of their support for the club: they might signal their opposition to the current owners of the club and their longing for previous, better times; or they might want to show their resistance against commercializing developments within the football world. Thus, different representations compete with each other: THIS is the football club I follow, not THAT. Through these processes of representation, the fans in fact *constitute* the object of their devotion in different ways: the team, but not the owners; previous incarnations, but not the current one; certain players, but not others. These club colours and crest wearing supporters all love their club, but the club might mean different things to them.

Such everyday practices of representation are further complicated by representations in the media. For a long time, events involving football fans were only represented on the news when violent or dangerous behavior was involved. Here, the football fan was mainly represented as a young, alienated and aggressive male. When such depictions were taken as representative, government policies and policing strategies were targeted towards precisely these figures. Current productions like *Sunderland 'til I Die* (Netflix, 2018-2020) show a more diverse fan structure with strong roots in the local community. We can now ask: who has the power to represent football fans in the media? In whose interest is it to present fans in certain ways? Do different media (public TV, streaming, social media) produce different representations? How do different representations, fictional or not, constitute the subject? Which discourses determine the

representation of fans? Which media technologies influence their representation?

Cultural Memory as Cultural Representations of the Past

Now, if meaning is created through representations, meaning is therefore dependent on how something is represented. And, in order to (temporarily) fix or define a meaning, representations are required. These cultural processes are also relevant when we discuss our understanding of the past, since it is through representations of the past that we create an understanding of bygone eras and events and these representations form our perception of the world. The concept of cultural memory helps us, in this regard, to understand the function of *representing the past in and for the present*.

Memory is studied in different subjects and fields from a range of perspectives, the most obvious being the mental and cognitive fields, yet also including and, sometimes, combining with social, material or medial aspects of memory. So, rather than a psychological, or even neuronal research into individual memory, the study of memory in Cultural Studies is more concerned with the cultural, collective and social creations and uses of memory.

“The term ‘*cultural* memory’ accentuates the connection of memory on the one hand and socio-cultural contexts on the other”.¹⁰ This cultural approach to memory takes the view, in addition to the idea of individual memory on an inner, personal level, that memory also exists on a societal level, where memory is “a matter of communication and social interaction”.¹¹ This means that memory can be analyzed as a function of our social life, making it a relevant category for anthropological, sociological and cultural and media research.

Cultural memory is concerned with studying representations of the past as a way to explain *which*, *why* and *how* certain memories are retained and remembered, while other past events are suppressed or even forgotten by a culture. An example of the use of cultural memory is the depiction of the ‘heroes’ (or, perhaps, villains) of the British Empire erected on the plinths arranged on Trafalgar Square which are to honor and remember the achievements of the British nation. As representations of important figures of British history, the statues are cultural markers which aim to recall specific *representative* instances of Britain’s past, the remembrance

of which is important for contemporary perceptions of Britain and its future.

The Fourth Plinth Project (1999-2001) and subsequent Plinth Commission (2005-present) work within this public and historic place of cultural signification; their temporarily exhibited selection of contemporary artworks aims to give a platform to allow for accounts of events and to represent people that have not been readily included in British history. This effort is visible in the display of *Alison Lapper, Pregnant* (Marc Quinn, 2005-2007) a marble sculpture which depicted the form of a disabled, female, pregnant body, or *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* (Yinka Shonibare, 2010-2012), which enters a dialogue with the cultural memory of the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) that was commemorated in the creation of Trafalgar Square at the center of which Nelson's Column was erected. The British-Nigerian artist's replica of Nelson's HMS Victory adds a colonial dimension to the square's previous cultural memory of reveling in Britishness and the triumphs of the past empire, since the sails of Shonibare's ship are printed in a colorful pattern associated with African prints (originally produced in the Netherlands from Indonesian design techniques).

The cultural memory which is tapped into and reactivated by the artwork *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* therefore still remembers Nelson's victory at the battle of Trafalgar and the subsequent ascendancy of the British Empire. However, the artwork also troubles the waters of this narrative by recalling Britain's history as an imperial power and by highlighting its concomitant trade networks. This piece of art, commissioned by the Mayor of London's Culture Team, is also an example of how representations of the past can be revisited and revised through culturally created artefacts. This recent representation demonstrates the contemporary desire to include a reflection of Britain's colonial past to help critically engage with and understand this shift in the recounting of British history but, just as importantly, to represent people of color and publicly include them in the fabric of contemporary Britain. As such, the art installation becomes an agent of cultural memory, questioning who is allowed to speak for the past and who is silenced.

Cultural memory captures both the forgetting and remembering aspects of past occurrences; it distinguishes between the relevance and agency these past occurrences are given in the present. In this sense, cultural memory

can be divided into two areas: one storage and one functional. The storage memory collects and preserves information which has lost its immediate importance. We might call it society's passive memory. By contrast, functional memory is the active memory of a we-group.¹²

The functional memory of a we-group is shaped by selective, interest-led representations of the past. In other words, cultural memory is the cultural functionalization of memories through media representations. Cultural memory's recollecting purpose is that it

provides a foundation for collectives ranging from small social groups to large units such as nations and states. It is created with the aid of different symbolic media (e.g. texts, pictures, buildings, rituals). Through common points of reference in the past and a shared fund of cultural traditions, such collectives establish their own we-identity.¹³

The cultural memory examples discussed above are about pieces of art, regarded as high culture, and are supported by institutions such as the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) and the Mayor of London's Culture Team, and thus promotes a more traditional understanding of what culture is. Yet, as we have found during this course, "culture is ordinary".¹⁴ So, while the plinths of Trafalgar Square are a good example of the use of representations for cultural memory, following Raymond Williams' notion, cultural memory can also be regional or local in scale.

Indeed, returning to our footballing example above, we can see less grandiose though perhaps more pervasive instances within the broad scope of cultural memory. AFC Sunderland, a football team in the North East of England, is represented by red and white stripes, and employs cultural memory as a way of creating a sense of group belonging with its fan base. The North East of England was once famed for its coal mining production and a large proportion of the people living in the city directly worked down the pits or were indirectly part of coal mining culture. However, with the UK's deindustrialization and decommissioning of deep cast coal mining since the late 1970s, this form of industry no longer exists in the area. The closure of the last operating coal mine in the city in the mid-1990s meant an end to coal mining culture. The site of the last coal mine to be closed in the city was purchased by the local football club and

was repurposed for the new home ground called The Stadium of Light.

Moving the home ground of an established football club is a culture shock, particularly for the traditional fan base. The demolition of the old ground and the move to the new location came at a difficult time of change for the city where deindustrialization caused the erosion of the local coal mining culture. The club manager and board members wanted to recall the city's coal mining heritage by giving the new stadium a name that was intended to capture the miners' experience of rising up from the underground dark into the light. Moreover, to create physical cultural memory markers to forge connection between the football club and the city's coal mining heritage, the club kept the pit wheel, which they painted in red and exhibited (mounted on a platform) outside of the stadium where they also have a statue of a miners' lamp – a traditional mining work utensil – as a symbol of light. These cultural artefacts are all material and medial efforts to maintain and forge a connection to the local fan base, creating a we-group through the recollection of a shared past and shared culture, in this case, of coal mining.

Cultural memory, similar to representation, appears to anchor meaning. However, it is through (re-)remembering that once fixed meanings can be changed since they are recalled by different people, in different contexts, at different times and for different reasons. Though memory is inherently connected to history, it is important to emphasize that memory is not concerned with the past as such, but with the constructions of representations: “In the context of cultural memory, the distinction between myth and history vanishes. What counts is not the past as it is investigated and reconstructed by archaeologists and historians but only the past as it is remembered”.¹⁵

Much like the processes of representation, cultural memory functions to create meanings, drawing on representations and transferring them into the present. It is in this sense that representation is constitutive. The selection of specific cultural representations creates a shared collective experience and a common understanding of the past, which duly plays a role in perceiving the present or enacting an envisioned future. This purposeful depiction of the past in representations is what we call the functionalization of cultural memory. Representations and cultural memories shape our perceptions of reality and, therefore, our belief systems; perceptions are related to how we remember the past and, in turn, our culture is based on the ways and forms in which we create and

engage with representations of the past and the present. This is why the study of representations and cultural memory, and the struggle over these, are central to the work of Cultural Studies.

1. Stuart Hall, "Introduction", in: *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, London: 1997, 1-11, here p. 1.
2. Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Anders Koed Madsen, Hugh Mackay & Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, 2nd ed., Milton Keynes: 2013, p. 7.
3. Stuart Hall, *Representation & the Media*, Media Education Foundation Transcript, Northampton: 1997, p. 6.
4. du Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studies*, p. 4.
5. Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power", in: *Formations of Modernity*, eds. Stuart Hall & Bram Gieben, Cambridge: 1992, 275-320, here p. 291.
6. Cf. Hall, *Representation & the Media*, p.12.
7. Raymond Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 2nd ed., London: 1983, p. 269.
8. Hall, *Representation & the Media*, p. 14.
9. Hall, "Introduction", p. 4.
10. Astrid Erll, "Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction", in: *Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds. Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning, Berlin: 2010, 1-18, here p. 4.
11. Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory", in: *Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds. Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning, Berlin: 2010, 109-118, here p. 109.
12. Aleida Assmann, *Introduction to Cultural Studies: Topics, Concepts, Issues*, Berlin: 2012, p. 189.
13. Ibid.
14. Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary", in: *Conviction*, ed. Norman MacKenzie, London: 1958, 74-92, here p. 75.
15. Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory", in: *Cultural Memories: The Geographical Point of View*, eds. Peter Meusbürger et al. Dordrecht: 2011, 15-27, here p. 19.

Selected Bibliography

Assmann, Aleida: *Introduction to Cultural Studies: Topics, Concepts, Issues*, Berlin: 2012.

Erll, Astrid & Ansgar Nünning, eds.: *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, Berlin: 2010.

Hall, Stuart, ed.: *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 2nd ed., London: 2013.

quote as:

Vicki Allen, “Representation & Cultural Memory”, *An Introduction to the Study of British and American Cultures*, cultural-studies.org (October 2022)