

# Aula 3

## REPRESENTANTING THE OTHER (PART I)

### **META**

Illustrating how the process of representation takes place empirically by providing students with some examples from news media channels

### **OBJETIVO**

Ao final desta aula, você deverá ser capaz de:

Showing how news media channels can represent racial difference both implicitly and explicitly

Presenting the four major theories which try and explain why difference is important for meaning from linguistic, anthropological and psychoanalytical perspectives.

### **PRERREQUISITO**

Familiaridade com os períodos formativos da literatura inglesa;  
Conceitos-chave da Teoria da Literatura e da história literária.  
Noções de história dos Estados Unidos.

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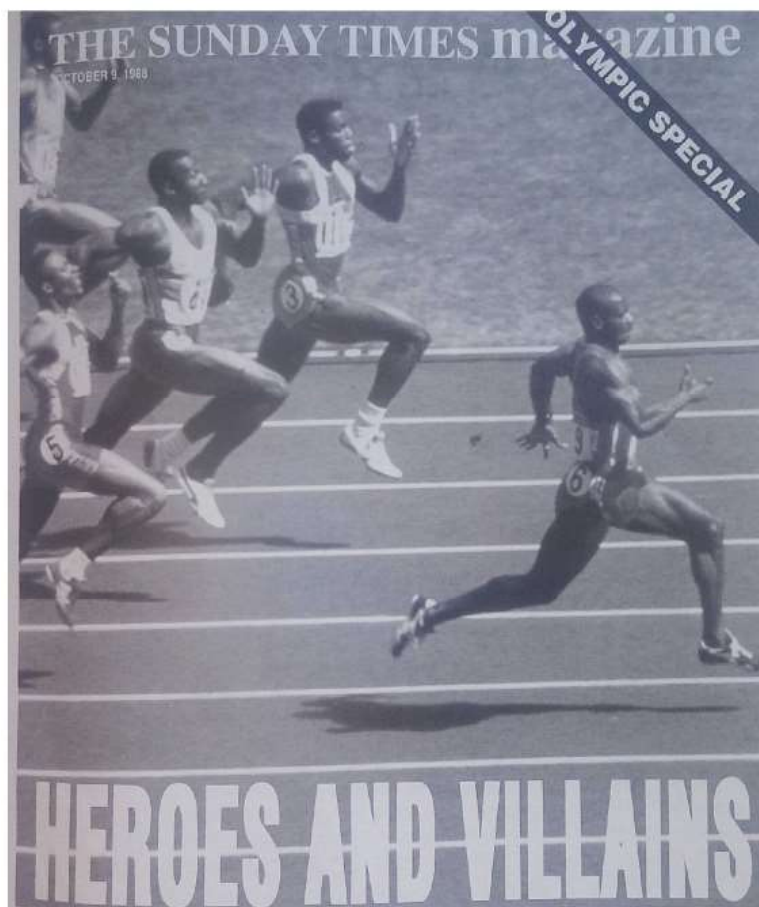
## INTRODUCTION

Similarly to what we did in class VI, where you were presented to a brief exposition on how some institutions are able to create systems of representation and assign different meanings to various objects in an apparently objective fashion, we will continue to address the practice of representation. In this class, however, our focus will rest upon the way black people – who are often portrayed as the Other – are represented in news media in general. In order to do so, we will make use of some images which circulated as headlines or featured in reports about specific events in which African Americans were at the center of the stage. It should also be said that what follows is, in its majority, based on a text authored by Stuart Hall (2003) entitled the Spectacle of the Other.

By using such a text as our main source, we will also try and carry out a brief exposition of how “difference” is represented in some of the cases in point and, as it has already been suggested in previous classes, the way it is always linked to power relations. As difference is an extremely broad concept, it will perhaps be useful to say that we will focus on racial and ethnic difference while reflecting on the examples we will use, even though most of the conclusions one can draw from them are equally applicable on other types of difference. We must also say that all of the examples reproduced here can be found in a more detailed manner in the aforementioned text from which this class has been created.

As it has been said in previous classes, you might be required at some point to turn back to issues previously discussed in order to understand the new ones which will be brought forth. In this respect, you will notice that, similarly to what you learned in class VI about the possibility of assigning different meanings to a single object, images/photos will also admit a variety of “readings” or meanings. Nevertheless, one meaning/reading is always suggested by that who is doing the representation, the same way museums offer the meanings/readings/interpretations of the objects they exhibit. Such a phenomenon reveals that meaning – in both cases – is not absolute. Therefore, it not only may as, in most cases, should be contested. Hopefully, this class will help you see the matter from this perspective, too. In the following section, the images to be remarked upon will be displayed. Next, we will sketch what some important theories say about difference and then we will move forward into the conclusion.

## REPRESENTATION AND AMBIGUITY



'Heroes and Villains', cover of The Sunday Times Magazine, 9 October 1988

Before you start to read the following lines, try and see if you can infer what is taking place in the photo. What do you see and what can you make of it?

This photo was the cover of the Olympics Special of the Sunday Times magazine issued on October 9th 1988. If you look at it carefully, you will probably notice that it features five athletes on a running track at full speed. One of them is clearly ahead of the others. This event was the men's 100 meters final at the 1988 Olympics and the sprinter who is leading the race is Ben Johnson, a black Canadian, who broke the world time record on the occasion, leaving both Carl Lewis and Linford Christie behind. It stands out in the photo the fact that all of them are black. So far, there is nothing intriguing about it, right?

What makes us think that there is something else we still do not know is its caption "Heroes and Villains". Upon turning to it for understanding what the cover means, we start to make suppositions so as to harmonize what we "see" to what we "read". That is when we might connect the dots

and come up with a hypothesis: drug-taking, since this is one of the ways an athlete can become a villain in a competition setting. Such was the case. The cover was a reference to the lead story which talked about the rise of drug-taking in athletics. Ben Johnson tested positive for enhancing drugs for which reason he was disqualified – having to pass his gold medal to Carl Lewis – and banned from athletics.

According to Hall, the suggested meaning of the image states that every athlete – regardless of their ethnicity – is a potential hero and villain. But something else seems to be going on in the photo. Johnson embodies those possibilities in a very particular way, mostly due to his being black, therefore, representing difference – the Other.

If you apply what you learned in previous classes, you will notice that there are some levels of meaning in which this photo can be analyzed. The first one is a denotative one in which we see Johnson winning the men's 100 meters final. Now, if you knew the circumstances under which the photo came to light, you could have had a connotative understanding of the episode. So, instead of just seeing a sprinter winning a competition, you would see sprinter, who took enhancing substances, unfairly winning a competition. Still, you could also interpret the event from a racial perspective in which case you would see a black sprinter, who took enhancing substances, unfairly winning a competition (do you see how many ways one can look at this photo?). So, this photo can be seen as depicting disgrace or triumph, or both. Thus, to use Hall's own words, "meaning floats" in the photo. It cannot be fixed in a definite way, even though the aim of representational practice is to privilege a single meaning and make us see it as the only one possible.

This is done in the photo through the use of the caption "heroes and villains". If it was not there to "guide" us to the intended interpretation, we would be faced with a variety of possibilities. So, the caption referred to the meaning the magazine wanted to fix – that is called the preferred meaning – which found in Johnson its best expression, since he embodied both heroism (due to his successful career) and villainy (because of the doping scandal). Because this meaning is foregrounded, the other plausible meanings the photo can accommodate might go unnoticed such as that of undeserving victory. Citing Barthes (1977), Hall says that the caption is frequently used to emphasize one of the many possible meanings and fix it with words (think of the museums from class VI).

If we take then the meaning emphasized by the magazine and try to reflect on it on racial terms, we might be surprised at the suggestion that even when black people excel in something, they cannot carry it off or that they do it through dishonest means. The photo which at first only alluded to Johnson winning a race can now be said to contain racial stereotyping. This seems to happen in a very subtle way so that it does

not raise any eyebrows. But it can also be done explicitly as we will see in the following example.



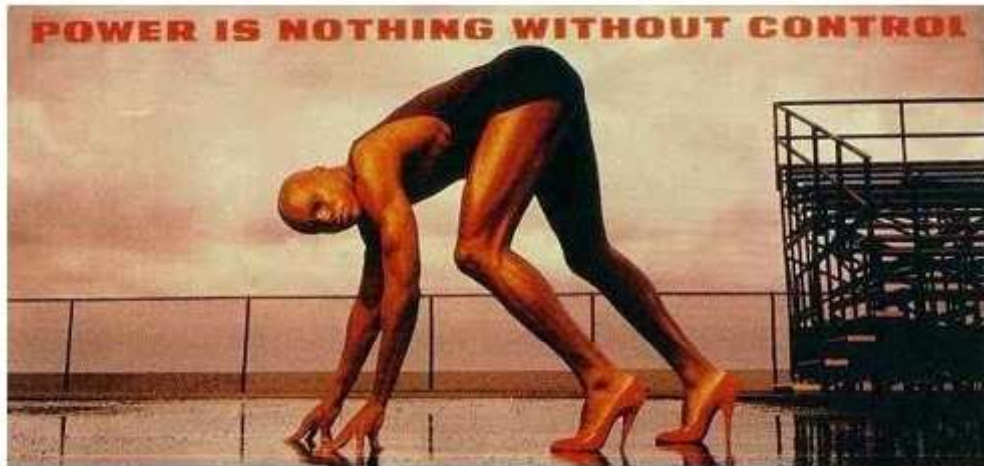
Christie pictured in 1992.

(Fonte: Getty) <https://www.irishmirror.ie/showbiz/celebrity-news/linford-christie-turns-down-strictly-6150652>

The man you see in the photo is Linford Christie, the captain of the British Olympics squad in 1992, celebrating his victory in the men's 100 meters while holding a Union Jack. As we have seen in the previous example, many meanings can be assigned to it. On the one hand, his victory may represent a great moment both for black people and the British Olympic team. And on the other, one could also argue that it suggested that you could be “black” and “British”. In interviews given by the athlete, he affirmed to have been questioned about to where he felt he belonged to which he answered by saying that, even though, he was a native of Jamaica where he lived until the age of 7, he did not see himself as being other than British.

However, what it is interesting here is the way many sections of the British press reported on it. His photo was used by some news media channels to perpetuate sexual stereotypes about black men through a joke. The Sun, a tabloid newspaper, on the day after his Olympic achievement, published an article whose focus rested on the fact that the tight-fitting Lycra shorts Christie wore revealed the size of his genitals. After such a remarkable feat, writing about his genitals is not only odd, but also racist, since such a joke is a result of the sexual stereotypes assigned to black men which reduce them to a phallus. In so doing, The Sun was representing an individual that it considered racially different in a derogatory way.

When it comes to representing “difference” – in this case, “difference” is embodied by black people who occupy the place of an Other against whom the white world wants to define itself – race is not the only aspect emphasized. There is also the issue of sexuality and gender which might become a target of stereotyping practice or derogatory representation. Let us look at one more example.



Carl Lewis, photographed for a Pirelli advertisement  
(Fonte: <http://www.resilience.org/stories/2014-03-24/power-is-nothing-without-control-how-to-lose-an-empire/>)

What you see is a photograph for a Pirelli advertisement featuring Carl Lewis, an American Olympic medalist sprinter known for his physical prowess. What meanings can be assigned to it? Is there a preferred meaning? If so, what other meaning (s) is (are) being eclipsed by it?

Drawing on what we have seen so far, we can safely say that there are at least two plausible meanings which can be to the photo. The first one is that suggested by the caption “power is nothing without control”. In order to understand what the intended message is, one has to be aware that Pirelli is a tire company. Once you know that, the high heels worn by the sprinter starts to make sense. What it is being said then is that having powerful car might be of no use if it does not have the proper tires which will allow its driver to steer it safely. The power is embodied in the photo by Carl Lewis who is a remarkable athlete and the lack of control is suggested by the high heel with which, no matter how skilled he is at sprinting, he will not be able to perform as well as he would if he were wearing proper footwear.

What is, however, the other meaning which is being eclipsed by the one suggested in the caption? In order to perceive it, we would need to turn to a broader repertoire of representations, or should we say, stereotypes concerning black sexuality which has been around for some time and occasionally emerge in different media channels – mostly frequently in entertainment. Such a stereotype is that of the supersexuality of black

men which is often associated to the myth of the oversized genitals. Black men are often portrayed as being sexually more developed – which is by no means a compliment – than whites. This stereotype is still being used today (e.g. adult entertainment industry). Knowing this is fundamental to apprehend what the photo is suggesting in a second level.

Similarly to what we said about power, Carl Lewis represents black supersexuality. Nonetheless, the supersexuality he embodies is being disturbed by his wearing high heel which is culturally categorized as feminine footwear. The photo, therefore, becomes highly ambiguous. And that seems to be done purposefully. So, one could argue that this combination of signifiers suggests that this super-male black sprinter may not be all he seems. To put another way, his supersexuality is being called into question. See how gender, sexuality and race might be interwoven together?

## DIFFERENCE: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

We will now turn to the issue of difference. Based on Hall's exposition, we will bring you the main theoretical approaches you should be familiarized with in order to understand why difference attracts some much attention and why it is so important for the study of representation. Four theoretical perspectives will be presented and we may place some emphasis on the one which is of more interest to us. All of them have positive as well as negative aspects which indicate that difference is necessary, but also dangerous if misused.

The first approach comes from linguistics. It is probably the most talked about in academia. Ferdinand de Saussure was its proponent and, according to him, "difference matters because it is essential to meaning; without it, meaning could not exist" (HALL, 2003, p. 234). If you are hearing this for the first time, this might probably have sounded confusing. But we will try and break it down for you. Basically, what Saussure argues is that meaning is constructed through difference – or variation if you will. Thus, we only know what a cat is because it is not a bat or pat. That is also the case in language itself. We can only mean something because language is a system marked by difference (different letters, different phonemes which make it possible to form different words which, in turn, can convey different ideas). In other words, we could not mean anything if everything was the same (same exact letters, same exact phonemes, etc.).

One implication which follows this assumption is that there is no essence to meaning, since it is determined by difference. So, one knows what blackness is because one can contrast it with its opposite – white – and not because one knows its essence. This could be applied on any other concept expressed by language. But it does not stop there; we can also take up this approach to analyze cultural notions. So, we only know what means to be

Brazilian, because it differs from being Argentine, but we are probably not able to find out the essence of “Braziannes”.

In the example featuring Carl Lewis, the idea of femininity was only possible because of the addition of an object which made the photo differ from the traditional stereotypes on black sexuality. It is difference against a uniform background which produces meaning.

Binary oppositions are also fundamental in the production of meaning. White/black, masculine/feminine, European/non-European, civilized/uncivilized, Christian/pagan are just some of the binary concepts which have been used to mark difference and, for a significant amount of time, they were thought to be important for organizing the chaotic reality into a fixed structure. However, they have grown obsolete and now are considered too reductionist. By only providing two extremes, binary oppositions exclude a world of possibilities. For instance, if you had to describe a painting by only using the colors black and white, this would certainly provide a very limited description of it. There are many another colors which resist such labels that would be essential for a more accurate description of the painting. To some extent, this seems to be the effect produced by binary oppositions upon culture – or the world if you like. By relying exclusively on two possibilities, the complexities embedded in culture are wiped out so it can fit a dichotomical frame.

There is yet another issue. Such oppositions almost invariably are not neutral, that is, they are charged with positive or negative meanings and bear a hierarchical relationship. This argument was advanced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Basically, he says Western civilization is grounded on such binary oppositions. However, he argues these are not natural – even though they might look so –, but created to legitimate a relation of domination. We could think, for example, of masculine/feminine. Since Aristotle, the former term has ruled over the latter. Throughout Western history, masculinity has been assigned positive values, such as rationality, force, leadership, while femininity – as the opposite term – has been invested with negative notions, such as irrationality, weakness, etc.

The same thing could be said about White/black. The first term has always represented positive ideals: holiness, purity, cleanliness, heaven, god, civilization, Europe, knowledge, and eventually racial and cultural superiority. Black, on the other hand, has been associated with all sorts of negative ideas: dirtiness, impurity, devil, hell, ignorance and then racial and cultural inferiority. What should be emphasized is that the process of representing the other in a negative light is always attached to a will to power, to dominate, to conquer, as Said suggested in his book *Orientalism* (1978).

This was the one approach we wanted to emphasize, let us now go through the next ones at a quicker pace. The next approach is also linked to language, but this one was advanced by a Russian linguist called Mikhail



Bakhtin. While the Saussurrean approach says that meaning is produced by difference, Bakhtin argued that we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the Other. Thus, meaning is supposed to emerge in a dialogue, which means to say, that there is an interactive aspect to it. To use Bakhtin's words, meaning is fundamentally "dialogic". Therefore, what follows is that it does not belong to anyone in particular. On the contrary, it has to be negotiated and that is, according to Hall, one of its downsides. Based on that, one can also conclude that meaning cannot be fixed permanently. It is always susceptible to change. In a more practical level, that means Europe could only find out what it meant to be European when she established a dialogue with other cultures (non-European) and vice versa. Another consequence of assuming that meaning is dialogic has to do with the struggles such a process entails, since meaning cannot be finally fixed.

So, if you look back to Linford Christie's example, you will notice that the fact of him being black and British calls into question the idea of a white Britishness or that one can only be British if one is white.

The third approach is grounded on anthropology and basically argues that culture assigns meaning to things by placing them in different positions within a classificatory system. According to Mary Douglas, who draws on Durkheim's and Lévi-Strauss' works, social groups impose meanings on their world by classifying them or organizing them into a system. Here difference is fundamental, once you cannot classify things without first establishing difference between them. Hall mentions one example from Lévi-Strauss concerning food. One way of assigning meaning is dividing them into groups: those which can be eaten raw, those which cannot; those which are fruits and those which are not, and so on.

However, this approach also contains downsides to it, according to Hall. The issue here is when something resists categorization, i.e., when it does not fit any of the two groups available. Under such circumstances, marginalizing is the normal course of action. When something resists categorization, it poses a threat to the stability of a culture. That is why the latter tries to keep everything in its appointed place. Now, imagine that on racial terms: how to place those people that are neither black nor white? More often than not, the easy solution is to silence them or erase them so they do not disturb the established cultural order.

To this approach, boundaries are key to culture. However, their negative effects reveal themselves when singling out difference becomes a weapon to protect the alleged purity or essence of a culture. When that is the end, difference is used to stigmatize, stereotype and diminish the other. One does not have to go very far to see this. The recent rise of nationalism in many European countries, mostly triggered by the immigration crisis, might serve as an example of it.

The last approach which tries to account for the importance of difference for the production of meaning comes from psychoanalysis. Its basic premise is that the Other is indispensable for the constitution of the self, both as a subject and to sexual identity. This view is very much indebted to Freud's work which claims that one's sense of subject as well as one's sexual identity is not defined at an early age, but it develops through childhood in the interaction with its parents. Despite the controversies this assumption raised, one basic assertion still seems to stand; namely, subjectivity can only be formed in interaction with an Other. However, just like the previous approaches, this one also contains negative sides to it one of which is, if identity is formed through interaction, that means there is no inner core to the self, no essence in our identity. The latter is always incomplete, split, since it forms itself in relation to others.

### CONCLUSÃO

What all these theoretical approaches seem to reveal is that difference is central for the production of meaning. Without it, it would be impossible to assign meaning to things, and, if we take on the psychoanalytical perspective to it, even to recognize ourselves as subjects, since our very self is defined by difference. To put it simply, difference pervades our culture for which reason it is an endless source of meaning. Another conclusion one can draw from what has been exposed about those perspectives is that there are both positive and negative sides when it comes to difference. It is, therefore, ambiguous. So, if on the one hand, it is necessary for ordering and signifying things around us – and even ourselves as has already been remarked –; on the other, it can prove to be a vicious weapon for stereotyping, demonizing, marginalizing and eventually oppressing the Other. We have seen such a practice at work in the examples provided in the first part of the class. As you could notice, difference was being used to mock, denigrate, humiliate and perpetuate oppression.



### RESUMO

This class aims at providing you with some examples of how racial difference may be represented both explicitly and implicitly by some news media channels. Firstly, we will present and remark on some interesting cases, calling your attention to the way a single photo can be assigned different messages. Secondly, we will enumerate some theories that try and explain

the nature of difference pointing out its ambiguous character. Then, we will wrap it up by making a few last considerations.



## ATIVIDADE

Answer these questions below in English:

Explain, in the light of what has been exposed, how important difference is in the production of meaning.

Esta atividade objetiva verificar se você compreendeu satisfatoriamente um dos principais pontos desta aula.



## PRÓXIMA AULA

REPRESENTING THE OTHER (PART II)

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