Cultural Diversity V: Representations

Eugenia Siapera

esiapera@jour.auth.gr
Outline

- Some theory: what do representations do?
- Regimes of representation
- Five regimes:
  - Racist
  - Domesticated
  - Commodification
  - Essentialist
  - Alternative
Theory

- What do representations do?
- Four approaches:
  - A cognitive approach: stereotypes
  - The role of language: frames and discourse
  - Semiology and genealogy
  - The performative power of representation
“. . . I am a Jew.
Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal’d by the same means, warm’d and cool’d by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, shall we not die?”

The Merchant of Venice, III, i, 58-66
Govt: Kostunica’s statements have negative impact on Serb integration

Commenting on the recent statement made by designate Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica on the cantonization or division of Kosovo, Kosovo Government spokeswoman Mimoza Kusari said that the Kosovar executive wasn’t surprised by statements coming from Belgrade. ‘Mr. Kostunica’s statement isn’t surprising, because he is a proven ultranationalist even from the previous times and Serbia’s wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo,’ said Kusari. ‘It was said before that the government will be fully committed to integrating all communities. But we would’ve been more successful with the Serb community if it were not for such statements by Belgrade and the Serbian Government.’

Koha, Kosovan Daily Newspaper, 4 March 2004, in UN Mission in Kosovo Media Monitoring
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Gamson, 1992: Frames on US media – the first two were the most common
“I am at the barber’s and a copy of Paris-Match is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.”

Roland Barthes, Myth Today, 1973: 112
Binary Oppositions

original / copy
primary / secondary
inside / outside
reality / appearance
soul / body
pure / corrupted
father / son
male / female
speech / writing

centre / margins
normal / deviant
natural / unnatural
straight / gay
white / black
self / other
philosophy / myth
Foucault, Discourse and Power

- Discursive formations constitute objects in certain terms, and determines how we should treat them
- Discourses reveal the operation of power and domination
- Representations: an entry point to understanding discursive formations and the role of power in determining how to deal with objects (governmentality)
Orientalism

Said (‘1979) : Orientalism functions as a discourse that determines both what the Orient and the West are, how they are positioned vis-à-vis each other and crucially how we ought to deal with each.

First and foremost: the Orient cannot speak, cannot represent itself, it is irrational, exotic, incapable of governing itself wisely – hence, the West must come in and govern – the civilizing mission of colonialism.

Orientalism found not only in literature and government discourses, but in science, in art etc, forming the object of a tightly knit set of discourses constructing the Orient as inferior and subordinate.

But, where is the ‘Orient’ in Said’s work: where is the agency and resistance of those constructed as ‘Orientals’?
The performative work of representations

- Austin (1963): Speech and language do things
  - E.g. ‘With this ring I thee wed’
- Derrida (1967):
  - written language does things, it works even though its author is not present and despite/regardless of authors’ intentions
  - Every repetition slightly changes the ‘original’
- Butler (1997): the repeatability (iterability) of language enables representations to change and offers the possibility for resistance
In the end, representations…

- Are performative: they do things
- They form the condition of possibility of difference
  - They are implicated in power structures: they do not all enjoy the same degree of ‘success’ – some are more ‘valid’ than others
    - Their power depends on the extent of their acceptance
    - Resistance can only use the same means
- The space of representation (c.f. space of appearance, Silverstone, 2006) is a field of political struggles
- Representation constitutes a crucial weapon both for dominant and for dominated groups.
Regimes of representation

- Not a single way of representing but multiple competing ones
- The notion of regimes of representation (after Foucault’s regimes of truth): the convergence of certain ideas and discourses with certain power structures and mechanisms that sustain these as ‘truth’ – these can exclude, marginalize and control other ideas and discourses.
- But marginalized discourses are not fully repressed – rather they find a place in a system of representations that is ordered hierarchically
- The notion of a ‘regime’ implies the existence of a regular and systematic construction of objects in specific ways
The racist regime

- Basic premise: people are members of a given racial group and display at all times the characteristics of this race, mostly originating in biology.

- In a second phase, this regime considers people as members of a given ethno-cultural group, displaying its characteristics (new racism) – in some instances race and culture coincide.

- In specific terms: difference is irrational, violent, sexualized, inarticulate, when it does speak it demands but does not deserve – since it is irrational it impossible to reason with it: hence it must be treated through power.

- In parallel, alterity is also treated as victimhood – racialized subjects are sentimentalized, they are servile and naturally inferior – often these are gendered
The racist regime in research

- Bogle (1973): four types of blacks in Holywood
  - (i) Toms and (ii) Mammies, based on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852): men and women as essentially good, but always servile and submissive
  - (iii) Tragic mulatto
  - (iv) Coons
  - (v) Bad Bucks
Mammy

Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind*
Racist Regime Updated

- Similar representations of Muslims, Eastern Europeans, Southern Europeans, Indians, Asians etc.

- Examples:

  “It is simply an abuse of language to expect that Danish Christians, Jews or pagans have to show respect towards a religion which [sic] practice goes against that of human rights” (Ekstra Bladet, editorial, 1st March 2006, cited in Hussain, 2007: 4).

Islam compared to Christianity:

  “Islam is the opposite of Christianity. Islam is almighty and infallible, a religion of law, a system where faith and the law are connected, where the answers to all existential questions are to be found in the holy book. They are not to be discussed and they are not to be mocked. We must understand that some Muslims also in this country have a fundamentally different way of thinking than us and some of them simply will not accept our way of life and our democratic values.” (Berlingske Tidende, editorial, 5th Feb 2006, cited in Hussain, 2007: 5).
More recently

- Fitna and Innocence of Muslims
- Both as Films and as reactions
Tragic Mulatto

Dorothy Dandridge
The ‘Yellow Peril’

[Image of a caricature depicting a figure holding a gun, labeled 'The Yellow Terror in all his glory.']
Gendered Racism

- Gendered racist representations construct women as victims, and often sexualize them.

- The representation of women wearing hijabs, and especially niqabs constructs women as victims patiently waiting for their white knight in shining armour.

- Klaus and Kassel (2005) found that German media represented Afghan women in a manner that helped justify intervention – similar findings in the US (Stabile and Kumar, 2005).

- Dominant metaphor: light – from darkness into the light, from the brutal Dark Ages of the East to the Enlightened West.

- Disenfranchises women, overlooks their own struggles for liberation and their attempts to articulate their own voices.
Gender racist representations

- Women are also sexualized, esp Eastern women: films such as *Madame Butterfly* (Long, 1989), *Miss Saigon* (Schonberg and Boublil, 1989), *The World of Suzie Wong* (Mason, 1957) featured tragic women-sexual objects.

- More recent films, such as *Birthday Girl* (Butterworth, 2001) and *Lilya 4-ever* (2003, see analysis by Kristensen, 2007) construct Eastern European women as prostitutes – in all cases passively waiting to be saved by Western men.

- If they attempt to take their fate into their own hands, they are vilified as ‘Dragon Ladies’, dangerous two-timing women.
The Domestication of Difference

- The domesticated regime seeks to ‘tame’ and contain difference within confines deemed safe and acceptable.

- The regime of domestication can be understood as one of assimilation or subsumption of difference, which is therefore considered irrelevant. Ultimately, this regime negates difference through domestication, quite literally through making it ‘our’ own, everyday and banal, or else tempered through mixing or hybridization.

- Main themes: Emphasis on folklore, sameness, and a hybridity that ends up removing all threatening aspects

- In the end homogenizes and negates difference

- Not in opposition to the racist regime, but rather the other side of the coin.
Domestication

- Through folklore, difference is made quaint and picturesque.
- Folkloric difference is reduced to external elements or symbols of culture, such as dress, food, religious festivals, and cultural artefacts, which appear to celebrate difference, while at the same time ignore its demands for equal recognition.
- Examples: Ugly Betty, a Muppet Show etc
- The problem is not in poking fun at other cultures, but in locking them forever into their traditional and folkloric signs and symbols.
Ugly Betty with poncho, ABC 2006-2010
More on domestication

- A second theme is insistence on sameness - the problem here is not that people are not the same, but rather that sameness is rendered a condition for acceptance.

- Similarity becomes a condition of acceptance, and the criteria are drawn from the dominant culture.

- Example: Mamdani’s (2004) distinction between ‘good’ [modern, secular, and Westernized] and ‘bad’ Muslims [long beards, too religious etc].

- Another example: Muslim women, e.g. Rachida Dati, former Minister and currently a Euro MP – her picture appeared in Paris Match in 2007 with the headline ‘The face of a changing France’...

- Difference is accepted only if it is prepared to negate itself and erase any marks of difference.
2007
l'année
de toutes les ruptures
UN NUMÉRO SPÉCIAL

Rachida Dati
LE VISAGE DE LA FRANCE QUI CHANGE

Ingrid Betancourt
LA LETTRE À SA MÈRE ET À SES ENFANTS
L'intégralité d'un document déchirant
Domestication finally

- Hybridity: only accepted insofar as its dominant features are those emphasizing sameness
- Well-known figures of pop culture, such as Halle Berry, Beyonce Knowles, Shakira, Alicia Keys etc
Commodification

- This regime accepts difference, but subsumes into another logic: that of the market
- Why is this a problem?
- Karl Polanyi: “To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment, indeed even of the amount and use of purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society.” (1944/2001: 73).
Commodification: How does it work

- An initial levelling of all identities and a reordering on the basis of profit generation
- It only recognizes these aspects that have an exchange value in the market and marginalizes everything else.
- It prioritizes these elements of different identities that can be successfully marketed or branded, and ignores the rest.
- It ignores persistent inequalities and power differentials in favour of a superficial levelling or equivalence of all identities.
- Representations here focus on aspects of style, appearance and looks, by creating certain associations between specific identities and styles, and through commodifying cultural identities.
- The function of this regime is to capitalize on difference: if it cannot, then difference and alterity is at best ignored and at worst destroyed.
Examples

- **United Colors of Benetton** - Tinic (1997) : they decontextualize social issues from their original surroundings and recontextualizing them within a framework of product or brand promotion.

- This is why these representations only remain at the superficial level of style and appearance, and in doing so, they fail to address the wider problematic of difference and the ways in which it is mapped on inequality, both symbolic and material.
Identities as brands

- The regime of commodification operates through associating a particular style and/or characteristics with a particular identity. This rests on the wide diffusion of cultural/ethnic stereotypes, but playfully reinvents them as brands.

- E.g. Tourist advertising and promotion, ethnic restaurants etc.

- Another element: the transformation of identity into a commodity to be consumed.

- This reproduces the same cycle of domination and exploitation, because it does not really problematize, question and discuss aspects of difference and identity, but merely focuses on and reproduces superficial markers of difference.
Classic Barbie, Ghanaian ‘Shani’ Barbie, Chinese Princess, South African Princess
The Other Side

- What happens when communities themselves undertake their own representation?
- Who has the right to represent?
- What is the role of authenticity?
- Two regimes:
  - The essentialist regime
  - The alternative regime
The essentialist regime

- This regime posits that the right to represent belongs only to ‘self’, only to those belonging to the identity represented; secondly, this regime posits that accurate representations must authentically capture the ‘essence’ of the identity portrayed.

- A polemical regime responding to the racist regime

- But imposes its own version of an essential identity at the core and in doing so, it sets up borders and controls who enters and exits the group

- Three themes:
  - A historical continuity
  - A stable and unchanged core
  - Authenticity: who belongs and who doesn’t
Historicity works by presenting a more complex story of the community that involves a common past and continuity through time, emphasizing unity and destiny.

Examples: Underground (Kusturica, 1995), some Hindi films, and the historical reimagining of Africa in contemporary black culture in the West.

E.g. Underground constructs a picture of historical continuity in the Balkans, and a core set of characteristics of Balkan people, as brave, passionate etc (Zizek, 1997; Iordanova, 2001).

Similarly, Hindi films such as Amar, Akbar, Anthony (Manmohan Desai, 1997) and Henna (Raj and Rhandir Kapoor, 1991) impose an almost canonical understanding of Hindi national identity and its interconnection with other identities in the subcontinent. (Virdi, 2003).
More

- The genre of Blaxploitation: *Sweet Sweetback's Baadaaass Song* and *Shaft* (van Peebles, 1971 and Parks, 1971) black masculinity as highly sexual and prone to violence, with black men working as pimps, hustlers and small time crooks.

- Spike Lee’s films, such as *School Daze* (1988) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989): an equally stereotypical and masculinist portrayal of (American) blackness, centred around notions of work and the work ethic (‘you are only worthy if you hold a job’), heterosexual sexuality (‘to be Black is to be straight’), a revered set of canonized icons (Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Mohammed Ali) and victimization at the hands of the police (Lubiano, 1997).

- Latinidad: in films such as *Selena* (Gregory Nava, 1997) and *Frida* (Julie Taymor, 2002), but also in the famous telenovelas, Latinidad revolves around linguistic symbols, such as accented English or Spanish, passionate (heterosexual) affairs, religious symbolism, brown faces, and significantly, it is located in the domestic sphere, understood as the sphere of intimate, sexual and familial, relationships (Aparicio, 1999; Molina-Guzman, 2006).
The question of authenticity

- Two components:
  - The right to speak for and represent the community
  - To be true to yourself
- Only community members are ‘allowed’ to speak on behalf of the community - they should also display the core characteristics of the community, and hence be ‘true’ to this identity
Authenticity

- Examples: *The Joy Luck Club* (Wayne Wang, 1993): intergenerational harmony achieved only in embracing traditional (Chinese) community values
- Reconciliation through ‘a return to the roots’
- Three issues:
  - A simplified version of community values and traditions
  - Ignores cultural dynamism and change across time
  - It marginalizes those who chose a different route
Strategic essentialism

- Although this regime is problematic there are potential benefits involved: these mainly include the tactic of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1985/1996: 214).

- For Spivak, essentialism is problematic only if applied to community members – if it is used strategically in order to achieve political goals, then it may prove beneficial.

- Mobilization of essentialist positions may prove useful in the construction of self consciousness and help organize effectively.

- Spivak is very clear that this is only a strategic kind of essentialism which has nothing to say about the actual contents of identity – it must be used only as part of efforts towards ‘subject-restoration’ (1996: 219).
The alternative regime

- If the other regimes declare ‘this is what cultural difference is’, the alternative regime poses this as an ongoing question: what is cultural difference? Who might ‘we’ be?

- Three main themes:
  - The ambiguity of the representation;
  - The creative ways in which it deals with questions of cultural difference;
  - The multiplicity of the perspectives and/or identities/images.
Alternative representations

- Beyond good and bad: the creation of ambiguity
- *Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chadha, 1993), *East is East* (Damien O’Donnell, 1999), *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005, CW Network), the characters of *Ali G* and *Borat Sagdiyev* (Sacha Baron-Cohen, 1998-2007) display such ambiguity
- They pose questions, but do not resolve them, they confront audiences with questions on identity/difference
- Creativity, as found in camera angles but also in narrative devices and scripts, the use of humour etc is also central: the point is to use these in order to prise open stereotypes and fossilized thinking about certain identities, about difference and about our position
- This is how, for e.g., *The Simpsons* (Matt Groening, 1989): by articulating the unspoken racist stereotypes on ethnic characters, it makes us re-think our relationship with cultural diversity.
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WHAT A CRUEL MALE-DOMINATED CULTURE!

NOTHING COVERED BUT HER EYES,
WHAT A CRUEL MALE-DOMINATED CULTURE!
Multiplicity

- The alternative representational regime can only be truly alternative if it recognizes and acknowledges other points of view. The use of narrative tropes that allow for differing points of view within the same story is one of the clearest ways for supporting such multiplicity of perspectives.

- Difficult topics, including the topic of violence between different communities, are confronted in this regime through the presentation of different perspectives.

Finally

- Should we accept this regime as the best one?
- Perhaps, but we should take into account some of the political losses it entails.
- These primarily include its reluctance to posit a positive programme for change. Second, the ease by which it repeats, thereby giving some sort of credence to, problematic positions. In addition, although giving voice to all sounds fair enough, we must keep in mind that not all voices are equivalent...