Read this statement carefully:

…By the word reading, we mean not only the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the … capacity to put them in a creative relation between themselves and other signs (Hall, S. in During, S. (ed) 1993: 99).

How can we understand this statement in reference to your choice of media text in reference to organising category? Pay particular attention to approaches to representation, reading protocols, audience address, techniques of narration, implied/resisting reader.   Your essay should synthesise theoretical explanations and textual analysis.

To understand how signs convey meanings of a particular text, it is important to study the theoretical approach to representation and understand how media texts might be said to 'work' in forms of representation. In this essay, I will examine the chosen media text and explain how it 'works' in relation to the question, along with an analysis of the connections between texts, reading protocols and meanings interpreted.

The media text chosen from a men's magazine, NewMan, was an interview on actress-model, Jaymee Ong. With scanty, sexy dressing and posing close to nudity, it is certainly inviting for men - one of the audiences addressed. Women could also be the audience although the majority readers would be men.

I will now explain the quotation and elaborate on its meaning with reference to the media text. By glancing through the front cover's (Appendix 1) photograph and decoding the signs that made up the word "naked", one might misinterpret the text's content to be on pornography. However, by reading the subsequent word "truth" and the interview piece (Appendix 2), one should notice the insertion of the word "naked" prior to "truth" was to emphasise on the point that the interview narrated the "exposed facts" about Jaymee's life, hence "naked truth". With this illustration, it shows that individual words functioning as signs should not be simply read and decoded exclusively. Instead, signs among other signs must go together in order for media texts to 'work' and construct meanings. With the media text's topic on a woman, it therefore falls under the organising category "Gendered identities: images of the 'real'".

As mentioned earlier, media texts might be said to 'work' in forms of representation. So, what is representation? According to Hall (1997: 61), representation is "the process by which members of a culture use language or a signifying system to produce meaning". In the semiotic approach, representation was understood based on the way "words functioned as signs within language" (Hall 1997: 42). Although language is central to the production of meaning, tool of analysis such as discourse plays an important role in the study of representations and meanings interpreted.

Foucault's work on 'representation' was concerned with the production of knowledge and meaning, not through language but through discourse - a set of systematically organised statements with the "power to structure, classify and normalise the social

world" (Schirato & Yell 2000: 58). His emphasis was on cultural understanding and shared meanings produced in different periods (Hall 1997: 43). Foucault's work coincides with the materialist approach to representation, which I will examine pertaining to the media text.

The materialist approach to representation emphasises on the social nature of language where meanings are shared and not simply reduced to individual meaning. The act of making representations is delimited in time, place, culture, inherited compositional practices subject to social and historical contexts (Burston 2004: 13). Each representation also takes its shape according to available discourses.

The media text portrays discourses of femininity and female sexuality where women are represented as traditional objects of scrutiny. The words and photographs of the text could be interpreted into various meanings. For instance, in the Western culture, the word "naked" and photographs of women dressed sexily are deemed normal and not obscene for media publication. However, in the Asian culture, it could be deemed inappropriate if published in magazines intended for young people. Then again, as Asian culture is becoming less conventional nowadays, photographs of women posing almost naked might be appreciated and accepted in adult magazines. With this example, it proves that meanings are not autonomous and permanent, but are different and vary in terms of differing cultures and contexts.

Representations and meanings are derived from individual's reading protocols. With the media text chosen, men and women who are the audiences addressed would hence, interpret the text differently.

For the men, they would likely interpret representations as 'entertainment' and as 'moral technologies' (Mercer 1986: 177). By this, it means that the visual representations - photographs - are not realistic but are images of 'the real' achieved through artifice in composition. Not every woman does appear as sexy and feminine as Jaymee. What lies behind those images is not reality but surface features of 'the real' enmeshed in an arrangement of poses and camera angles. Therefore, men interpret the media text as entertaining in which photographs representing femininity and female sexuality are only "objects of consumption" (Kuhn 1985: 19) that are far from being 'the real'.

Alternatively, women see stereotypes at work. Sexism often involves stereotypes where women are the "analysis of character" (Neale 1993: 41). More often than not, women are portrayed as 'dumb' or 'bimbos' who have only their looks and bodies to flaunt. Though readers knew the content was on Jaymee's life as an actress-model, there is yet a possibility where such a text with appealing photographs was to deliver the message that women are nevertheless seen as 'bimbos' and powerless as compared to men. With the shifting attention from 'entertainment' to 'stereotype', it shows how a media text could be approached and read differently by its audiences.

With the focus on femininity and female sexuality discourses, it is no doubt that the media text would include sexy images of a woman - Jaymee - , along with questions corresponding to the identified discourses - "What would you say to talking it all off for the camera?" and "Do you think you are sexy?" (Appendix 2) This brings me to the next point on the techniques of narration required by the audience to make sense of the text.

Although meanings are produced through discourses, meanings interpreted depend not only on the discourses of a text. Rather, they depend also on other contexts such as individual knowledge and understanding. In this case, before the media text can have an 'effect' or satisfy a 'need', notions of femininity and female sexuality must first be appropriated as meaningful discourses and be "meaningfully decoded" (Hall 1993: 93) along with other contexts.

To understand the concept of a woman's femininity and female sexuality, the audience must have knowledge about women: what kind of clothing or makeup are considered sexy and feminine, what does clothed and unclothed bodies tell, how photographs construct 'ways of viewing' and to be able to relate the concept with subjects who personify the discourse (Britney Spears, for example). Once the audience understand these conditions attached to the concept, any representation of it would make sense.

While the 'preferred meaning' of the media text could be light reading with pleasure, the audience could think otherwise – as entertainment or stereotyping. Therefore, they are not implied readers who consent to the 'preferred meaning' but are instead, resisting readers

based on the "negotiated code" (Hall 1993: 102) who see meanings as differential and not fixed.

To conclude, 'reading' is not only about the capacity to decode signs but also about understanding representations by interpreting meanings through discourses and wider contexts. A media text may have an intended discourse but unless the readers have the acquired knowledge to decode the text, representations would not be understood. Even if representations were understood, readers' perception of meanings would differ according to various readings protocols, hence the reason why meanings are not fixed.

Word Count: 1115 words

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