

## The Encoding / Decoding Model on Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as a Thing

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### ABSTRACT

John Keats, a main figure in the second generation of Romantic poets, was not generally well received by his contemporary critics, though during the course of time, he has become one of the most beloved poets. Stuart Hall proposes an analytical model of communication, namely the encoding/decoding model, which assumes a complex structure of relations to be produced and sustained through linked but distinctive moments which are termed as production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction. This paper employs Hall's encoding/decoding communication model as a yardstick to move beyond his approach, which mainly addresses modern mass media and communication system, and relate the distinctive moments playing integrally in encoding and decoding to Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819). Furthermore, there is an attempt to turn the spotlight on the ode's durability after the French Revolution passions abate and the poem starts to gain its thingness.

Keywords: Stuart Hall; Keats; encoding; decoding; thingness; Grecian urn.

### INTRODUCTION

Stuart Hall (1932- 2014) the Jamaican-born cultural theorist and sociologist, along with Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, was one of the founding figures of the school of thought known as *British Cultural Studies*. Hall's propositions primarily address representation, identity, hegemony and cultural studies. A favorite social site to be profoundly analyzed was mass media communication taken into fuller account through his encoding/decoding model of communication which, like textual analysis, focuses on the scope of negotiation and opposition on the part of the audience. Critical of the long held traditional "mass-communication research" which "has conceptualized the process of communication in terms of a circulation circuit or loop", Hall openly takes a semiotic approach developing his mindset on how media messages are produced, circulated, consumed, and finally reproduced (Hall et al. 2005, p. 117). A text- be it a movie, book, or even a poem- is not simply passively accepted by the audience but interpreted by them based on their individual experience and cultural background. A text may have no objective meaning, but it contains a variety of objectively describable features. The response of a

particular reader is the joint product of the reader's own horizon of expectations and the confirmations, disappointments, refutations, and reformulations of these expectations. There is a dialectic or dialogue between a text and the horizons of successive readers.

Stuart Hall takes into consideration "the way in which culture organizes everyday life" (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002, p. 92). The concept and core of culture have constantly been of paramount notice, especially since mid-nineteenth century and Matthew Arnold's series of periodical essays collected as *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). In this work Arnold argues that culture is then "properly described not as having its origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a study of perfection" (pp. 44-5). Then if it is a study of harmonious perfection, culture holds a significant function to mankind as it "consists in becoming something rather than in having something, in an inward condition of the mind and spirit, not in an outward set of circumstances" (p. 48). Nonetheless the perfection ideal of culture is not so vigorously escalated by succeeding critics and some of them, namely Stuart Hall, tend to perceive culture as a semiotic phenomenon encompassing discourse and representation. This paper tends to address Hall's

encoding/decoding communication model as a yardstick to relate the distinctive moments playing integrally in encoding and decoding to Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819). It should be noted that Hall's communication model typically applies to mass media and the proposed moments, namely production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction, are basically expected in mass media analysis, nevertheless a broader application can make sense when addressing the reception of poems at a particular period of time. In other words, it could assist us to take a moderately novel look at a historical communication medium, being a poem, and look into its good or poor reception in the era wherein it was composed. With this task being accomplished, we will mark the poem's durability long after its first appearance, while taking note of the *Thing Theory* and *Thingness* proposed by modern thinkers, the key figures of which should include Bill Brown, Jane Bennett and Daniel Miller.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), a German philosopher, became a founding figure of German idealism in his own right and is nowadays appreciated for his original insights into the nature of self-consciousness and subjectivity. Fichte daringly invites us to look from the point of view of the object and collapses the distinction between subject and object by showing "how the very thought of an object is indistinguishable from the object's call or summons to the thinker" (Cole, 2013, p. 107). Here he refers to the call of things, the demands that objects make upon subjects: "The objects are not comprehended, and cannot be other than bare summons calling upon the subject to act" (Cole, 2013, pp. 107-8). Upon pursuing the call of things, a number of leading concepts comes in handy to carry out this comparatively analytical study integrating Stuart Hall's groundbreaking communication model with the propositions brought up in thing theory studies. These concepts should include "the thingness of objects" (Brown, 2001, p. 4), "the incalculability of the thing" (Bennett, 2012, p. 242) and pottery craft as "less verbose practice" (Bennett, 2012, p. 242). In regarding Hall's model, several exclusive terms come into view, including hegemonic viewpoint, discursive forms, arbitrary linguistic signs and dominant discourses. The interplay built among these culturally-pregnant concepts and terms, while keeping a glimpse at the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary compulsions born out of the French Revolution, would make way toward working out the reception of Keats's *Ode* during and after his life time. In simple terms, Keats' poems, particularly *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, hardly ever passed successfully through the last moments, distribution and reproduction, Hall pro-

poses, because ideas rich in revolutionary impetus were better consumed and reproduced than those poetic lines which appeared less prone to the current revolutionary thoughts.

## THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND LITERARY REVOLUTION

Many commentators such as William Hazlitt drew a direct correlation between socio-political revolution and literary revolution as a consequence in Britain. It may be claimed there was a fairly precocious precedent for such a correlation in the 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* hinting at Wordsworth's idea of a necessary connection between 'society' and 'literature':

Several of my Friends are anxious for the success of these poems...on this account they have advised me to prefix a systematic defense of the theory, upon which the poems were written. But I was unwilling to undertake the task.... For to treat that subject with the clearness and coherence, of which I believe it susceptible, it would be necessary to give a full account of the present state of the public taste in this country, and to determine how far this taste is healthy or depraved; which again could not be, without pointing out, in what manner language and the human mind act and react on each other, and without retracing the revolutions not of literature alone but likewise of society itself' (Day, 1996, pp. 85-6).

Feverous compulsions, as consequences of the French revolution, never ceased in figures' minds and pens but were given fuller voice through the communication media- books and articles. In *The Prelude* William Wordsworth "evokes from the unbounded and hence impossible hopes in the French Revolution a central Romantic doctrine; one which reverses the cardinal neoclassic ideal of setting only accessible goals, by converting what had been man's tragic error- the inordinancy of his 'pride' that persists in setting infinite aims for finite man- into his specific glory and his triumph" (Day, 1996, p. 98). The revolution had already built revolutionary ideology- either physical or mental- in the society and its discourses were constructed and encoded by men of letters. Such a connection between the revolution and English literature is articulated by Edward Dowden in *The French Revolution and English Literature* (1897):

The closing years of the eighteenth century and the opening years of the nineteenth... are pre-eminent for the keenness and intensity of the lyrical cry in literature. A vast epic, however, of

historical struggle, of national aspiration and national effort [The French Revolution], was being unrolled before the eyes of men. It did not stifle the lyrical cry of the Romantic poets, but it added a breadth and volume to their passions. (p. 158)

By the same token, M. H. Abrams contends that Romantic poets were almost all centrally political and social (Day, 1996, p. 94). Yet despite the dominant revolutionary discourses underpinned during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, not all writers represented them in the communication media via which messages were encoded. In Hall's words, the hegemonic viewpoint "defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture" (Hall, 1980, p. 137). However, Keats's unwavering love of beauty and pleasure was accompanied by his detachment from the excitement and turmoil stirred by the French revolution which defined a large part of the mental horizon of possible meanings in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century English culture. Least concerned with the social issues of life, Keats is said to hold the distinction of being the most romantic of romantics, with his poems being composed for the sake of poetry and pleasure, being no palpable propaganda for the propagation of certain objectives. Contrary to many of his major English poets such as Wordsworth and Shelly, Keats kept his distance from revolutionary goings-on and led a life busy with the beauty of nature and proneness to it. His disengagement from the political issues obsessing many of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars can be implicitly traced in his suggestion of negative capability which invites thinkers to be capable of being in 'uncertainties, mysteries and doubts' and not to involve personal feelings in poetry. Yet 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are generally marked by revolutionary discourses suggestive of commitment to revolutionizing the world, either the outer or inner world. Whereas most of the Romantic poets came under the influence of French revolution, Keats remained the ardent lover of sensual imagery, as his "Endymion" suggests that "A thing of beauty is a joy forever" (1899, p. 49). Running along the same venues, Stopford Brook (2013) remarks that:

The ideas that awoke the youthful passion of Wordsworth, of Coleridge, that stirred the wrath of Scott, that worked like yeast in Byron and brought forth new matter, that Shelley re clothed and made into a prophecy of the future the excitement, the turmoil, the life and death struggle which gathered round the Revolution were ignored and unrepresented by Keats... in Keats the ideas of the Revolution have disappeared. He has, in spite of a few passages and till quite the end of his career, no vital

interest in the present, none in man as a whole, none in the political movement of human thought, none in the future of mankind, none in liberty, equality, or fraternity, no interest in anything but beauty. (pp. 197-8).

In his ode, Keats is amazed at the vain ecstasy and struggle pursued by people: "What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?" (9-10). Although he plainly notes the despair over the goal of kissing her which may almost never be accomplished, he consoles the 'Fair youth' with her eternity being preserved as long as the artistic Grecian urn keeps back the scythe of time. Nearly winning the goal of kissing her, the fair youth should never grieve as she is always fair:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;  
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (15-20)

The robustness and productivity of the Romantic life is no surprise since the romanticists were encouraged, stimulated and justified by historical circumstances in the wake of the French Revolution, but mainly in a spiritual manner, though, the Romantic figures "did not all laud the notion of politically revolutionary tendencies in Romanticism" (Dowden, 1897, p. 90). Keats is better known as the poet of *Beauty* but it should not overshadow Keats's latent or even unconscious impression drawn from the current discourses which manifests itself in his idea of *Negative Capability*; it is akin to a spiritual revolution sprouting from inside, especially after the drastic despair and disillusionment following the outside revolution: "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats, 1970, p. 43). Man's capability of receptivity to the world and its natural marvel, while rejecting the predetermined formulated theories and categorical knowledge, releases him from the yoke of the predetermined, which is implicitly a manifestation of a kind of revolution, but it is a far cry from the hegemonic viewpoint of revolution propagated in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; his revolution lies in man's susceptibility to nature and beauty, not to the excitement and wrath stirred by the French revolution. The ode hails the reader to the immortal nature displaying ever-piping songs, which are 'unwearing' and always new, and boughs never bidding the spring adieu:

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed  
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;  
And, happy melodist, unwearied,

For ever piping songs for ever new;  
 More happy love! more happy, happy love!  
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,  
 For ever panting, and for ever young; (21-27)

Then no wonder his poems rarely got through the consumption moment and subsequently through the reproduction moment. In other terms detached from the dominant discourses awaking the passion and stirring the wrath and turmoil in many writers, his poems, being replete with sensual imagery and lacking in the vital interest of hegemonic literary viewpoint, could not easily draw attention to be consumed and reproduced by a wide audience. In fact, Keats encodes mainly the aesthetic aspects of Romanticism rather than revolutionary-pregnant ones, so his poems- in particular *Ode on a Grecian Urn*- were not comparatively welcomed by the wider audience. As mentioned earlier, the Revolution had largely affected Romantic generations- both the first- and second generations in different ways. Hancock (1899) clarifies on the impact of the French Revolution “bringing with it the promise of a brighter day, the promise of regenerated man and regenerated earth” (p. 47). He stresses the fact that it was received with joy and acclamation by “the oppressed, by the ardent lovers of humanity, by the poets whose task it is to voice the human spirit”, and among these poets were “two young Englishmen, Wordsworth and Coleridge, both at first full of faith in the great promise” (pp. 47-8). Although they initially sympathized with the philosophical and political principles of the Revolution, some writers, after the bloody turn of the Revolution and the emergence of the Reign of Terror, took on more conservative politics later in life. Hancock explains: “Then the Revolution failed; and with its failure came violence, bloodshed, and chaos”, however they did not necessarily refrain from any sort of revolution, but “these young men, once so ardent, now fearful, or, if you choose, now more wise, joined the ranks of the conservatives and the lost leaders” and it is obvious that “even in the face of failure and multitudinous horrors the spirits of Revolution still survived” (p. 48). The Revolution brought along a dramatic change in the constitution of the society “which should ameliorate the earthly condition of man and insure him against the oppression of despotic rulers” (p. 48). Hancock further argues that the revolutionary ideas “were the historic foundations of the golden promise of the Revolution” which swept away the past “to change the figure, like a flood” (p. 49). The flood in political life left its significant mark on the poetical life as well. However, despaired of the outer Revolution, some poets gravitated towards revolutionizing their inner world after witnessing fresh bloodshed and terror. Thanks to the newly

acquired freedom of the common people, the spirit of Revolution directed many writers, particularly Wordsworth and Shelley, to write for and about working men and the like.

Prior to the French Revolution, however, literary works emphasized restraint, self-control, and common sense and they mainly addressed aristocrats and clergy, and rarely the working men. Motivated by the revolutionary spirit, the writers brimmed over with new ideas and awaited a chance to unleash them. Many of them turned to ordinary lives to portray and pieces that the common man could relate to. Peter Kemp, in *Encyclopædia Britannica online*, argues that “fresh ideals came to the fore; in particular, the ideal of freedom, long cherished in England, was being extended to every range of human endeavor” (para 2). The most notable feature of literary pieces is the emergence of individualism and imagination while “the main trend of 18th-century poetics had been to praise the general, to see the poet as a spokesman of society addressing a cultivated and homogeneous audience and having as his end the conveyance of ‘truth’” (para 3). The poet became an individual strongly relying on his perceptions and the workings of his own mind. Feeling and imagination became the finest criteria to define the Romantic poetry as Wordsworth’s famous statement of spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings indicates the emphasis put on feelings, which implicitly bring forth sincerity and naturalness.

#### LINGUISTIC CODES IN *ODE ON A GRECIAN URN*

Keats employs the rhetorical device *ekphrasis*, which is “the intense pictorial description of an object...to evoke an image in the mind’s eye as intense as if the described object were actually before the reader” (Cuddon, 1998, p. 252). Keats intensely relates pottery as a medium of art to poetry as another medium of art by defining and describing its essence and form. His ode yields resemblance by imagery to the eye a visible representation of the painting on the urn. It goes without saying that the Greek urn transcends a merely silent sensual object via the linguistic codes giving voice to this otherwise mute art object. Basically the urn as an object turns into a thing since “less verbose practice [pottery in here] is probably better suited to the task of acknowledging the call of things” (Bennett, 2012, p. 242). The art of pottery and painting silently provoke the poet’s imagination as the urn is a “foster-child of silence and slow time” (2) which was created from stone by an artist encoding the message(s) through no words but “unheard” sweeter melodies. Contrary to Neo-

classical stress on man's finitude, reason, attempted objectivity, conformity and mechanical form, Keats underlies spontaneity, intuition and organic form: "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of the Imagination-What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth-whether it existed before or not" (Keats, 1970, pp. 36-7). On the same mainstream, it is not "the sensual ear" to which the unheard melodies are played:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter: therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone: Fair youth,  
beneath the trees, thou canst not leave. Thy song,  
nor ever can those trees be bare; (11-16)

In relation to Hall's communication model, before the production of meaning and message, there would precede frameworks of knowledge and relations of production which exist embedded in the dominant discourses. As mentioned earlier, revolutionary discourses of freedom and disposal of despotic rulers were rather pervasive during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Britain and had been encoded and decoded by many thinkers and even common people to their own perception. By decoding, it is not meant simply basic recognition and comprehension of what a text says but the interpretation and evaluation of its meaning with respect to the relevant codes, though there is unlikely full consensus on the decoded meanings amongst the intended audience, since "decodings do not follow inevitably from encodings" and there exists "no necessary correspondence" (Hall et al. 2005, p. 125). Following up the argument further into social hypothetical positions of readers, Hall identifies three major positions for them, namely "dominant-hegemonic position" through which the audience (exclusively the reader concerned in this paper) takes the connoted meaning full and straight; "the negotiated code or position" containing a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements; and finally "the oppositional code" decoding the message in a contrary way (Hall et al. 2005, pp. 125, 127). Should the last hypothetical position be taken by the majority of audience towards a communication medium, being a poem in this study, they will definitely "detotalize" the message in the preferred code or find it incompatible with their decoded meanings, thus the message and subsequently the poem will not effectively pass through the consumption and reproduction moments, which often failed to meet some of Keats's poems. The revolution, as mentioned earlier in Hancock's words, was received with joy and acclamation by the poets whose task is to voice the human spirit; the spirit being mainly defined as a free and revolutionary one whose end is to rebel against the

despotic rulers. Keats, however, remained the ardent lover of sensual imagery and beauty by all means. In his 1817 letter to his brother, Keats (1899) expressly suggests that "with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" (p. 277). Such a strong belief in pure beauty far exceeded the public taste, so after the production moment, it could not have been circulated and finally reproduced.

As discussed earlier, the response of a particular reader is the joint product of the reader's own horizon of expectations and the confirmations, disappointments, refutations, and reformulations of these expectations. There is a dialectic or dialogue between a text and the horizons of successive readers. Once this dialogue is not built up between a text and a reader, the reproduction moment is hardly met and the text, being an ode here, is not received appropriately. Based on Hall's model, one reason could be that ideas rich in revolutionary impetus were better consumed and reproduced than those poetic lines which appeared less prone to the current revolutionary thoughts and kept distance from the current goings on of his time. In other terms, Keats encodes mainly the aesthetic aspects of Romanticism rather than revolutionary-pregnant ones.

With the passage of time, despair and disillusion arose but transported the outside revolutionary despair into an inside revolutionary hope and elation which are encoded as "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter" (Keats, 1899, p. 135) as if those melodies outside sound infertile but those unheard (inside) fertile. This message as a social production, which is produced by the medium of poetry, has to be circulated, distributed and reproduced in the discursive form by the reader to have the circulation of the product live on. If the message is not taken, there can be no 'consumption' and "if the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect" (Hall et al. 2005, p. 117). Keats's statement "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" reveals his unwavering faith on beauty and the truth arising from it, but this claim could not have been decoded as an effective representation of the present political movement of human thought in a society most of whose major figures are practically oriented toward revolutionary discourses.

Keats, born and raised in a middle-class family, grieved over the cold shoulders given to him since his poems seemed not to have been distributed and hence consumed under the shadow of the dominant-hegemonic discourses of revolution which were never as pronounced in his poems as in his contemporaries. With *Ode on a Grecian Urn* set as an example, the

encoded messages do not perfectly satisfy "a need" and are not "put to a use" (Hall et al. 2005: 119), thus the reception is not built with the reader. Based on Hall's model, the audience are barely passive receivers and they actively participate in the production process in a larger sense along with the production itself, though the latter is predominant because it is "the point of departure for the realization of the message" (Hall et al. 2005, p. 119). Elasmar and Hunter (2012) similarly contend that "the individual audience members are not passive receivers of television messages; rather, audiences actively choose among the many available messages" (p. 50). In a comparable way, R. S. White (1987) contends that for Keats reading provides "a simultaneous continuum between passivity and active creation" and the words he is reading are supposed "to be activated by the reader's relationship with them, which may change from time to time even when the same reader reads the same text" (pp. 21-2). Given that, Keats was certainly not heedless of the co-operative relationship where "reader and text become indissolubly united in a moment of creativity" (22). Coping with the dramatic change caused by the revolution which struck English people like a flood, readers, assumed as active participants of a text could not be expected to gravitate to an ode which appears unaffected by the suffering and hardship inflicting upon them. The urn itself is "unravish'd," or pure: "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time" (1-2); the trees never have to deal with losing their leaves: "Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed/Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu" (21-22); and even the violent sacrifice of a cow hasn't been committed yet: "Who are these coming to the sacrifice? / To what green altar, O mysterious priest, / Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies, / And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?" (31-4).

Brought up in a middle-class community and often ill and in debt, Keats never appealed to a good number of attentive audiences, so the communication circuit can have been disrupted at distribution or consumption moment, so his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*- similar to his other poems- was not approached justly at his life time. As Hall suggests, a message would be received at a specific stage if it is recognizable or appropriate, but seemingly the ode's message was not well recognized in its immediate reception. The first response to the ode came in an anonymous review in the July 1820 *Monthly Review* claiming that "Mr Keats displays no great nicety in his selection of images. . . he thinks that anything or object in nature is a fit material on which the poet may work . . . Can there be a more pointed conceit than this address to

the Piping Shepherds on a Grecian Urn?" (Matthews, 1971, p. 162). Josiah Condor, the editor of the British literary magazine *The Eclectic Review*, argues that:

Mr. Keats, seemingly, can think or write of scarcely anything else than the 'happy pieties' of Paganism. A Grecian Urn throws him into an ecstasy: its 'silent form,' he says, 'doth tease us out of thought as doth Eternity,'- a very happy description of the bewildering effect which such subjects have at least had upon his own mind; and his fancy having thus got the better of his reason, we are the less surprised at the oracle which the Urn is made to utter. (Matthews, 1971, p. 237)

Matthews then goes on critiquing 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' in fairly harsh words which may have left their marks on Keats's sensitive spirit: "That is, all that Mr Keats knows or cares to know. But till he knows much more than this, he will never write verses fit to live" (p. 237).

With the dominant-hegemonic revolutionary discourses less pronounced, Keats does not utterly keep away from his current ideology as he subtly reverses neoclassic ideal of only accessible goals in his ode when emboldening the lover not to grieve though he can barely gratify his desire:

Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
Though winning near the goal - yet, do not grieve;  
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (17-20)

### THE URN AS A THING

Poetry, as a communicative medium, embeds arbitrary linguistic signs that are more or less products of conventions. Subsequently the farther from the conventional discourses, the less reception from the audience; Hall argues that "the articulation of an arbitrary sign- whether visual or verbal- with the concept of a referent is the product not of nature but of convention, and the conventionalism of discourses requires the intervention, the support of codes" (Hall et al. 2005, p. 121). With that given, despite comparably little attention to Keats's ode during his life time, principally due to the asymmetry of its encoded messages with the dominant ideological discourses which basically favored revolutionary ideas and moves imbued with anarchism and liberalism, it started to receive more scholarly appreciation after the heat of revolution nearly diminished, concurrent with which Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, in Brown's terms, began to gain its thingness: "we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us [. . .] when their

flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested” (Brown, 2001, p. 4). In simple terms, once an object breaks down or is used contrary to our expectations, it no longer serves its common function and it casts away its socially encoded value and appears to us in new ways by suspending our habits of seeing it. Hence, Brown continues, the story of objects “asserting themselves as things” is the story of “a changed relationship to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (p. 4). Comparatively speaking, the Grecian urn has already shed its socially recurring encoded value and been transformed from an object into a thing as it no longer serves the function of an urn but that of a raconteur of a flowery tale which narrates the story of deities and mortals, men and gods, bold lover and fair beloved. It far exceeds a common urn to preserve water or the like, but it becomes the preserver of sweet unheard melodies. The urn has gotten rid of the common circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, thus it has gained its thingness. Now it is a thing worth of being narrated.

Historically speaking, the ode’s asymmetry with the dominant ideological discourses began to disappear as time blurred them in the ensuing years and the ode raised from the ashes and drew increasingly close attention. To Matthew Arnold’s acclaim, the passage describing the little town “is Greek, as Greek as a thing from Homer or Theocritus; it is composed with the eye on the object, a radiancy and light clearness being added” (1971, p. 378). Sidney Colvin (1920) also lauds the ode as a masterpiece: “while imagery drawn from the sculptures on Greek vases was still floating through his mind, he was able to rouse himself to a stronger effort and produce a true masterpiece in his famous *Ode on a Grecian Urn*” (p. 415). Featuring the imagery drawn from the sculptures, the poem depicts the Grecian Urn as an eternal thing which should transcend any confinement of time and place since it is the child of ‘slow time’:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,  
 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express  
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:  
 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape  
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?  
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?  
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?  
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (1-10)

Evidently John Keats, either consciously or unconsciously, had fathomed the thingness of the urn and

the incalculability leading to its retreat from the ruthless time which has not ravished it yet. The urn can express the history in a flowery tale free of any verbal or written rhyme because it is no longer an object but a beautiful thing which sweetly tells the truth that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (49). Ironically the poet understates the written codes to elate the visual codes of the urn, thus “a flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme” (4), “those unheard / Are sweeter” (11-12), its happy boughs never shed leaves “nor ever bid the Spring adieu” (22), “For ever piping songs for ever new” (24) and the urn “shalt remain, in midst of other woe” (47). Such poetic remarks in one way or another lend elation to the ode itself as the poem is portraying an eternal thing being encoded via the linguistic codes of the poem.

On the other hand in 1819 there was no TV or internet to entertain Keats, therefore sitting around and staring at old pottery could have enthralled the poet and he would have engaged himself with the urn: “when we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object” (Brown, 2001, p. 7). Hence, it is more than history lying within the urn and subsequently in the poem which transcends the worn, tough surface of the urn; it is the *void* constituted by the urn and poem; it is, as Brown explains, all those “spaces within [...] that enables us to image and imagine human interiority” (p. 7). Thus not a merely verbose object does portray human interiority more accurately than an object having retained its thingness. Keats represents his own interior through the urn’s depicted scenes and once the urn as an object gains its thingness, it encodes the message lying somehow within the human interiority:

When old age shall this generation waste,  
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
 "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," - that is all  
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (46-50)

## CONCLUSION

Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding communication model is best suited for the analysis and description of televisual images and mass media and how the dominant and hegemonic discourses are encoded within them under the influence of the frameworks of knowledge and relations of production. However, his model can comparatively address the historical reception of other sorts of communication media such as poetry and take into account how a poem is received at a particular era. Keats’s *Ode on a Grecian*

*Urn* was barely welcomed by his contemporaries. Many of whom were brimming over with the revolutionary impulse of the French Revolution. Yet with the decline of the revolutionary compulsion, the ode posthumously emerged and began to gain its thingness and durability. In the course of time, the eternity of the painted scenes entailing the ode's durability preserve it from, in Shakespeare's words, time's "scythe to mow". Taking recourse to the images drawn from pottery as 'less verbose practice', the ode receives wider audience, especially among the academia, by calling forth its thingness.

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