

# Topic on a Page

## Theoretical Perspectives

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## RECAPPING SEMIOTICS

**Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913)** proposed that every sign is made up of two elements:

1. **Signifier** – The form of a sign – something which can be seen, heard, touched, smelt or tasted, e.g. *Thumbs up*
2. **Signified** – The idea or meaning conveyed by the signifier, e.g. *The idea that you have done a good job*

**Sign = Signifier + Signified**

- The relationship between these two elements communicates **meaning** to the audience
- One cannot exist without the other – audiences will always interpret the **signifier** and connect meaning to it, even if that meaning is confusion
- The interpretation of the **signified** can depend on its context and the personal experiences and ideas of the consumer

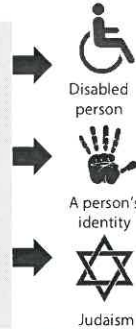
**SEMIOTICS** is the study of how **signs** communicate meaning in our culture



A **SIGN** is the smallest unit of meaning, e.g. a word, or part of an image

**Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914)** proposed the **triadic model** – there are **three** different types of sign, each of which has a level of relativity to that which is being represented

- 1 **Iconic sign** – Holds physical similarities to the object it signifies and resembles what it stands for
- 2 **Indexical sign** – Holds some physical or literal connection to what is signified, although there is no direct resemblance
- 3 **Arbitrary sign/symbol** – Bears no physical or literal resemblance to what is signified – the meaning it conveys is a culturally accepted convention that must be learnt



## BARTHES' FIVE CODES (1915–1980)



**Roland Barthes (1915–1980)** was a French philosopher and semiotician who was heavily inspired by the work of Saussure. His work on the 'system of signs' has contributed massively to **structuralist** theory and has made him one of the twentieth century's most important cultural theorists.

Barthes was revered for taking a **semiotic** approach to the study of narrative. He suggested that there are **five** codes that media producers regularly employ in narratives to create meaning for an audience to interpret:

- 1 **The hermeneutic/enigma code** – anything in a text that is not fully explained, thereby setting up a puzzle for the audience to solve. This is designed to generate intrigue.
- 2 **The proairetic/action code** – minor units of action that lead to narrative progression. Multiple codes of this type tend to follow on chronologically from one another in a process of 'cause and effect', i.e. *one often leads to another*
- 3 **The referential/cultural code** – references in a text that can be understood with a good knowledge of news, events and culture, both contemporary and historical
- 4 **The semantic code** – something in a text that **connotes** more than just a surface level of meaning and significance
- 5 **The symbolic code** – non-literal meanings in a text that use **binary opposites** to demonstrate meaning

Signifier →



Signified →

Person 1: Skull and crossbones

Person 2: Pirate ship

Person 3: Danger

## SEMIOTICS



## FURTHER SIGNIFICATION

Barthes explains semiotics in a similar way to Saussure through a process of **signification**. He argues that there are two levels of signification:

1. **Denotation** – The literal, or universally agreed upon, meaning of a sign or symbol
2. **Connotation** – The meanings audiences associate with the sign or symbol based on their own broader experiences and knowledge of the world

Barthes acknowledged the complexity of this process and proposed that there is an **order of signification**:

**The first order of signification** is denotation, by which the audience reads the literal meaning of the object, word or image. At this level, a picture of a Cadillac would signify a car.

**The second order of signification** is connotation, by which the audience connects the denoted object, word or image with their own broader cultural concepts and values. At this level, a picture of the same Cadillac might signify wealth or speed or a specific road trip the viewer took.



**Denotation** – A yellow triangle with thick black outline. In the centre there is a small black circle surrounded by three wave-shaped blocks

**Connotation** – Many would understand this as the international sign warning against radiation poisoning. They would also acknowledge 'yellow' as a colour used for most warning signs. Certain audiences may recognise the sign from a film or television show. Others, e.g. *children*, might not recognise it at all.

Barthes proposed that there is also a **Third order of signification**

He put forward the idea of '**myths**', i.e. things that society **accepts as innate and true** but which are actually **artificial constructs**

Barthes stated that ideologies are myths, for it can be suggested that many people's beliefs are formed from their personal experience or the content they consume

Barthes believed that myths are often created to fulfil a political agenda – *the National Rifle Association in America notoriously blame mental illness for mass shootings as opposed to the legalisation of guns. This enables them to continue the sale of guns.*

## NATURALISATION OF MYTHS

If a constructed sign or convention is repeated enough, it becomes **naturalised**

Barthes argues that the repeated signs in dominant media texts, e.g. *action heroes are always male*, allow consumers to understand the signs as 'common sense' and **natural** rather than an idea that is constructed



Barthes used this cover of the French magazine *Paris Match* as an example of a myth being naturalised.

The magazine used the picture of a black-skinned soldier in order to show the diversity and greatness of France. This myth diverts audiences from considering the country's historical exploitation of black people through colonialism.

Paris Match © Hachette  
Filipacchi Médias, 1955



# RECAPPING NARRATIVE

**NARRATIVE** refers to the way in which a sequence of events is constructed. It defines how the events are positioned in relation to each other for the benefit of the audience.

**Narrative** is not the same as **Story**

**Story** refers simply to the sequence of events as they happened

If you reshuffle the sequence of events, the story is still the same, but the narrative is now different

Narratives are concerned with: **causality** (one thing leading to another); **time** and **space**

## WHAT DRIVES NARRATIVE?

- Most narrative theories are united in the idea that characters are **primary causal agents**, i.e. *they are the driving force behind narrative*
- Narratives often use **hooks** as a means of gripping the audience and pulling them into the narrative, e.g. *a tense opening scene*
- Cultural tropes** are commonplace themes, plot points and visual cues that appear in a narrative to help the audience's understanding of it

## AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA – KEY TERMS

- Analepsis** – Another word for flashback
- Prolepsis** – Another word for flashforward
- Restricted** – A quality of narratives that withhold information from the audience, usually to invoke mystery and set up a satisfying twist ending
- Omniscient** – A quality of narratives that provides the audience with perspective on all relevant characters and events. This can result in dramatic irony as the audience are more in the know than the characters.

## DIGITAL MEDIA

Developments in online and participatory media are challenging theories of narratology as audiences now have more control over the stories told through these forms. In user-controlled video games, audiences arguably have more control over narrative progression than the producers.



# NARRATOLOGY

Tzvetan Todorov (1939–2017)



- Todorov (1939–2017) was a Bulgarian-French philosopher and **structuralist** literary critic who studied classic folk stories and fairy tales before applying his findings to film and media
- He proposed that most narratives share an **underlying structure**; this is known as the theory of **equilibrium**
- There are five key stages to his proposed structure:

### DON'T FORGET

Todorov applied this structure to **linear narratives**. Many audio-visual products, e.g. *crime dramas, music videos*, will manipulate space and time for dramatic event. **However**, these complex narratives can still be analysed by the criteria of these five stages.



### IDEOLOGY

As well as themes and characters, narratives can **convey ideology**, particularly at the **resolution** stage.

For example, the narrative construction of *Get Out* tells us something about writer-director Jordan Peele's ideology – that black people, particularly in America, live in fear of white people because they hold systematic power in society. However, Chris's escape (**resolution**) could imply hope that black people will, one day, be able to live free of fear from the legacy of slavery and racism in America.

- Equilibrium:** The opening of the narrative in which the world is in a state of balance; there is no major conflict between characters
- Disruption:** The point at which the state of balance is disturbed by a key action or event
- Recognition:** The point at which the protagonist acknowledges balance must be restored
- Resolution:** The characters attempt to solve the conflict and restore some kind of balance
- New equilibrium:** The conflict has been resolved so a new equilibrium is established

## EXAMPLE – *GET OUT* (2017)

Period of imbalance

**Equilibrium** – Chris, a black man, heads out for a weekend away to meet his white girlfriend's parents

**Disruption:** His girlfriend's family behave strangely towards him making inapt observations about his race

**Recognition:** When he is imprisoned, Chris learns the family's plan to transfer a white man's brain into his body

**Resolution:** Chris manages to escape the house, killing all members of the family in the process

**New equilibrium:** Chris is picked up and driven home by his friend but is traumatised by his experience

THERE ARE SEVERAL DIFFERENT TYPES OF NARRATIVE:

2

**CLOSED** – A narrative with a clear beginning, middle and end. It ends in a state of equilibrium, e.g. *The Lion King* (1994), *Jaws* (1975)

**OPEN** – A type of narrative with no clear or definitive conclusion – the story continues on after the text has stopped, e.g. *The Simpsons* (1989–), *EastEnders* (1985–)

**MULTISTRAND** – Multiple different story threads and characters, often overlapping or intertwining, e.g. *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), *Love Actually* (2003)

**LINEAR** – A narrative in which the events are told/presented in chronological order as they are in the real world, e.g. *The Dark Knight* (2008), *1917* (2019)

**NONLINEAR** – A narrative in which the events are told/presented out of chronological order, unlike the real world, through flashbacks, reverse-ordered stories, time travel, etc., e.g. *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Lost* (2004–2010)

**CIRCULAR** – A narrative that returns to the very place it began from e.g. *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), *Memento* (2000)



Vladimir Propp (1895–1970)

## GOOD TO KNOW

- Vladimir Propp** is another primary example of a theorist who believed that narratives are driven by the actions of characters
- Propp analysed Soviet folklore and proposed that characters in narratives can be classified into **eight** different categories:

**Hero** – The protagonist of the story. Embarks upon a journey motivated by the lack or loss of something.

**Villain** – Antagonistic character who wants to prevent the hero from completing their journey

**Princess** – Acts as the object of the hero's desire. They are usually acquired by the hero at the end of the story – Also referred to as the **Reward**.

**Dispatcher** – Sends the hero on a journey and illustrates the importance of that journey

**Donor** – Provides the hero with either an object or the advice they need to complete their journey

**Princess's father** – Presents the hero with the reward/princess at the end of the journey

**Helper** – Aids the hero on their journey – often referred to as a **sidekick**

**False hero** – Raises complications or tries to take credit for the hero's actions in order to obtain the reward





**GENRE CATEGORISATION** is a way of grouping texts which share common attributes and characteristics.

# GENRE

- Texts that share similar codes and conventions in terms of **form**, **style** and **content** are grouped into genres
- However, genre labels – horror, comedy, drama, etc. – are not rigidly fixed. They are fluid.

## SUBGENRES

These can be defined as smaller categories within a larger, 'parent' genre. By breaking down a broad genre into smaller parts, the niche interests of audiences can be appealed to with more precision.

## GENRE HYBRIDITY

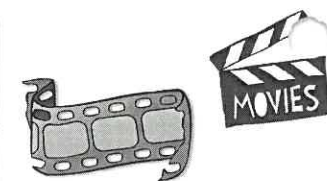
This arises when a text does not precisely fit into one single category but instead holds the conventions of two or more different genres. Unlike **subgenres**, hybrids do not fall under the bracket of a 'parent' genre – they are something new entirely

These are the two key ways in which genres borrow from, and overlap with, one another – something Neale identifies as commonplace

## HISTORY AND CULTURE – GENRE POPULARITY

Genres and their popularity are emblematic of both audience trends and evolving cultural views.

For example, Hollywood cinema throughout the 1970s was notably more pessimistic, explicit and realistic than it had ever been before. Audiences were becoming increasingly aware of social inequality due to the civil rights movement and the second wave of feminism. They had also been exposed to news footage of the Vietnam War and the horrific Sharon Tate murders – many believe that Hollywood films were responding to these shifts in American society.



# GENRE THEORY

Steve Neale

The way in which the genre of a media text is classified depends on the media form. Print media can be categorised in various ways:

**Structure** → The ways in which iconography and technical codes are arranged in texts, as well as the themes, locations and character types used in the text

**Blueprint** → The way in which producers analyse industry trends and create content based on what the contemporary culture is showing a desire for

**Label** → The way in which genres invite a sense of shared understanding between producers and audiences. Audiences can use labels to communicate their desire for more of a particular genre to industry gatekeepers.

**Contract** → The way in which audiences have expectations of certain genres. If a genre text fails to meet these expectations, audiences may cease to support the work of that producer.

## Why repetition appeals to audiences

Audiences enjoy having their expectations met – genres offer comfort and familiarity

It is easier to identify meaning in a media text with a contextual knowledge of its genre

It is easy for audiences to select the media they want to consume based on their existing knowledge of genres

## Why variation and difference appeal to audiences

Most audiences like to be challenged and to experience something 'new' whenever they consume a media text

When audiences have a strongly cultivated knowledge of a particular genre, it can be satisfying when a text within that genre subverts expectations

Neale also explored the extent to which media institutions rely on genres to ensure high audience engagement and maximised profit. Here are the reasons why genres appeal to producers:

- Producers gain an understanding of how to construct content in a way that has proven audience appeal
- They provide quick and easy ways of categorising audiences and of targeting them effectively
- They allow producers to hire skilled personnel who have specific skills relative to that genre
- Tried and tested formulas offer a financial safety net
- Creates clear channels of distribution for media texts that fall under the same category as previously successful media texts
- Previously successful media texts within the same genre can be used to inspire marketing strategies

**Steve Neale** (1950–) is a professor at Exeter University who studies genre, particularly in relation to Hollywood cinema.  
**Note:** His findings can be, **and have been**, applied to other media forms

He proposed that...

- The key to genre is not just the repetition of codes and conventions, but difference and variation as well
- Films will subvert certain conventions and stereotypes so they can differentiate themselves from previous genre entries and not be considered an exact **copy** of a previous film
- The maintaining of genre is a **process** – It is not as simple as drawing upon the same **repertoire of elements** again and again

## REPETITION AND VARIATION

- **Repetition** – Through this process, certain generic conventions can become established and easily identifiable for audiences
- **Variation** – Texts that break the mould are equally important in order to prevent genre stagnation and keep audiences engaged



See how *Joker* (2019) appealed to audiences through the repetition of comic book codes/conventions **and** through variation and difference

Repetition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• References various comic books and graphic novels</li><li>• Featured 'Easter eggs' that probably only fans of previous comic book films would be able to spot</li><li>• Shows a character's transformation from an ordinary person to a supervillain – 'An origin story'</li><li>• Lead actor, Joaquin Phoenix, has star appeal</li></ul>
Variation and difference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Features brutally realistic scenes of violence</li><li>• Focus on themes of class inequality and mental illness</li><li>• Emphasis on dialogue and character over action scenes</li><li>• References to Martin Scorsese films such as <i>Taxi Driver</i> and <i>King of Comedy</i></li></ul>

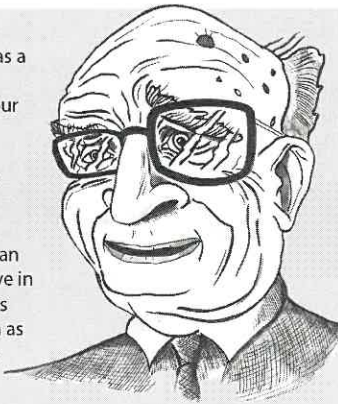
## SUSPENDING DISBELIEF

The success of fictional texts often depends on the extent to which audiences embrace the **internal logic** of the fictional world in question. Neale identified two ways in which audiences measure this:

- **Cultural regime of verisimilitude** – How plausible the fictional text is in comparison to the audience's knowledge of historical and cultural contexts, e.g. *Biopics and historical dramas often invite this form of analysis as they are representing real-life events*
- **Generic regime of verisimilitude** – How plausible the fictional text is in comparison to the audience's knowledge of the laws and rules of the genre, e.g. *science fiction and fantasy films invite this form of analysis as they tend to imagine completely fictional worlds*



- **Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009)** was a French anthropologist who sought to understand human thoughts, behaviour and culture
- He believed that all human cultures shared similar overarching **structures** and that the human brain naturally organises and combines pieces of information to create **models** which can help us make sense of the world we live in
- While studying in the USA, Lévi-Strauss founded the school of thought known as structural anthropology, which is now better known as **structuralism**



# STRUCTURALISM

## Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009)

**Structuralism** is an analytical methodology based on the idea that a single element – such as a thought, an action or a cultural ritual – can only be fully understood when compared to the larger systems that it exists within. In essence, we can only access the full meaning available within a media text if we acknowledge its various connections to other similar texts.

### Defining aspects of structuralism

No text can be understood in isolation

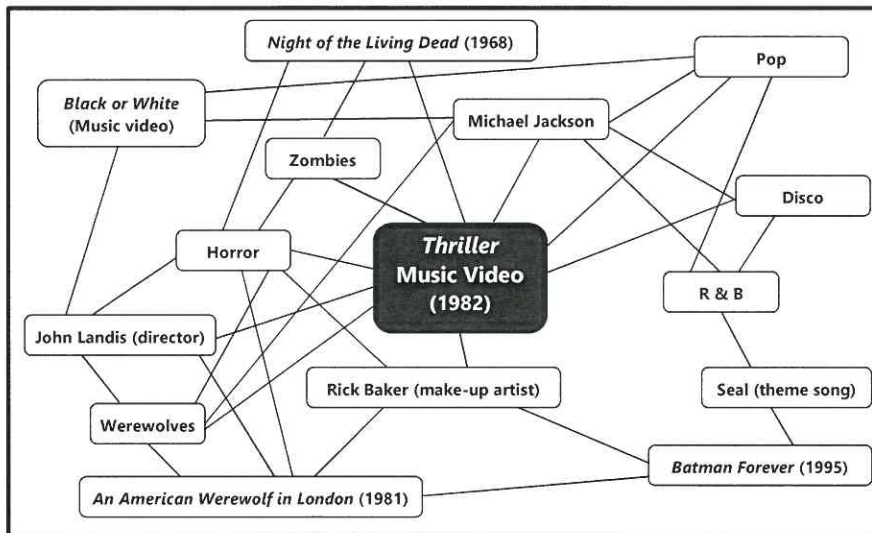
A text exists within greater structures that influence its meaning

For example, every media text is connected to a series of others that share codes, conventions, themes, producers, subject matters, etc.

The diagram (see right) demonstrates that a single text does not exist in isolation – almost every aspect of it can be more clearly understood if we acknowledge the ways in which it is connected with other media texts, genres, producers, etc.

### Conveying an ideology

- The way in which binary opposites are presented **or** resolved in a media text can be indicative of the **creator's ideology**
- A core example would be newspapers such as *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* – these papers will often present the binary opposites of Conservative vs Labour as being largely equivocal to right vs wrong, thus demonstrating their right-wing ideology
- In fictional works, creators may choose to blur the lines between traditional binary opposites as a form of criticism against societal norms – modern audiences are showing a greater appetite for this form of moral ambiguity



### POSTSTRUCTURALISM

In essence, this term describes a school of thinking that builds upon certain **structuralist** thoughts while rejecting others. **Roland Barthes** is considered a post-structuralist thinker – his detailed breakdown of signifiers and signified is thought to have developed the original structuralist arguments of **Ferdinand de Saussure**

### Rejections of original structuralist thinking

- The use of binary opposites in narratology has been historically used to justify prejudicial viewpoints, e.g. *that men are superior to women, that the rich are more civilised than the poor*
- With binary opposites, there is a strong tendency for one of the two concepts to be framed as superior to the other, thus diminishing the complexity of a text, e.g. *good is always presented as morally correct in comparison to evil*

**Mythemes** – A term coined by Lévi-Strauss describing the individual units that comprise the stories he studied. Using this model he proposed that the meaning of narratives could be understood through:

**Character relationships** → The **actions** they take → The **themes** these actions invoke

Notice how the theories of **semiotics**, **narratology** and **genre** all help to explore the relationships between multiple media texts. This process of trying to make sense of repeated patterns between texts makes them all **structuralist theories**.



## BINARY OPPOSITES

The idea that two completely opposing ideas or concepts – e.g. light and dark, wet and dry, good and evil – can only be understood fully through their relationship with one another

**Structural analysis** views binary opposites as the primary way that meaning is conveyed in media texts

### BINARY OPPOSITES CAN TAKE MANY FORMS...

**Narrative** – Conflict is key to the development of drama – conflicts, whether internal or external, always feature a binary opposition at their core

**Examples** – War vs peace, chaos vs order, guilt vs redemption

**Themes** – Most media texts are infused with themes that help convey meaning to the audience – themes usually represent a form of conflict that raises moral questions for the audience

**Examples** – good vs evil, life vs death, care vs neglect

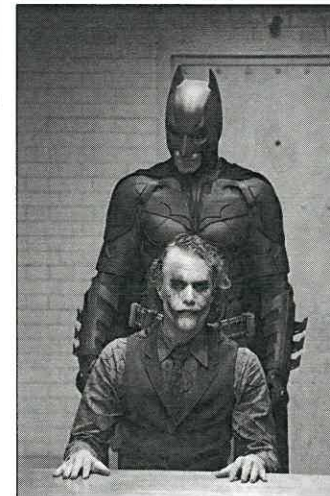
**Character** – Human beings are prone to clashing based on their morals, motivations and identities – when such clashes take place, these characters come to represent binary opposites

**Examples** – Cop vs criminal, superhero vs supervillain, master vs apprentice

**Aesthetics** – Binary oppositions are also present in imagery – frequently exemplified in how light and colour are used

**Examples** – Dark vs light, red vs blue, grainy vs crisp

These different elements can often work in tandem, i.e. a single moment or image can display multiple binary opposites simultaneously:



*The Dark Knight* © Warner Bros. Pictures, DC Comics, Legendary Pictures, Syncopy, 2008

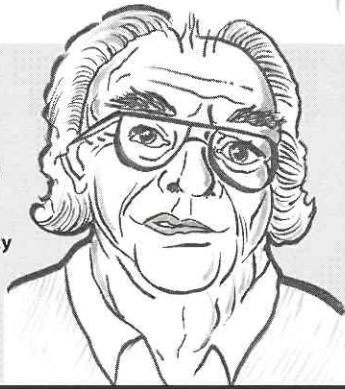
1. **Ideology** – Batman's sense of order stands in opposition to Joker's love of chaos
2. **Costumes** – Batman's multifaceted, armoured suit as opposed to Joker's ragged, mismatched shirt and waistcoat
3. **Colour** – Batman is dressed almost entirely in black as opposed to Joker who wears a vibrant mixture of red, white, green and blue
4. **Mask** – Batman's face is shielded by an archetypal symbol of fear as opposed to Joker whose facial features are accentuated by a symbol of comedy
5. **Lighting** – Batman's face is concealed in shadow as opposed to Joker's which is shown in full light
6. **Signature music themes** – Batman's brooding, epic score opposes the distorted buzzing that accompanies Joker
7. **Brains vs brawn** – Batman's physical strength stands in opposition to Joker's intellectual strength
8. **Hero vs villain** – Batman saves innocent lives as opposed to Joker who takes them



# POSTMODERNISM

## Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007)

- **Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007)** was a philosopher and sociologist who specialised in **postmodern** and **poststructuralist** thinking
- His 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulation* coined three key concepts of postmodern analysis – the ideas of **simulation**, **simulacra** and **hyperreality**
- These three terms all relate to Baudrillard's proposal that society is becoming an **urbanised culture of consumption**



**Simulacrum** – A sign that imitates something original but lacks its inherent quality or essence – over time, it has become disconnected from the original

**Example** – Pictures of celebrities on posters and magazines are often Photoshopped to make the colour and texture of their skin more conventionally 'attractive' – these edited pictures do not authentically represent the faces of these celebrities and yet we eventually accept them as authentic

### OTHER MAJOR POSTMODERN THEORISTS



**Fredric Jameson**

**Linda Hutcheon**

**Michel Foucault**

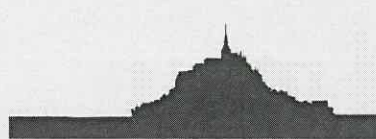
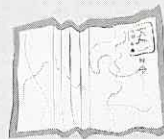
Baudrillard proposed that this occurs like Chinese whispers in a process he called **the precession of simulacra**, which is thought to result in **simulation**

- **Stage 1:** A copy of something real is created. We accept it as authentic because it basically resembles the original.
- **Stage 2:** The truth of the original is further corrupted by the creation of a second copy – we no longer trust the copy as it appears to 'distort' reality
- **Stage 3:** A sign is created that claims to faithfully represent reality, but it is a copy without an original
- **Stage 4:** Pure simulacrum – there is no relationship whatsoever between the sign and reality

**Simulation** – The idea that the space we exist in as modern humans is a combination of both the physical real world and the constructed technological world of the media to the extent that we can no longer differentiate representation from reality



**Baudrillard's analogy** – A great empire creates a map that is of the same physical size and detail as the empire itself. The map is then laid over the empire itself. When the empire collapses, the map remains as a disconnected replica of the original. Living in the simulation is like living on this map.



**Example** – Idealised adverts for holidays, clothing, make-up, etc. – they purport to show something attainable in real life but show it in such a perfect manner that the reality fails to measure up to the advertisement



**Hyperreality** – The breakdown between the 'real world' and a simulated, constructed version of reality, to the point where the two become indistinguishable and things that are fake seem to be more 'real' than reality itself

### PRINCIPLES OF POSTMODERNISM

- 1 Rejects the idea of **grand narratives** – this refers to belief systems that seek to explain or justify the human experience, e.g. *a religious faith, Marxism, liberalism, etc.*
- 2 Sceptical of existing structures in art and society, e.g. *genre, capitalism*
- 3 Rejects the idea of **highbrow** and **lowbrow** culture
- 4 Promotes moral relativism – the idea that 'right' and 'wrong' are not fixed, but rather they are fluid notions dependent on context and situation
- 5 Rejects the idea of **techno-futurism**, i.e. the idea that innovations in science and technology will enlighten the world and make it a better place

### PROMOTES THE CONCEPTS OF...

**Subjectivism** – The idea that the true meaning of human existence lies with the individual, i.e. *meaning can only be found internally*

**Pluralism** – A rejection of the idea that there is one objective truth or school of logic, i.e. *a diverse range of people's values, beliefs and lifestyles should be allowed to coexist*

### Further characteristics of postmodernism...

Self-reflexivity   Moral ambiguity   Irony

Eclecticism   Breaking of the fourth wall

Meta-referencing   Fragmented time

The bridging of highbrow and lowbrow

Postmodernism is a school of thought designed to question and deconstruct the theories and conventions of modern Western philosophy

Postmodernists tend to believe that the barriers between the 'real' world and the world conveyed through the media are crumbling. Therefore, it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate reality from simulation – this growing lack of distinction between the two might be called **implosion**.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF POSTMODERNISM

**Intertextuality** – When a media text makes reference to other pieces of media, art, literature or the real world beyond itself. There are several forms of intertextuality used by postmodernist texts that help display a sense of self-awareness:



**Bricolage** – When a text is constructed from parts of other pre-existing texts, creating new meaning through the assembly of individual parts, akin to a more sophisticated method of collage

**Parody** – The imitating of a writer, artist or genre, but executed in an exaggerated manner that comments on the original text

**Pastiche** – An imitation of another's work, usually in a comedic but respectful way, but without the same sense of commentary on the original text

**Homage** – When one text respectfully plays tribute to another, usually through the borrowing and recontextualising of the original text's codes and conventions

**Aspects of surrealism** – An artistic movement aiming to capture the disorder, freedom and atmosphere of dreaming

### Postmodern critiques

- The lines drawn between supposed **highbrow culture** (art, opera, literature) and **low-brow culture** (genre films, music videos, video games) is **elitist**
- These lines have been constructed by the upper and middle classes in order to disparage the working class
- Certain, once derided, genres such as exploitation and kung fu are now referenced in acclaimed films, TV shows and music videos



# THEORIES OF REPRESENTATION

Stuart Hall (1932–2014)



Stuart Hall (1932–2014) was a Jamaican-born Marxist theorist known primarily for his work in sociology and cultural studies. Hall studied the way in which economic and political power structures affected language and representation in the media.

Meaning is created through language

**Note:** When Hall refers to language, he is referring to any system of signs (e.g. gestures, facial expressions, clothes, objects), not just spoken or written words.

Hall suggested that there are three types of signs used in media

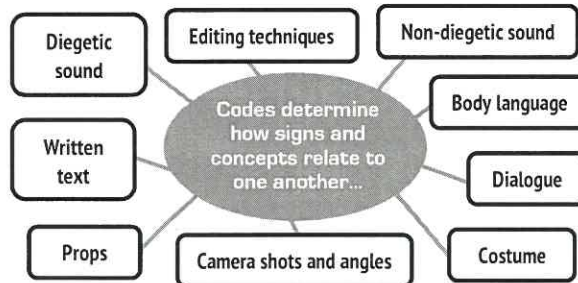
**Reflective** – Language reflecting a 'fixed truth' that is already present in the world. The representation authentically mirrors the meaning of the object, person or setting.

**Intentional** – Language expressing the opinions of the producer as opposed to the truth

**Constructionist** – Signs that embrace the understanding that meanings in media texts are always artificially constructed. They should not be confused with 'fixed truths' in society.



SHARED  
CONCEPT MAPS



Hall conveyed the idea that meaning is 'encoded' into a text by the producers, and is then deciphered (decoded) by the audience – whether or not an audience 'decodes' the intended meaning is dependent on their knowledge of an issue/subject and whether they have a similar perspective to that of the media producers.

**Example:** In ancient Egyptian society, it was widely understood that cats were the protectors of the Pharaoh and guardians of the underworld – therefore, they were highly honoured and respected. By contrast, cats were associated with witchcraft and persecuted as a result during the Renaissance era – here we have two entirely different concept maps for two entirely different cultures.



Hall proposed that **stereotyping** is one of the most common forms of representation

## Stereotyping

Representations that reduce a person or group to a narrow set of traits and characteristics through a process of **simplification**\*

**Simplification** – Process which makes something easy for an audience to understand, reducing any sense of complexity

**In reality...** Women, people of colour and the LGBTQ+ community, among many other diverse groups, have been represented stereotypically in the mainstream media

Key term	Examples in Western mainstream media
<b>Positive stereotyping:</b> The attribution of seemingly positive qualities to a person or social group. This form of stereotyping still reduces groups down to fit a narrow expectation, instead of reflecting the diversity of real life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Black men as athletic and sport obsessed</li> <li>Asian students as intelligent and academically motivated</li> <li>Italians as friendly and amazing at cooking</li> </ul>
<b>Negative stereotyping:</b> The attribution of negative qualities to a person or social group. With this form of stereotyping, media producers position the audience to see the person/group in a bad light.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arabs as villains and fools</li> <li>Muslims as terrorist sympathisers</li> <li>Homosexual men as effeminate and physically weak</li> </ul>
<b>Countertypes:</b> Representations of people or groups that actively combat stereotypical thinking, usually promoting a more tolerant and progressive society in the process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women as action heroes</li> <li>Men being sensitive and understanding</li> <li>Disabled people being independent and confident</li> </ul>

## WHY STEREOTYPING OCCURS...

- The use of stereotypes – particularly negative ones – in the media often exposes a particular **bias** or **ideology** on the part of producers. Stuart Hall suggested that stereotyping often occurs because of **essentialism** – the belief that aspects of identity, particularly gender, are biologically determined at birth, *e.g. men and women are naturally born with a set of traits and characteristics*
- This is the opposite to **social construction** – the idea that concepts which separate people into categories are created and perpetuated by society

Hall suggested that stereotyping reinforces the **dominant ideology** – the attitudes, beliefs, and values shared by the majority of people in society. This is usually the ideology that is presented by institutions and people in positions of power.

Hall suggested that **othering** can occur because of...

**Ethnocentrism** – The belief that one's own culture is ideologically superior to the cultures of others.  
**Patriarchy** – A society in which white, heterosexual men are granted social, cultural and economic power at the expense of women and minorities.

**\*Cultural hegemony:** The widespread promotion of ideas and beliefs which are valued by the most powerful individuals in society

## 'OTHERING'

Hall suggested that **in-groups** effectively prioritise the representations of certain people, groups and ideas at the expense of others (**out-groups**). A key example would be the prominence of straight, white-skinned, **male** heroes in media narratives throughout history – this has resulted in the '**othering**' of homosexuals and the **BAME** community among other groups.

The construction of **stereotypes** in the mainstream media usually occurs because of the people who hold power within the industry. We might describe the producers and entrepreneurs – who create stereotypes in order to maintain **cultural hegemony**\* – as the **in-groups**. In turn, the **social groups** who are misrepresented by these industries (ethnic minorities, the homeless) might be described as **out-groups** or the **subordinate**



# THEORIES OF IDENTITY

David Gauntlett (1971–)



David Gauntlett (1971–) is a sociologist and media theorist who focuses on the ways in which modern media texts shape the identities of audiences.

Gauntlett suggested that we model parts of our identity based on the media we consume and the products we buy:

- Products such as cars, clothes and mobile devices act as signs that can contribute to our values and attitudes
- Interests in music, books, films, games, etc. can also become a defining part of a person's identity

In this sense, media texts provide us with the 'tools' we need to construct our identities – most people will take different tools from different texts, *e.g. the fashion sense of Naomi Campbell, the speaking style of Holly Willoughby*

## PRODUCTION OF MEDIA → CONSUMPTION OF MEDIA → CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY



### EXAMPLES OF THIS PROCESS IN MOTION



Media text	Tools/resources	Constructing an identity
<i>Mean Girls</i> (film)	Well-written characters and lines of dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dressing and behaving like characters</li><li>• Quoting memorable lines of dialogue</li></ul>
<i>Girls by The 1975</i> (music video)	Iconic Imagery and relatable lyrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Buying the band's merchandise</li><li>• Recommending band to friends and families</li></ul>
'Brute Intelligence' Audi (advert)	Advertising codes persuading reader of the Audi brand's strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Buying the new Audi model</li><li>• Investing an interest in cars and new technology that comes with it, <i>e.g. voice integration</i></li></ul>

**Negotiated identity:** The process by which people consider the elements that influence their identity – it also refers to the way in which people assess their relationships and agree on 'who is who' in their social circles

**Collective identity:** The process by which someone is made to feel as if they belong to a particular group – media texts enable this as they inspire fandom and companionship between audiences

### 'YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT!'

- 📺 According to Gauntlett's theory, audiences can be heavily influenced by the representations they see in media texts – it is, therefore, important for media producers to avoid negative stereotyping and to ensure they are not glamorising harmful behaviour
- 📺 Many fear that the prominence of violent male protagonists in video games might encourage young boys to model their identities based on these characters

The fluidity with which gender is now conveyed is far more successful in representing the reality of the world we live in



There is thought to be a causal link between revolutions in technology and the increasingly diverse representations available to audiences. In previous decades, audiences could only learn about the world's events through newspapers and a limited number of radio and television channels – now they have more newspapers, hundreds of channels and thousands of online resources to learn about a particular news story. These modern audiences will naturally be exposed to a much wider range of representations.

The effect of new media – Audiences have been given a platform to be more vocal in their opinion of media texts:

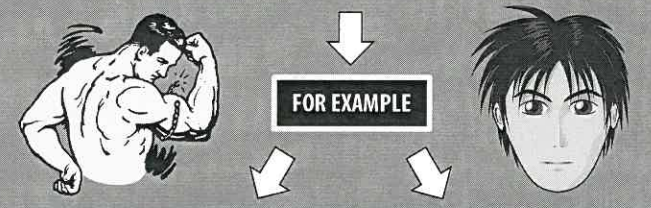


- They can create blogs and vlogs
- They can tweet their views
- They can share articles and reviews that reflect their views with friends and families

Media producers are starting to acknowledge this activity and construct representations in a way that is guaranteed to appeal to the desires of their target audience

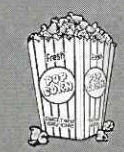
## DIVERSE REPRESENTATION

In previous decades, the mainstream media was **reductive** in the way it represented male and female identities. The **ideals** of male and female identity were shown to be very singular and specific. In recent years, the media shows us a diverse range of stars, icons and characters that exist on a spectrum. Audiences can pick and choose which ideas and behaviours they admire from this spectrum and apply them to their own identities.

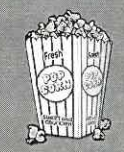


In the 1960s, the majority of male film stars, *e.g. Paul Newman, Sean Connery, John Wayne*, were traditionally handsome, stoic and masculine. **Now**, successful male film stars can range from traditionally muscular types like Dwayne Johnson and Vin Diesel to more delicate and sensitive types like Eddie Redmayne and Timothee Chalamet.

In the 1950s and 1960s, most advertisements conveyed women as blonde, slender, sexualised and submissive to their male partners. **Now**, the women we see in adverts are much more diverse in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic background and body shape.



### THE 'PICK AND MIX' CONSUMER



This idea of Gauntlett's proposes that audiences now choose which aspects of products they want to consume and which they don't:

- Skipping sections of a Netflix show you aren't enjoying
- Making note of a magazine cover star's make-up but ignoring the rest of her outfit
- Reading the gossip columns of a tabloid newspaper but ignoring anything political

Now that representations are less restricted, audiences are more empowered to construct an identity that is layered and complex.



## Useful Background Knowledge

- Mulvey (1941–) is a British **feminist** theorist who studied the representation of women in mainstream **cinema**
- In her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* Mulvey suggested that visual media is constructed in a way that caters specifically to the pleasure of male, **heterosexual** spectators – Mulvey referred to this theory as the **male gaze**
- The idea is that female characters are always designed to be viewed by men, whether within the diegesis of the film, by the film-makers, or by the audience
- Mulvey's theory supports the idea that women are often represented as **passive objects**, as opposed to **active subjects**



Laura Mulvey (1941–)  
– The Male Gaze



Van Zoonen's work can be more easily understood with a knowledge of these influential theorists:

### John Berger (1926–2017) – Art critic

- Berger outlines that in imagery, beginning in Renaissance art and continuing into modern imagery, **men are constructed as active** whereas **women simply appear**.
- He drew people's attention to the abundance of paintings that show women as passive objects of physical beauty.

**Berger:** 'You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting "Vanity," thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.'



This quotation of Berger's draws attention to the link between sexual objectification and the denial of **agency** – women have been historically vilified in the media for being sexually confident and promiscuous. However, it has been accepted as normal when the males who possess cultural capital create work that eroticises women's bodies.

## BODIES AS SPECTACLE



The idea of a human body displayed in imagery as something for the viewer 'to behold' – this can be achieved through costume, make-up, framing, camera movement, etc.

### Codes, conventions and techniques used to present women as spectacle:

Restricting women to the role of the princess or the helper	Using costume and make-up that sexualises women	Framing women from high angles and shots with soft focus
Depicting women as 'passive participants'	Perpetuating traditional beauty standards – having men validate a woman's beauty	Timid facial expressions and submissive gestures

### MALE BODIES

- Male bodies are also sexualised in the mainstream media but, unlike female bodies, **athleticism** and **physical power** are valued above all else – much of this imagery can be found in fitness-based imagery, e.g. *the shirtless cover stars of Men's Health magazine*
- Throughout the 1980s, the bodies of action stars such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger were shot in a way that emphasised their muscular physiques to make them look desirable – heterosexual women were encouraged to **gaze**, while men were encouraged to **replicate**
- In products targeting women, men are presented as **romantic** spectacle as opposed to **sexualised** spectacle

The sexual **objectification** of women in the mainstream media has been historically rife – the value of female characters is often measured by the extent to which their bodies fulfil **male gratification**. Van Zoonen noted that the **male gaze** is something that female characters in film and television often bring upon themselves, i.e. they invite the gaze of male characters by stripping or dressing promiscuously. This has been a way in which media producers can justify the sexualisation of a female character.

# FEMINIST THEORIST

## Liesbet van Zoonen (1959–)

Liesbet van Zoonen (1959–) is a Dutch professor of popular culture, famous for books such as *Feminist Media Studies* in which she explores issues of gender, diversity and politics in the modern mass media from a feminist perspective.



## GENDER IDENTITY AND DISCOURSE

Van Zoonen rejects the idea that gender is a rigid binary of set masculine and feminine behaviours and attributes. She theorises that gender is a **fluid concept** susceptible to different contextual and cultural factors.

- Van Zoonen believes that contemporary culture is largely designed to promote rigid gender roles and to encourage men and women to behave in a way that fits an **essentialist** philosophy
- This has led to the widespread **subjugation** of women since women have been traditionally encouraged to be soft, submissive, agreeable and the general **carers** in society

This form of **subjugation** has been enabled to thrive in **Western patriarchal culture** – a society that is structured to serve the interests of white, heterosexual males at the expense of women and minorities

Van Zoonen puts forward the idea that intentional, **systematic** sexual objectification of women in imagery is a core part of the patriarchy's power, because it has caused men to believe that women should act and look a certain way. It has also caused women to **internalise** these messages as a result of ongoing **reinforcement**. The phrase **internalised misogyny** is often used when describing women who reject feminist ideas.

The disparity of women's roles in different cultures supports van Zoonen's notion that ideas of gender are constructed based on discourse and context

**Example 1:** The *Haudenosaunee* are an indigenous people in North America traditionally led by a 'Clan Mother' – this woman would act as leader of the tribe and would theoretically have final say over her tribe's most important decisions with the council of male chiefs

**Example 2:** Women in Saudi Arabia are heavily restricted in their social rights due to the country's interpretation of **Sharia Islamic law** – up until 2018, women were forbidden from driving, let alone leading the country





# FEMINIST THEORY

bell hooks (1952–)

## PATRIARCHY

- The theory that society is structured in a way that grants white, heterosexual men complete social, cultural and economic power at the expense of women and minorities
- The term comes from the Greek phrase *patriarkhia*, meaning the 'ruling father'
- Mass media has long conveyed a dominant ideology that the patriarchy is innate and that women are biologically inferior to men, in order to benefit those in power that control the **cultural hegemony**
- However, according to hooks, patriarchal society is more complex than a simple hierarchy in which all men dominate over all women

hooks writes that the patriarchy is also **white supremacist** and **capitalist**, and that there are racial and class-based **hierarchies** within it. As such, men are still treated favourably on the whole but **white women** from affluent backgrounds are afforded more privilege than **black men** from **working-class** backgrounds.

White men

White women

Men of colour

Women of colour



hooks contends that...

- Patriarchal society has conditioned women, as well as men, to hold sexist values, e.g. *women criticising other women for how they dress*
- Prior to the women's liberation movement, women were conditioned to base their self-worth on how attractive they appear in the eyes of men

bell hooks (1952–) is the pen name for Gloria Jane Watkins, an American author, social activist and feminist theorist who focuses on oppressive systems in society and the effects of capitalism on race and gender. Her books include *Feminism is for Everybody* and *ain't I a woman: black women and feminism*.

hooks described **feminism** as a struggle to combat sexist oppression and the ideology of domination

She believes that **race** and **economic status** are intrinsically tied in with **gender** to form patriarchal structures



Bell hooks (1952–)

For hooks, Feminism is not just a hobby. It is a political commitment

## Women's beauty standards



hooks considered how fashion magazines glorify a specific type of body image (*slender, pale*) which can, in reality, have a damaging psychological effect on female audiences

She proposed that, rather than rejecting the value of beauty altogether, female beauty should be viewed and appreciated outside of the normal sexist structures that objectify women

## INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM

As an intersectional feminist, hooks rejects the idea that...

Feminism is about victimisation

Feminism is simply 'man-hating'

Women are all equally oppressed

Feminism is an issue for white, middle-class women to tackle

A school of feminism acknowledging that women's identities and experiences are diverse and complex. It proposes that issues such as race, age, class, mental ability, etc. contribute to discrimination as well as gender.

## Some concerns of intersectional feminism...

- The struggles of women in 'third world' countries such as Afghanistan and Bangladesh
- The rights of transgender women
- The sexual assault of men
- The setbacks of **white feminism\***
- Homophobic discrimination

**\*White feminism** – An offshoot of fourth-wave feminism that has been criticised by intersectional feminists for its focus on the issues of white women to the neglect and detriment of issues relating to people of colour and men from minority groups

## COMMODIFIED BLACK CULTURE

Western popular culture has a habit of devaluing people of colour by **appropriating** their work and sanitising it for a mass, predominantly white, audience – this essentially turns black cultural identity into easily digestible, 'homogenised' entertainment

hooks cites the way in which blues, jazz and soul were adapted into the more commercial rock and roll, popularised by artists such as Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly – much of the authenticity and political intention from the original movements is then lost in translation



Another example could be Quentin Tarantino's film *Django Unchained*, which blended elements of the *blaxploitation* movement with more mainstream genres to construct a narrative surrounding slavery in nineteenth-century America – certain scholars and film-makers criticised the way in which a horrific 'black' experience was translated by a white man into entertainment, while others praised Tarantino for tackling the subject head on

## THE OTHER

The experience of black women is traditionally shown as 'other' or different from that of the viewer, i.e. *there is nothing for the target audience to empathise with*

Depictions of black women in mass media are sexualised for a white male audience

This is a form of **exoticisation**, reminiscent of how women of colour were used as sex slaves during the colonialist era

Hooks cites rap and hip-hop music videos as specific examples of this **othering** – other examples of this extend from fashion magazines to Disney films



# GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

Judith Butler (1956–)



Judith Butler (1956–) is an American philosopher who gained recognition for her work on third-wave feminism, queer theory and gender roles.

## PERFORMATIVITY

Any form of word or utterance that directly causes action or social change – the power and impact of this language is highly dependent on context

A judge's sentence in a court can send someone to prison

A judge's verdict on a talent show can kick-start someone's career

The words 'I do' mean very little in isolation but in the context of a wedding they are life-changing



Butler proposes that performativity relies on the repetition of **rituals** – it takes more than just a singular act to make something performative

**Rituals** – Choreographed acts that are repeated by people on a regular basis. Usually they will have a specific societal importance.

Singing hymns and psalms at a religious mass

Military drills

Singing the national anthem at a sports game

Reciting the Lord's Prayer before a meal in a Christian household

## EXAMPLES OF RITUALS

Ritual Islamic prayer repeated five times a day

Individuals can have their own personal routines and behaviours that become ritualistic

- ❖ Using jargon that reveals a particular political ideology, e.g. '*mansplaining*', '*patriarchy*', '*TERF*' might be words understood and used by a modern feminist
- ❖ Keeping a journal to document your experiences
- ❖ Singing and dancing for fun
- ❖ Regular engagement with yoga or tai chi
- ❖ Cross-dressing or dressing in drag



## GENDER ROLES

Butler used these ideas to counter the argument of **essentialism**, i.e. the idea that gender roles of masculinity and femininity are innate and predetermined from birth. Instead, she proposed that a person's gender is established through the way in which they behave and the actions they take. In this sense, gender is a performance that is regulated by social and cultural norms. Like rituals, gender performativity is repeated and gradually cultivated over time.

Butler analysed the ways in which men and women are prescribed to behave in a certain way so as to fit into society's expectations of them:

Boys are encouraged from an early age to:

- ★ be strong and athletic
- ★ be brave and not cry
- ★ occupy positions of power in society
- ★ have interest in Maths and Science
- ★ play with action figures

Girls are encouraged from an early age to:

- ★ be slim and delicate
- ★ play with Barbies and doll's houses
- ★ have long hair and wear make-up
- ★ have interest in Arts and Humanities
- ★ want families and undertake caring roles

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RITUAL AND IDENTITY

Why might you engage in rituals?

To demonstrate your belonging to a specific group

To give your life structure and clarity

To have an enjoyable hobby and to incorporate that into your personality

To show respect to a person or institution

To demonstrate your devotion to a particular faith or belief system

## Traditional view

Our identity determines the ways in which we perform and the rituals we partake in – these behaviours then reinforce our (already existing) identity

VS

## Butler's View

We manufacture our identity through our performances and ritualistic acts – these behaviours have been learnt and internalised from the world around us. They are **not** intrinsically determined from birth.

## Sex and Gender

**Sex** refers to the way in which males and females differ biologically. **Gender** refers more to the roles males and females hold in society. Butler suggested that no one has a gender identity beyond a series of 'gendered expressions' which are manufactured and performed

## MORE OF BUTLER'S IDEAS

Feminist thinkers that solely attribute the oppression of women to men are creating their own divisions between genders that are potentially as harmful as those established in a patriarchal society

Traditional feminism historically excludes the narratives of people who lack formal categories of identity, e.g. *non-binary people*

Traditional feminism, while claiming to be a uniting force for all women, is fairly restrictive in the way it categorises women – this categorisation has been applied based on elements such as biology, sexuality and people's capacity to bear children

Cross-dressing and drag are significant ways in which people can mock or undermine the social construction of gender – Butler referred to this subversion as 'gender trouble'

Widespread criticism has been directed at traditional gender roles, primarily because they have been socially constructed in order to further the subjugation of women by controlling how they act and live, while simultaneously excusing harmful male behaviour. The #MeToo movement challenged patriarchal power structures, particularly within the entertainment industry, in which men were granted the power to sexually exploit women without consequences.



# ETHNICITY AND POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Paul Gilroy (1956–)



**Paul Gilroy** (1956–) is a British academic and cultural studies theorist who has written on issues regarding black British identity and the effects of colonialism on contemporary attitudes towards race and ethnicity. Some of his most influential books include *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987).

Gilroy argues that Western media still promotes and maintains colonial attitudes in regards to race. He proposes that the hegemonic perception of non-white cultures is affected by the history of European colonialism.

## COLONIALISM

Colonialism is the practice of European states invading foreign territories, displacing or enslaving native populations and profiting from the natural resources of these territories.

- \* The period of European colonisation began with the exploration of North America by explorers such as Christopher Columbus (British) and Ferdinand Magellan (Portuguese)
- \* It ended with the outbreak of World War I, which led to the dismantling of many European empires
- \* At its peak, the British Empire was the largest colonial empire in the world – its dominions included India, Canada, Australia and a number of African nations

Racist attitudes from colonial times have trickled down through history to shape the racial tensions that still exist in Britain and America today

## DIASPORA

A mass group or population that are involuntarily dispersed or displaced from their homeland

### Examples of diaspora

- People of African ancestry living in North America because of the transatlantic slave trade
- The 'Windrush' Caribbean diaspora who came to Britain to work following the Second World War
- The Jewish people who were forced to flee Nazi-occupied nations in Europe

Diasporic populations often feel that their cultural identity is **disconnected**, that they neither belong in the country they live in nor their country of historical origin – Gilroy mentions that black British people have been made to feel they are not truly British or European because they are part of a diaspora from either slavery or forced migration

A term coined by Gilroy for a prejudiced ideology that establishes clear binary opposites between societies and races that are 'civilised' and those that are 'uncivilised' or 'savage'. According to Gilroy, this ideology will always create racial hierarchies in which the 'civilised' societies are considered more advanced and sophisticated – furthermore, geopolitical relations will continue to function in a way that considers the differences between cultures as opposed to the similarities.

The criteria for 'civilised' is defined by European/Western standards, and has been used historically as a moral justification for colonialism – settlers believed that they were civilising the natives by enforcing their culture and religious practices. This ideology has created a hierarchy in which white Europeans and Westerners are considered superior and are, therefore, empowered to subjugate other races.

**Example** – Much of Western children's animation throughout the twentieth century was designed in a way that 'othered' non-white cultures, particularly the African-American community. This was executed through the way in which certain facial features, body proportions and linguistic ticks were exaggerated to a grotesque extreme. Examples can be found in:

- Early Disney films, e.g. *Dumbo* (1941), *Song of the South* (1946)
- Censored Eleven cartoons

## Gilroy views on diaspora

It is important not to conflate the terms race, ethnicity and nationality – they all carry their own unique and important meanings

Your racial heritage is not necessarily the same as your ethnicity or nationality

Diasporic groups have created and shared music, art and culture in order to reclaim power and communicate the difficulties of black experiences

## CIVILISATIONISM

Gilroy suggests that much of the **modern mass media** is still constructed in a way that allows the continued existence of colonial discourses – a culture of **civilisationism** is still apparent

Black culture (and other non-white cultures) is still portrayed as 'niche' or secondary, whereas Western culture is depicted as the norm or the mainstream

## DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

This concept was originally coined in 1903 by W E B Du Bois, an American academic and civil rights activist – Gilroy built upon Du Bois' ideas in his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*

It describes the internal conflict experienced by black people who must live in an oppressive or prejudiced, overwhelmingly white society, e.g. *England, America* – these people are unable to identify themselves as belonging to the country they live in or to the country from which they carry a heritage. As a result, they are forced to view themselves first through the eyes of a society that views them as inferior before they can view themselves as a citizen.

Gilroy argues that the sensation of **double consciousness** transcends cultural and national boundaries

He also contends that the forced enslavement of black people throughout the colonial era has led thousands of families to grow up in countries where their original cultural identities are not cultivated or respected.

## TRANSATLANTIC BLACK CULTURE

Gilroy proposes that there is a shared **cultural heritage** between British and American black people due to the similar patterns of oppression and institutional racism they have faced. This has resulted in a similar set of cultural traits:

Similarity	Black British Culture	Black American Culture
Music	Grime, jungle, garage	R & B, rap, hip-hop
Literature	<i>Small Island</i> , <i>Why I'm no Longer Talking to White People About Race</i>	<i>Blackboy</i> , <i>The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colour-blindness</i>
Cinema	<i>Young Soul Rebels</i> (1991), <i>Bullet Boy</i> (2004)	<i>Menace II Society</i> (1993), <i>Moonlight</i> (2016)

**Music** – All the above genres have roots in forms of Caribbean or African music and explore similar themes relating to racial identity, police brutality and the perception of black subcultures in Western societies.

**Literature** – The books above explore the author's experiences of racism, discrimination and alienation – there is also discussion of how British/American societies are structured in a way that disadvantages non-white groups.

**Cinema** – The films above belong to subgenres that explore the difficult experiences of young black people growing up in disadvantaged areas – many explore the ways in which young black men fall into criminal gangs because of the ways in which their communities are neglected.



# POWER AND MEDIA INDUSTRIES

Curran (unknown) and Seaton (1947–)



Together, Curran and Seaton wrote *Power without Responsibility: the press and broadcasting in Britain* – this is widely praised as one of the most important works on British media



- Jean Seaton (1947–) is a professor of Media History and an official historian for the BBC who has written many books on the relationship between the media and politics in Britain
- James Curran is a Professor of Communications who has written many books on the media including *Media and Power*, *Media and Democracy* and *Misunderstanding the Internet*

## NEW MEDIA

Developments such as the Internet and digital technology have led to new forms of media (e.g. blogs, vlogs, social networking sites) which are harder to regulate than traditional media forms – this is due to the rise in UGC (user generated content), which allows a much wider range of media producers to showcase content.

This could be seen as a step towards more **socially diverse patterns of ownership** in which the media landscape is allowed to become more exploratory and exciting (something Curran and Seaton argue for).

However, **Curran and Seaton** argue that online media requires regulation:

- It is easy for children to access content that is harmful, disturbing or inappropriate through online platforms – for example, age-restricted games can be downloaded on a parent's account and watched by children easily
- Free video-sharing platforms such as YouTube can provide a platform for people who are **racist** and **homophobic** or even to people who wish to incite violence
- Freedom of speech has been taken to its limit – the total lack of online censorship is proving harmful in some circumstances, e.g. *it is well documented that many young people (including celebrities) have taken their own life because of online trolls*
- **Online piracy** has become a growing problem – this can threaten the extent to which producers have ownership over media texts – media industries are receiving less profit for the work they produce

### New media allows companies to maintain control:

- Algorithms that place certain sites at the top of online searches – guarantees views
- The use of cookies to access audience data – larger companies can afford to pay for these and learn more about the wants and desires of their target audience

**Curran and Seaton** argue that online media remains dominated by a small number of conglomerates – they suggest that 75% of the most visited sites on the Internet are connected to major conglomerates – *Facebook, Amazon, YouTube, Google, etc.*

## CONTROL AND OWNERSHIP

**Conglomerate** – A large business organisation comprised of multiple different companies working within the same / similar industries

**Horizontal integration** – When a corporation which is already established for creating a particular form of media acquires another company operating within the same form

- \* Curran and Seaton propose that the modern media landscape is owned and controlled by a small group of individuals and **conglomerates**
- \* These media conglomerates wield great power in society – they are able to maintain **cultural hegemony** through the texts they produce
- \* The conglomerates in possession of this power are primarily motivated by money – they minimise costs in order to maximise profits
- \* Generally, ownership within media industries is becoming more and more concentrated over time, e.g. *Disney has bought dozens of properties and rival studios over the past decade or so in a process of horizontal integration*



Curran and Seaton argue that the higher the concentration of ownership, the less access audiences have to diverse and interesting forms of media. **However**, there are theorists who disagree, saying that long-established media conglomerates are better equipped to create quality works that appeal across a wide range of audiences. Furthermore, when independent companies are merged with larger conglomerates, they are arguably granted more money and resources to create high-quality work.

## QUALITY AND CREATIVITY

- Curran and Seaton propose that the limited concentration of power restricts creativity, originality and quality within the mainstream media
- This is because the conglomerates in power are financially risk-averse

**Example** – It is widely thought that independently produced films with auteur directors are of a higher quality than studio-produced films that cost hundreds of millions of dollars – studios rely on profit to stay afloat so their films have to tick certain boxes (e.g. happy ending, jokes, long action sequences) to keep the pundits happy. Independent film-makers have the creative freedom to create work that strives for truth and artistic originality.

**'We want to shrink the media moguls'**  
(Curran, 2013)

The implication here is that powerful individuals (e.g. Rupert Murdoch) are stifling opportunity and creativity

**MORE CONTENT = LESS QUALITY**

- New technology has led to an embarrassment of riches when it comes to media products audiences can consume – industries have to produce output at a fast rate in order to stay afloat in a competitive market
- Curran and Seaton argue that the increased amount of content has led to a **fall in quality**
- We are **inundated** with **imported shows**, **reality shows**, **gambling** and ongoing **repeats**; something that can be described as **candyfloss culture**, content that is light-hearted and fun but that fails to fulfil an audience's needs



# REGULATION

Livingstone (1960–) and Lunt (unknown)



- Sonia Livingstone (1960–) is a social psychologist who has written extensively on media and communications, particularly the opportunities and dangers of thriving online technology
- Peter Lunt is a professor of media and communication who specialises in media regulation, audiences and the participation of the public in popular culture

Together, they have worked on several books and articles, most notably *Media Regulation: Governance and the interests of citizens and consumers* (2011)

## TRADITIONAL REGULATION AT RISK

**REGULATORY BOARDS** – Organisations that monitor media products being released or broadcast in a country. The UK has:

- ✓ BBFC – British Board of Film Classification – gives age ratings to films, decides on whether they can be released theatrically
- ✓ OFCOM – Office of Communications – handles broadcasting and telecoms in the UK
- ✓ IPSO – Independent Press Standards Office – handles printed press such as newspapers and magazines

The British government has a duty to regulate media impartially without political bias or motivation – this is demonstrated through the rules and regulations set out by Ofcom – the regulatory body that oversees the UK's mass communications industry



**Responsibility to citizens**  
Regulates content that could be considered harmful or damaging to audiences; enforces penalties on communications companies that breach standards



**Responsibility to consumers**  
ensures that there is competition within the UK's television industry; Ensures audiences are 'satisfied' with the media they consume

The global nature of new media is difficult to regulate as different countries have different **national values**. What might be deemed tame in the UK might be deemed outrageous and offensive in another country

## STRUGGLE IN THE UK

There is an underlying conflict at the core of British media regulation – the needs of the public as citizens **vs** the desires of the public as consumers

### Needs of people as citizens

- Protection from content that is violent, disturbing or discriminatory
- Access to content that isn't politically biased or manipulative, e.g. *propaganda*
- The right to freely express themselves through media
- Access to important or evocative information, e.g. *freedom of the press*

### Needs of people as consumers

- Access to a variety of media texts from a vast range of sources
- Access to media that is provocative and divisive, but greatly enjoyed by many
- The ability to choose what they consume and when they consume it
- A fair and competitive media industry

Livingstone and Lunt argue that these needs often contradict each other – protection often limits freedom and vice versa. They suggest through their writings that the needs of consumers are currently being prioritised over the needs of citizens.

**TRADITIONAL REGULATORY METHODS (E.G. FILM CERTIFICATES, VIDEO GAME CERTIFICATES, PRESS REGULATION) ARE BECOMING LESS AND LESS EFFECTIVE**

According to **Livingstone and Lunt**, there are three general reasons for this:

1. **THE EVER-GROWING POWER OF GLOBAL MEDIA CONGLOMERATES**
2. **THE CONVERGENT NATURE OF MEDIA, STIMULATED BY NEW TECHNOLOGIES**
3. **THE EVOLVING MANNER IN WHICH MEDIA PRODUCTS ARE PRODUCED, DISTRIBUTED AND MARKETED**

### THIS PARTICULARLY APPLIES TO ONLINE MEDIA...

- Unlike traditional media texts, **disturbing/inappropriate/discriminatory** content can be posted online **before** it is reviewed
- Age restrictions are easy to bypass or ignore completely
- Regulatory boards do not have international authority, so potentially harmful content may be accessed without any safeguarding process

Form	Traditional regulation	Why this no longer works
Film	Applying age restrictions to films – audiences must be of age to purchase a DVD or access a theatrical screening	Films are now available through online streaming services – children can easily access their parents' accounts. Many films are uploaded illegally online – no account is required to access many of these.
News	The Press Complaints Commission was responsible for upholding journalistic standards for British print publications – this was manageable as regular news was only accessed through the British press, television and radio	More and more people are now consuming online news from across the globe – articles and news stories are shared through social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. It is impossible for one regulatory board to censor an international online platform.
Video Games	Applying age restrictions to games – audiences must be of age to purchase physical copies in stores	A vast range of games can now be downloaded from digital stores and through mobile apps – browser games from sites such as <i>agames</i> and <i>miniclip</i> are barely regulated at all



## FORMATTING

Cultural products are formatted in way that will make them appealing to a mass audience and, by extension, commercially successful. In the mainstream media, profit is prioritised over artistic factors.

Major cultural products are formatted in a way that fulfils the following criteria:

## GENRE

- 1 Genres with mass appeal can usually resonate with audiences across nations and demographics
- 2 They usually feature 'family-friendly' content
- 3 Unpopular genres tend to be avoided by major companies, as these are only likely to attract niche audiences
- 4 Film genres such as action, adventure, comedy and thriller tend to be financially reliable
- 5 Film genres such as Westerns and social realism tend to appeal only to a niche audience

## STAR POWER

- 1 The promise of famous actors, directors, writers, presenters, celebrities and notable figures can attract audiences to a cultural text
- 2 Many of these 'stars' have well established pre-existing fan bases
- 3 Ideally, these stars will have **cross-demographic appeal**
- 4 These stars attract audiences and increase the profitability of the text

## SERIALISATION

Sequels, reboots and spin-offs of **existing franchises** are safer investments than stand-alone films / television shows because they offer familiarity

# CULTURAL INDUSTRIES

David Hesmondhalgh (1963–)



David Hesmondhalgh (1963–) is a professor of music, media and culture who is recognised for his work on media industries and production – his books include *Media Productions*, *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*, and, most significantly, *The Cultural Industries* (the fourth edition of this was published in 2018).

## MINIMISING RISK AND MAXIMISING AUDIENCE

According to Hesmondhalgh, companies that produce **cultural products** operate like **traditional businesses** – they are profit-driven and want to attract as many consumers as possible. He talks of various ways in which these companies can ensure the commercial success of a cultural product.

### Vertical integration

When a company owns most of the chain (if not the entire chain) of production for a media text, e.g. *Sony films tend to be produced, marketed, exhibited and distributed by Sony – furthermore, these films can be viewed on technological devices released by Sony. The entire process of production and consumption is facilitated by one conglomerate.*

### Horizontal integration

When a company which is already established for creating a particular form of media acquires another company operating within the same form, e.g. *Disney has purchased 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Marvel and Lucasfilm, so it has ownership over multiple cinematic properties*

### Wide-scale operation

- The largest conglomerates currently possess ownership over a variety of cultural industries
- **Internationalisation** (expanding enterprises on a global scale) is an effective way for cultural industries to reach audiences and minimise financial risk

### Controlling the release schedule

- Corporations will ensure that a product is released in multiple countries simultaneously
- It is difficult to generate and maintain hype if the release dates are scattered
- If a product is released in one country months before another, it is likely to be **pirated** within that window

Alternatively, corporations can withhold the release of a product and only make it available on certain platforms

- This gives the product an air of exclusivity
- Certain audiences will purchase the platform as well as the product, e.g. *buying a games console in order to play a specific video game*

## NEW MEDIA

Corporations that **diversify** into several areas and that take advantage of multiple media platforms and technologies are more likely to minimise risk and maximise profit

For example – Joe Rogan produces one of the most successful podcasts in America – he ensures that his episodes are accessible through streaming services such as YouTube and through an official website. They are also available to download through Apple Podcasts and Spotify. These various platforms also allow audiences to access the podcast on PCs, laptops, mobile phones, tablets



### The ultimate marketing campaign

Hesmondhalgh also states that commercial success relies on large-scale **marketing campaigns**. It is no longer good enough to market a film using just a poster and a theatrical trailer – the most successful films are advertised through magazine features, social media pages, TV spots, official websites, publicity stunts, etc.

**Commodification** – The process of transforming an existing item/idea into a product that can be bought and sold

According to Hesmondhalgh, culture is becoming more and more commodified:

- ❖ Works of art such as *The Mona Lisa* are copied onto postcards, prints, replicas, etc. These are then traded and sold to the public – this arguably cheapens the impact of the original.
- ❖ The original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) is considered to be an independent, art-house film – however, it has spawned several sequels, remakes and reboots as well as various pieces of merchandise. This has led many to forget the quality of the original film.

### Containing radical change

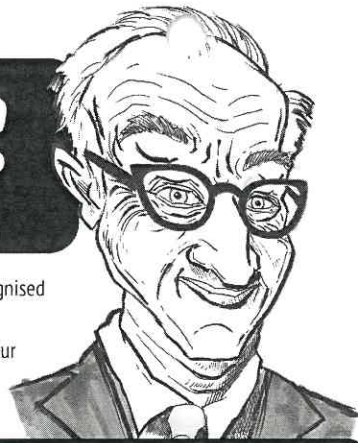
- Hesmondhalgh contends that online media has the potential to completely dismantle the current operation of cultural industries
- **However**, major media conglomerates are currently preventing this by incorporating elements of the Internet into their profit-driven models
- For example, newspapers now post features and stories through an official website and various social media platforms – this has saved many publications from closure



# MEDIA EFFECTS

Albert Bandura (1925–)

Albert Bandura (1925–) is a Canadian-American psychologist recognised for his development of the **social cognitive theory** – his work on aggression and the ways in which children can imitate the behaviour they see can be effectively applied to the effects of media texts on audiences.



**Bandura's social learning theory (early 1960s)** – Children can learn to adopt aggressive behaviour from watching others act aggressively. He extends this idea to suggest that audiences can learn to imitate **transgressive behaviour** they see enacted in media texts, particularly films and video games.

**Transgressive behaviour** – Any form of behaviour that exceeds the boundaries of convention or acceptability in civilised society, *e.g. violence, drug use, sexual provocation*

## Bandura acknowledges the complexity of this theory:

- Factors beyond the media can allow people to learn aggressive behaviour, *e.g. social neglect, alcohol, drug use, abusive households*
- Individuals who experience these things might be more likely to **seek out** violent media texts and enjoy them – this opposes the idea that violent media texts make their audience more violent

The social learning theory is often used to explain high-profile cases of criminal behaviour

Example: In 1993, the horror film *Child's Play 3* was widely accused of inspiring the murder of two-year-old James Bulger – in reality, there were various social factors that may have caused his killers to enact the crime, *e.g. absent parents, behavioural issues*

The social learning theory has also been used in order to inspire positive change in media audiences

## The Sabido method

**Miguel Sabido** wrote and advised on a number of television shows (particularly in developing countries) – his aim was to infuse positive and progressive messages into media products in order to educate audiences. This method has been used to raise positive awareness about homosexuality, women's rights and the issues with class prejudice among many other things.

## MODELLING

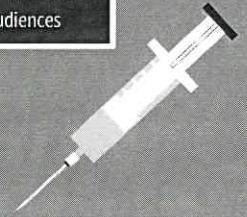
Bandura also proposed that audiences can adopt **attitudes, behaviours, traits** and **emotions** from media texts through a process called **modelling**:

- Audiences observe the behaviour of characters in media texts – particularly those that are represented as heroic, glamorous and charismatic
- If audiences **identify** with these characters then they will (sometimes subconsciously) adapt aspects of their own identity and start imitating the behaviour of these role models

## CONTEXT

The **hypodermic needle theory** – this theory falls in line with Bandura's idea that media texts are capable of inserting ideas directly into the minds of audiences

- ✓ This model, also known as 'the magic bullet', was originated in Harold Laswell's book *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, published in 1927
- ✓ The idea was that media texts, like needles, inject ideas and messages into the **minds** of their audience, who are, in turn, **powerless** to reject these messages
- ✓ This theory was particularly accepted in the 1940s and 1950s – a period in which media forms such as **radio** and television were described as 'plug-in-drugs'
- ✓ This theory is now widely considered to be **outdated** and patronising – media theorists generally consider audiences to be more **active** than **passive**
- ✓ There are, however, more recent examples of people buying into this theory, *e.g. violent video games such as Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto were widely accused of being a form of drug abuse that would desensitise audiences to violence*
- ✓ This is sometimes referred to as **The Hypodermic Syringe Model**



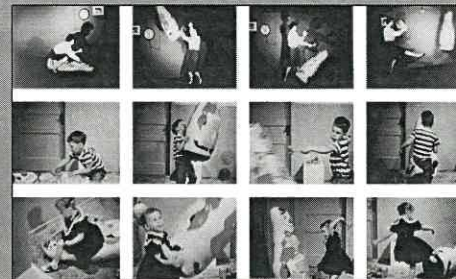
### Desensitisation

Occurs when audiences are repeatedly exposed to acts of violence, sex, aggression and discrimination in media texts – They begin to feel less empathy, sensitivity or fear in regards to those acts

## The Bobo doll experiment

An experiment conducted by Bandura in 1961 which built upon the needle theory:

- Bandura placed three different groups of children in separate rooms with a 'Bobo doll'
- Prior to being placed in the room, two groups were shown different videos. One group saw a person being violent towards the Bobo doll, while the other saw a person treating the Bobo doll gently. The third group weren't shown any video.
- **85% of the children** who were **exposed to the violence imitated the behaviour** they had seen, whereas only **11% of the children** who were shown the gentle video acted violently towards the Bobo doll.



Images from the Bobo doll experiment

## CONCLUSION

Bandura concluded that children will often **imitate** the behaviour they see enacted in media texts. In this sense, media texts are capable of implanting ideas into the heads of audiences, particularly children.

## Issues with the theory

- The methodology of this experiment has been discredited by certain theorists
- It only works on the assumption that children would treat people the same way they treat dolls
- The behaviour of the children is likely to have been affected by the laboratory setting and the presence of researchers

According to Bandura, this model occurs in four stages:

1. **Attention** – Noticing an action portrayed in a media text
2. **Retention** – Identifying with a particular character / role model
3. **Reproduction** – Imitating the behaviour of the character / role model
4. **Motivation** – Finding a reason to continue imitation, *e.g. If the behaviour is shown to be rewarded*





George Gerbner (1919–2005) was a professor of communication who gained recognition for his work on the effects of television, particularly his article *Science on Television: How it affects public conception*. He is most widely recognised for founding the **cultivation theory**.

# CULTIVATION THEORY

George Gerbner (1919–2005)

**Cultivation** – The act of developing something to make it stronger – in the context of media viewing, this will usually be an opinion or a world view

## Key Proposals

- If someone is continuously exposed to mass media, their views will begin to match those expressed through the media texts they consume
- The cultivation of views and opinions relies on **repeated patterns of representation** – eventually these representations will become ingrained in the consumer's head
- The process of cultivation is usually very gradual – media texts influence audiences over extended periods of time
- The idea is that the media affects the views and opinions of consumers without them noticing



## What is Cultivated?

- The media does not accurately represent the nature of reality – life is too nuanced and complex to convey accurately within a single text
- It is easier and more attention-grabbing to represent the world using stereotypes
- Cultivation tends to reinforce **mainstream values** that allow the **cultural hegemony** to be maintained – for example, advertisements are renowned for reinforcing **essentialist** ideas about gender, i.e. *they market products and services based on the assumption that men and women have fundamentally different needs and interests*

## A POSITIVE SPIN

If we accept Gerbner's model, then our perception of certain people or social groups can be affected by media representation. For a long time, transgender people have been represented as cyphers or, worse still, as being mentally unstable – as society's understanding of gender develops, it is possible that we will gradually find more and more positive representations of transgender people in the mainstream media. These representations will affect people's ideologies and begin to form a new **dominant ideology** in which transgenderism is met with acceptance.

## EXAMPLES – REPEATED PATTERNS OF REPRESENTATION



The Sun © News Corp, 2017

### The Sun newspaper – Jeremy Corbyn

This front page is emblematic of the way in which *The Sun* newspaper reported on Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn – the use of mocking alliteration to tie Corbyn to Jihadi terrorist groups paints him as both foolish and dangerous. Throughout Corbyn's leadership, *The Sun* repeatedly printed headlines accusing him of various crimes, from terrorist sympathising to blocking Brexit – audiences who read *The Sun* newspaper on a daily basis will have been repeatedly exposed to negative representations of Corbyn. Gerbner would argue that audiences were influenced to oppose Corbyn.

Many left-wing commentators believed that the consistently negative reporting from papers such as *The Sun* was a huge reason why Corbyn lost so catastrophically at the 2019 general election

## TELEVISION

- Gerbner's most influential studies took place in 1976 – therefore, his theories refer mainly to television as opposed to new media
- He argued that television has come to **hold the same power that religion has** in terms of its influence over people's ideas and behaviour. It only took television a few decades to achieve this.
- Gerbner and his team found that there was a **correlation** between the amount of television people watched and the extent that they thought the USA was a violent, crime-ridden country

## GERBNER'S KEY TERMS

**Enculturation** – When the attitudes and values of people are made to align with the cultural hegemony of the society they inhabit

**Mainstreaming** – The way television encourages the attitudes and values of audiences to become synchronised with what is presented in the mass media – according to Gerbner, this process is particularly successful in maintaining a political status quo

**Resonance** – When audiences begin to see aspects of television as representative of their own lives and experiences – this affects their perception of the world they live in and can result in mean world syndrome

## 'MEAN WORLD SYNDROME'

A concept, also known as 'Mean World Index' relating to the idea that mass media can influence the attitudes of heavy consumers. Specifically, it relates to how people are made to perceive risks and dangers in everyday life.

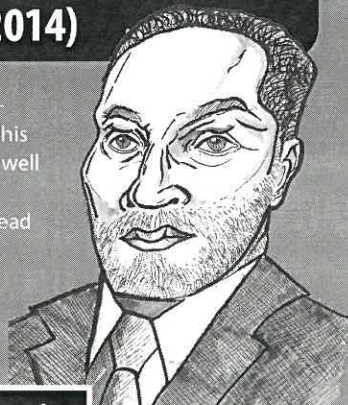
- The media often prioritise representations of violence and hardship. These stories are attention-grabbing and will often give audiences visceral pleasure – even though in reality they are quite rare
- Consequently, consumers will begin to perceive the real world as being more dangerous and crime-ridden than it actually is



# RECEPTION THEORY

Stuart Hall (1932–2014)

Stuart Hall (1932–2014) was a Jamaican-born Marxist theorist known primarily for his work in sociology and cultural studies. As well as his theories on **representation**, Hall studied the process by which audiences read and interpret media texts. *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* and *Encoding/Decoding* are two of his most significant works on the subject.



## Hall's Key Proposals

- 1 Producers always have an intended meaning that they wish to convey through a media text
- 2 Producers encode ideas into a text using media language
- 3 Audiences then decode these ideas
- 4 However, some audiences might not decode ideas in a way that was intended by the producers...

For example, the 2019 Gillette commercial entitled *We Believe: The Best Men Can Be* was **encoded** with messages that encouraged men to be respectful towards women and to call each other out for toxic or aggressive behaviour. However, a large section of the male audience **decoded** the advert and found it to be preaching and patronising – **these men took an oppositional reading**.

On YouTube, the advert has 811,000 likes and 1.5 million dislikes

## KEY TERMS WORTH USING

- **Agenda setting** – Audiences are positioned to take the hegemonic reading of a text, e.g. politicians will often repeat the same slogans on televised news in order to appease their constituents
- **Framing** – As with agenda setting, biases are infused into a media text in order to make it appeal to a specific section of the audience based on the interests, ideologies and life experiences of that group
- **Conditions of consumption** – Are audiences consuming the text on their own or are they consuming it with other people who can influence their reading? For example, your reading of a political speech on the news might change if your friend sitting next to you says 'They're talking rubbish!'

## THREE AUDIENCE READINGS

Hall proposed that there are three hypothetical ways in which audiences can read a media text – which reading an audience takes is based on the degree to which they are **willing** or **able** to **decode** the producer's intended meaning from the text:

### PREFERRED READING

Also known as the **dominant** or **hegemonic** position

Occurs when an audience **fully decodes** the producer's intended meaning

They are agreeable and supportive of the ideology

### NEGOTIATED READING

Occurs when an audience **partially decodes** the ideas infused into the text

They will agree with certain intended meanings while rejecting others

### OPPOSITIONAL READING

Occurs when an audience **fail to / choose not to decode** the ideas infused into the text

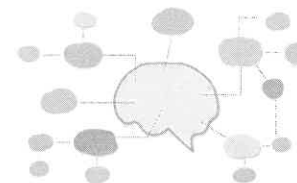
They are perhaps able to decode the intended meaning but they actively disagree with its ideology

The reading an audience takes will often depend on contextual factors including the individual's particular life experiences. For example, a newspaper story covering a care home abuse scandal might inspire a variety of readings:

- A woman with an elderly mother might completely accept the intended meanings
- A woman who works as a carer might consider the story biased and unfair. She would be taking an oppositional reading.

Be careful not to generalise when you talk about how different demographics might respond to a particular text. For example, it was long assumed by producers that women prefer to consume media that explores subjects such as fashion, make-up and relationships. As discussions regarding gender have developed, these assumptions are now considered to be overly simplistic and outdated.

Hall argued that people take different readings because everyone has a different **conceptual map**. Furthermore, he argued that different readings are taken because most media texts are **polysemic**, i.e. they are **multilayered** and they contain meanings that extend beyond those encoded by the producer.



**For example** – In 1968, George A Romero set out to direct a low-budget horror film in which a group of characters have to defend themselves from a zombie attack. Romero cast black actor Duane Jones in the lead role simply because he auditioned the best – however, audiences and theorists have since read the film as an allegorical critique of racism in America because of the trajectory of Jones' character – this is a prime example of a **polysemic text**

## OTHER VARIABLES THAT MIGHT DETERMINE HOW SOMEONE READS A MEDIA TEXT

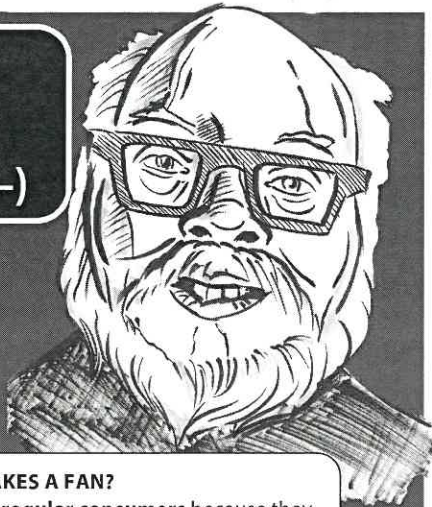
Gender	Age
Ethnicity	Social class
Sexuality	Politics
Religion	Hobbies



# FANDOM

## Henry Jenkins (1958–)

The writing of Henry Jenkins (1958–) mostly focuses on popular cultural forms – he reflects on his own, and other people's, experiences as media fans. His major academic works include *Convergence Culture* (2006) and *Textual Poachers* (1992).



### WHAT MAKES A FAN?

Fans can be distinguished from **regular consumers** because they are actively involved in the creation of meaning beyond that which superficially appears in a media text

### Key Proposals

- Fandoms are **social entities**, i.e. they are groups that have a distinct 'personality' or code of ethics
- Fans participate in **textual poaching**
- Fandoms do not simply **consume** media – they are a devoted audience
- Fandom goes against what is traditionally considered the **hierarchical** nature of the creator–audience relationship in which the audience **passively** consumes a text
- Modern media audiences belong to a participatory culture which thrives on social interaction

## FANDOM AS SOCIAL GROUPS



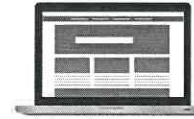
Fans will often construct their personal identities based on their interests – these fans demonstrate, in this way, that they belong to a particular **subculture**

- Appearance** – T-shirts, tattoos, badges, haircuts
- Hobbies** – Fan events, cosplay conventions, public screenings
- Socialising** – Friendships are often based on shared interests; this is particularly the case with relationships formed through **fandom** – the Internet allows people with niche interests to connect globally

In this sense, Jenkins argues that there is a significant **social dimension** to fandom

Jenkins claims that media fans actively construct and circulate meanings among one another. The most pure example of this is the **fan theory**, i.e. a usually *bizarre and radical interpretation of a media text* – these theories are often circulated through social media sites and online forums.

# F.R.I.E.N.D.S



**Bizarre example** – The 10 seasons of *Friends* (1994–2004) have been interpreted as Phoebe's (played by Lisa Kudrow) fantasy. The idea is that she is a homeless drug addict imagining an ideal life with friends she never had – series co-creator Marta Kauffman was shocked and appalled by the theory, stating that 'someone needs a life'.

## ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY → ADVANCED FANDOM

Developments in the Internet and digital technology have transformed fan dynamics – it has allowed fandom to flourish:

- Access to source material is now easier due to file-sharing and search engines
- Advanced software and digital technology is less costly and more accessible – fans are able to produce digital art and videos with more ease
- Social media presents the vital element of communication that allows subcultures to form and grow

### Responding to fandom

Fans can play a huge part in influencing the production of a media text:



When the first trailer for *Sonic the Hedgehog* (2020) was released, fans complained about the design of the titular character over social media – the film's producers responded by quickly redesigning the character before release – the fans helped shape the final product

Nielsen is an American organisation that measures data for audiences, the goods they buy and the media they consume – not only do organisations such as this analyse audience figures, they also measure the emotional reactions audiences have to television shows by analysing the responses expressed through Twitter posts. These insights are then shared with the television companies who can take this into consideration when they come to produce the next series.



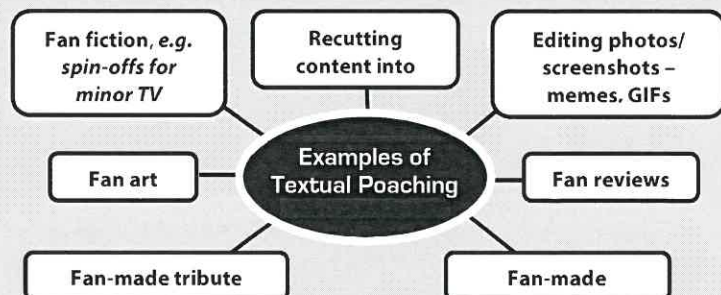
**Prosumers** are media audiences who also create their own media texts, straddling the roles of both producer and consumer. It is debatable whether this gives a creative 'voice' to marginalised groups or whether it is simply another way to expand a capitalist model of consumption, e.g. *bloggers, social media users, creators of fan trailers*

## TEXTUAL POACHING

### Issues with textual poaching

- It is unauthorised by the creators of the original material – It will often contradict the artistic intentions of those original creators
- Whether or not this counts as **content theft** is dependent on the stance of the media creators
- Occasionally, sexually explicit fan content can result in retaliation by the original creators, e.g. *the actors and show creators behind Stranger Things have criticised certain fans for sexualising some of the younger characters*

This term is used by Jenkins to describe how fandoms often **repurpose original material** in order to create their own **fan art/fiction**

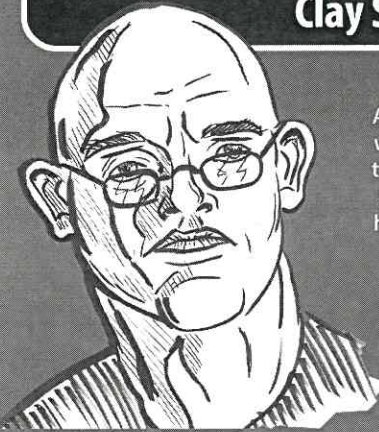


**Progressive purposes** – In many cases, fans engage in **textual poaching** in order to challenge or subvert the **heteronormative** narratives of mainstream media, e.g. *fans are renowned for producing fan art that imagines queer romances between characters that are*



# 'END OF AUDIENCE'

Clay Shirky (1964–)



Clay Shirky (1964–) is an American author and academic who has written extensively on the Internet and its relationship with modern society. Some of his most notable works include *Here comes Everybody: The power of organising without organisations* (2008) and *Cognitive Surplus: How technology makes consumers into collaborators* (2010).

## Key beliefs...

- Developments in online media have changed human social dynamics at large
- The Internet has allowed people to form large, decentralised groups, i.e. groups that take some of the power and responsibility away from dominant groups
- Audiences can now share information which would previously be deemed inaccessible
- The transition into this 'new world' is not fully complete yet – the blurring of lines between **traditional passive consumption** and **active audience consumption** is still in motion



## No longer passive consumers...

The traditional relationship dynamic between producers and audience members has long been a strict one-way relationship; a small group of professional producers would make work that would be broadcast or shown to an audience, and there would be very little to no direct feedback from audiences to creators. Shirky proposes that 'passive audiences' no longer exist within the modern media landscape. They have more power than ever before.

## THE INTERNET AND NEW TECHNOLOGY

The relationship between media products and individual audience members has been totally transformed by online media and digital technology – it has made media audiences more active:

### FOR EXAMPLE:

In 1950, you could sit down and watch a television programme at home – however, there weren't many other ways in which you could participate with the programme



In 2020, there are many ways in which you can participate with a television programme:

- You can share your opinion of the programme by posting on social media
- You can like or share someone else's post on social media if you agree with their opinion
- You can like, share or comment on posts made by the programme's producers
- You can message friends and encourage them to watch the programme on catch-up services
- You can review the programme through a blog or online forum
- You can upload a personal review on YouTube
- You can create fan fiction or fan art and share it online
- You can create memes and GIFS and share them online

These developments over the past 50 years or so support Shirky's theory that audiences have become more active and participatory than ever before

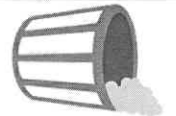
## KEY AUDIENCE TERMS

- Web 2.0 – The second generation of the Internet where sites prioritise active users who generate content rather than those who simply consume content. It can also work across multiple technological platforms.
- Media plurality – Something that online media has significantly increased. This describes the diversity of voices and opinions made available through the media.
- Remix culture – A society which enables people to take materials from media products and appropriate them to create new work such as textual poaching
- 'We the media' – The idea that online grassroots journalism has altered the way we consume news (coined by Dan Gillmor)

## 'TALKING BACK'

- If audiences post positive responses to a particular film, more people are likely to seek that film out – particularly if the poster is an influencer
- However, when a film such as *Cats* (2019) receives overwhelmingly negative responses through Twitter, it tends to have a negative impact on the film's box office takings

Like Henry Jenkins, Shirky recognised that the traditional disparity in power between media producers and audiences is beginning to collapse – audiences can now 'talk back' and have their opinions heard by producers. Social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram allow for the amplification of both praise and criticism of a text, meaning that media companies have given increasing attention to the marketing and reception of texts on social media.



## Review sites – IMDB (Internet Movie Database), Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic, Letterboxd

These allow audiences to give films, TV shows and video games a star rating or percentage score – the sites are designed to aggregate these and present an overall score for the text. Review sites and social media have shifted the balance of power away from professional film critics and magazines, and more towards general audience consensus.

Rotten Tomatoes is particularly interesting as there can often be a huge disparity between professional critics' scores and the scores given by general audiences:

Film	Critic score	Audience score
<i>Joker (2019)</i>	68%	88%
<i>Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017)</i>	91%	43%
<i>The Greatest Showman (2017)</i>	56%	86%

## MASS AMATEURISATION

We are now living in an age in which traditional consumers are producing their own media. Shirky has explained this phenomenon as being a result of shifting attitudes from 'Why publish this?' to 'Why not publish this?' By this he means there are no longer strict structures in place that determine which media products are suitable for public consumption – anyone can release any media text to the public at any time.

**Advantages** – Allows talented creatives from outside the mainstream to have their work seen and recognised on a wider scale. It also gives audiences a wider range of media products to choose from

**Disadvantages** – Arguably makes the media market oversaturated leading to a dilution in quality

### How is this possible?

- ❖ The ubiquity of smartphones with high-quality cameras and microphones, as well as a general reduction in the cost of DSLRs and recording equipment
- ❖ Sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allow for individuals to make a career out of producing work outside the structures of the industry, without any creative restrictions or commercial strategising

### Cognitive surplus

A term coined by Shirky which describes the way in which audiences dedicate their spare time to the creation of online products, often collaboratively with other audiences – this habit allows people to socially interact with fellow creators and it allows them to be recognised for their talents