Media Language Theories

Barthes: Semiotics

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1

*the media constructs meaning through a process of **denotation and connotation**.*

- **We read the media imagery in the same way that we read conventional language.**
- We decode media in two distinctly different ways; first, producing a **denotative reading** that recognises the literal content of an image, and then producing a **connotative reading** that diagnoses a deeper symbolic meaning.
- Image based connotations are created though: props, post-production effects, pose, costuming, composition and lighting.
- Media imagery is **polyvalent - likely, in other words, to a number of connotative effects**.
- Text-based elements can provide anchorage - tying down the meaning of an image for the reader.
- Barthes suggests that meaning is produced by the simultaneous deployment of hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, cultural and symbolic features

2

*the media has an **ideological effect** on audiences*

- The media is powerful because it has the capacity to **produce realistic portrayal of the world.**
- The media has a **myth like capacity to guide and influence** our behaviours and actions.
- The media naturalises ideas through **repetition.**
- The media reduces or simplifies ideas, discouraging audiences from questioning its specific presentation of the world.
- The media tends to reinforce the worldview of those who affect social power.

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Two theorists who challenge Barthes's thinking:

Claude Levi-Strauss: would be more interested in the way that media products articulate oppositions than in the effect of any single ingredient or moment. Lévi-Strauss would also argue that media products are informed by universally shared structures, Barthes argues that media products are constructed as a result of temporal or social influences.

Tzvetan Todorov: would argue that media products produce meaning through narrative features and that isolated instances of connotation are less significant.

Claude Lévi-Strauss: Structuralism

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1. media narratives use **binary oppositions**

- Lévi-Strauss offers a structuralist approach to media analysis, suggesting that **humans encode and decode the world using universally shared principles**.
- The media uses **binary oppositions to explain and categorise the complexities** of the world around us.
- Oppositions can be found in the media in the presentation of characters of narrative themes.
- Media makers also apply stylistic opposition to mise en scène, camera work, editing styles and image construction.
- Thematic oppositions in media products can be genre driven.

2. the way binary oppositions are resolved creates **ideological significance**

- Media products construct ideologies by **positioning their audiences to favour one side of an opposition**.
- **Narrative resolutions** – the ending of media products – often help us to diagnose which opposition the product favours.

Three theorists who challenge Lévi-Strauss ' thinking:

Stuart Hall: would also argue that media products can be encoded using binary oppositions, but he would add that audiences do not necessarily decode the products in the way that media makers intend.

Paul Gilroy: argues that Western binary thinking has traditionally classified ethnicity in terms of simplified white/non-white and civilised/uncivilised categories. He calls for the media to move beyond these simplistic and hugely damaging binary classifications.

Judith Butler: similarly argues that conventional Western gender binaries mask the complex nature of sexuality. She also argues that individuals have resisted gender binary using 'gender trouble.'.

Todorov: Narratology

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Todorov's Theory

Problem Solved

Restoration

Event

Climax
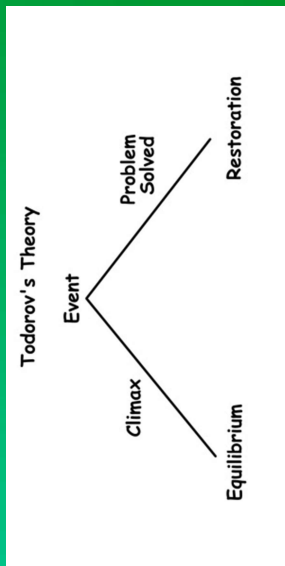
Equilibrium

1 *narrative patterns –* **equilibrium, disequilibrium and new equilibrium**

- Todorov suggest that meaning in media products is constructed through **narrative sequences and transitions** rather than through any individual effect or single moment within a product.
- Todorov suggests that an ideal **narrative structure follows a pattern of equilibrium, disequilibrium and new equilibrium**.
- The new equilibrium stage transforms characters and the world they inhabit.

**2** *the* **ideological effects** *of story structure*

- The power of stories lies in their deeper symbolic meanings.
- **Narratives construct ideals** for the audience through the use of equilibrium.
- **Disequilibrium sequences represent ideas, values or behaviours that are deemed problematic** – often these negative ideologies are embodied through the villain character.
- Narrative transformation produces further ideals or positive models of behaviour for a media audience.

? *Two theorists who might challenge Todorov's thinking:*
Steve Neale: would argue that story structures are continuously adapting and changing. The idea that there exists an 'ideal' story structure, as such, is problematic for Neale.
Lévi-Strauss: is concerned with the way that narrative present oppositions rather than the way those oppositions are transformed or synthesised.

Steve Neale: Genre Theory
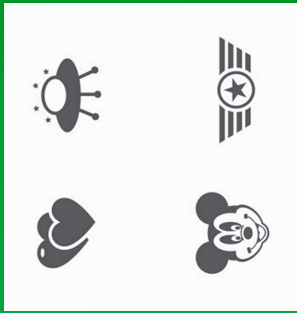
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*the pleasures afforded through **repetition and difference***

- The genre of a product is determined by a variety of factors.
- Genres offer specific pleasure to their audience.
- Audiences enjoy genre subversion as well as repetition.
- Genres are note fixed but are subject to constant change as a result of real world effects and the needs of audiences.
- Genre hybridisation is common feature within the contemporary media landscape.

2

***industry effects** on genre-driven media*

- **Genre-driven output is shaped by auteurs** and is also subject to the effects of institutional mediation.
- **Genre labelling is widely practised** by media producers to create a narrative image for a media product.
- Promotion and marketing materials (intertextual-relay) can fix the genre of a product.

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Two theorists who might challenge Neale's thinking:

Stuart Hall: would agree that products construct pleasure for audiences, but would also emphasise the potential dangers that certain genres have in effecting audience ideologies through genre specific character representations and stereotypes.

Curran and Seaton: might challenge the notion that genre hybridisation is not a significant features of the contemporary landscape. Curran and Seaton suggest that media concentration has in fact led to fewer experimental forms and the media companies are instead overly reliant on tried and tested narrative formulas that are designed to garner mass audience appeal.

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Baudrillard: Postmodernism
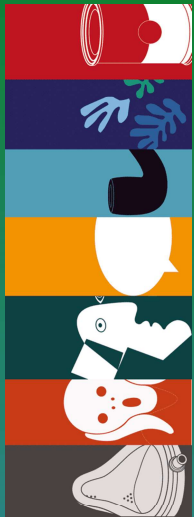
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from the **real to the hyperreal**

- Baudrillard suggest that there have been three distinct cultural phases: **pre-modernity, modernity and postmodernity**.
- We now live in the postmodern age which is marked by massive proliferation in media content and media messages.
- Media proliferation has resulted in an implosion of meaning through the **simultaneous presentation of oppositional truths**.
- Media proliferation is enables through the **endless copying of pre-existing media. Media forms 'blend' and hybridise during this copying process.**
- The postmodern age is marked by the dominance of advertising as a media form. Advertising has also impacted on other media forms creating hyperreal inertia.
- Baudrillard suggest that media blending has resulted in the construction of fictionalised reality.
- Audience yearn for authenticity in postmodernity; the media industry tries to satisfy this yearning through realised fiction.

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Two theorists who might challenge Baudrillard's thinking:
Roland Barthes: would argue that media products have a clear relationship with reality. Media texts represent and naturalise the world views of those who hold power in society.
Henry Jenkins: would contest the idea that postmodernity results in hyperreal inertia. Contemporary digital media, he would argue, can make a positive difference in the real world through the use of participatory culture.