

Media Language Theories

Semiotics: Roland Barthes

Semiotics is the study of signs and meanings. As part of your revision, you should make sure that you are familiar with the following aspects of Barthes' theory of semiotics:

- The idea that texts communicate their meanings through a process of signification.
- The idea that signs can function at the level of denotation, which involves the 'literal' or common-sense meaning of the sign, and at the level of connotation, which involves the meanings associated with or suggested by the sign.
- The idea that constructed meanings can come to seem self-evident, achieving the status of myth through a process of naturalisation.

Cultivation Theory: George Gerbner

George Gerbner is another theorist whose research was concerned with the effect that the media can have on audiences. His work explores the way in which the media can influence people's perceptions of social reality. The main principles of his cultivation theory include:

- the idea that exposure to repeated patterns of representation over long periods of time can shape and influence the way in which people perceive the world around them (i.e. cultivating particular views and opinions)
- the idea that cultivation reinforces mainstream values (dominant ideologies).

Cultural Industries Theory: David Hesmondhalgh

David Hesmondhalgh is an academic whose work focuses primarily on media policy and the creative industries. A third edition of his book *The Cultural Industries*, which charts the evolution of the cultural industries since the 1980s, was published in 2013. The main principles of his theory of cultural industries include:

- the idea that cultural industry companies try to minimise risk and maximise audiences through vertical and horizontal integration, and by formatting their cultural products (e.g. through the use of stars, genres and serials)
- the idea that the largest companies or conglomerates now operate across a number of different media industries
- the idea that the radical potential of the Internet has been contained to some extent by its partial incorporation into a large, profit-orientated set of cultural industries.

'End of Audience' Theory: Clay Shirky

'End of audience' theories are concerned with the changing relationship between media production and consumption in the digital age. Clay Shirky is a social media theorist who studies the effects of the internet on society. The main principles of his 'end of audience' theory include:

- the idea that the internet and digital technologies have had a profound effect on the relations between media and individuals
- the idea that the conceptualisation of audience members as passive consumers of mass media content is no longer tenable in the age of the internet, as media consumers have now become producers who 'speak back to' the media in various ways, as well as creating and sharing content with one another.

Fandom: Henry Jenkins

Henry Jenkins is an academic and theorist whose work focuses primarily on fandom, media convergence and participatory culture. His theory of fandom is outlined in the book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992). The main principles of this theory include:

- the idea that fans are active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings
- the idea that fans appropriate texts and read them in ways that are not fully authorised by the media producers ("textual poaching")
- the idea that fans construct their social and cultural identities through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, and are part of a participatory culture that has a vital social dimension.

Feminist Theory: bell hooks

bell hooks is a renowned feminist theorist and cultural critic who has written extensively on racial and sexual politics in film, music and popular culture. The main principles of her theory include:

- the idea that feminism is a struggle to end sexist/patriarchal oppression and the ideology of domination
- the idea that feminism is a political commitment rather than a lifestyle choice
- the idea that race and class as well as sex determine the extent to which individuals are exploited, discriminated against or oppressed.

Feminist Theory: Liesbet van Zoonen

Feminist theory is concerned with identifying, critiquing and challenging gender inequalities. Liesbet van Zoonen is a feminist academic whose work focuses on gender, popular culture and the media. The main principles of her theory include:

- the idea that gender is constructed through discourse, and that its meaning varies according to cultural and historical context
- the idea that the display of women's bodies as objects to be looked at is a core element of Western patriarchal culture
- the idea that in mainstream culture the visual and narrative codes that are used to construct the male body as spectacle differ from those used to objectify the female body.

Theories of Gender Performativity: Judith Butler

Judith Butler is an American academic and cultural theorist. Her theory of gender performativity is outlined in the books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993). The main principles of this theory include:

- the idea that identity is performatively constructed by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results (it is manufactured through a set of acts)
- the idea that there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender
- the idea that performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual.

Genre Theory: Steve Neale

Genre theory is concerned with the way in which media products are classified and categorised. Steve Neale is a theorist who has written extensively on genre. Although his work focuses primarily on film, his ideas can be applied to other media forms. The main principles of Neale's genre theory include:

- the idea that genres may be dominated by repetition, but are also marked by difference, variation and change
- the idea that genres change, develop and vary, as they borrow from and overlap with one another
- the idea that genres exist within specific economic, institutional and industrial contexts.

Cultivation Theory: George Gerbner

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Theories of Identity: David Gauntlett

David Gauntlett is a theorist who has published widely on a range of topics, including media and identity, everyday creativity and the use of digital media. The main principles of his theory of identity include:

- the idea that the media provide us with 'tools' or resources that we use to construct our identities
- the idea that while in the past the media tended to convey singular, straightforward messages about ideal types of male and female identities, the media today offer us a more diverse range of stars, icons and characters from whom we may pick and mix different ideas.

Audiences

Media Effects Theory: Albert Bandura

Media effects theories are concerned with the effects that the media may have on audiences. Albert Bandura is a psychologist whose research explores the way in which the media can influence social behaviour. The main principles of his 'social learning theory' include:

- the idea that the media can implant ideas in the mind of the audience directly
- the idea that audiences acquire attitudes, emotional responses and new styles of conduct through modelling
- the idea that media representations of transgressive behaviour, such as violence or physical aggression, can lead audience members to imitate those forms of behaviour.

Narratology: Tzvetan Todorov

Narratology is the study of narrative. A particularly influential narrative theorist is Tzvetan Todorov. The main principles of his theory of narrative include:

- the idea that all narratives share a basic structure that involves a movement from one state of equilibrium to another
- the idea that these two states of equilibrium are separated by a period of imbalance or disequilibrium
- the idea that the way in which narratives are resolved can have particular ideological significance.

Theories Around Ethnicity and Postcolonial Theory: Paul Gilroy

Postcolonial theory explores the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, and the continuing impact this can be seen to have on contemporary culture. Paul Gilroy is an academic who has published widely in the field of postcolonial studies. The main principles of his theory include:

- the idea that colonial discourses continue to inform contemporary attitudes to race and ethnicity in the postcolonial era
- the idea that civilisationism constructs racial hierarchies and sets up binary oppositions based on notions of otherness.

Postmodernism: Jean Baudrillard

The term postmodernism has a number of different uses and meanings. It refers to both a cultural movement that emerged in the mid-20th century in fields such as literature, architecture, media and the arts, and a critical approach that has been used in a wide variety of academic disciplines, including philosophy, sociology and cultural studies as well as media studies. A particularly notable postmodern thinker is the French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard. The main principles of his postmodern theory include:

- the idea that in postmodern culture the boundaries between the 'real' world and the world of the media have collapsed and that it is no longer possible to distinguish between reality and simulation
- the idea that in a postmodern age of simulacra we are immersed in a world of images that no longer refer to anything 'real'
- the idea that media images have come to seem more 'real' than the reality they supposedly represent (hyperreality).

Industry

Power and Media Industries Theory: James Curran and Jean Seaton

James Curran and Jean Seaton are academics whose work focuses mainly on media history and the political economy of the media. Their theory of power and media industries is outlined in the book *Power Without Responsibility* (2009), which provides a broad overview of the history of British media. The main principles of this theory include:

- the idea that the media is controlled by a small number of companies primarily driven by the logic of profit and power
- the idea that media concentration generally limits or inhibits variety, creativity and quality
- the idea that more socially diverse patterns of ownership help to create the conditions for more varied and adventurous media productions.

Reception Theory: Stuart Hall

Stuart Hall's reception theory is outlined in the essay 'Encoding, Decoding', which features in his book *Culture, Media, Language* (1990). The main principles of this theory include:

- the idea that communication is a process involving encoding by producers and decoding by audiences
- the idea that there are three hypothetical positions from which messages and meanings may be decoded:
 - the dominant-hegemonic position: the encoder's intended meaning (the preferred reading) is fully understood and accepted
 - the negotiated position: the legitimacy of the encoder's message is acknowledged in general terms, although the message is adapted or negotiated to better fit the decoder's own individual experiences or context
 - the oppositional position: the encoder's message is understood, but the decoder disagrees with it, reading it in a contrary or oppositional way.

Regulation Theory: Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt

Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt are academics who have published widely on media policy, media audiences and regulation. Their theory of regulation is outlined in the book *Media Regulation: Governance and the Interests of Citizens and Consumers* (2011). The main principles of this theory include:

- the idea that there is an underlying struggle in recent UK regulation policy between the need to further the interests of citizens (by offering protection from harmful or offensive material) and the need to further the interests of consumers (by ensuring choice, value for money and market competition)
- the idea that the increasing power of global media corporations, together with the rise of convergent media technologies and transformations in the production, distribution and marketing of digital media, have placed traditional approaches to media regulation at risk.

Representation

Theories of Representation: Stuart Hall

Stuart Hall was a cultural theorist whose research encompassed a wide range of topics, including how representations are constructed and the ways in which audiences may respond to these constructions. The main principles of Hall's theory of representation include:

- the idea that representation is the production of meaning through language, with language defined in its broadest sense as a system of signs
- the idea that the relationship between concepts and signs is governed by codes
- the idea that stereotyping, as a form of representation, reduces people to a few simple characteristics or traits
- the idea that stereotyping tends to occur where there are inequalities of power, as subordinate or excluded groups are constructed as different or 'other' (e.g. through ethnocentrism).

Media Language

Semiotics: Roland Barthes

Semiotics is the study of signs and meaning. Roland Barthes is a key semiotic theorist whose ideas you will need to be familiar with. The main principles of his theory of semiotics, which are outlined in his book *Elements of Semiology* (1964), include:

- the idea that texts communicate their meanings through a process of signification
- the idea that signs can function at the level of denotation, which involves the 'literal' or common-sense meaning of the sign, and at the level of connotation, which involves the meanings associated with or suggested by the sign
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Structuralism: Claude Lévi-Strauss

Structuralism is concerned with the underlying systems and structures through which meanings are produced. The cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss is one of the most significant figures associated with this theoretical approach. The main principles of his structuralist theory include:

- the idea that texts can best be understood through an examination of their underlying structure