

# CHAPTER 1 *Key concepts in media studies*

This chapter covers the key concepts — essential tools for AS and A2 media studies courses. The AS year usually begins with an outline of the key concepts and their application to media texts. These concepts are the basis of any analysis of the media and any discussion or evaluation of media topics involves their use. As listed below, they form the acronym GRAVIL and form a useful check list for examination purposes:

- Genre
- Representation
- Audience
- Values and ideology
- Institutions
- Language

## 1 *The key concepts explained*

### 1.1 Genre

This term defines a category, style or type of media product.

#### **Why is genre important?**

Classification of texts into genres seems to be a natural part of making sense of the cultural world. Children as young as five can classify television programmes and distinguish them by identifying key generic features, such as recognising real or pretend violence. Identifying genres helps audiences to make sense of plot conventions and narrative structures.

- All media products can be categorised as belonging to genres.
- Genres are identified by the repetition of distinctive features.
- Genres can be divided into sub-genres, for example vampire horror is a sub-genre of horror.
- Genres can determine the narrative conventions of a text.
- Genres generate expectations in audiences.
- Genres are used by producers to structure media products.

#### **How can we identify a genre?**

Genres can usually be identified through the sharing of common:

- character types
- iconography
- plots
- props
- locations
- music and soundtracks
- narratives or storylines

#### EXAMINER'S TIP

The difference between a plot and storyline is that the plot involves the technical means by which the audience is given information about the narrative progression of a film or drama. This can include camera movement, shot type and the soundtrack that accompanies the action, which are used to explain the motivation of characters and their progress through the time frame of the action. The storyline is the story that is being told.

## 1.2 Representation

This is the process whereby the media construct versions of people, places and events in images, words or sound for transmission through media texts to audiences. Representation is the basis of all media products. We live our lives through actual experience of others and the world around us. Media products construct versions of the living experience through representations.

- Representations provide models of how we see gender, social groups and places — aspects of the world we all inhabit.
- They are ideological in that they are constructed within a framework of values and beliefs.
- They are **mediated** by individuals and media organisations and reflect the value systems of their sources.
- No representations are real; they are only versions of the real.

### TERMINOLOGY

**Mediation:** the means by which, through the use of representation, a media organisation and its employees stand between an event and the public's perception of that event. The constructed versions of people, places and events that result in media representations involve changes to those people, places and events.

## 1.3 Audience

Audiences are the groups of individuals targeted by producers as the intended consumers of media texts.

### Why is the study of audiences important?

All media products assume the existence of an audience. The identification of an audience is vital for media producers, as this will affect the contents of the media text. The responses of audiences — **audience positioning** — can be researched and predicted as part of the process of marketing media texts. Audiences are affected in some way by media texts and the nature of this is the basis for a wide range of media research. Because of the wide availability of these texts, the actual viewers, readers or listeners may not always be those originally intended.

### How are audiences defined?

Audiences are traditionally defined according to a system of social classification used by advertisers and researchers:

- A professional workers: lawyers, doctors, managers of large organisations
- B shopkeepers, farmers, teachers, white-collar workers
- C1 skilled manual high grade: builders, carpenters, shop assistants, nurses
- C2 skilled manual low grade: electricians, plumbers
- D semi-skilled manual: bus drivers, lorry drivers, fitters
- E unskilled manual: general labourers, bartenders, porters

The scale is used to classify media audiences and to distinguish between the readership of tabloid and quality newspapers. The system has drawbacks as it ignores the class that people may think they belong to. In addition, social status does not necessarily relate to financial status, income, patterns of spending or aspirations. (For further discussion of audience classification, see the section on Advertising and marketing on p. 48.)



EXAMINER'S TIP

Although audiences are targeted by media producers, easy access and the open nature of media texts mean that there is often no way of ensuring that only the target audience accesses the product. For example, unless encrypted systems are used on television channels and strict controls are applied to the sale of magazines, children can access material aimed at adults. Although a certification system applies to videos and DVDs for sale or rental, there is evidence that children and young people under the specified age frequently gain access to adult material

### 1.4 Values and ideology

Ideology consists of a set of attitudes, beliefs and values held in common by a group of people and culturally produced within a community to sustain a particular way of life. Values and ideology are part of every media text. Understanding their presence is essential in order to explain how media texts influence us and the world that we inhabit.

- Religions such as Islam and Christianity and **meta discourses** such as **Marxism** are ideologies.
- All media products have an ideological dimension to them and are constructed within the context of a dominant ideology or a series of common sense values that are generally shared and understood by all members of a community.
- Marxists see these values as representing the interests of the dominant or ruling class and their maintenance of power.

Ideology is present in all media texts. It can be explored by assessing the attitudes, beliefs and values embedded within a text. Assumptions made about how the viewer or reader thinks and feels can be analysed.

TERMINOLOGY

**Meta discourse:** a postmodernist term used to describe all-embracing social theories like Marxism, which claim to provide a scientific framework for explaining how societies work.

**Marxism:** an ideology derived from the writings of the sociologist Karl Marx (1818–83), which sees society as dominated by capitalist structures that maintain the dominance of the ruling class and lead to the exploitation of workers. Marx's analysis sees the world dominated by 'class struggle', resulting in the eventual triumph of the working class through a process of revolutionary change. Marx's ideology forms the basis of belief in communist states and is still advocated by political parties throughout the world.

EXAMINER'S TIP

It is important to see the underlying ideology behind everyday assumptions in media texts, especially as the 'common sense' nature of ideology sometimes makes it seem invisible. A soap powder advertisement, showing two women discussing how to get the cleanest wash and which product to use, is ideological in that it assumes that women do the washing. It also makes assumptions that having clean washing carries social status and that knowledge of a particular product can help achieve this status.

### 1.5 Institutions

Institutions are collections of individuals working together in a hierarchical structure to achieve clearly defined, shared goals. Most will be business organisations — often part of large corporations working to achieve profitable financial returns on investments.

Some institutions may be set up by governments, with a specific function defined by law, but these too will have clear objectives and achievement targets, usually defined in financial terms.

### Why are institutions important?

Institutions determine and constrain the ideology, structure, content and distribution of media texts and are involved in the regulation and control of those texts. Nearly all media texts are produced within a business or industrial context, and financial structures are designed to produce a positive response from audiences and a profitable return for the product.

In a public service context such as the BBC, financial returns are important but emphasis is also placed on customer satisfaction and ratings to justify taxpayer support through the licence fee.

The control and standardisation of media products by dominant worldwide media organisations, using Western or American value systems, leads to claims of **cultural imperialism**. Concern over the power of these institutions in a globalised economy is a major issue in the study of the media.

### Examples of media institutions

- News Corporation
- BBC
- AOL Time-Warner
- MTV
- Disney Corporation
- Vivendi Universal
- Emap
- Sony

#### TERMINOLOGY

**Cultural imperialism:** the dominance of Western (particularly American) cultural values across the world as disseminated by the media. For example, American soap operas depicting the American way of life are dubbed into most of the world's important languages and have a worldwide audience. This has the effect of encouraging Western values, aspirations, role models, lifestyles and the consumption of associated consumer goods.

### Media ownership

As media technologies develop, so the corporate structure of media industries undergoes constant change and realignment. The coming together of media institutions, or the merger of formerly different elements within one institution, is called **convergence**. The term **synergy** is often used to describe the strengthening outcome of this merging. For example, the parallel releases of a new film with a DVD of the film uses two technologies to maximise a company's revenue from a product.

In the production of news, convergence may mean the development of multimedia newsrooms where print, television, radio and online news are combined through a central news hub, with reporters involved in the generation of news for all media.

### *Cross-media ownership*

Cross-media ownership is a natural commercial consequence of the coming together of the mass media industries in a highly competitive digital age. One outcome is the



concentration of ownership increasingly in the hands of a relatively few powerful international corporations and institutions. This involves a media corporation having interest in a range of different media. For example, the News Corporation owns companies involved in newspaper and magazine publishing, book publishing, film making, cable and DBS (satellite) television stations, and radio stations on a global scale.

In Britain, concerns over the tendency towards oligopoly power (where a few large companies dominate the market) have been balanced against the government's wishes: to encourage powerful industrial groupings capable of competing in world markets and to reduce regulation that is seen as inhibiting the natural evolution of media industries.

The issue of whether international conglomerates such as the News Corporation should be allowed to own UK terrestrial television channels is controversial. Channel Five has already given the corporation a foothold by awarding the news contract to Sky rather than, as before, to ITN.

EXAMINER'S TIP

It is important to recognise the commercial nature of all media products. Most of them are constructed by groups of individuals working within organisations that seek a large financial return on the product. This will influence the nature and content of the product, the medium chosen, the pattern of distribution and the target audience.

**Point for discussion**

The tendency towards convergence in media industries and the commercial and technological pressures towards cross-media ownership tend to favour international conglomerates, with the government in the UK increasingly seeing its regulatory role more in terms of media content than restricting corporate ownership. In 2006, the government restated its commitment to the public service ethos of the BBC, emphasising that it should balance its worldwide commercial activities with its core business of informing, instructing and entertaining the British audience. Issues of quality and type of programme were left deliberately vague.

**1.6 Language**

Language is a code through which meaning can be expressed and shared by groups of people. In media terms, it describes the sign systems, structures and codes used by a particular medium, such as photographic language, film/moving image language or print medium language.

In written form, language is the basis for recording, passing on and sharing the collective experience of mankind. Pictorial language (such as cave painting) has been the means of expressing core cultural and spiritual values since the earliest times.

- In media studies, language is the code used within a particular medium to convey messages to the audience. Unless the audience can decode messages and share the meanings intended, communication cannot take place.
- These codes are culturally determined and can be culturally specific. This means that they may be understood by some audiences and not by others.

- Media language can be written, verbal, non-verbal and visual.
- The language of film refers to all the elements that make up the construction of a film: sets, lighting, mise-en-scène and editing. In order to read a film, audiences must be familiar with all these elements.

## 2

## Applying the key concepts to text analysis

The key concepts are applied to media texts as part of a **deconstruction** process, where deconstruction is the separation of a text into its component parts and the analysis of these parts. All media texts are **constructed**, usually by working groups or individuals who select and combine their various elements; deconstruction is a reversal of this process. The AQA specification is quite specific in its checklisting of the key concepts, whereas for OCR and WJEC the approach is more implicit but no less important.

### 2.1 Questions to be considered (AS/A2)

When you analyse a media text using the key concepts, you need to ask yourself a series of questions concerning each concept. Answering these questions will help you to focus your analysis and ensure that you cover all of the important elements.

#### Genre

- What is the genre, sub-genre or type of media product? For example, is it a magazine advertisement, a television commercial, a television sitcom or a slasher horror movie?
- What are the key **iconographic** elements that identify the genre? In the vampire horror genre these would include vampire teeth, Gothic settings, graveyards, bats, crucifixes, garlic, wooden stakes and coffins.
- What are the **narrative** conventions of the genre? Examples include: ‘they all lived happily ever after’ in a fairytale; the girl unmasking the killer in a teen slasher horror movie; the storyline being resolved so that everything is back in place for the next episode in a sitcom; and the identification of the product with a positive and desirable lifestyle in an advertisement.
- How does the genre meet or challenge the expectations of an audience? Is the outcome predictable or does it have a twist? Can the audience guess the ending or are they surprised?

The crime thriller *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer 1995) seems to be following a fairly predictable pattern during the prolonged police interview with key witness Verbal Kint (played by Kevin Spacey) concerning the identity of the mysterious gangster Keyser Söze. The police interviewer and the audience are stunned by the sudden realisation in the last moments of the film, as the witness drives away, that he is the elusive gangster. This narrative device has the effect of encouraging the audience to want to see the whole film again, in order to pick up the detail that they missed that gives away the gangster’s identity.

## TERMINOLOGY

**Iconography:** the distinguishing elements, in terms of props and visual details, that characterise a genre.

**Narrative:** the storyline and structure of a media text, which provide a framework of expectation, predictability and outcome.



EXAMINER'S TIP

Remember that a media product does not have to fit into a prescribed genre and that contemporary texts often show characteristics of several genres designed to appeal to different audiences.

### Representation

- Consider who or what is being represented. If it is people, are they men, women or children? What are their race, origin, social class, status, nationality, age and state of health?
- Who (organisations or individuals) is responsible for constructing the representations? Examples are a BBC news team, a charity such as the NSPCC or a pressure group like War on Want.
- What places are represented?
- Are the representations **positive** or **negative**?
- Do the representations involve idealised versions of people and places? Such idealised images include cover girls on teenage magazines such as *Bliss* and *Sugar*, or photographs of Greek islands in a holiday brochure.
- What attitudes, beliefs and values are represented?
- Do the representations confirm or challenge existing stereotypes? For example, in light of the history of slavery, is it possible to represent black people as servants or low-paid agricultural workers without the associated negative connotations?

TERMINOLOGY

**Positive representation:** the representation of a person, place or social group in a way that would generate a positive and favourable response from a viewer, reader or listener, in line with the way in which the person, place or group being represented would wish to be seen and which enhances their sense of value and self-worth.

**Negative representation:** the representation of a person, place or social group in a way that would create a negative, unfavourable or hostile response from the viewer, reader or listener. This is often in line with prejudiced or stereotyped opinions and views.

### Audience

- What is the intended audience for the media product? For example, is it aimed at pre-school children, school children, pre-teens, teenagers, young singles aged 18–30, married couples with or without children, separated singles, middle-aged couples with adult children, retired couples or pensioners? It could be combinations of these.
- How is the audience defined and targeted by the product? Is it a mass audience or a niche audience?
- What is its gender, ethnicity and social class?
- What are the expected preferred readings for the product?
- How does the product reach the audience, and through what media?

### Values and ideology

What assumptions does the product make about the **attitudes**, **beliefs** and **values** of the audience, and how are these embedded in the product? Issues you could consider include:

- How does the text represent relations between men and women?
- Is heterosexuality seen as the norm?

- Does the text show violent solutions to disagreements as the norm?
- Does the text assume that people live in nuclear families (a man, a woman and their children)?
- How are older people represented? Are they treated with respect or ridicule?
- Are acquiring and spending money represented as the principal goals of life?
- Which cultures and ethnicities are represented?
- Who and what are not represented?
- Are the values **mainstream** or **alternative**?

## TERMINOLOGY

**Attitudes, beliefs and values:** these are terms commonly used when discussing the audience for media products and the factors influencing the reception of media messages.

- **Attitudes:** the positions people adopt in relation to a particular issue, for example being for or against fox hunting.
- **Beliefs:** deeply held views, such as a belief in human equality or a belief in God.
- **Values:** the moral or ideological structures within which beliefs and attitudes are formed, such as a belief in Christianity or Islam.

**Mainstream:** the uncontroversial, generally accepted attitudes, beliefs and values of the majority population. Mainstream values are influenced by dominant ideology.

**Alternative:** challenging or opposing the mainstream values of a society in a way that can be controversial and provocative.

**Preferred reading:** the reading or meaning of a media text intended by its producers.

**Negotiated reading:** a reading of a text whereby the audience interprets the meaning in the light of its own experience.

**Oppositional reading:** a reading of a text whereby the audience adopts a position of challenge, rejection and opposition with regard to the intended meaning.

**Dominant ideology:** the ideology of the ruling elite in a society, accepted by the majority as common sense and reproduced in mainstream media texts.

### Point for discussion

Theories of ideology owe much to the work of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Communist party leader imprisoned by Mussolini. Gramsci used the term 'hegemony' to describe the way in which dominant elites can maintain power over the economic, political and cultural direction of a society. The values that sustain elites in power are reproduced every day by the media and are made to seem like the common sense views of the majority so that any challenge to them is marginalised.

### Institutions

- Which business or corporate structures are involved in the production of the media product?
- Under what circumstances is it produced?
- Is it produced by mainstream industry or independently?
- How is the product financed?
- Who profits financially from its creation?
- How is it distributed?
- Under what circumstances is it accessed by the audience? Examples include cinema, home video, computer game, magazine, terrestrial television and satellite television.



### Language

- What media languages are involved in the product? Are they written, verbal, non-verbal, aural, visual or a combination of these?
- If the text is a film, how is the language of film used? If verbal or written language is involved, what kind of language is it — formal, colloquial or slang? What is the language **register**? Is there a regional accent? Are other techniques used, such as rhyme or alliteration? Are there any examples of **intertextuality**?

#### EXAMINER'S TIP

Although media languages may involve the use of the written word and verbal communication, it is important to remember that the term 'language' does not apply exclusively to the written word and verbal communication when used in a media context.

#### TERMINOLOGY

**Register:** the style and tone of language used in printed and oral/aural media texts. Register includes grammatical features, the choice of vocabulary and the mode of address used, and may involve the use of specialist vocabularies such as legal jargon or the technical terminology used for the specification and performance of cars.

**Intertextuality:** the practice of deliberately including references to one text in the narrative of another, usually as a device intended to engage the interest of the audience by appealing to their prior knowledge and experience of media texts. For example, in Robert Zemeckis's film *What Lies Beneath* (2000) there are many references to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), including bathroom scenes (the shower scene in *Psycho*) a menacing ghostly house, a character called Norman (Norman Bates in *Psycho*) a car going under water, a sliver of broken glass resembling the knife used in *Psycho* and, for good measure, there are references to Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, with the partial observation of activity in the neighbours' house through different windows. Finally, the shots using digital technology enhance Hitchcock's camera style, particularly in the shot zooming from a height into the moving car on the bridge, towards the end of the film.

#### EXAMINER'S TIP

When you begin the assessment of a media text, it is useful to sit back and ask yourself the following:

- What kind of text is it?
- Why was that particular medium chosen?
- How does the choice of medium determine the content of the text?
- Who produced it?
- What is the effect of the text on the audience?
- What is the producer's intention?
- Does it seek to inform, instruct, persuade or entertain, or a combination of these elements?

### 3

## Wider contexts and the analysis of media texts (A2)

A distinguishing feature between the work at AS and A2 is the emphasis at A2 on the wider contexts in which media texts are produced. These contexts are described as being: **social, historical, economic or political**, with the acronym **SHEP**. You are

expected to make reference to these in your discussion of media texts. In the outlines below there is inevitably some overlap between the categories. These contexts apply to all A2 units.

### 3.1 Social contexts

#### Chronology

##### *Early twentieth century*

The social contexts surrounding the creation of media texts involve the prevailing attitudes, beliefs and values at the time a text is produced. This is often called the **Zeitgeist**, a German word meaning ‘the spirit of the age’. For example, after the First World War ended in 1918, Germany, as the defeated nation, was in social turmoil, with a fear of communist revolution. However, it also had a liberated and creative arts scene. German cinema produced *Nosferatu* (director F.W. Murnau 1922), with its fears of aliens, disease and plague bringing the collapse of ordered society. The film reflected uncertainties and concerns in Germany, particularly fears of foreign influence reflected in the growth of anti-Semitism. Fear of plague introduced by the alien vampire perhaps related to the flu pandemic of 1918 that killed millions of people in Europe. At the same time, the film illustrated the creative and innovative atmosphere in the arts, with its Expressionist style and innovative use of the camera.

##### *1930s*

These were the years of the great economic Depression and growing uncertainty about political developments in Europe. In 1920 the 18th Amendment to the US Constitution had prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcoholic drink. The resulting black market in alcohol gave rise to a huge increase in gangsters and organised crime. Prohibition was abolished in 1933.

Cinema (dominated by Hollywood, the studio system and the great stars) reflected this background, with the development of the gangster movie, such as *Public Enemy* (William Wellman 1931), *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy 1930) and Howard Hawk’s *Scarface* (1932). Hollywood also provided escapist entertainment with films like *The Scarlet Empress* (Joseph Von Sternberg 1934), starring Marlene Dietrich, and the Hollywood musical *Top Hat* (1935), starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

##### *1940s and the war years*

In Britain, films reflected the need to raise national morale in the face of the threat of invasion; they emphasised self-sacrifice and the need for personal courage in facing the demanding and difficult tasks ahead. In a similar way, cinema in the USA in the 1940s reflected a growing patriotism but also the dark, uncertain and amoral world of wartime in what the French came to call **film noir**, when the films were first shown in France after the liberation of Europe at the end of the war. An example is *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder 1944).

##### *1950s and the post-war years*

Science fiction films in the 1950s reflected the growing fear of science gone wrong, the horrific consequences of exposure to radiation and fears of mutation with the development of the atom bomb. Examples include *The Blob* (Irvin S. Yeaworth Jr. 1958) and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold and John Sherwood 1954). Fear of communism and growing paranoia concerning ‘brainwashing’ and aliens were reflected in *It Came From Outer Space* (Jack Arnold 1953) and even *Teenagers from Outer Space* (Tom Graeff 1959), in which thrill-crazed space kids blast the flesh off humans.