Media Concepts Theories You Need to Learn ...

Concept	A Basic Description	Theorists
Audience	The uses and gratifications of media texts and the ways in which texts are designed to be read by a specific audience.	Barthes Dyer Hall
Representation	An image and **an idea**.	Barthes Dyer Hall
Media Language	The signs and symbols used that encode meaning in a media text The conventional features of media texts which are categorized in broad families.	Barthes De Saussure Altman + Hall
Industry	The ways in which ownership of media concentrates power The conflict between freedom of expression and media regulation.	Curran & Seaton Livingston & Lunt

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Barthes

Roland Barthes was an influential theorist who explored the way in which **texts make meaning**. Building on linguistics, he considered that all cultural forms; including media, are essentially made up of **a system of signs**. Barthes identifies two interrelated theoretical perspectives:

1. **Semiotics** - the study of individual signs

2. **Structuralism** - the study of the relationships between those signs

He argues that the organisation of these relationships **encodes particular ideologies.**

The Theory

The Active Audience - Barthes considered texts to be open to many possible interpretations (readings) from many different perspectives. To consider different possible readings, he pulled texts apart, to look at **the pieces (semiotics)** and **how they fit together (structuralism).**

Rather than having a meaning determined by the producer, or one which is somehow 'in' the text, Barthes considered the meaning of the finished text – a book, song, film or advertisement – **is to be created by the <u>audience</u>**, therefore a **text always remains open**.

Myth and Ideology - The term myth has two everyday meanings:

1. A **traditional narrative** which **explains symbolically** the **origins of the world and natural phenomenon** and is passed down through generations, for example, creation myths explain how the world began

2. Something which is **untrue although it is believed to be true** such as 'it is a myth that students can leave after fifteen minutes if their teacher doesn't turn up'.

Drawing on Marxist theory, for Barthes **myth works at the level of ideology**. Representations created in the mass media, through signs (semiotics) and the structures between them (structuralism), **naturalise a particular view of the world**. These representations **may 'mask' reality**. The construction of **myths in representations and narratives** therefore determines the text's **ideological perspective.**

Influences on Barthes:
- **Ferdinand de Saussure (Linguistics)**
- **Vladimir Propp (Russian Formalist)**

Barthes Narrative codes, describe how meaning is made in fiction texts by the use of these **five codes:**

1	**The enigma code** a.k.a. the hermeneutic code	**Narratives** set up puzzles to be solved; these enigmas delay the end of the narrative & maintain the audience's interest & anticipation. The answers to the puzzles are satisfyingly resolved later in the text	For example, the origin of Harry Potter's lightning scar is not made clear until later in the series.
2	The events and **actions code** a.k.a. the proairetic code	Relates to progression in **the narrative** and involves codes of behaviour or actions that lead us to expect consequences. Barthes asserts that each action could be named giving a series of titles to the text.	These action codes often made very explicit on the DVD – the **chapter titles** are generally based on events or significant actions.
3	The **symbolic code**	The process of **representing** an object, idea or feeling by something else (a visual metaphor). Often used to symbolise opposition which exists in the **narrative** (ref Levi-Strauss)	For example, a fence between two characters may symbolise their emotional distance / conflict.
4	The **semic code**	Refers to the use of **connotation** to give the audience an insight into characters, objects or settings that we learn to read through our understanding of narratives. **Media Language**	For example the colour red is often used to suggest danger or passion; therefore a red dress worn by a female character is likely to suggest her sexuality and/or danger.
5	The **cultural code**	Concerns the culturally specific knowledge from outside the text which is used to make meaning in a text. **Media Language & Audience**	For example Big Ben at the beginning of the news references the heart of political power in the UK.

Glossary of Terminology you should use to analyse texts using Barthes ideas:

● **Structuralism**: Approach to media analysis which borrows its principles from linguistics (the study of language). Structuralism considers the relationships (structures) between signs to be more important than what a sign may mean on its own.

● **Myth**: Artificial representations and invalid beliefs about society that circulate in cultural products, such as the mass media.

● **Paradigm**: A group of similar signs from which a selection is made to make a text (i.e. a selection may be made between a paradigm of colours, a paradigm of fonts, and a paradigm of sizes to produce red point 12 typography in Times New Roman).

   a. **Syntagm**: The combination of signs selected from **different paradigms**. In the example above, red point 12 typography in Times New Roman is a syntagm.

● **Semiotics**: The study of signs

   a. **Sign**: A unit that makes meaning **(Media Language)**

      i. **Icon (Denotation through close resemblance)**: A sign which visually corresponds to that which it represents.

         1. *The thing looks like the thing it represents*

      ii. **Index (Denotation through cause & effect)** A sign which refers in some way to that which it represents.

         1. *Smoke is an index of fire. An echo is an index of space. Footprints are an index of a person walking ahead.*

      iii. **Symbol (Connotation)**: A sign which is used to represent something to which it bears no logical relationship.

         1. *For example, there is no reason why green should symbolise jealousy. A rainbow may be symbolic of hope.*

De Saussure

Ferdinand de Saussure was a linguist and a semiotician, this means he studied language and how language communicates meaning. Media Studies has borrowed many of his ideas, to try to describe how the media, as a type of language, also communicates meaning. De Saussure was primarily interested in written language; however his analytical tools can also be used to describe texts, which use images, editing and sounds as well as the written word.

THE BASICS

De Saussure considered language to be a series of signs, which refers to real world objects, places, feelings, thoughts... (the referents). Language encodes complex meanings and ideas by combining signs to build up layers of denoted and connoted meaning.

A sign, de Saussure suggested, was made up of two parts:

1. The **signifier** is the physical sign in the text.
2. The **signified** is the implied meaning it carried.

De Saussure was trying to explain how human beings, through language, describe their world, their experiences & their ideas. He enabled the study of and literature to become more formalised and scientific. It is important however to remember that whilst we use semiotics to study distinct and individual features of a text, de Saussure was clear that **the whole is greater than the sum of its parts** and that we need to look at how signs combine to communicate ideas.

● *So for example the colour green doesn't always mean envy, we need to look at other elements of the sign to consider what the overarching meaning is (Barthes called this syntagm).*

Richard Dyer

...is a British media theorist, who discussed a star's special place in the audience's lives. He (similarly to Hall) suggests that a star's **meta-narrative** impacts on the consumption by the audience. He argued that the **star image is manufactured and artificial** and that individual stars have their own unique selling point (brand values).

The Paradox of the Star

Dyer's central idea was that the star image could be discussed using two key **paradoxes**. 'What on earth is a paradox,' you may ask – well, it's a statement that seems to contradict itself.

Dyer suggested that a star image simultaneously carries two contradictory ideas. He said...

'...a star is both ordinary & extraordinary.'

- Dyer suggested that a star must be represented simultaneously as, **just like us** (the audience/regular people), but also at the same time possess something we do not have and something that makes them **special, different, extraordinary**... This might mean they are more talented, gifted, confident, passionate, artistic, sensitive, carefree or sexy, but also they are allowed to be rebellious, anti-social, or angry maybe. They are idealised version of humanity...idols.
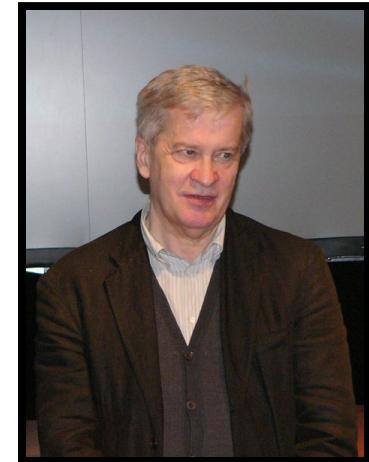
'...a star is both present & absent.'

- Dyer also thought that the audience struggles with another paradox; and that is that the star is simultaneously **present** in our lives, be this in our social groups chat, our style, our identity, and our consumption habits.. However they are also **absent**, something that we perceive as out of reach, on a pedestal, and not actually there.
    - *Note: This links in really nicely with a postmodern theory called* **hyper-reality**.
- Dyer argued that as an audience we strive to **complete the star image** through consuming their products, shows, merchandise etc. We strive to complete the image by engaging with the star's meta-narrative and, if possible, seek the ultimate satisfaction, seeing them live!
- The problem of course is that the meta-narrative shifts and changes and we are constantly striving to complete the image and constantly frustrated in our attempts to do so.

Hall

Stuart Hall is a cultural theorist who tries to explain how society interacts and how individuals in society have different interpretations and responses to media texts.

He tried to understand a very simple question; **'Why do some people like one media text and dislike another?'**

Furthermore he tried to understand the ideological underpinning of media texts & media audiences and he moved media theory away from a model, which assumed that the audience was a 'mass audience' which responded en-masse and interpreted a text in the same way.
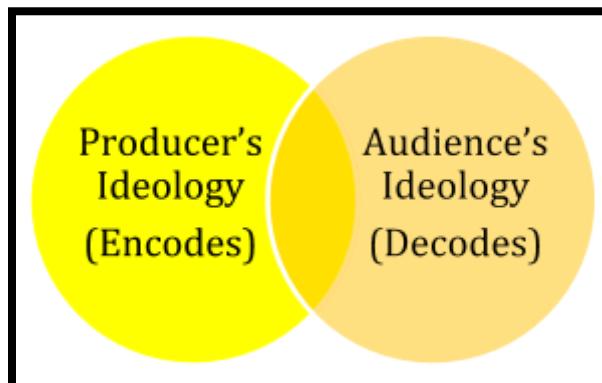
His ideas are part of **'Reception Theory'.**

Reception theory states that the way in which an audience has individual interpretation of a media text and that reading is a two stage process.

1. The producer **encodes** ideology into a text and wishes it to be read in a particular way.
2. The audience then **decodes** the text, but they also bring their own ideology to the text.

A preferred reading is made where ideologies meet...
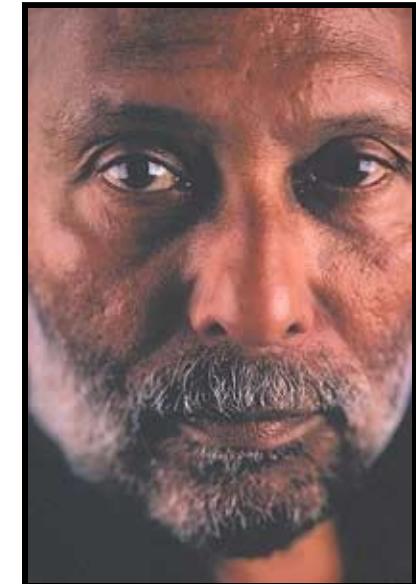
Hall suggested that media texts could be read in **three possible ways**:

1. Preferred or dominant reading
2. Negotiated reading
3. Oppositional or aberrant reading

The factors which cause people to read media differently, he explained by saying there are **four areas** which have an impact on our interpretation.

What factors affect your reading?	
Demographic	*Who you are*
Psychographic	*Values, Opinions and Beliefs*
Situated Culture	*How & where you consume the text*
Cultural Competence	*Your cultural understanding and experiences*

Lacey

In his book '**Introduction to Film**' **Nick Lacey** describes genre as an act of **'similarity and difference'**; this simple idea is essential to understanding genre theory.

When an audience consumes a media text defined by a generic label they have certain **expectations** of the text, certain features which are often described as the **'repertoire of elements'**. An audience member will want their expectations satisfied, but will also be unhappy if the text they consume is an exact copy of previous texts. They want something **similar** but at the same time **different**.

THE REPERTOIRE OF ELEMENTS
This is a framework (or structure) which allows students to study genre by comparison with other texts.

In music (videos) those repertoire of elements may be:	
Element	*Description*
Iconography	*A familiar stock of image to do with the band / star the connotations of which have become fixed; costume, props, locations...*
Camera and Editing	*Production techniques which echo the rhythm, tempo and instrumentation of the music.*
The Sound	*Conventions of musical style (instrumentation, lyrics, style, influences)*
Narrative	*How events in the story reflect the lyrics and tone, and therefore the ideology (ies) of the genre.*
Star Values	*Values/ideology promoted by the star (or their label) which are attractive to fans.*
Performance	*The style of performance along with the attitude, mannerisms and vocal style (grain of voice) of the lead singer.*

In print media (digi packs) those repertoire of elements may be:	
Element	*Description*
Art / Image	*The design, style, mise-en-scene of the main image on the album cover*
Colour Scheme	*The palette of colours which are used in the design*
Typeface(s)	*The fonts which are chosen and the design features applied to those fonts.*
Copy (The Words)	*The connotation of the word choices used, especially in the album art.*
Effects / Filters / Brushes / Stroke	*Any effects applied in Photoshop or Illustrator, including design features lines / shapes and filters.*
Representation	*The ideology (values, attitudes and beliefs) of the band / artist.*

Altman

Rick Altman has written widely about film, his most well known book is called 'Film/Genre'. His ideas can be applied to any media text defined by a generic label. In writing he tries to explain the uses of genre and suggests that there are four distinct uses that genre is put to by four different groups concerned with film production, distribution and consumption.

1. **The Producer (Blueprint)**
   a. A media producer uses genre to **minimize their risk,** by understanding what is currently popular / selling.
   b. The producer also uses genre as a **blueprint** for production.
2. **The Distributor (Label)**
   a. Will use genre to communicate the nature of the media text that are selling; they will use well known generic codes and conventions in marketing materials in order to **communicate the genre** of the product or artist to an audience.
3. **The Audience (Contract)**
   a. Use their understanding of genre to decide which media to consume as they **seek predictable pleasure**.
   b. The audience will also use genre to **shape their expectations** of the text, which if met will give them enjoyment. However if their expectations are not met they may reject the text because their expectations are denied or subverted (it's too different); the **generic contract** is broken
4. **The Student (Structure)**
   a. Will use genre as a **comparative system** in order to study media texts.
      i. They will use the **repertoire of elements** to group texts into a **corpus** which may be defined by a generic label.
      ii. They will also use **similarities & differences between texts** to explore the characters, themes, visual style, sound, iconography, performance and narrative of a genre.

Curran and Seaton

Curran & Seaton's Power & Media Industries Theory

A political economy approach to the media – arguing that patterns of ownership and control are the most significant factors in how the media operate.

Media industries follow the normal capitalist pattern of increasing concentration of ownership in fewer and fewer hands.

- This leads to a narrowing of the range of opinions represented and a pursuit of profit at the expense of quality or creativity.

The internet does not represent a rupture with the past in that it does not offer a level playing field for diverse voices to be heard. It is constrained by nationalism and state censorship. News is still controlled by powerful news organisations, who have successfully defended their oligarch.

Livingstone & Lunt

Livingstone and Lunt – regulation theory.

Livingstone and Lunt think the needs of a citizen are in conflict with the needs of the consumer, because protection can limit freedom. They noticed that regulating media to protect citizens from harmful content can limit freedom of expression.

Livingstone and Lunt studied four case studies of the work of Ofcom. Ofcom is serving an audience who may be seen as consumers and/or citizens, with consequences for regulation: consumers have wants, are individuals, seek private benefits from the media, use the language of choice, and require regulation to protect against detriment; citizens have needs, are social, seek public or social benefits from the media, use the language of rights, and require regulation to promote the public interest.

Traditional regulation is being put at risk by: increasingly globalised media industries, the rise of the digital media, and media convergence.