Applying Academic Ideas to Long Form Television Drama

STRANGER THINGS & THE KILLING

Evolving Media H409/02

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Applying Academic Ideas to LFTV Drama

This resource explores the application of the set academic ideas and arguments in relation to Long Form Television Drama. It provides suggested prompt questions for analysis, and examples of application and evaluation.

Students will need to **apply** relevant academic ideas and arguments to the chosen LFTV dramas in **Question 3**, and **evaluate** the ideas of one specific theorist in **Question 4**.

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Media Language Academic Ideas

- Semiology – Barthes

- Narratology – Todorov

- Genre Theory – Neale

- Structuralism – Levi-Strauss

- Postmodernism - Baudrillard

Applying Barthes to *Stranger Things*

- **What signs are used to communicate meaning? Identify the signifier/signified and denotations/connotations.**
- **What values might the signs suggest to the audience?**

Consider the **signs** used in the sequence which introduces Hopper. **Signifiers** such as his badge, gun, uniform, and the empty beer cans all communicate meanings in relation to the character but they also suggest values and **ideological messages** around power and masculinity. This demonstrates the way objects develop a social meaning which reflects **dominant ideology**.

The establishing shot of the Wheeler house in the opening sequence is another example of the way **signs** work as **myths**. Whilst the house is just a physical object, the meanings it suggests about ideas of family and home, and the way in which those ideas are viewed as the expected **social norm** show how signs accrue social meanings which can communicate **ideological messages**.

Semiology is useful for identifying some of the ways in which meaning is communicated in LFTV drama, and for considering how those meanings might relate to **social values** and **ideology**. A limitation in its application to LFTV drama is that it does not account for the importance of other media language elements such as genre conventions or narrative structures in creating meaning. It may result in readings which do not reflect the potentially diverse meanings and values audience members may construct.

Applying Barthes to *The Killing*

- **What signs are used to communicate meaning? Identify the signifier/signified and denotations/connotations.**

- **What values might the signs suggest to the audience?**

Consider the **signs** used in the sequence when Lund meets Mayer. Signifiers such as Mayers gun pictures, basketball hoop and other props signify his immaturity as opposed to Lund's professional family oriented props. This could highlight a common **ideology of gender maturity**.

Signs used to establish characters and reflect social groupings can be seen through **signifiers** such as costume. Take Theis' appearance which **signifies** him as a blue-collar worker in comparison to Troels who is presented in a more formal way through his smart suits which signifies his higher status and middle class demographic. Does this trigger how the audience view them as suspects?

The establishing shot of the woods in the opening sequence is another example of the way **signs** work as **myths**. Whilst the woods is just a place, the presentation of the setting connotes danger and helps establish the situation the soon to be victim finds herself in. This is playing on **myths** created in horror films and reflects **common genre messages**.

Applying Todorov to *Stranger Things*

- **What different stages of the narrative can be identified (equilibrium, disequilibrium, etc.)?**
- **What values are suggested by the different stages of the narrative?**
- **What is the significance of multi-strand narratives to Todorov's ideas (e.g. does it create limitations? Can different narrative stages be identified for the different narrative strands?)?**
- **What are the limitations of Todorov's ideas due to the use of narrative arcs across multiple episodes?**

1. The **equilibrium** introduces the four boys playing inside a suburban family home – identifying the **social norms** suggested by the narrative. This sequence focuses on the idea of the nuclear family living in a suburban home as the norm, with responsible parents caring for their children.

2. The **disequilibrium** is Will's disappearance – this suggests Will is more vulnerable as a latchkey kid, reinforcing **social norms** around the nuclear family.

3. There is no **resolution** of the main **narrative arc** in episode one. Will's disappearance is not resolved until the final episode of season one.

4. Applying **narratology** to only the first episode suggests a different set of **values** and **ideologies** than applying it across the whole of the first season. The first episode suggests a socially conservative set of values which portrays the working class single-parent Byers family less positively than the two-parent middle class Wheeler family. However the resolution of the first season sees Joyce Byers go into the Upside Down to rescue Will, whereas the Wheelers are oblivious to what is happening to Nancy and Mike, subverting the **ideology** established in episode one. Similarly in the first episode the recognition of the **disequilibrium** and the attempt to repair it is focused around the masculine authority of Hopper and the police. This **patriarchal ideology** is challenged over the course of the first season by the **agency** shown by female characters such as Nancy, Joyce, and Eleven.

5. Todorov's theory is useful in identifying values and ideologies suggested by a narrative, but is less applicable to the **multi-strand narrative arcs** of LFTV drama.

Applying Todorov to *The Killing*

- **What different stages of the narrative can be identified (equilibrium, disequilibrium, etc.)?**
- **What values are suggested by the different stages of the narrative?**
- **What is the significance of multi-strand narratives to Todorov's ideas (e.g. does it create limitations? Can different narrative stages be identified for the different narrative strands?)?**
- **What are the limitations of Todorov's ideas due to the use of narrative arcs across multiple episodes?**

1. The **equilibrium** introduces Lund's impending move to Sweden with her family (something she seems hesitant about). We also gain an insight to the Birk Larsen family which appears to be built on a stable relationship and secure home.

2. The **disequilibrium** is the killing of Nanna, with the audience given unrestricted knowledge of the event before the characters realise what has happened. The final **realisation** being the body discovered at the end of Ep.1

3. There is no **resolution** of the main **narrative arc** in episode one. Nanna's murder is not resolved until the final episode of season one.

4. Applying **narratology** to only the first episode suggests a different set of **values** and **ideologies** than applying it across the whole of the first season. By having the **disruption** on screen first could reflect an opinion that crime is common and a common aspect of society. The **disruption reinforces stereotypical gender roles** in crime with a female victim. Lund's countertypical determination and fierce independence is evident through the third realisation stage (she realises before the other main characters) and she is the driving force in the attempt to restore stage which offers a subversion of **gender representation and ideology**

5. Todorov's theory is useful in identifying values and ideologies suggested by a narrative, but is less applicable to the **multi-strand narrative arcs** of LFTV drama. Here the first two stages are out of sync (the murder occurs before the equilibrium is presented to the audience), and the resolution is gradual depending on character.

Applying Neale to *Stranger Things*

- **What genre or genres do you think *Stranger Things* belongs to?**
- **Does *Stranger Things* suggest that genres change over time?**
- **How are the conventions of LFTV Drama used within *Stranger Things*?**
- **What evidence is there that genre expectations are shaped by marketing or reviews of *Stranger Things*?**

Stranger Things demonstrates **generic hybridity**, blending a range of elements from genres such as horror and science fiction. Arguably this blending of genres helps it appeal to a broad audience. A range of **generic conventions** are used including character types, settings, and lighting and sound codes.

Neale's theory is useful for identifying the ways in which genre influences narrative, characters, representations, and the use of technical codes in *Stranger Things*. It also draws attention to the importance of genre to audience appeal.

Genre codes in *Stranger Things* are potentially less important than its use of **intertextuality** and narrative to address the audience.

It could be argued that the **distribution** of *Stranger Things* limits the importance of **intertextual relay** in constructing genre expectations. As Netflix released all episodes of season one simultaneously reviews and marketing may have had less influence on shaping audience expectations in relation to genre.

Applying Neale to *The Killing*

- **What genre or genres do you think *Stranger Things* belongs to?**
- **Does *The Killing* suggest that genres change over time?**
- **How are the conventions of LFTV Drama used within *The Killing*?**
- **What evidence is there that genre expectations are shaped by marketing or reviews of *The Killing*?**

The Killing is an example of a **pure genre text** in many ways. The show is based around a tried and tested 'whodunnit' narrative with multiple suspects and a race against time mystery to solve. However the **social-realist** nature of the show cannot be overlooked and provides gritty realism to complement the script and performances by the show's cast. The opening sequence has also arguably borrowed classic **media language conventions** from the **horror** genre.

Neale's theory is useful for identifying the ways in which genre influences narrative, characters, representations, and also draws attention to the importance of genre to **global audience appeal**. The common thriller aspects of the show would have provided familiarity whilst the Danish 'exoticism' would be offering a culturally sophisticated BBC4 viewer something different to shows from the UK and America.

The show also conformed to typical weekly episode release dates, however the distribution rights being bought by Netflix saw a huge rise in viewing figures and reflected how consumption habits of audiences had **evolved** since 2007. The LFTVD a perfect show for binge-watching!

Applying Levi-Strauss to *Stranger Things*

- **What pairs of opposing forces can you identify in the episode?**
- **What key conflicts are suggested by the binary oppositions?**
- **Does one half of a pair seem more powerful than the other?**
- **How is the audience intended to respond to the opposing forces?**
- **Do the binary oppositions suggest any ideological messages?**

A range of **binary oppositions** can be identified in *Stranger Things* including:

adult/child; safety/vulnerability; male/female; masculine/feminine; power/weakness; authority/powerlessness; bully/nerd; popular/outsider; known/unknown; science/paranormal; middle class/working class; nuclear family/single parent family.

Generally within the episode the first half of each pair of opposing forces above is seen as more powerful or dominant, however the narrative is arguably more sympathetic to the weaker second half of the pairing. This suggests a more liberal **ideological position** which is sympathetic to those without social power. Whilst *Stranger Things* represents a **patriarchal** society, analysis of the use of **binary oppositions** suggests a degree of critique at work. Similarly the sympathetic depiction of Will (and to an extent the other three boys) indicates a critique of **hegemonic masculinity**. The character of Eleven arguably disrupts several of the **binary oppositions** in relation to both power and gender.

Applying Strauss' ideas can be a useful way of identifying key conflicts and values within LFTV drama as well as suggesting intended audience response. This can help to identify **ideological messages** communicated. Application of Strauss' ideas may lead to assumptions about audience response, and does not consider the influence of other elements such as technical or genre codes on audience response.

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Applying Levi-Strauss to *The Killing*

- **What pairs of opposing forces can you identify in the episode?**
- **What key conflicts are suggested by the binary oppositions?**
- **Does one half of a pair seem more powerful than the other?**
- **How is the audience intended to respond to the opposing forces?**
- **Do the binary oppositions suggest any ideological messages?**

A range of **binary oppositions** can be identified in *The Killing* including:

Death/life; violence/nurturing; selfishness/duty; racism/inclusivity; safety/vulnerability; betrayal/loyalty; truth/lies; leaving/arriving; male/female; masculine/feminine; power/weakness; authority/powerlessness; known/unknown;

Generally within the episode the first half of each pair of opposing forces above is seen as more powerful or dominant, however the narrative is arguably more sympathetic to the weaker second half of the pairing and this is where the audience are positioned. This suggests a more liberal **ideology** which is sympathetic to those without social power or the victims of crime.

Whilst The Killing represents a somewhat **patriarchal** society, analysis of the use of **binary oppositions** suggests a degree of critique at work. Lund arguably disrupts several of the **binary oppositions** in relation to both power and gender, the same can be said for Theis.

Applying Baudrillard to *Stranger Things*

- **To what extent does *Stranger Things* rely on signifiers (props, costume, music) of the 1980s to represent the time period?**
- **In what ways does *Stranger Things* challenge fixed ideas about identity?**
- **How important are other media texts to the representations in *Stranger Things*?**

Stranger Things can be described as **hyperreal**. It is a representation that is based on other media representations. The density of **intertextuality** that underpins *Stranger Things* results in a representation of small town America in the 1980s that is based on media texts of that era.

The representation of the 1980s in *Stranger Things* depends on **signs** – costumes, hair styles, props, set design, music, pop culture references – creating a **hyperreal** version of the 1980s. There is no attempt to represent the lived reality of 1980s America.

Baudrillard's ideas are a very useful way to analyse how representations are constructed and the way meaning is made in a media text such as *Stranger Things* due to its extensive use of **intertextuality** and the predominance of **signifiers** to represent a historical time period. It does not help to consider LFTV drama specifically as a media form, and it does not consider the pleasures of **hyperreal** media texts for audiences.

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Applying Baudrillard to *The Killing*

- **To what extent does *The Killing* present a hyper realistic representation of real life?**
- **How important are other media texts to the representations in *The Killing*?**

The Killing portrays recognisable and relatable 'real' aspects of society such as local elections, the family home, the workplace and racism in society. Therefore the show sacrifices elaborate special effects, intertextual references and familiar cast members to immerse its audience in the 'real' world constructed on screen.
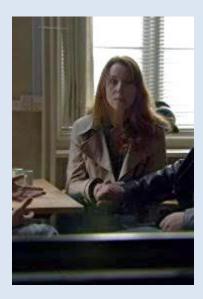
The fact that the show is a TV drama makes what we see on screen a **'hyperreality'** by default, but this could be applied to ANY media text ever made!

Baudrillard's ideas are a very useful way to analyse how and of course why representations are constructed and the way meaning is made in a media text. But the show grounds itself in reality even though it is written & produced for television to provide drama. The murder storyline (whilst being represented realistically) is **a hyper realistic event**, not an every day occurrence or life experience for the vast majority of audiences.

Media Representation Academic Ideas

- Theories of Representation – Hall
- Theories of Identity – Gauntlett
- Feminist Theory – van Zoonen
- Feminist Theory – hooks
- Theories of Gender Performativity – Butler
- Theories Around Ethnicity, and Post-Colonial Theory - Gilroy

Applying Hall to *Stranger Things*

- **Who is represented and who is not represented?**
- **How are social groups represented differently?**
- **Can you identify a preferred reading?**
- **How have producers attempted to fix meanings in relation to representation (e.g. through stereotypes or ideology)?**

The social groups represented in *Stranger Things* construct a representation of a predominantly white, **patriarchal**, **heteronormative** society. Considering the social groups absent from the representation (e.g. gay characters, female characters in positions of social power) is a useful way to identify the **ideologies** at work – although some of these ideologies are arguably challenged to a degree across the narrative of season one.

A range of **preferred readings** can be identified in episode one, often with **stereotypes** being used as an attempt to fix meaning, e.g. vulnerable child, harassed single mother, emotionally repressed male. However, the audience may respond in a range of ways to these representations.

Hall's approach is useful in analysing the processes of representation in a media product. It draws attention to the way in which the **preferred reading** of the representation is fixed, and how that reading may be resisted or challenged by audiences. Applying Hall to one episode of a LFTV drama may neglect the ways in which characters develop and evolve across the course of the more complex narratives of LFTV drama.

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Hall on Representation
https://youtu.be/aTzMsPqssOY

Applying Hall to *The Killing*

- **Who is represented and who is not represented?**
- **How are social groups represented differently?**
- **Can you identify a preferred reading?**
- **How have producers attempted to fix meanings in relation to representation (e.g. through stereotypes or ideology)?**

The social groups represented in *The Killing* construct a representation of a predominantly white, **patriarchal**, **heteronormative** society. Considering the social groups absent from the representation (e.g. gay characters, ethnic minority characters in positions of social power) is a useful way to identify the **hegemonic ideologies** at work.

A range of **preferred readings** can be identified in episode one, often with **stereotypes** being used as an attempt to fix meaning, e.g. vulnerable female (Nanna), powerful male politician (Troels), childish male (Mayer). Audiences are familiar with these in the media and therefore allow themselves to accept the **preferred reading** as it will help them decode the narrative.

Where does this fall-short? Lunds strong female character in a lead role and position of power subverts the usual gender stereotypes, and the equality of the Birk Larsen family and the condemnation of a racially motivated killing reflect a **liberal ideology.**

Negotiated readings can occur more frequently when presented with **culturally specific stereotypes.**

Hall on Representation
https://youtu.be/aTzMsPqssOY

Applying Gauntlett to *Stranger Things*

- **What messages are suggested about different identities (e.g. gender, social class, sexuality)?**
- **Are some social groups represented in contradictory ways (e.g. are there representations of different male identities?)?**
- **What evidence is there to suggest that identities are not fixed?**
- **Given its historical setting does the representation of the past suggest that identities were more fixed in the 1980s than they are now?**
- **Does online fan culture for *Stranger Things* offer self-expression to audiences?**

The representation of 1980s society may suggest that identities were more fixed in the past than they are in contemporary society. The first episode depicts a world of **patriarchal** power and entrenched **gender roles**, which can be contrasted to an extent with contemporary society.

Despite this the representation of some social groups suggests identities are less fixed and communicates contradictory ideas about identity. Consider the contrasting representations of **masculinity** and **male identity** through characters such as Hopper, Mr Wheeler, Mr Clark, Jonathan, Steve, and Will.

Online *Stranger Things* fan culture has allowed self-expression and identification with characters (itself a way of expressing identity). The vast amount of online fan culture including fan art, fan fiction, and memes demonstrates the way in which online media allows audiences to participate in popular culture, and to express their own identities.

This perspective is useful for identifying the different ways in which LFTV drama represents social groups, and considering the relationship between audiences, identities, and media products. It emphasises the power of the audience and so does not take into account the importance of media producers, or existing genres and narratives, in constructing representations of identity.

Applying van Zoonen to *Stranger Things*

- **Is there a difference between the way male and female characters are represented?**
- **How does *Stranger Things* represent the social position of female characters in 1980s America?**

The representation of gender in *Stranger Things* arguably reflects the **patriarchal** nature of 1980s America and the 1980s media representations which influenced *Stranger Things*. A number of female characters are represented in subordinate or stereotypically female roles such as Florence (Hawkins Police secretary), Mrs Wheeler (housewife), Joyce (single mother in a low paid job), and Eleven (during her time held in the Hawkins National Laboratory).

The more **empowered** representation of Eleven (such as when she escapes capture at the end of the episode), the representation of Nancy as good at science, and the ways in which Nancy, Eleven, and Joyce become more empowered across the **narrative arcs** of the first season can be seen as reflecting the contemporary **cultural context** in which representations of **female empowerment** are in demand. The representation of women in *Stranger Things* does not rely on the **objectification** of female characters. This could reflect an attempt to construct a more progressive representation.

This approach is useful for considering gender roles within specific **social** and **historical contexts**. The focus solely on gender neglects the significance of other factors, such as social class, on representations of **power relations** within television drama.

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Applying hooks to *Stranger Things*

- **How is gender represented in *Stranger Things*?**
- **Does *Stranger Things* depict a patriarchal society?**
- **How do identities other than gender (e.g. social class, ethnicity) impact on the social position of the female characters?**

Stranger Things represents a **patriarchal social order** with a range of male characters shown in positions of power and authority (Hopper, Dr Brennan, Principal Coleman, Joyce's boss). Female characters are often shown in less powerful social positions. Arguably the patriarchal nature of the representation results from the 1980s setting reflecting the more rigid **social structure** and **gender roles** of the time period. Whilst episode one establishes the patriarchal nature of the society *Stranger Things* is set in, over the course of season one the narrative often subverts this through the increasingly **empowered** representation of female characters such as Nancy, Joyce and Eleven.

An **intersectional** approach to *Stranger Things* may draw attention to the impact of **social class**, allowing for a consideration of the differences between Joyce as a working class single mother and Mrs Wheeler as a middle class housewife.

hooks' approach may also draw attention to the focus on representations of white woman and the absence of any significant female characters from other ethnicities. Whilst *Stranger Things* may develop a narrative of female empowerment it is focused solely on the empowerment of white female characters.

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Applying hooks to *The Killing*

- **How is gender represented in *The Killing*?**
- **Does *The Killing* depict a patriarchal society?**
- **How do identities other than gender (e.g. social class, ethnicity) impact on the social position of the female characters?**

Applying hooks to the analysis of representation in LFTV drama helps to identify the **ideological messages** communicated in relation to gender, whilst encouraging a focus on the inequalities suggested by the representations in relation to identities such as ethnicity and social class. Whilst this is a useful approach to analyse representation it does not consider the ways in which representations are constructed within LFTV drama, or consider how audiences may respond or be expected to respond to representations of social inequality.

Applying Butler to *Stranger Things*

- **Which characters' performance of gender roles conform to social expectations?**
- **Which characters challenge normative gender roles?**
- **Are characters treated differently based on how they perform gender roles?**

The character of Eleven does not conform to **gender norms**, and is mistaken for a boy by Benny the diner owner. Because Eleven has been raised in isolation she has not learned how to perform a **normative, societal gender role**. This supports Butler's idea that there is no essential gender identity. As Eleven becomes more **socialised** across the narrative of season one her performance of gender norms increasingly **conforms to social norms – even dressed to look the part of 'girly girl'**.

Will is also represented as not conforming to masculine and other male gender characteristics, as he is described by Joyce as being more sensitive and feminine. He also is the victim and 'saved' by a young female (also breaking genre conventions and expectations).

Both characters can be seen as examples of what Butler calls '**gender trouble**' as they do not conform to **gender norms**. The way other characters react to them shows how gender norms are **expectations of,** and reinforced by members of American society (e.g. Will being bullied).

Butler's approach is useful for considering how gender roles are performed and subverted by characters in LFTV drama.

Butler on Gender Performativity
https://youtu.be/Bo7o2LYATDc

Applying Butler to *Stranger Things*

- **Which characters' performance of gender roles conform to social expectations?**
- **Which characters challenge normative gender roles?**
- **Are characters treated differently based on how they perform gender roles?**

Lund is first introduced to the audience as a mother rather than her profession as police officer. This could **reflect traditional gender roles** and **stereotypical gender representations**. However this drastically changes as the episode and series progresses due to Lund's commitment to her job and neglect of her son. This non-matriarchal persona **breaks gender norms** and is an early indicator of **'gender trouble'** in the show'.

The world of politics and the police force are shown to be **patriarchal**. Whilst Lund is a highly ranked officer, it is clear that this institution is portrayed to be **male dominated with a juvenile 'boys club' mentality**.

The Birk Larson family offer a **complex representation of gender roles**. Whilst there seems to be **equality** in the household, it is Pernille who is undertaking domestic chores whilst Theis is out at work performing the role of 'provider' for the family. This reflects a more traditional and somewhat outdated ideology of the home and the **gender roles** of a mother and father.

Lund is perhaps decoded as a physically and emotionally **stronger, more independent female** than Pernille, is this due to the gender role she has in society even though they are both female?

Butler on Gender Performativity
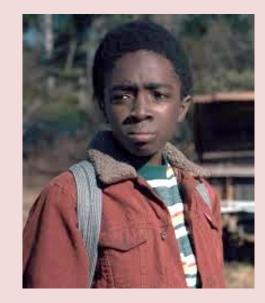https://youtu.be/Bo7o2LYATDc

Applying Gilroy to *Stranger Things*

- **How is ethnicity represented in *Stranger Things*?**
- **What attitudes to ethnicity are evident?**

Gilroy's view that **colonialism** continues to influence attitudes to ethnicity can arguably be seen in *Stranger Things* which focuses on a social world which is predominantly white. Whilst there are a small number of black characters (Lucas, Officer Callahan, Principal Coleman) who can be seen as broadly positive representations, they are generally supporting or minor characters. The narrative is focused on and driven by white characters.

Gilroy's approach is helpful in identifying issues around the representation of ethnicity in LFTV dramas and drawing attention to the way in which media representations are often addressed to a white audience and as a result marginalise other ethnicities.

Whilst this approach is useful for identifying messages and values communicated in relation to ethnicity it doesn't help to consider the ways in which those messages are constructed or interpreted by the audience. The focus solely on ethnicity does not consider the significance of the representation of other social groups such as gender, sexuality, or social class.

Applying Gilroy to *The Killing*

- **How is ethnicity represented in *The Killing*?**
- **What attitudes to ethnicity are evident?**

Gilroy's view that **colonialism** continues to influence attitudes to ethnicity can arguably be seen in *The Killing* which focuses on a society (and culture?) which is overwhelmingly white. Whilst there are a small number of non-white characters (shop owner, Nanna's teacher) representations are not fully explored (even though innapropriate behaviour of the teacher is uncovered) and they are generally minor characters.

The narrative is focused on and driven by white characters.

Whilst Denmark is not necesartily represented as **multicultural**, their liberalist ideology is present through the condemnation of the race-related killing and acts of racism in episode 1.

Media Industries Academic Ideas

- Power and Media Industries – Curran and Seaton

- Regulation – Livingstone and Lunt

- Cultural Industries - Hesmondhalgh

Applying Curran and Seaton to *Stranger Things*

- **What is the ownership structure of Netflix?**
- **What evidence is there that Netflix either restricts or encourages access to a diverse range of content?**

The success of Netflix may undermine Curran and Seaton's view that the internet does not challenge the dominance of established media institutions, as Netflix has emerged as a significant competitor in the television market. Similarly the process of the **concentration of media ownership** cannot be applied at this time to Netflix. However **streaming** television is dominated by a small number of companies such as Netflix and Amazon, resulting in an **oligopoly** which arguably limits audience choice.

Whilst Netflix does still act as a **gatekeeper** for content it could be argued that it does offer a platform for media products from diverse cultures. The massive investment in original content by Netflix can also be seen to challenge Curran and Seaton's arguments, with the production of prestige content a key strategy for growth. However, the success of *Stranger Things* can be seen to result from its reliance on commercially successful genres and narratives, and it is produced by established industry producers such as Shawn Levy.

Applying Curran and Seaton to LFTV drama is useful for considering the ways in which media ownership can impact upon production and distribution of television content, however it does not consider the ways in which media productions are shaped by audience demand and it arguably underestimates the impact of online media.

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Applying Curran and Seaton to *The Killing*

- **What is the ownership structure of Danish PSBs?**
- **What evidence is there that DR and its programming either restricts or encourages access to a diverse range of content?**

The success of Netflix may undermine Curran and Seaton's view that the internet does not challenge the dominance of established media institutions, as Netflix has emerged as a significant competitor in the television market. Similarly the process of the **concentration of media ownership** cannot be applied at this time to Netflix. However **streaming** television is dominated by a small number of companies such as Netflix and Amazon, resulting in an **oligopoly** which arguably limits audience choice.

The publice investment in the station means DR are bound to offer diverse but culturally accurate representations for their primary Danish audience. However, the success of The Killing can be seen to result from its characters and narratives that are perhaps globally familiar rather than being .

Applying Curran and Seaton to LFTV drama is useful for considering the ways in which media ownership can impact upon production and distribution of television content, however it does not consider the ways in which media productions are shaped by audience demand and it arguably underestimates the impact of online media.

Applying Livingstone and Lunt to *Stranger Things*

- **What are the differences between the regulation of broadcast and streaming television?**
- **What does Netflix suggest about the challenges to regulation posed by the rise of online media?**

Netflix has to abide by EU **regulations**, but is outside the scope of the UK regulator for television, **Ofcom**. This illustrates the challenges for regulators posed by global and online media **distribution**.

As a result regulations which apply to UK television broadcasters do not apply to Netflix, and some regulations (such as the **watershed**) are only suitable for **broadcast television** rather than **streaming** services. *Stranger Things* contains scenes which could potentially be distressing to young audiences (e.g. the opening sequence, the shooting of Benny), but Netflix does not restrict access to this content leaving it to the account holder to manage access to their account or make use of parental controls.

https://www.radiotimes.com/news/2018-05-04/how-is-the-watershed-changing-in-the-modern-tv-world/

Ofcom have identified that '*changing technology, audience fragmentation and global competition*' pose risks to **public service broadcasters** such as the BBC. In order to protect the public interest served by public service broadcasting Ofcom want UK broadcasters to work together to compete with streaming services and to continue to adapt to the challenges of the digital age by 'finding new ways to distribute programmes; capture younger audiences; and make world-class content that reflects life in the UK'.

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/media/media-releases/2018/streaming-overtakes-pay-tv

Applying Livingstone and Lunt is a useful way of considering the impact of technological developments on television broadcasters and audiences however it does not suggest anything about how audiences engage with media products, nor about the impact of ownership on the content produced.

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Applying Hesmondhalgh to *Stranger Things*

- **Who produced *Stranger Things*? What does this tell us about media ownership?**
- **To what extent have the producers of *Stranger Things* used established genres, stars and narratives in order to appeal to the audience?**

Hesmondhalgh is useful for considering the ways in which *Stranger Things* is designed to appeal to a broad audience. A range of strategies including the use of popular **genres** such as horror and sci-fi, the use of well-known actors such as Winona Ryder, the influence of popular films on the **narrative** and characters (e.g. *E.T.*), 1980s nostalgia, and the mix of young and adult characters all help *Stranger Things* to have broad audience appeal and be a 'big hit'.

The use of data and **algorithms** by Netflix to engineer original productions to appeal to its audience is another way in which it can avoid risk, and links to Hesmondhalgh's view that digital technology has led to increased **surveillance** of audiences by companies.

Hesmondhalgh's focus on **ownership** does not take into account the active role of audience interaction with media products, and does not consider the cultural or ideological elements at work in media products such as LFTV drama.

Netflix can be seen as a challenger to established media organisations, disrupting the dominance of a small number of media **conglomerates**, although it is one of a small number of companies dominating the ever-increasing market for streaming services. With the budget spent on Netflix Originals, Netflix is now able to vertically integrate.

A LEVEL
MEDIA STUDIES

Media Audiences Academic Ideas

- Media Effects – Bandura

- Cultivation Theory – Gerbner

- Reception Theory – Hall

- Fandom – Jenkins

- 'End of Audience' Theories - Shirky

Applying Bandura to *Stranger Things*

- **What messages about society are communicated in *Stranger Things*?**
- **How could *Stranger Things* influence audience values or behaviours?**

The representations in *Stranger Things* could influence people's beliefs and attitudes, e.g. towards different social groups such as gender, social class, ethnicity. For example the representation of male characters in positions of authority may reinforce **patriarchal** ideas about gender roles.

Stranger Things features some scenes of violence and aggressive behaviour (e.g. bullying) which could influence people's behaviour.

The application of Bandura's ideas draws attention to the importance of **regulation**, however it may result in simplistic assumptions about the impact of media representations.

Bandura and Social Learning Theory
https://youtu.be/zerCK0lRjp8

Applying Bandura to *The Killing*

- **What messages about society are communicated in *The Killing*?**
- **How could *The Killing* influence audience values or behaviours?**

The representations in *The Killing* could influence people's beliefs and attitudes, e.g. towards different social groups such as gender, social class, ethnicity. For example the representation of male characters (especially politicians) in positions of authority may reinforce **patriarchal** ideas about gender roles.

The Killing features scenes of gender-based violence and aggressive behaviour (e.g. murder) which could influence people's behaviour.

Application of Bandura's theories to *The Killing* may ignore the ways in which behaviours and values are framed critically within media texts, and the different ways in which audience members may engage with the meanings communicated. For example the racism expressed by Vagn is condemned and critiqued and therefore unlikely to see audiences behave in a similar way because of someone's race, sexuality or religion.

So I put her in the car, and I drove the car in the water.

Applying Gerbner to *Stranger Things*

- **What messages about society are communicated in Stranger Things?**

- **Is *Stranger Things* likely to reinforce existing values or beliefs?**

Stranger Things reflects a range of social values in relation to areas such as **gender roles** and the **family**. Its depiction of **social norms** can be seen as an example of **mainstreaming** although the complexity of representations and the different ways in which audiences may engage with these representations would arguably limit their impact upon the audience.

Stranger Things potentially contributes to **mean world syndrome** through its depiction of the vulnerability of children, and its representation of sinister government conspiracies.

Gerbner's perspective is useful for considering the ways in which media products may shape audience attitudes over a period of time, and draws attention to the **mainstreaming** of values and attitudes.

Applying Gerbner to *The Killing*

- **What messages about society are communicated in *The Killing*?**
- **Is *The Killing* likely to reinforce existing values or beliefs?**

The Killing could potentially contribute to **mean world syndrome** through its depiction of crime and murder. The opening sequence of a young female being stalked and killed might **influence audiences** into thinking that society is dangerous, even in more liberal countries such as Denmark which boasts a low-crime rate. Murder, death and crime are all too common in the media, and *the Killing* is another show that conforms to these themes.

The show continues to follow the downward spiral of the Birk-Larson family after their daughter's murder, audiences might be **affected** by this uncomfortable and emotional part of the narrative leading to possible paranoia and over-protectiveness by parents.

Gerbner's perspective draws attention to the **mainstreaming** of values and attitudes, even though *The Killing* is not necessarily mainstream TV and far more niche in its appeal. It did start the Nordic-Noir mainstream boom.

Television viewing is now much more fragmented than in the 1970s when Gerbner's studies took place, as a result the ability of television to **cultivate** attitudes and values through the repetition of similar messages to mass audiences has arguably been lessened. Gerbner's views underestimate the diverse and contradictory nature of media representations, and does not consider the ways in which audience members (especially in the online age) can actively engage with media texts and reject the values and beliefs communicated.

Applying Hall to *Stranger Things*

- **What preferred readings can you identify in *Stranger Things*?**
- **How have these meanings been encoded?**
- **In what different ways could audiences respond to these meanings?**

A range of **preferred readings** can be identified in *Stranger Things*. Consider the sequence which introduces the four boys followed by Will's disappearance. What elements are used to encourage the audience to sympathise with Will and fear for his safety? What different ways could the audience respond to this?

The **encoding/decoding** model is a useful way to break down how meaning is constructed in LFTV dramas, and the ways in which those meanings are decoded and interpreted by audiences. It draws attention to the importance of identifying the ways in which elements such as technical codes and genre conventions are used by producers to construct specific meanings and effects, and also highlights the active ways in which audiences engage with these meanings and accept, reject or modify them.

Hall's perspective focused on the communication of one **preferred reading,** neglecting the possibility that the messages communicated by a media text may contain multiple or contradictory meanings. For example the representation of **gender roles** in episode one depicts a patriarchal society, however it is one in which the power of male authority figures (such as Hopper and Mr Wheeler) is arguably subverted. As a result there is not a single **preferred reading** in relation to gender, but multiple meanings which could be interpreted in multiple ways by the audience.

A LEVEL
MEDIA STUDIES

Applying Hall to *The Killing*

- **What preferred readings can you identify in *The Killing*?**
- **How have these meanings been encoded?**
- **In what different ways could audiences respond to these meanings?**

The most obvious **preferred reading** can be identified in *The Killing* through the show's main narrative arc. The audience are positioned to be on the side of the police and want justice via the catching and aprehending of the individual responsible. This preferred reading provides the episodic drama and tension episode to episode.

The **encoding/decoding** model is a useful way to break down how meaning is constructed in LFTV dramas, and the ways in which those meanings are decoded and interpreted by audiences. It draws attention to the importance of identifying the ways in which elements such as technical codes and genre conventions are used by producers to construct specific meanings and effects, and also highlights the active ways in which audiences engage with these meanings and accept, reject or modify them.

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A LEVEL
MEDIA STUDIES

Applying Jenkins to *Stranger Things*

- **What examples can you find of textual poaching and convergence culture in relation to *Stranger Things*?**
- **How does *Stranger Things* demonstrate the idea of spreadable media?**
- **What do Jenkins's ideas suggest about the way audiences engages with LFTV drama?**
- **How important is spreadable media to the success of a media product?**

Stranger Things demonstrates the **participatory** nature of media audiences and the use of **textual poaching**. There is extensive evidence of fan culture for *Stranger Things* including fan poster art, fan fiction, memes, and social media posts and interactions **(ironic for a show built around textual poaching and fandom!)**

The 'Justice for Barb' meme is a good example of **convergence culture** as something which emerged from the audience. It arguably suggests the way in which fan culture can interact with media production, demonstrated in the season two storyline focused on Barb's parents which was a response to audience reaction to the character of Barb.

Social media also allows audiences to interact with actors, writers, and producers. An example of this is the actor who plays Will Byers using Instagram to respond to online fan discussions about the character's sexuality. https://goo.gl/g3KE73

The success of *Stranger Things* may be partly down to its **spreadability**. The use of intertextuality, retro styles, appealing characters, and cast members active on social media all make it suited to the creation of shareable content.

Applying Jenkins to *The Killing*

- **What examples can you find of textual poaching and convergence culture in relation to *The Killing*?**
- **How does *The Killing* demonstrate the idea of spreadable media?**
- **What do Jenkins's ideas suggest about the way audiences engages with LFTV drama?**
- **How important is spreadable media to the success of a media product?**

It's Christmas Jumper Day isn't it?

Participatory culture around The Killing is scarce. Fandom and online poaching and sharing has really only added to the cult status rather than the mainstream appeal the show has internationally. The show has its own wiki page, but memes, parody's (such as the Xmas jumper day), knitting pattern downloads are all centred around the jumper worn by the main character. The fair-isle sweater has taken on a life of its own and has become the stand-out iconic aspect of the show.

The Killing's lack of **spreadability** may be down to two factors. First, *The Killing* existed in a time before social media and viral content became commonplace. Second, the show was not targeted and did not attract the age group that are likely to share content online and use social networking to share and spread content.

Jenkins' ideas are useful for considering how audiences actively engage with media products across different platforms, but does not support discussion of the ways in which meanings are constructed by producers within LFTV drama.

Applying Shirky to *Stranger Things*

- How does *Stranger Things* suggest that audiences engage with media products in different ways across different platforms?
- What evidence is there of user-generated content in relation to *Stranger Things*?

Stranger Things fan culture demonstrates the different ways in which audiences engage actively with media products. The 'Justice for Barb' meme is an example of media audiences who '**speak back**' to the media. The *Stranger Things* fan wiki and the show's numerous fan-made podcasts are an example of **cognitive surplus** – people using their free time creatively to produce content.

To an extent the Netflix model is a shift away from the restricted nature of television production, distribution and consumption.

Shirky's ideas are useful for identifying how new media technologies have changed the ways audiences engage with media products, and can become active producers themselves. It also draws attention to the different ways audience consume and interact with media products. However Netflix, and other distributors of LFTV drama, still act as **gatekeepers** following the '**filter then publish**' model.