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**Professor Sonia Livingstone**, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science

*Media Theory for A Level* provides a comprehensive introduction to the 19 academic theories required for A Level Media study. From Roland Barthes to Clay Shirky,

- From structuralism to civilisationism, this revision book explains the core academic concepts students need to master to succeed in their exams. Each chapter includes: Comprehensive explanations of the academic ideas and theories specified for GCE Media study.
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Cover image: STRANGER THINGS, Winona Ryder (Season 2, aired October 27, 2017). ©Netflix/courtesy Everett Collection

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Media Theory for A Level

# Media Theory for A Level

## The Essential Revision Guide



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Table 10.2 Butler: ten minute revision

**Concept 1:** *Our gendered identities are not naturally given but constructed through repetition and ritual.*

- Our bodies or sex do not define our gendered identities.
- Genders are not fixed by childhood experiences.
- Gender is constructed through the continuous repetition of micro-rituals.

**Concept 2:** *Contemporary culture reinforces a traditional gender binary – identities that fall outside of that binary are constructed as subversive.*

- Heteronormativity is entrenched within society.
- Non-heteronormative identities are marginalised or subjugated.
- The media assists in the marginalisation of subversive identities through absent representations, abjection and parody.
- The performance of gender trouble is a difficult, sometimes painful, process given the entrenched nature of heteronormativity.

**Two theorists who might challenge Butler's thinking**

- **David Gauntlett:** acknowledges much of the work of Butler, but would suggest that contemporary media practices mean that heteronormativity does not completely dominate and that the media allows for diverse or fluid identity construction. He suggests that society has adopted a much more positive view of gender subversion than is presented by Butler.
- **Liesbet van Zoonen:** would agree with Butler's assessment that gender is a social construct but would suggest that the media reinforces male power as a result of women internalising male power and assuming the same passivity that on-screen depictions of femininity construct.

## 11 Media and identity

David Gauntlett

David Gauntlett has been included in the list of prescribed A Level theorists primarily for his work regarding identity theory. Heavily influenced by the thinking of the sociologist Anthony Giddens, Gauntlett constructed a timely critique of mass media consumption models and their effects on audience thinking.

Gauntlett was particularly interested in the impact of the media proliferation boom of the 1980s and 1990s that gave audiences access to more media products and broadcast channels than ever before. The resulting diversity of choice, in Gauntlett's view, fundamentally changed the way that audiences use media products, turning viewers into active rather than passive consumers, and, as a result, giving audiences more control over the way they use the media to craft their identities.

### Concept 1: traditional and post-traditional media consumption

*Anthony Giddens: traditional and post-traditional culture change*

To explain Gauntlett's ideas it is necessary to take a preliminary detour and to explore Anthony Giddens' analysis of the far reaching social changes currently affecting Western societies. We are transitioning, Giddens argues, from a society in which our identities were constructed via rigid traditions to a distinctly different phase that he calls 'late modernity'.

In social structures in which tradition dominates, the notion of who we are is heavily determined by long-standing social forces. The roles

that men and women are expected to fulfil, for example, are tightly regulated and heavily moderated by social customs, family expectations and rigid social codes. Thus, cultures based on 'tradition' produce fixed identities that are hard to escape from. Men are expected to assume stereotypically masculine identities, to adopt the role of the primary earner, while women are expected to look after children, to cook for their families and to keep the family home clean. These rigid roles, importantly, are reinforced by the ideological stances taken by wider social institutions such as education, religion and, importantly, the media.

The period that Giddens calls 'late modernity' begins to take shape in the years following the Second World War and is characterised by a relaxation of the rigid social roles expected in a traditionally ordered society. Individuals in 'late modernity' realise, in short, that they can shape their own outlooks and beliefs. This transition is partially enabled, Giddens argues, via the liberating effects of globalisation and by exposing individuals to values and identities that are different to those they experience at the local level.

Globalisation, in brief, allows individuals to transcend the rigid expectations of their immediate communities. By watching, for example, an American soap opera that contains powerful female characters, women in traditionally ordered communities might perceive that an alternative identity exists other than the one that their society has prescribed for them.

### *Giddens and the reflexive project of the self*

As a result, Giddens suggests that individuals who live within 'late modernity' are able to engage in what he calls the 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991, 164). The 'self' in 'late modernity' is not fixed, but fluid. In short, we have far more control over who we are in 'late modernity'. We can revise or deconstruct our identities. We can escape the narrow gender or class-based roles prescribed by traditional social structures.

Importantly, David Gauntlett openly acknowledges Giddens' arguments, using them to explore the effects of the contemporary media landscape and arriving at the conclusion that the variety of media products available for us to consume allows us to 'create, maintain and revise a set of biographical narratives – the story of we are, and how we came to be where we are now' (Gauntlett, 2008, 107).

#### **Box 11.1 Discuss it: can you find evidence of social change in your own family?**

Giddens suggests that the transition to 'late modernity' accelerated towards the end of the twentieth century. Think about the gender-based roles that your parents and grandparents assume in your own family:

- Who is responsible for cooking, cleaning or childcare in your immediate family? Who goes out to work?
- Do your parents assume traditional or post-traditional gender roles in your immediate family?
- Do your grandparents have a more fixed notion of their gender roles?
- What expectations do you have of yourself and the role you expect to play in your own future family?
- How do your families and your classmates' families compare? Is there evidence to suggest, as Giddens argues, that we are moving from traditionally ordered identities to a less traditional set of expectations?

### **Concept 2: reflexive identity construction**

#### *David Gauntlett: self-help books and consumer led identities*

Gauntlett connects Giddens' notion of the 'reflexive project of the self' to the proliferation of media content in the 1980s and 1990s. He argues that the sheer diversity of new products and channels, both niche and mainstream, facilitates the process of identity editing by audiences.

Gauntlett cites the growth of self-help manuals during the 1990s as evidence of our desire to manipulate the way we engage with the world at large. These self-help guides, he tells us, 'describe aspirational but reasonably realistic (as opposed to utopian) models of how we might expect women and men to present themselves in today's society' (Gauntlett, 2008, 233). Self-help books tell us that we do not have to endure the personality flaws that hold us back from the jobs we want or the relationships we desire. A whole new you, whatever that 'you' is, can be realised at the flick of a self-help page found in your local bookshop.

**Lifestyle magazines and transformation narratives**

Gauntlett suggests that a similar dynamic can be identified in contemporary lifestyle magazines where advice columns and inspiration articles prompt audiences to realise their true callings. The front covers of magazines such as *Vogue* and *Men's Health* are shop windows to a sexier, more successful future-self for their readerships. Inside, lifestyle-oriented contents pages invite their readers to assimilate aspirational ingredients from the diversity of articles and glossy (but not too perfect) imagery that adorns their pages.

**Multi-protagonist television and music**

In television, too, it could be argued that the arrival of new programme formats in the 1990s facilitated further identity play. Reality television shows of the period drew contestants from a wide social spectrum, asking audiences to reject or embrace candidates based on nothing more than mediated backstories or the narrative journeys those contestants crafted during show transmission. The birth, too, of multi-protagonist TV drama further enhanced the notion that identity was fluid. Where traditional drama formats focused audiences on the identities of a single hero protagonist, multi-protagonist hits such as *Friends* and *Sex and The City* asked audiences to pick their favourite character – to identify with the on-screen presence they felt most akin to. In today's on-demand oriented television landscape, the multi-protagonist drama format rules. From *No Offence to The Returned*, most of the television set texts required for exam study contain a rainbow of protagonists that facilitate the same effect.

We might argue that solo music artists have also provided audiences with a set of useful narrative templates as to how identity might be repurposed. Music thrives on identity experimentation, on blurring gender and ethnically-based stereotypes and, in doing so, the music industry has connected impressionable young audiences to a roll call of global stars who have successfully affected identity change. From Michael Jackson's plastic surgery driven resculpting to Beyoncé's regeneration as a radical feminist, the identity U-turns of music artists provide audiences with a streaming narrative of fluidity that they can copy.

**Advertising and the alternative you**

Likewise, Gauntlett suggests that marketing and advertising agencies construct multiple possibilities of who we might be through product

branding, providing us with 30 second glimpses of who we might become – of the ideal versions of ourselves and our loved ones.

Of course, we have the power to reject those images, yet, equally, we can also be seduced or inspired by them. These lifestyle narratives, the life-hack impulse of our age, Gauntlett suggests, have gathered further momentum in the digital era – repackaged and repurposed by everyday users in self-penned webzines and DIY YouTube tutorials (Gauntlett, 2008). In the globalised multi-channel media landscape of the late twentieth century, audiences are now in charge of the remote control. Audiences gatekeep the identities they are exposed to and if they do not like what they see they have the power to change channels or, more interestingly, use contemporary digital media platforms to create their own channel.

**Box 11.2 Interview with David Gauntlett (January 2019)**

*MD: Your book Media, Gender and Identity (2002, second edition 2008) is hugely optimistic about the capacity of audiences to use media in shaping their identities. Do you still feel that the contemporary media landscape affords the same opportunities?*

*DG:* Back then, it was still exciting to talk about people using popular culture within the process of constructing their sense of self-identity. But that was people making use of material that was generated by others – a professional elite, essentially. Nowadays, that sounds awful. The positive thing we have now is the online culture made by everybody, which – while far from perfect – is definitely much richer and more diverse and exciting than what you got from traditional media.

Of course, traditional media still exists and provides us with big, visible slabs of popular culture, which remains a battleground for representations – the questions about who gets represented, and how. But in 2017 I criticised the then new UK A Level syllabus for 'making young people study their grandparents' media preferences', which some teachers seemed to think was harsh, but it's true. The 'mass media' perspective – the shared culture where everyone watches the same stuff – is very twentieth century. It made sense then, but not now. You really want to be talking about the present diverse, digital world.

*MD: You are a passionate advocate of digital technologies and their capacity to stimulate a DIY culture. What potential does this culture have to positively transform society?*

DG: The basic point I made in *Making is Connecting* (2011, second edition 2018) is that it's always better for people to be making media, and participating in culture, rather than just being a consumer of it. And the arrival of technologies which enable people to do that quite easily, and engage in highly networked conversations around it, makes a fundamental difference to media studies and, more importantly, to our social and cultural life. For too long our cultural conversations were led by the fortunate elite. Now, it's much more open to everyone, which is obviously better. But recently we've seen more of a toxic spiral of social media nastiness – and the mass-surveillance, advertising-driven business model perfected by Facebook – which is awful. We can still get back to a positive, open, DIY culture, I believe, but it'll take a lot of work.

### Box 11.3 Apply it: diagnose the ways that set texts encourage identity fluidity

What evidence is in your set texts to reinforce Gauntlett's idea that the media facilitates identity play? Think about the following:

- Do your set texts construct a single ideal identity or do they offer a number of lead characters, presenting the product's audience with a diversity of identities to choose from?
- What versions of gender, ethnicity or class are constructed through the various role models presented in your set texts? Do they reinforce, deconstruct or subvert traditional identities?
- Do your set texts encourage audience identity play? How?

#### *Magazines and online media*

- In what ways do the magazines you have studied offer life-changing advice? Which articles promote identity play? What features of readers' lives do the magazines aspire to improve?
- What kinds of aspirational imagery do products present? What effect might ideal imagery have on readers' notions of identity?
- In what ways do the same magazines also construct realism? What is the combined effect of presenting aspiration and realism side-by-side?
- In what ways do the online set texts you have studied offer life advice or deliver role models that their audiences are encouraged to copy?

- How does characterisation, *mise en scène* or language usage reinforce the aspirational nature of the various role models?
- How does the digital presence of contemporary magazines help facilitate identity play? In what ways do magazines encourage audience engagement?
- How does that engagement help audiences to reshape their identity?

#### *Radio*

- In what ways do the radio presenters of your radio set texts offer their audiences aspirational role models?
- How does programme content help audiences to reshape or change their real-world lives?

#### *Television and film marketing*

- Do set texts offer multiple protagonists? Do these varied protagonists offer a range of identities that audiences can use to inform their own identity construction?
- Do set texts provide aspirational role models?
- Do set texts offer a variety of gender-based representations?
- Do set texts actively deconstruct or question traditional notions of identity?

### *Gauntlett: the power of media narratives*

Gauntlett also draws our attention to the way in which most story structures are concerned with the transformation of a central hero, suggesting that we can 'borrow from these stories when shaping our narratives of the self' (Gauntlett, 2008, 120). In this sense, the characters we watch on television shows or follow in online games offer us examples of how we can transfigure ourselves, of how we can become something better.

Most products provide their fictional leads with character weaknesses or with quests that need to be completed if they are to gain happiness. The journeys those characters take – the challenges they face – might potentially mirror our own weaknesses, or provide us with a template to guide our own goals or desires. At the very least, the transformations offered suggest that our identities are not fixed, but can be altered for the best if we are motivated enough to change who we are.

### Box 11.4 Analyse it: identify the impact of narrative transformation in your set texts

Use the following questions to provide three sentence analyses for your set texts to diagnose the effect of character transformation on audience identity:

*Fiction-based narratives (TV drama):*

- What barriers do central characters face in the wider narratives of the product?
- Do these challenges connect to wider issues of gender, ethnicity, class or ability?
- In what ways does the set text character triumph?
- In what ways do characters transform themselves?
- What are the potential effects of those triumphs on the product's audience?

*Non-fiction narratives (magazines, news, radio):*

- In what ways do your set texts encourage identity transformation?
- What positive benefits are wrought by transformations?
- What are the potential effects of those narratives on the product's audience?

Use the exemplars below to help structure your responses:

**Exemplar 1: *Deutschland 83* (AQA and OCR).** Moritz's mission in *Deutschland 83*, to assume the identity of a West German first lieutenant, provides an interesting example of what Gauntlett would call a transformation narrative. Narratives arcs such as these provide audiences with an identity transformation blueprint. The transformation of Moritz in *Deutschland 83*, for instance, is one of liberation, allowing him to transcend the narrow confines of East German society. The text, moreover, reinforces a sense for the audience that their identities are a reflexive project and that they too can revise who they are and escape their own local conditions.

**Exemplar 2: *Huck* magazine (Edugas):** Gauntlett suggests that a range of contemporary media products provide readers with transformation blueprints they can use to legitimise identity play. Huck's 'Beyond Binary' feature clearly provides such a template, with Jacob Tobias's self-penned account of his transgender transition offering a clear challenge to fixed notions of traditional gender roles, while also demonstrating the psychological benefits of that transition. Tobias's call to 'work

with me' at the end of the article, moreover, is an open invitation to Huck's readers to accept gender fluidity as the natural condition of our postmodern age and to similarly affect their own identity-oriented experiments.

Further set text help is available for a range of products for all exam boards at [www.essentialmediatheory.com](http://www.essentialmediatheory.com)

### Using Gauntlett, van Zoonen and Butler to develop arguments in long formal essays

Gauntlett, importantly, is cautious not to overly exaggerate the potential role that the media plays in enabling identity fluidity. He might assert that audiences play an active role in using media to construct non-traditional identities, but he also realises that the weight and scope of traditional representations constructed through media broadcasting do not necessarily enable limitless or very liberated versions of ethnicity or gender.

Gauntlett clearly acknowledges that the media manufactures 'narrow interpretations of certain roles or lifestyles' (Gauntlett, 2008, 113). Yet his conclusions regarding the overriding effect of the contemporary media landscape is a great deal more optimistic than that suggested by van Zoonen or Judith Butler. For Gauntlett, the diversity of representations available to consume via contemporary media contrasts sharply with van Zoonen's assessment that we are controlled by the dominant pull of patriarchy. He also provides a more upbeat assessment than Judith Butler, whose identification of 'gender trouble' as a subversive act conflicts with Gauntlett's optimism. For Gauntlett, 'gender trouble' is not merely a sideshow or a subversive niche. Indeed, contemporary mass media has helped to mainstream non-heteronormativity. (See Table 11.1 for a further comparison of Gauntlett's, van Zoonen's and Butler's representation theories.)

Table 11.1 Quick reference: gender representation theory comparison table

Theorist	Key arguments	Audience effects
<b>van Zoonen</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The media is maintained through patriarchy.</li> <li>• Images of female objectification dominate female representation.</li> <li>• Media makers can challenge dominant representations but those challenges are viewed as subversive.</li> <li>• Calls on media makers to offer subversive representations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audiences are largely passive.</li> <li>• Audiences, both male and female, internalise female objectification.</li> <li>• Audiences reinforce patriarchal ideologies by subconsciously aligning themselves with the values of a male-dominated society.</li> </ul>
<b>Judith Butler</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender is socially constructed.</li> <li>• Society constructs a binary view of gender (strict roles for males and females).</li> <li>• Society also presents male/female relationships as the norm (heteronormativity).</li> <li>• The media reinforces heteronormativity through heteronormative representations.</li> <li>• Alternatives to the gender binary exist, but are presented as subversive.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audiences internalise socially constructed gender norms.</li> <li>• Audiences can seek out representations that offer 'gender trouble'.</li> <li>• Audiences learn how to perform gender via the media.</li> <li>• Audiences can learn alternative models of gender performance – but they are rare and often painfully wrought.</li> </ul>
<b>David Gauntlett</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender is socially constructed.</li> <li>• We now live in a post-traditional society.</li> <li>• Audiences realise they can change their identities.</li> <li>• The media provides a range of products in which a huge diversity of identities is portrayed.</li> <li>• Alternative lifestyles are becoming mainstream.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audiences are active. They control the representations they want to engage with and can actively reject those that do not appeal.</li> <li>• Audiences are free to experiment with a variety of identities.</li> <li>• Audiences use global media to offer alternatives to the identities that society constructs for them.</li> </ul>

Table 11.2 Speak David Gauntlett

<b>Active audience engagement</b>	Active audiences are in control of the way they watch or interact with the media. Gauntlett would argue that active audiences use – or make – media products to craft their own identities.
<b>Aspirational narrative</b>	A product that offers a means to self-improvement or offers audiences an ideal lifestyle choice.
<b>Fixed identity</b>	Fixed identities do not give individuals a great deal of choice about who they want to be. Identities might be fixed by religious beliefs, social norms or rigid family roles.
<b>Fluid Identity</b>	Our identities can be described as fluid identities when we realise that they can be changed or that we do not necessarily have to conform to the rigid categories laid down by traditional social structures.
<b>Globalisation</b>	Globalisation, in this chapter, refers to the way that media products began to be produced and shared across the globe as a result of ownership changes in the 1980s. Globalisation brought audiences into contact with a much wider range of identity influences.
<b>Media proliferation</b>	Media proliferation refers to the explosion of media products and channels that started to occur in the early 1980s. Media proliferation meant products were increasingly produced for niche or specialised audiences.
<b>Post-traditional society</b>	A society that does not require individuals to adopt rigid roles or identities.
<b>Reflexive project of the self</b>	A term coined by Anthony Giddens to describe the way that identities are constructed in a post-traditional society. Giddens argues that individuals are able to craft and revise their own identities – that our identities are a constantly evolving and adapting project.
<b>Window to the future self</b>	A product that gives its audience a glimpse into who they could become. Commonly used to describe magazine front covers.

Table 11.3 Gauntlett: ten minute revision

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**Concept 1: traditional and post-traditional media consumption**

- Gauntlett's ideas build upon Anthony Giddens' assertion that society has progressed to a stage that Giddens calls 'late modernity'.
- The conditions of late modernity enable audiences to escape the prescriptive identities that are constructed for them through localised social norms and traditional viewpoints.
- Gauntlett argues that contemporary media has brought audiences into contact with a wider range of representations – and, importantly, that audiences can consciously shape their own sense of self.

**Concept 2: reflexive identity construction**

- The media provides a variety of role models and lifestyle templates that audiences use to guide their own outlooks.
- Audiences are engaged in a continuous revision of their identities.
- Media narratives mirror the process of identity transformation.
- Audiences are in control of the media – adapting and assimilating ideas about themselves through the various representations that the media presents.

**Three theorists who challenge Gauntlett's thinking**

- **Stuart Hall:** would argue that the media landscape is not diverse, but saturated with stereotypical portrayals that reflect wider social inequalities. This leads to a deeply problematic portrayal of minority groups of all persuasions.
- **bell hooks:** hooks would argue that portrayals of black women are largely absent from the media and, when they are present, they are prone to produce overly sexualised portrayals.
- **Paul Gilroy:** would argue that British media narratives do not offer diversity but are stuck within a colonial mindset that positions non-whites as threatening, primitive or uncivilised.

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## 12 Ownership effects

James Curran and Jean Seaton

Curran and Seaton's widely read history of the media in the UK, *Power without Responsibility*, is concerned, to a large degree, with narrating the story of how the media landscape has fallen under the control of a handful of global media conglomerates.

Of course, the media landscape has changed considerably since the book's first publication in 1981, and the seventh edition of *Power without Responsibility* (2010) very much reflects contemporary concerns regarding digital media. But at the heart of Curran and Seaton's book remains a core concern – a guiding notion of what the media *ought* to be doing, and it stems, in part, from James Curran's detailed reading of the development of the radical press in the early 1800s.

The numerous radical press pamphlets and small-scale newspapers of the Victorian era, Curran argues, were engines for social and political change. Made by the working class and designed to be read by a working class readership, they highlighted the plight of the poor, and fostered, Curran tells us, 'an alternate value system that symbolically turned the world upside down' (Curran and Seaton, 2010, 15).

The lifespan of this early media form, however, was short lived. A combination of rising production costs and increased competition from high quality, professionally produced titles eventually drove the radical free press out of business. Newspapers of the mid Victorian period, Curran argues, could only be mass produced by those who could afford the extensive start-up costs needed to manufacture products on an industrial scale. Curran, too, points to the corrosive effect of commercial advertising which was sold to offset production costs: the radical press, with its agenda to effect political change, did not partner well with the commercial activities of advertisers who represented the system they wanted to undermine. Without advertising income, the