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Media Theory for A Level

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# Media Theory for A Level

## The Essential Revision Guide



Mark Dixon

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## 10 Gender as performance

Judith Butler

Butler's theoretical work is concerned with unearthing the processes, both cultural and psychological, that shape our identities. She is guided, in many senses, by a quest to test orthodox explanations of gender, principally those of the theoretical heavyweights – Claude Lévi-Strauss, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Butler's critique of these thinkers is concerned, to a large degree, with the various explanations they give to describe the development of gendered identities that do not fit into orthodox heterosexual categories.

Butler concludes that masculinity and femininity are not naturally given states, but instead are maintained by individuals through everyday acts. Our gendered identities, she argues, are not established at birth, nor are they formed in childhood or adolescence, but are instead realised through a continuous performance of gendered behaviour. The media, more importantly, plays a vital role in providing us with a set of gender-based templates that we use to inform those performances. Moreover, the dominance of heterosexual-oriented representations across media forms, Butler further argues, helps to maintain traditional male and female identities as a social norm.

### Concept 1: gendered identities are constructed through repetition and ritual

Butler draws attention to Lévi-Strauss's anthropological work regarding the cultural myths that deal with incest and sex-based taboos. She highlights his conclusions that myths are powerful makers of meaning, both reflecting and defining the way we relate to others in the wider world. Lévi-Strauss suggests that myths tend to reinforce male power as the norm because males are the more naturally dominant gender. Similarly,

the absence of homosexuality within mythic stories provides evidence that our natural sexual inclinations are heterosexually oriented.

Butler is also interested in the work of the influential psychologist, Jacques Lacan, who, she tells us, similarly defines male and female genders using a binary straightjacket. The word 'binary' infers that there are only two possible gender states – male or female – and that normal male/female relations are heterosexually inclined. Lacan argues, furthermore, that our gendered identities are fixed when we emerge from infancy and identify our independence from the world around us. The discovery of the phallus by boys during this transition, Lacan suggests, prompts a symbolic awakening – a moment when males realise they effect sexual power. That awakening, he further argues, translates into masculine social power. Female infants, conversely, are defined through the symbolic discovery that they are phallus free, and the realisation that they are castrated and socially powerless.

To Lacan, and perhaps comically to us, the realisation of having, or not having, a penis naturally creates the patriarchal social structures in which we live. Importantly, for Butler at least, Lacan further defines homosexuality as an aberration of those symbolic awakenings or as becoming established as a result of heterosexual disappointment during formative sexual encounters.

Butler also examines the work of Sigmund Freud, who similarly explains same-sex affection as a form of melancholia, formed by boys through an unnatural rejection of the mother during the Oedipal phase, or, for girls, as an over-identification with the mother figure during the Electra stage (see Box 10.1 for further explanation). Freud suggests that these key moments in infancy inform lifelong behaviours and, moreover, that homosexuality produces a mental aberration as a result: a kind of depressive melancholia that forms as a result of the realisation by gay individuals that conventional heterosexual satisfactions will not ever be realised.

### Butler's gender revolution

Butler offers a complex and devastating critique of these three cornerstones of twentieth-century thinking. Her principle objections run as follows:

- **Male and female identities are not naturally configured.** Butler's critique of Lévi-Strauss points to the array of gender-based

identities that exist in addition to heterosexuality. Butler tells us that these non-heterosexual identities, and the relationships that non-binary individuals form, are built on desires that are just as valid as those experienced by heterosexuals. Their exclusion from myths and other cultural products reflects, Butler infers, the wider marginalisation of these groups in society.

- **Gender does not exist inside the body.** Butler critiques the notion that gender – whatever it is – is stored within the body as if it were something akin to a soul. Freud's assertion that our sexual identities are internalised during the Oedipal phase is illusory – our gendered identities, Butler argues, are realised through our desires, sexual contacts and physical expressions of love. Our gendered identities are not a fixed object; they are constituted as a result of our behaviours.

- **Gender is not solely determined by primary experiences during childhood.** For Butler, the Lacanian of Freudian idea that our gendered identities are fixed during infancy is a myth that serves to reinforce a heterosexual ideal: a socially imposed ideal. Our genders, Butler argues, are far less stable than Freud or Lacan suggest in that we continuously form and reform our sexual identities throughout our lives.

### Box 10.1 Help box: what is the Oedipus/Electra complex?

Freud argued that children become very aware of their genitalia at the age of three – this stage leads to the development of intense emotional attraction to the parent of the opposite sex and to feelings of jealousy towards the parent of their own sex. Boys (through the Oedipus complex) fall in love with their mothers and hate their fathers, while girls (the Electra complex) become attached to their fathers and develop intense jealousy of their mothers.

For boys, the intense rivalry for their mother's affection leads to an internalised fear that their fathers will castrate them as punishment. Boys, Freud suggests, have to reposition their fathers as role models to avoid being emasculated, and in copying their father's masculine behaviour they assume a male identity. Girls, conversely, will eventually realign their love for their mothers (thus creating their female identity) but will also retain their love for father figures.

### Box 10.2 Discuss it: what are the problems with the arguments used by Lévi-Strauss, Lacan and Freud to explain how we construct our gendered identities?

*Claude Lévi-Strauss*

- What criticisms could be made of the idea that our genders are fixed by nature? What other factors might contribute to the creation of our sexualities or gender-based notions?
- If our genders are not naturally fixed, why do so many cultural stories construct heterosexuality as the norm? Can you identify any myths or fairy tales in which homosexuality even features?

*Jacques Lacan*

- Does the discovery of a penis really invest men with a sense of internal power?
- Lacan argues that homosexual desires form as a result of heterosexual disappointment – does this theory describe a natural process? Is this idea formed, perhaps, as a result of his own heterosexual vantage point?

*Sigmund Freud*

- Can we really explain adult same-sex sexual attraction as the result of rejecting or over-identifying with our parents at a very early age?
- In what ways is Freud's description of homosexuality as 'melancholic' problematic?

### *Butler's alternative gender model*

Butler puts forward an alternative view of our gendered identities that can be summed up as follows:

- **Our genders are culturally rather than naturally formed.** Butler tells us that our biological anatomies do not determine our genders. The normalisation of heterosexuality is established, she further argues, as a result of long-standing social rituals that orientate us towards traditional male and female roles.

- **Our genders are not stable but are constructed through repeated actions.** Rituals and performative actions constantly reinforce our identities: the act of wearing make-up, for instance, or dressing in female or male clothing fosters an illusion that we have a seamless and permanent male or female identity. Similarly, our manners and behaviours work as learned micro-performances that continuously signal our identity to ourselves and to others. Importantly, those gender-based cues can be learned or imitated from media products.

### Concept 2: gender subversion and gendered hierarchies

Butler might argue that our identities are an open story, but she also acknowledges that heterosexuality is the dominant identity mode in our culture. To maintain an identity that falls outside of the heterosexual norm in our society is, she suggests, a subversive act that takes a great deal of effort to maintain. Subversion is difficult Butler argues, painful even, because heteronormative ideals are so deeply entrenched within the fabric of language and other cultural practices.

#### Box 10.3 Challenge it: challenging heteronormativity is painful

Butler argues that it is incredibly difficult or painful to assume a non-heteronormative identity. Media narratives mirror this assertion, often constructing gay characters who have to seek acceptance from friends and family or who have to confront homophobic intolerance.

- Can you name any media products that use storylines that reinforce the idea that gender subversion is difficult?
- To what extent are those storylines outmoded?
- Can you think of any media products that offer us more positive representations of non-heteronormativity?
- In what ways do the target audiences of products affect non-heteronormative representations?

#### Gender subjugation

Butler argues that non-heterosexual identities – male homosexuality, lesbianism, transgender identifications – are socially suppressed in favour of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity privileges traditional male and female identities while also promoting heterosexuality as a default relationship model. The subjugation of identities that fall outside of conventional heteronormativity, Butler tells us, can be effected through physical coercion: gay men, for instance, can be compelled to attend conversion therapy by concerned family members or punitive physical deterrents can be deployed to prohibit same-sex relationships (Somalia and Sudan, for example, apply the death penalty as a deterrent for homosexuality).

More importantly, heteronormativity and male patriarchy are reinforced through cultural practices that position non-heterosexuality and female empowerment as a social taboo. Butler draws our attention to the following media processes that commonly marginalise female power and non-heteronormativity:

- **Absent representation.** The sheer lack of alternative representations in the media helps reinforce heteronormativity/male power as the norm. Analysis by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) found that, in 2018, only 8.8 per cent of American prime time television shows regularly broadcast non-heterosexual characters – a figure that represents a significant increase on the previous year, but still establishes heterosexuality as the ideal social model. Absent representation allows straight relationships to take centre stage as a behavioural norm, while relegating other media representations to the margins of broadcasting. GLAAD, interestingly, identified Netflix as industry leaders in terms of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) representations in 2018, with 88 non-heteronormative characters used across its programming (GLAAD, 2019).
- **Abjected representations.** Butler acknowledges the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva (see Box 10.4) in suggesting that heterosexuality and male power are reinforced through the suggestion that alternatives to those identities are disturbing, repellent or unnatural. Narratives, for instance, that focus on sex change operations create physical abjection of trans people through the presentation of graphic surgical procedures. Depictions that focus on castration and so on have a deeply unsettling effect.

- **Parodic representations.** Media presentations of homosexuality often use exaggerated masculine or feminine behaviours in a comedic way, through, for instance, overly camp presentations of gay men. Parodic characterisations of this nature produce questionable humour while also reinforcing the idea that homosexuality is an aberration. Yet, for Butler, parodic representations also create what she calls 'gender trouble' and draw audience attention to the performative nature of gender per se. The drag queen, for example, who represents anatomical masculinity yet performs a traditionally feminine role reveals to the audience a sense that all our identities might similarly be constructed or, in Butler's words, that 'the inner truth of gender is a fabrication' (Butler, 2007, 186).

#### Box 10.4 Help box: Julia Kristeva and female abjection in film

Film theorist Julia Kristeva famously argued that horror films rely on a range of well-worn strategies that repulse audiences through the use of female-oriented depictions that are intended to be disturbing or unsettling. Films like *Carrie* or *Teeth*, for example, create their horror effects by referencing and distorting female bodily functions (menstruation, birth or female sexuality). For Kristeva, the cultural effect of such depictions is to reinforce the idea that the female body is somehow taboo or needs to be hidden from public view, which, as a result, consolidates patriarchal power.

#### Box 10.5 Discuss it: how does the media present gender subversion?

*Absent representations analysis*

- How many of your set texts contain prominent LGBTQ representations?
- Why do you think that LGBTQ representations are missing from media products?
- Why do you think Netflix leads the field in terms of including characters that are gender diverse? Could this be related to the target audience of Netflix?

*Hierarchical subjugations*

- Can you think of any mainstream products, including your set texts, that have constructed problematic LGBTQ representations? In what ways are these portrayals negative?
- Can you think of any products that deliver abjectified LGBTQ representations?
- Can you think of any products that construct comedic or parodic characters who are non-heteronormative?

#### Box 10.6 Apply it: using Judith Butler to explore representation effects in set texts

Use the following questions to help you find moments in your set texts that can be explained or interpreted using Butler's ideas:

*Concept 1: gender as performance*

- Are there moments in the text in which characters openly perform a gender-based identity?
- Do the set texts give advice to their audience on how they might perform their genders?
- How do magazine set texts help their readers/viewers adopt traditional male or female roles?
- Do the set texts provide alternative models of gender or sexuality?

*Concept 2: reinforcing hierarchical binarisms*

- Are the set texts dominated by heteronormative representations? Are lead characters presented within conventional family units? Do lead characters follow heteronormative love interests?
- Does the set text give space to marginalised or non-binary identities? How much space is given to these moments? What is the effect of any absent representations?
- Do the set texts present marginalised identities in a way that creates abjection?
- Do the set texts offer moments that subvert traditional heteronormative expectations? Are these moments constructed as painful or difficult? In what way do those representations reinforce hierarchical binarisms?

**Exemplar 1: Zoella (Edugas).** Zoella's YouTube output centres around the production of make-up tutorials and haul-based videos. In a Butlerian sense, Zoella is providing her 12 million subscribers with a pattern of ritualised gender performance via this content – evidencing, in a very literal sense, the means through which she, and they, can assume an orthodox female identity. The controlled application of make-up and the careful selection of fashion wear provide a gender performance template that audiences can use to reinforce their own feminine identities. It is interesting to note that in one particular upload, 'Zoella Does My Make Up', Alfe Deyes becomes the gender-troubled subject of that feminine transition. The result, Butler would argue, simultaneously offers male and female viewers a drag version of Alfe that is both comic (and hence abjecting), while also constructing the liberating/unsettling possibility that masculinity per se is a performance-oriented construct that can be easily manipulated.

**Exemplar 2: Teen Vogue (AQA).** *Teen Vogue* presents itself as 'the young person's guide to conquering...the world'. It certainly contains articles that are designed to raise political awareness, but much of its online content is dedicated to giving fashion and beauty advice to its young female readership, and Judith Butler might argue, this advice provides young women with the rituals and performative templates needed to assume a socially acceptable female identity. 'Do try these at home', the webzine suggests, enabling *Teen Vogue's* audience to perform a version of socially sanctioned femininity through the hair and make-up routines presented. The male/female couplings presented within the site's imagery are predominantly heteronormative in nature, and further reinforce the long-standing gender binaries of contemporary society.

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

Table 10.1 Speak Judith Butler

<b>Abjection</b>	The process of constructing an object or person as repulsive. Abjection is used, Butler infers, to suggest that non-heteronormative identities are unnatural.
<b>Compulsory heterosexuality</b>	A phrase used by Butler to describe the deeply entrenched social expectation that we assume male/female identities and that we engage in heterosexual relationships.
<b>Gender/sex</b>	Butler differentiates between gender and sex. Gender, she argues, is the socially constructed identity that we assume, while sex refers to the body we are born with.
<b>Gender trouble</b>	A representation or identity that falls outside of heteronormativity. Gender trouble might be inferred through: asexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality, lesbianism, pansexuality, transgenderism or transvestitism. Butler suggests that the performance of gender trouble is a difficult and sometimes painful process.
<b>Gender performance</b>	The repeating of acts or rituals that continuously define our gender. Butler argues that our gender is not innate but constructed through the continuous repetition of micro-rituals.
<b>Gender subversion</b>	A representational process that undermines heteronormativity.
<b>Heteronormativity</b>	The dominance of heterosexuality as a normal or preferred identity – usually accompanied by a view that gender is binary (either male or female).
<b>Parodic representation</b>	An imitative gender representation usually constructed using exaggeration or dissonance. Drag queens are parodic in that they offer us a highly exaggerated version of femininity. Parodic representations can be used to subjugate marginalised identities, but they also simultaneously sketch the performative nature of gender for all of us and are therefore subtly subversive.

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