LFTVD: academic theories

Semiology – Barthes

How the theory is useful
- Can be applied to any sign, including language and image, to tease out connotations and ideology (see media language analysis under Question 3 on pages 146-51).
- Useful for ‘micro’ analysis of media language.

How the theory is limited
- Does not explain anything specific to LFTVD as it is a general theory of signification.
- Less useful for analysing ‘macro’ media language elements such as narrative and genre.

Exam tip
You should not try to guess which theory might come up but instead revise all the theories. Some theories apply better than others – as shown in the pages that follow. Those that work better may be more likely to appear in this question (and those that don’t might be more likely to appear in Question 3).
- Does not reveal anything about the ownership and control of television and the process of mediation that leads to the narratives in television.
- Does not say about how audiences interpret LFTVDs and give meaning in different ways to the same signs.

**Genre theory – Neale**

**How the theory is useful**
- Was developed primarily to explain film genre, but can be applied to LFTVD as this is the most filmic form of television output, requiring an 'intertextual relay' of pre-publicity and reviews to generate the large audiences required.
- Draws attention to processes of difference-within-repetition (variation) and hybridity in LFTVD (see genre analysis under Question 3 on pages 151-4).
- The theory of genre as 'shared code' can be applied to the LFTVD itself as a form despite the fact that these dramas range across various different genres. For example, an early version of the form, *Twin Peaks*, established audience expectations of enigmatic narratives that have been developed through each addition to the generic corpus.

**How the theory is limited**
- Many LFTVDs have the resources to rely on elements such as high production values, the star system, tone and exoticism rather than genre to market themselves, emphasising individual difference rather than generic similarity.
- Some LFTVD generic descriptors, such as ‘Nordic Noir’ arose after the showing of some programmes, suggesting that this was not a ‘shared code’ with the audience at the time.

**Structuralism – Levi-Strauss**

**How the theory is useful**
- Can be applied to any cultural product, including LFTVDs (see analysis under Levi-Strauss for Question 3 on pages 162-3).
- Can be used to analyse LFTVD narratives, for example, by studying how they set up an ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ opposition, asking the audience to identify with the inside, and then in some cases (e.g. *Mr. Robot, Homeland, Deutschland 83*) playing around with this opposition to disorientate the audience.
- Can be used to analyse representations and their ideological effect, by establishing which side of an opposition the narrative values (see analysis under Levi-Strauss for Question 3).

**How the theory is limited**
- Does not explain anything specific to LFTVDs as it is an extremely high-level theory of culture.
- Does not tell us anything about the ownership and control of television and the process of mediation that leads to the narratives in LFTVDs.
- Does not tell us about how audiences interpret television and give meaning.
Narratology – Todorov

How the theory is useful

- Is sufficiently simple to be widely applicable, meaning that it is possible to identify the key elements – equilibrium (often implied) and disruption – in LFTVD (see analysis under Todorov for Question 3 on pages 159–62).
- Is very useful in teasing out the messages and values underlying a narrative, in pointing to the significance of the transformation between the initial equilibrium (displayed or implied) and the new equilibrium (see analysis under Todorov for Question 3).

How the theory is limited

- Was not designed to explain long form serial narratives but single narratives with resolutions, so does not explain complex narratives where climax and resolution are necessarily delayed and sometimes, in programmes that are designed to last many series, are never reached (see analysis under media language for Question 3 on pages 159–62).
- Does not help to understand television’s tendency towards segmentation rather than linearity, e.g. the multiple segmented storylines of some long form dramas (see analysis under media language for Question 3).
- Does not help to analyse narrative strands that do not add to the narrative drive towards resolution but establish characterisation, spiral out from the main linear narrative or create cliffhangers (see analysis under media language for Question 3).

Postmodernism – Baudrillard

How the theory is useful

- Can be applied to any cultural product, including LFTVD (see analysis under Baudrillard for Question 3 on pages 163–4).
- May be celebrated in LFTVDs that refuse any simple identification of ‘the real’ in the fictional world (e.g. Mr. Robot – see analysis under media language for Question 3 on pages 154–6).

How the theory is limited

- Does not explain anything specific to LFTVDs as it is an extremely high-level theory of the postmodern world.
- Is unfalsifiable as it cannot be proved false or true.

Theories of representation – Hall

How the theory is useful

- Can be applied to any media product, including LFTVDs (see the selection and combination, stereotypes and ideology analysis under representation for Question 3 on pages 179 and 164–79).
- Draws attention to the role of power in representations – both the general distribution of power in society and the power of the television industry – but also the power of the audience to decode representations in different ways (see Hall on audiences on pages 192–4).
How the theory is limited
- Does not explain anything specific to LFTVDs as it is a general theory of representation.

Theories of identity – Gauntlett

How the theory is useful
- Can be applied to any media product, including LFTVDs.
- LFTVDs may tend to offer diverse and contradictory representations that audiences can use to think through their identity as they have the time and resources to develop complex representations (see analysis under representation for Question 3 on page 180).
- LFTVDs (especially the non-English-language examples) often attempt to reach and engage an international audience by offering a local representation with international resonance, thus increasing the diversity of representations of place and cultures (see analysis under audience for Question 3 on pages 164–79).
- LFTVDs may achieve cult status, adding to their value in helping create identities.

How the theory is limited
- Assumes that audiences are powerful, active agents and so may underestimate the power of media conglomerates and the forces of global capitalism to shape popular culture, tastes and identities.

Feminist theory – Van Zoonen

How the theory is useful
- Can be applied to any media product, including LFTVDs, especially representations of gender (see analysis under representation for Question 3 on pages 180 and 164–79).
- Can be used to apply the concept of patriarchy to the ownership and control of television, the recruitment and ethos of television professionals, and the representation of gender in LFTVDs, especially the representation of women's bodies.

How the theory is limited
- Does not explain anything specific to LFTVDs as it is a general theory of patriarchy.
- In prioritising gender inequalities, the theory may not aid analysis of other forms of inequality in representation in LFTVDs.
- In stressing the influence of social conflict on representations the theory may underestimate the influence of social consensus on representations.

Feminist theory – hooks

How the theory is useful
- Can be applied to any media product, including LFTVDs, especially representations of gender (see analysis under representation for Question 3 on page 180).
- Can be used to apply the concept of 'intersectionality' to misrepresentations and stereotypes based on one or more of gender, race, class and sexuality, and their interrelationship in any LFTVD representations (see analysis under hooks for Question 3).
How the theory is limited
• Does not explain anything specific to LFTVDs as it is a general theory of patriarchy.
• In prioritising gender linked to other inequalities, the theory may overlook similarities or equalities in representation in LFTVDs.
• In stressing the influence of social conflict on representations the theory may underestimate the influence of social consensus on representations.

Theories of gender performativity – Butler

How the theory is useful
• Can be applied to any media product, including LFTVDs, especially representations of gender (see analysis under representation for Question 3 on page 181).
• Can be applied particularly to LFTVDs where the performance of gender is foregrounded, e.g. through representations of women preparing to present their bodies for display, of people training or reinforcing characters in masculinity, or representations that expose or disrupt heteronormativity (see analysis under Butler for Question 3).

How the theory is limited
• Does not explain anything specific to LFTVDs as it is a high-level theory of gender.
• Is unfalsifiable as it cannot be proved false or true.

Theories around ethnicity and post-colonial theory – Gilroy

How the theory is useful
• Can be applied to any media product, including LFTVDs, especially representations of race, ethnicity and the post-colonial and post-slavery world (see the analysis under representation for Question 3 on page 181).
• Draws attention to the continuing role of racist ideology – of the superiority of White western culture – across a range of representations in LFTVDs (see the analysis under representation for Question 3).

How the theory is limited
• Does not explain anything specific to LFTVDs as it is a general theory.
• In prioritising race and the post-colonial experience the theory may not aid analysis of other forms of inequality in representation in LFTVDs.
• In stressing the influence of social conflict on representations the theory may underestimate the influence of social consensus on representations.

Power and media industries – Curran and Seaton

How the theory is useful
• Studying television as an industry draws attention to issues such as forms and effects of ownership and control, the working practices of creators, and issues of risk and profitability.
• Applies particularly to the international dominance of American television products and the American streaming services distributing many LFTVDs.
How the theory is limited
- In prioritising the effects of ownership and control on the content of LFTVDs this theory may not aid in understanding how ideologies, audience choice or media language conventions may determine media content.

Regulation – Livingstone and Lunt

How the theory is useful
- Applies in part to LFTVDs produced by European public service broadcasters, which may be regulated in the interests of citizens.
- Applies in part to LFTVDs produced by American cable and streaming services, which treat audiences as consumers and are only lightly regulated to avoid harm.
- Draws attention to the challenge of globalised television industries to traditional regulation.

How the theory is limited
- Only applies to the consumption of these LFTVDs in Britain or to British LFTVDs as the study of Ofcom was from a national perspective.

Cultural industries – Hesmondhalgh

How the theory is useful
- Draws attention to the forms and effects of ownership and control, such as the differences between the purely commercial American television products and the public service ethos of most European producers.
- Draws attention to the issues of risk and profitability in LFTVDs where high budgets are at stake and the ways producers will try to minimise these risks by using formatting – e.g. genres, the star system (and co-production deals for the smaller European broadcasters).

How the theory is limited
- In prioritising the effects of ownership and control on the content of LFTVDs this theory may not aid in understanding how ideologies, audience choice or media language conventions may determine media content.

Media effects – Bandura

How the theory is useful
- May apply to a wide range of media products, including LFTVDs.
- Draws attention to the need to investigate the direct effects on individuals who consume LFTVDs.
- Supports the arguments of those who think television should be regulated to avoid public harm.

How the theory is limited
- The complex and nuanced representations common to LFTVDs are less likely to cause a direct effect on audiences.
- Prioritising the effects of the media on the audience may mean that the effects of the audience on the media are underestimated (see Jenkins and Shirky).
Cultivation theory – Gerbner

How the theory is useful
- May apply to a wide range of media products, including LFTVDs.
- Draws attention to the need to investigate the longer-term effects on individuals who consume LFTVDs, especially heavy ‘box set’ users.
- Suggests, via its interest in the attitudinal effects of violent representations, that television programmes are possibly creating the belief in the audience that the world is characterised by negative/dangerous events.
- Supports the arguments of those who think television should be regulated to avoid public harm.

How the theory is limited
- The complex and nuanced representations common to LFTVDs are less likely to cause an indirect effect on audiences.
- Prioritising the effects of the media on the audience may mean that the effects of the audience on the media are underestimated (see Jenkins and Shirky).

Reception theory – Hall

How the theory is useful
- May apply to a wide range of media products, including LFTVDs (see analysis under audience for Question 3 on page 36).
- Draws attention to different possible audience readings of a LFTVD’s messages and values, while acknowledging the role of power in creating dominance within television messages and values.

How the theory is limited
- Assumes that there is one dominant meaning to which the audience responds – does not fit messages with a multitude of different possible readings (e.g. ironic messages such as those in Mr. Robot, House of Cards, Homeland, Stranger Things, Deutschland 83).

Fandom – Jenkins

How the theory is useful
- Applies particularly to the range and diversity of representations offered by LFTVDs to ‘textual poachers’ who wish to use these products to create their own culture, e.g. via fan sites.
- LFTVDs may achieve cult status, adding to their value for fans.

How the theory is limited
- This optimistic view of the power of LFTVD audiences may underestimate the power of the oligarchy of media conglomerates to shape and control television content (see Curran and Seaton).
- This view might underestimate the effects of LFTVDs on their audience (see Bandura and Gerbner).
‘End of audience’ theory – Shirky

How the theory is useful

- Draws attention to the way audiences for LFTVDs can provide value for one another by using websites to offer fan fiction, wikis, fan theories, merchandise (e.g. Sarah Lund sweaters) and so forth.

How the theory is limited

- Does not apply to broadcast television.
- Streaming services do not reflect the view of the online media proposed by Shirky insofar as they primarily operate like the ‘old’ media by offering centrally produced content.
- This optimistic view of the power of audiences may underestimate the power of the oligarchy of media conglomerates to shape and control television content (see Curran and Seaton).
- This view might underestimate the effects of LFTVDs on their audience (see Bandura and Gerbner).