

Module 3: Broadcast TV

In this module we will look at the most popular TV genres and apply some media theory to the texts as well as applying the key concepts.

Background on institutions

Before the 1990 Broadcasting Act, the four main terrestrial channels had a public service broadcasting remit (PSB) to provide a diverse range of programmes across their weekly schedules that informed, educated or entertained their audiences. However, the 1990 act made changes that attempted to introduce more competition into the broadcasting industry. All media institutions including the BBC need to make money. The BBC has BBC Worldwide as its commercial arm. This sells successful formats such as Spooks, Teletubbies and The Office overseas. The BBC can afford to be more experimental because it is supported by its PSB remit and it does not have to rely on pleasing advertisers which can often mean that producers for the commercial channels tend to play it safe to ensure advertisers don't pull out.

New innovative genres and approaches to TV programmes such as the odd and imaginative sitcom, Spaced, have come out of the BBC rather than their commercial rivals. Purely commercial institutions are supported by advertising revenue and tend to be more conservative and stick to tried and tested formats.

If we look at the early evening (5.30-7pm) schedules for the five terrestrial channels we can see the identity and positioning of the channels as well as their target audiences. The representations offered, the advertisements and trails and the idents (channel identities logos, music, etc.) themselves can contribute to your understanding of the institution. Channel 4, for example, is very different in its approach to BBC2, which is different again from ITV. Sky of course is not terrestrial but also has a very distinctive branding and ideology.

Comparing BBC and Sky news is a fruitful exercise to determine the values and ideological positioning of the institutions. And if you have access to international channels these help to throw clearly into relief the ideas and values encoded in texts. A news story covered by Euro news is very different from that covered by the BBC. The Iraq war clearly showed the ideological differences here. The BBC showed very different footage and covered a very different angle to that of Euro news. The BBC had to bear in mind that British men and women were dying in that conflict so the coverage was much more upbeat and less negative than the French and European owned Euronews slant which showed failed missions and interviews from Iraqi people who were critical of the foreign military on their soil.

Sitcoms

Certain genres are the backbone of the TV schedule. Sitcoms and soaps are two mainstream genres that have endured throughout the history of TV.

Producers like sitcoms because they are cheap, the same sets are used, small casts can be utilised over an extended period of time. The sitcom can be scheduled at anytime because the narrative is circular and the characters never move on or grow

up. They never learn from their mistakes and are stuck in here and now. So Homer is forever foolishly misbehaving, forgetting his wife's birthday present. Sitcoms have a clear beginning, middle and end. They follow a classic narrative structure where a state of order is disrupted and then the text moves towards restoration. Sitcoms have synchronising motifs, which are slogans, catch phrases or events that are repeated in every episode. So in The Simpsons we expect to see Homer say 'D'Oh', Bart to exclaim 'Eat my shorts' and Homer to strangle Bart and drink a lot of Duff beer.

Audiences like the familiarity and repetition. The sitcom offers escapism and relaxation as well as entertainment to a broad mainstream audience. The characters are trapped in a situation and the humour is derived from this very entrapment. The narrative does not move on from episode to episode unlike in a serial like Lost or Desperate Housewives. Audiences don't have to keep up with a changing plot over the weeks because at the end of every episode the characters remain in the same situation whatever has happened during the preceding 30-40 minutes. The opening sequence is often the signal to what is going to happen in the programme. The Simpsons is no exception. We get a grasp of the characters and possible plots as well as the familiar theme tune to alert us that our favourite programme is about to start.

In black American sitcom such as The Cosby Show and The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, the family unit is built around a very successful father and mother with quick witted youngsters to provide the conflict that leads to comedy. The young audience of the Fresh Prince would take pleasure from the amicable conflict between generations and the ways in which the younger characters are 'cool'. The family home and workplace of all sitcoms allows the humour to come to the fore. A more outlandish setting would distract from the comedy and would not reflect the audience's own personal circumstances as they watch it.

British sitcom tends to appeal to the dry wit of the audience. Another repeated feature of the British sitcom is their focus on failure. Basil Fawlty, Victor Meldrew and Rick Gervais' character in the The Office experience a succession of painful and unsuccessful experiences. New sitcoms have often twisted the format slightly to refresh an old formula. So in The Royle Family you have low key observation of a family that seems to spend its whole life on the sofa watching TV. The Office is partly filmed like a documentary such as characters revealing themselves in a head and shoulder shot to the camera and looking over their shoulder as if a camera man is following them in a documentary. (Image - Copyright BBC).



Detailed textual analysis of the opening sequence of The Simpsons



The Simpsons is a very successful sitcom that has been running for over 25 years. Its success is based on the fact that it tackles serious issues as well as continually mocking figures of authority such as the president, the Olympic committee, the major and big businesses. In fact anything is up for investigation in this sitcom so it appeals to children who like the naughty boy antics of Bart and his mates as well as adults of all social classes because the storylines tackle adult problems such as relationship and personal crisis as well as political issues. (Image Copyright Channel 4).

In The Simpsons' opening sequence we see clouds and the words 'The Simpsons' which reminds us that we are about to watch this as we come downstairs to watch our favourite animated sitcom. The words are softly spoken in a soothing and warming choir. After that the camera zooms through cumulus clouds. This could signify that you're invited to see Springfield's shenanigans from a bird's eye view. The first major landmark we see is the cooling towers which may signify that the cooling towers have given off steam which has made the clouds. Before the sitcom even begins the viewer has a negative view of the nuclear industry which was Matt Groening's aim when he first made the sitcom in the 80s. He said then that he wanted to publicise the negative effects of nuclear power in every show.

The camera continues to zoom in on the town and we do a tour of the key locations of the action. We see through the window of the local primary school 'Springfield Elementary', we see Bart writing lines on the class chalkboard, which we assume has been a punishment set by his teacher. The audience feels instant recognition as Bart is behaving like stereotypical naughty school boy. Every time we see the chalkboard there is a different gag on it. Bart then leaves in a hurry on his skateboard to get home. This repetition offers familiarity and a different joke every episode.

This show is pitched at families and it explores in a fun way the dilemmas families face. Because it is a sitcom, Homer can marry a prostitute in Las Vegas and be back with Marge by the end of the episode. He is portrayed as a foolish but lovable fool. This foolishness is connoted in the opening sequence when Homer is leaving the power plant where he works. As his shift is over he leaves in a rush and drops a radioactive uranium bar which bounces back and gets stuck on his back, which shows the carelessness of Mr. Burns and how the nuclear power plant is managed. It also ensures that the audience is very clear about the polluting effects of nuclear power in a fun but consistent way.

The gay Mr. Smithers and his employer Mr Burns are seen in the background looking at a blue print when the end-of-shift whistle blows. Burns puts his watch up to his ear and shakes it, as if he believes it has stopped, which to an extent shows us

that Mr. Burns doesn't want his employees to stop working and it explains his character has a love of work and money. Even at this stage we can see that he is the stereotype of the greedy businessman.

The mum of the family Marge is also portrayed as a familiar stereotype. She is the housewife depicted here at the checkout in a supermarket. She doesn't have a job and is responsible for the home so she is shown in the stereotypical housewife's role. Maggie, the baby of the family, is accidentally scanned in to the cash register. This connotes that we are about to see a comedy. You then see the price machine appear with some numbers (\$847) which when the show started in 1989 was the average monthly cost of raising a baby. Maggie is misplaced in a bag and as Marge is desperately worried that she has lost her child she gives a sigh of relief when she sees her head pop out of the bag. The humour in this sequence is lighthearted and slapstick and sets up the audience's expectations of what is to follow. We know that this is going to be a happy escapist text for relaxation when we see visual codes such as Marge's long strange blue hair and the various other visual jokes in this sequence.

The daughter of the family, Lisa, is pictured playing her saxophone with the rest of the school band and she is forced to leave as she is playing a different song as to everyone else, which reminds us that Lisa is a very talented, smart individual. The representation of Lisa mocks the stereotype of the swot in a gentle way. During this clip every time she plays the saxophone she plays a different tune to the previous episode.

We then go back to Bart skateboarding dangerously in between people on a street who then passes a police officer and crosses the road without looking and is just missed by a car, and we are left with Chief Wiggum the police officer shouting at Bart. The audience is clearly shown that the key figures in an everyday ordinary American town will be featured in an amusing way.

The camera quickly zooms into the car where we see Maggie holding a steering wheel making it appear as though Maggie is driving, the camera then zooms out revealing the wheel to be just an adaptation for her, as the camera then pans out to show Marge driving. Then both Maggie and Marge hoot their horns.

The camera pans out to the garden where we see almost every Simpsons character on the lawn. The Simpsons all somehow miraculously reach home in the space of about ten seconds. Homer arrives first, parking his car in front of the garage, while Bart lands on the car roof with his skateboard, which unsurprisingly does not dent the car. As Homer steps out of the car, he quickly dodges Lisa zooming by on her bike, and then screams as he sees Marge's car coming towards him. Then the scene shifts to Marge's sight, inside the car, showing Homer running away from her until he goes in through the door. The connotations of this is that you are about to watch a fun family show loosely based on reality but tackling some serious issues which is connoted by the radioactive waste bouncing after Homer.

