

Compare and contrast how realism through television influences the audience

[Art & Culture](#), [Art Movement](#)



Introduction

The analysis which will follow will look at the British television drama, in particular looking at the different codes of realism and how it uses different techniques to draw upon this. The comparing and contrasting of how realism through television influences the audience will also be discussed. In addition to this, a brief overview of the analysis will be discussed using the examples; Coronation Street (1960) and Shameless (2004), considering the class and gender issues thoroughly. "...for, in my view, television is from its very nature, more suitable for the dissemination of all kinds of information than for entertainment as such, since it can scarcely be expected to compete successfully with films in that respect. Nevertheless, the lighter forms of entertainment will certainly have their place." (Gerald Cock, 1936, pg. 7)

The view of television that emerges from Cock (1936) shows the assumptions that have been made in the early decades about the function of television. When television is first apparent, what is noticed the most is the assertion of immediacy; being a continuing theory appearing throughout the analysis of television. According to Cock (1936), the effect that this theory has is one of the factors that gives British television drama its iconic form; individualising this genre of television from cinema and the drama programmes that were scheduled in the United States of America.

One factor of realism to consider is social realism. This is the struggle of socialism, influenced by the level of social development surrounding the subject in hand. This is in comparison to critical realism. According to Lukacs (1963), social realism differs from critical realism. Socialist society is seen as

an independent one, not simply there to be as a support for capitalist society.

An example that effectively shows realism through television drama is *Shameless* (2004). This hybrid television programme has aspects of a soap drama; in the mixture of social realism that is consistently displayed throughout the different storylines. This popular television programme is surrounding family life and the dramas which occur on a day-to-day life, within challenging conditions. The drama is set in the outer suburbs of Manchester on a disadvantaged estate; showing real situations through a fictional narrative, in a comedic way. In terms of the drama, Nelson (2007) suggests that *Shameless* (2004) resembles a sitcom type television programme to a serial drama. This can be apparent through many continuing narratives throughout the programme. An example of this can be that all of the episodes throughout the series begin in the exact same way by hearing Frank Gallagher's voice-over that introduces his family and their life on Chatsworth Estate; the sense of a sitcom being that Frank never changes throughout. This factor brings comedy to the television programme as it carries a significant comic irony, as the name of the estate is the same as the stately home of that name. This portrays to the audience that Frank Gallagher is one of the main protagonists in *Shameless* (2004).

When referring back to realism throughout television, *Shameless* (2004) has many issues that are addressed through the narrative. One of the ways this television programme is effective in portraying realism is that the writer, Paul Abbott draws upon his own experiences of growing up in a chaotic

household; giving the material and narratives written a huge sense of realism. This is also because Abbott writes from an insider on the social experiences, rather than an observer looking on from the outside.

“ The deserting parents, the teenage pregnancies, the lack of legitimate income, the criminal sentences...Chaos became the norm and our threshold for tolerating up-heaval was tested to the nth degree...Bits of that life were unmissable.”

(Paul Abbott, [http://www. channel4. com/programmes/shameless](http://www.channel4.com/programmes/shameless), 2005)

A code is a sign or signal which gives a sense of meaning to communication. According to Bernadette Casey (2008), the codes that are made up are used as a set of rules, according to the context and the culture it is within.

Examples of codes that everyone can relate to can be simple codes like traffic lights on the roads to more complex codes like different languages from around the world. Within television studies, the term ‘ code’ means to seek ‘ unexplored audio-visual systems which have the capacity to construct and organise meaning in media texts’ (Casey, 2008, pg. 38). John Fiske (1987) also attempts to discuss media and television codes, beginning to argue that reality is already encoded culturally; therefore aspects like dress and behaviour are influenced by culture. He also states that technical codes influence that camera to manipulate how different characters on camera are represented to the audience.

The concept of representation is closely influenced by the aspect of reality when linked to television. Richard Dyer (1985) outlined an approach on

representation. When the audience watch a television programme, they become absorbed in the context of the narrative. For example: a character's role or position on the camera. He also argues that in order for the audience to engage their interest in a particular television programme, then the media representations of that programme must provide some sort of pleasure from it. However, a criticism to this argument is that the assumption is made that the audience watching shares the enjoyment equally, which is not always accurately the case. Many social differences shown on television make certain that each viewer will experience a different level of pleasure. Some of these social differences that influence viewer's pleasure levels are ethnicity, class, gender, age and sexual orientation. This therefore links onto one social aspect of television that is being discussed, with the support of examples.

Class can be understood through television in two ways; first by analysing the history of the concept and the theories that surrounds it and secondly, the way in which the different classes have been represented throughout television. According to Karl Marx (1983), the term 'class' has a number of complex meanings; referring first and foremost to economic and social position, and the power and status that is gained as a result from this. He also argued that society is split into two large sections; those who own the means of production (capitalists) and those who work for the production (proletariats). With Marx's theory in support, the 'base/superstructure' model was invented, resting on the ideas that the class structure or economy (the base) determined all other aspects of what we may call culture (the superstructure). Even though Karl Marx's research was before the time of

television, more recent researchers link Marx's theories to more recent television theories relating to class structures. When audiences are offered television, it is linked to supporting capitalism and ruling-class ideology. For example: most news channels on television focus on subjects surrounding international finance, world markets and domestic industrial conflict. This therefore showing a more upper-class agenda. The notion of economic class has been made additional to the ideas surrounding social class; being used as a significant way in enhancing market research tasks for advertising purposes and throughout television industries. This is to determine and profile specific audiences. Social class groups are based on lifestyle choices, spending power and income. In the United States of America, class went through a transition of being unaware for audiences within television. This was partly influenced by the anti-communist fever of the Cold War period. This according to Casey (2008) marginalised class. Wilson (1980) also supported this notion by stating that the absence of working-class characters on television had received less attention than other issues portrayed on television programmes. Some of these include: gender and race. There is some previous research that supports the class representation throughout television programmes. Butsch (1995) conducted a survey of prime-time television in the United States of America. The findings were that over four decades analysed, there was a consistent under-representation of working-class occupations and an over-representation on more highly professional and managerial occupations. This shows that audiences prefer wealth and glamour, and that lower-class representations have a negative connotation on television programmes.

One example that will be used to analyse the way the representation of class is highlighted throughout is the British television drama *Shameless* (2004). This popular television programme, as explained above is surrounding family life and the dramas which occur on a day-to-day life, within challenging conditions. The drama is set in the outer suburbs of Manchester on a disadvantaged estate; showing real situations through a fictional narrative, in a comedic way. The television drama is seen as somewhat of a tradition, as the writer Paul Abbott aimed to expose the more disadvantaged estates in contemporary Britain; succeeding extremely well, with the audience often laughing rather than being sympathetic or feeling concerned for the different characters within *Shameless* (2004). However, for some viewers watching the working-class origins, they feel some discomfort as they feel that they are being made to laugh at their own life. This is because they think that there is an increasing level of social realism throughout as there is a sense of mockery in the social problems of challenging circumstances in the narrative that are raised.

“...traditional social realism takes the colour out of working-class life, Abbott restores it in a new hybrid of styles...questioning whether the hybridisation and upbeat treatment typical of contemporary television dilutes any potential political impact. Patently, the anarchic comedy of *Shameless* differs from the ‘serious’ docu-drama treatments of earlier examples of social issues television.” (Nelson, 2007, pg. 50)

Another example that successfully displays the issues of class and social differences is the iconic British soap opera; *Coronation Street* (1960). With

the support of Geraghty (1991), this soap opera concentrates on the working-class characters in order for them to be recognisable towards the audiences; through accents, the costume that they wear, and even their lifestyle choices. The class differences throughout a soap opera like Coronation Street (1960) allow the audience watching to make their own judgments on the individual characters throughout. Over the years, the class structures on Coronation Street (1960) has changed dramatically, although when the process was taking place, it seemed only a slight transition.

Examples of this are the accents of the different characters changing and becoming less regional and broader. Another example of the social changes that happen throughout the narrative is when the factory got demolished and replaced with houses to accommodate the changes in the narrative and with that, the new characters that may join the soap and the storylines. Characters such as the iconic and well known Ken Barlow, achieving the middle-class role when he aspired to be a student also shows the shift in the class structure as society moved on throughout the different decades.

Another code of representation that is often used through narratives of many television programmes is the ideas surrounding gender. Gender is similar to representation, in that there have been many theories and debates surrounding this subject. The terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' are used on many occasions when referring to cultural and social aspects of gender. This is compared to the terms 'male' and 'female' being used to describe biological sex. When referring to gender representation within television, scholars state that starting from the 1970's, gender through television was

focused on the representation of femininity. This was through audiences seeing images of female characters or feminine personalities in either fictional programmes or news programmes. However, there are some researchers that argue against the above statement; stating that gender is not defined through characters and television personalities alone. According to Allen and Hill (2004), in order for gender to be analysed successfully throughout television, it needs to be considered through all genres. Some examples that are mentioned are talk shows, melodramas and soap operas. This links onto the example soap opera that is being analysed for using gender issues consistently throughout the narratives; Coronation Street (1960).

One of the most famous, yet controversial storylines that was to be shown in this soap during the late 1990's is the Hayley storyline of being a transsexual; questioning her sexuality and indeed her gender, where the progression in the storyline sees Hayley fulfil her dream at having a sex-change operation and gender readjustment. Granada successfully portrayed this sensitive subject as they allowed the audience to get to know the character Hayley before allowing the storyline to progress. This was seen as being a controversial storyline of its time as it was before the watershed, therefore setting itself up for audience complaints. However, they shown this story by representing a man who has gender corrective surgery to become a woman, by the character being actually played by a woman; adding a sense of realism to the narrative. By introducing the character of Hayley first for

the audience to get to know and recognise, they reached a happy ending with the audience by experiencing the gender change with Hayley.

What we can therefore conclude from the analysis that has been made is that throughout the television drama history, there has been many issues that are consistently highlighted throughout different narratives of the different television programmes, that television audiences can relate to; therefore making some television aspects more popular than others. This has been successfully portrayed through the representing codes of gender and class and how through different storylines and characters, can sustain realism; being the popularity aspect that allows the audience watching to relate to what is being shown. As well as previous literature being compared and contrasted for support, the uses of examples such as television drama *Shameless* (2004) and the iconic British soap opera *Coronation Street* (1960) shows just how these codes of representation are used throughout, being a successful technique in ensuring their popularity amongst audiences is kept to a consistently high standard throughout each episode and each series.

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