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SECTION

I

Theory and Practice

In this first section of the book we will introduce you to a set of easily remembered theoretical concepts which provide a foundation for your analysis, understanding and reflection with regard to both existing media texts and your own work. However, you may need to supplement this with more developed and detailed theory depending upon the level of your course. The second thing this section of the book does is to take you through the various stages of video production in detail. This will form the basis for your own practical work.

Knowing: The Theory of Video Production 1

Introduction

There is something about the prevalence and simplicity of modern video cameras and camera phones which has turned many of us into non-professional video-makers, often leading us to believe that the process of making videos is simpler than it actually is. There is a tendency to think that making a video, simply involves picking up a camera, choosing the subject for the video, pointing the camera, pressing the record button and ... job done!

Although most students embarking on college and university media courses are almost certain to have made non-professional videos before, they are likely to be new to professional video production. In the following chapters, we want to show you that producing *good* video involves much more. We shall, therefore, introduce you to the theoretical concepts that you will need to consider and will outline the correct processes involved when producing a video. These discussions form the bedrock for the rest of the book in that they introduce all the relevant information which will be worked through in more detail in the remaining chapters.

The theory of video production

When starting a video production course many people are surprised or, more usually, shocked to learn that they will have to think about theory. However, this applies in other areas of life, for example when taking a driving test. Understanding how and why something happens (the theory) can inform the way in which we do something (the practice). It is exactly the same for video production.

In the introduction we looked at some of the reasons why it is important for theory and practice to be studied together, and this chapter aims to provide you with a set of key theoretical concepts from communication, cultural and media studies. They are the 'building blocks' that you need to use, both when analysing existing products and when thinking about and producing your own videos. These concepts are so fundamental that you need

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I	Institution
C	Contexts of production
A	Audiences
R	Representation
L	Language
I	Ideology
N	Narrative
G	Genre

Figure 1.1 The key concepts

not only to be aware of them and understand them but also, much more importantly, to learn them and use them in all your video production work. They are not easy to remember but understanding them means that you can not only effectively analyse existing media products but also make your own productions more creative and critical.

To help you to remember the key concepts we have come up with an easily remembered mnemonic device: I CARLING (shown in Figure 1.1).

These concepts should be used as a first stage when theorizing your work but should also be supplemented by higher-level theory and further reading. We will look in much more detail at each of these concepts in subsequent chapters and will show you how they should be used to inform your own video-production work in relation to specific briefs. For now, though, let us take a brief look at each of the terms.

Institution

In everyday language, the term 'institution' may refer to something physical, often something associated with the state, such as a hospital or a prison. If we use a prison as an example, the term suggests that it is strongly built and has walls and cells and a high level of security. However, as Tim O'Sullivan *et al.* (1994: 152) note, the term 'institution' also refers to 'the underlying principles and values according to which many social and cultural practices are organized and co-ordinated': that is, the values and assumptions which lie behind these easily observable characteristics. So, if we continue with our example of a prison, in analysing the institution of a prison we would need to consider the types of values and assumptions which organize it: for example, the fact that the state controls the prison service, the idea that prisoners should be locked up in those cells and the power of the prison officers over the prisoners.

Just as we can talk about institutions of the state such as prisons, so we can talk about 'media institutions'. This term alludes to the fact that most video

productions are made not by individuals but by businesses or organizations. As mentioned above, a full exploration of any media institution would need to focus both on the easily observable characteristics of what the institution is and on the values and assumptions which underpin it. So, for example, we can talk about the BBC as being a media institution. If we were to examine it in detail, we would need to look both at what the institution physically is (the buildings, studios, equipment) and, more importantly, the values and assumptions of the people working within this institution, which will affect the types and styles of programme produced. This is often related to the final aspect of interest with regard to media institutions: who actually owns and/or controls the institution.

With regard to television and video production, there are, broadly speaking, two types of media institution in the UK. They have very different values and assumptions and patterns of ownership and control:

1. *Public service institutions*: these are organizations which are often controlled, either directly or indirectly, by the government, produce media products which are generally universally available, are free from direct external control and are produced to a high standard, primarily for the 'good of the public': in the words of the founder of the BBC, Lord Reith, to 'inform, educate and entertain'. Public service broadcasters tend to be what are called major producers ('majors'). Examples of public service broadcasters include the BBC in the UK and ABC in Australia.
2. *Commercial institutions*: these are organizations which exist primarily to make a profit, either by charging for access to their products or through advertising or sponsorship. They can be split up into major commercial organizations, such as ITV in the UK or NBC in the USA, or independent organizations ('indies') such as Endemol. However, many so-called independents are, in fact, owned by the majors or, as we shall see in the next chapter, entirely dependent upon them.

It is vital to recognize that different institutions will tend to produce very different types of video (or, in media studies terminology, media text) as a result of who owns and controls them and the values and assumptions of the people working within them. In the UK, for example, the primary aim of the BBC has, historically at least, been to focus on the need to inform and educate, leaving the entertainment aspect to its rivals: ITV and, latterly, Channel 4 and Five. It is worth noting, however, that, as a result of developments in modern media such as cable, satellite and the internet, increasingly the values of the two types of institution are tending to permeate each other (Casey *et al.* 2002: 34). Both are increasingly producing programmes that they know are popular, cheap to make and capable of filling up the schedules

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and/or being repeated on television or, increasingly, streamed on the internet or mobile devices. This goes some way to explaining the extent of reality TV on our screens in the early part of the twenty-first century. More importantly, though, new types of media production and distribution mean that the institutional power of existing media organizations is undergoing rapid and distinct change. It is being eroded by new types of media organization such as Microsoft, Google and Yahoo, consolidated by media organizations merging into transnational corporations such as AOL-Time-Warner and possibly being subverted and made more democratic through community television, internet television and web spaces such as MySpace and YouTube. The book's website looks in more detail at these developments and the challenges and opportunities that they may offer you as a video-maker.

So, key questions that you should ask (and be able to answer!) about the institutional source of *any* text might be as follows:

- *What* is the text's institutional source: that is, is the institution a large corporation or a small independent company? Is it a public service institution or commercial institution?
- *Who* owns and controls the business or organization which produced the text?
- *How* has the institutional source of the text shaped and affected the text?

Even though your current videos are all likely to be produced within the institution of a college or university, when you are planning and carrying out research for your own videos, their likely institutional source if they were being produced 'out in the real world' is something that you need to consider carefully.

Tasks to do

1. Watch a range of different programmes on a number of different channels (both terrestrial and digital cable/satellite if possible). Make sure that you have the institution template, downloaded from the book's website, in front of you.
2. Look at the end credits of each programme to see who has produced it and keep a note of the name of the programme, the type and style of programme and the company which produced it. If you can, label each producer as a public service or commercial organization. In addition, see if you know whether the organization is a major or an independent. Go to the website of the company and look for the answer if you don't know.
3. What, if any, points can you make about types of programmes and their institutional source?

Contexts of production

No video, or indeed any other media product, is produced in a vacuum: its production will always be affected by external considerations. The term ‘contexts of production’ refers to the types of situation in which different media products are produced and the factors which might influence a production. These external factors will almost inevitably affect whether the text will go into production and, if it does, what it will look and sound like.

Some of the main contexts of production that you need to consider might include the following:

- *The historical context of production*: the historical conditions which exist and which allow for the production of certain types of text while excluding the possibility of others. For example, during the Second World War (1939–45), much of the film production within the USA and UK was dedicated to producing films which were, either explicitly or implicitly, propagandist: that is, they unquestioningly supported the allied war efforts and demonized the German/Japanese.
- *The technological context of production*: the emergence of affordable digital technology, both hardware and software, for example, has meant that many more people than previously can now produce media texts. Remember, though, that this context will be different for people working in different parts of the world: not everyone has the same access to technology.
- *The economic context of production*: the economic conditions which exist and which allow for the production of certain types of text. Will something be profitable? Is it possible to produce something cheaply using existing technology? This is closely related to the notion of institution that we looked at above.
- *The social context of production*: the social conditions which exist and which allow for the production of certain types of text. The women’s liberation movement of the 1960s, for example, made possible certain types of cultural production which were previously unknown, as in the case of *Spare Rib*, a magazine with an avowedly feminist political agenda. In terms of moving-image production, the movement also enabled many women who had previously been excluded from cultural production to make challenging, political video. A more contemporary example might be swearing on television: in the 1970s, the Sex Pistols uttered a number of strong swear words on a UK chat show and there was a national outcry; at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the chef Gordon Ramsay can utter the same swear words more than a hundred times in ten minutes on an entertainment programme without a murmur; indeed, it is an integral

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part of the entertainment. Social conditions have changed and swearing is now deemed to be more acceptable.

- *The political context of production:* the political conditions which exist and which allow for the production of certain types of text. During the 1980s, for example, the British Government decided that allowing members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), who were at that time engaged in military activities against the British, to appear on television was 'giving terrorism the oxygen of publicity'. Members of the IRA were, therefore, expressly forbidden from appearing and speaking on UK television programmes. However, broadcasters overcame this by using actors to say their words. Following the Northern Ireland peace process of the 1990s, this was repealed. This is an old example and we are, of course, aware that there are more recent examples, but it is a very good illustration of how the political conditions of the time directly affected the shape of media texts.

Audience

The audience for any media product is simply those people at whom the text is aimed and/or those who are likely to watch it.

Historically, people have tended to talk about the 'audience' as though it were possible to categorize everyone watching into one broad group which shares the same ideas and values, both generally and with regard to what they are watching. While this might be true of audiences where people are physically together in a place such as a theatre (although we very much doubt it), it becomes very problematic when talking of the mass audience for media products such as film and television. However, this has not stopped certain ideas about the relationship between media texts and media audiences and the direct effects (more often than not *bad* effects) which powerful texts are assumed to have on a powerless audience becoming widespread. One continuing example of this might be the long-running debate about violent films and their effects on children.

The audience has increasingly been seen by both academics and producers of media texts to be much more complicated. Rather than being one homogeneous mass, the audience for any programme is likely to be split, or segmented, into different categories and to be more powerful than previously imagined. Advertisers, for example, will rarely, if ever, talk about the audience as one homogeneous group, therefore, but will talk about different audiences based on attributes such as age and gender (*demographic* categories), where people live (*geodemographic* categories) and what their tastes are (*psychographic* categories). Academic writing about audiences has also

moved on in two broad ways: first, looking at the different ways in which audiences 'use' the media (what has been termed the 'uses and gratifications' model) and, secondly, looking at the different ways in which media texts can be 'read' (what has been termed the 'encoding/decoding' model). We will look at these ways of categorizing the audience, the relationship between audiences and texts and the problems of segmenting the audience in later chapters.

For the moment though, the key questions that you should ask about the audience for any text might be as follows:

- *Who* is the text addressing? Are there any specific types of audience which are implied by the text? Are there any groups of people whom the text might exclude?
- *What* is the message that the text is seeking to get over to the audience. Is there an assumption that the audience will share that message? Is there only one way of reading the text or are there various possible readings?
- *When* and *where* and *how* is the audience, or audiences, likely to see the text? At what time of day: morning, afternoon or evening? Where: at home, at school or at work? How: on television, on the internet or on a mobile phone? Will it engage their full attention or will they watch it in a distracted manner while doing something else?
- What effects might these conditions have on the way in which the text is read?

Tasks to do

1. Make a list of as many words as you can which describe people: male/female, black/white, gay/straight, young/old, etc. Don't stop until you have at least forty words and, if you are on a roll, keep going. Think, too, about whether some of the categories you have come up with can be split further: young, for example, could be split into babies, toddlers, pre-teens and teenagers.
2. Select three very different television programmes (you may include advertisements if you wish) which obviously appeal to different audience groups. For each programme, choose all the words from the list which seem to be appropriate for that programme.
3. Compare and contrast the audiences that you appear to have identified. What points and/or assumptions can you make about these audiences and the programmes made for them?

Representation

There is a general saying that the camera never lies. This is not true! The term 'representation' refers to the fact that media texts such as videos are *always* constructed artefacts. In the process of their production, certain choices about content and style are inevitably made by the people who produce them. This means that they do not necessarily show reality *as it really is* but can re-present reality in a number of very different ways (including lying!). For example, a fly-on-the-wall documentary following the exploits of a group of city-based debt collectors may alter the viewers' perceptions about these individuals simply by deciding to include, or omit, certain shots or to use certain camera angles or light in a particular way, all of which will make the reality of those debt collectors look different. The audience, of course, may only see the representation and, as such, this becomes their truth.

Much of the work on representation in media and cultural studies has tended to focus on whether or not certain representations are 'distorted' and, if they are, the extent to which they are and the possible effects. One example might be the work of the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) and their analysis of news from the 1970s onwards. They found that in news stories about industrial disputes, certain groups of people, such as politicians and business leaders, tended to be given more screen time during news broadcasts than, for example, union members or members of the public, and they were presented in a more positive manner. It is here that we can situate the idea of stereotyping. Stereotyping is where a particular representation of a group out of the many possible is repeatedly chosen and that representation is seen to tell the whole story about that group. It becomes the accepted way which is quickly and easily understood by both audience and producers and is a shorthand way of conveying complex debates, narratives or characters. However, the more negative aspect of the process is that this representation is repeated and repeated until it becomes established as 'the truth', even if it is not. The GUMG found that the point of view of the 'good and reasonable' business leaders tended to be given priority by the people making the news over that of the 'trouble-making' unions. In this respect, the concept of representation links very closely with that of ideology (see below).

As a media producer, which is what you will become when we begin the production activities, you are responsible for the types of representation in your videos. This is a big responsibility.

For the moment, some of the key questions that you should ask about representation within any text should be:

- *Who* or what is being represented by the text? Why are they being represented at all?
- *How* are they being represented: positively? negatively? neutrally? Why are they being represented in this particular way?
- *What* techniques have been used to create this representation?
- *What* are the effects of the types of representation on offer in the text on the way in which the audience(s) will read the text?

Tasks to do

1. Select three different types of television advertisements for differing products from television.
2. For each advertisement, work through the above questions.
3. Write a two-paragraph description of each advertisement, summarizing your key findings. What points can you make about the type of representations that you discovered?

Language

The term ‘language’ here refers not to the written and spoken language within a media text, but rather to media language: that is, the techniques and filmic languages used to create meaning by film and video-makers in the production of their work. Just as we can talk about written and spoken language being built up from small units of meaning into larger units of meaning, so too can we talk about the same process happening with video (see Figure 1.2).

LETTERS	are put together to form	WORDS	are put together to form	SENTENCES	are put together to form	TEXTS
SHOTS	are put together to form	SEQUENCES	are put together to form	SCENES	are put together to form	TEXTS

Figure 1.2 Letters–Words–Sentences–Texts

There are specific, accepted rules (or, in media terms, codes) which are used to organize these units of meaning. For example, the way in which lighting is used can dramatically affect the meaning of the shot and the information that the audience receive. If you look at the shots in Figure 1.3, all of which use the same subject and one lamp, you can see what we mean.



Figure 1.3 Uplighting, downlighting and flatlighting

The only difference between each of these shots is that the lamp used to light the subject has been moved. The difference in meaning, though, is dramatic.

There have been various ways (or methodologies) used to examine how these media languages have been used to create certain meanings and how such meanings have been understood by audiences, and we will look at these throughout the book. For the moment, we would like to introduce (or, as is more likely the case, reintroduce) you to one of the main methodologies used: semiotics.

A brief history and résumé of semiotics

You will almost certainly have come across the term 'semiotics' already, as it is a key methodology used within communication, media and cultural studies to analyse texts. As a result, we do not intend to provide an exhaustive description of what it is and how it is used: for a more detailed description see, for example, Bignell (1997), Branston and Stafford (2006) or Gillespie and Toynbee (2006). What we want to do is to introduce the main points of semiotics which relate most directly to our current discussion around video production. As a brief definition, we can say that semiotics is 'the study of *signs* and *sign systems* and their role in the construction and organization of *meaning*' (O'Sullivan 1994: 32, emphasis added).

Semiotics is a way of analysing meaning by looking at the signs (words, for instance, but also, as we shall see in a moment, pictures, symbols and sounds) which produce and communicate meanings. The highlighted words in the definition above are central to any understanding of what semiotics is and why it is used. We shall, therefore, look in detail at each of these in the following discussion.

The term 'semiotics' was first coined by a European linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, at the beginning of the twentieth century (although he referred to it as semiology). The word came from the Greek word *semeion*, meaning sign. It later became more generally referred to as semiotics through the work of an American philosopher, Charles Peirce (pronounced purse).

Saussure's only book was entitled *Cours de linguistique générale* or *A Course in General Linguistics* (1915). It was not actually written by Saussure but was written after his death by two of his students from lecture notes made by Saussure. As the title of the book suggests, Saussure was interested in language and particularly the ways in which individual words are organized into systems of language at any one time (what is termed a *synchronic* analysis). Unlike other linguists, he was not interested in examining either the ways in which individuals use language in actual speech or writing (what he termed *parole*) or the history and development of individual words (the 'science' of philology or etymology) or complete languages (what is termed a *diachronic* analysis). Rather, he was interested in studying the ways in which individual words are organized into *systems* of language (what he termed *langue*) which are then used by individuals and which shape their perception of the world. In Lapsley and Westlake's elegant summation, he was 'interested in asking not how [language] developed but how it works' (1988: 33).

Central to language for Saussure was the *sign*. For him, signs were linguistic: that is, individual words. He argued that signs were composed of two distinct elements: the *signifier*, which is the 'physical' part of the sign (the word on the page, the spoken word) and the *signified* which is the mental concept associated with that sign. Following John Fiske (1990), we can represent the relationship between these two elements, as shown in Figure 1.4.

In reality, however, Saussure argued that these two components could not be separated and that they were 'indivisible'. In his own words, the sign equals the 'inseparable unity of the signifier with the signified: we never have one without the other' (de Saussure 1974: 67). He went on to make a number of key points about these signs:

1. The relationship between the signifier and signified is 'arbitrary'. For example, the signifier 'tree' has no connection, either in sound or shape,

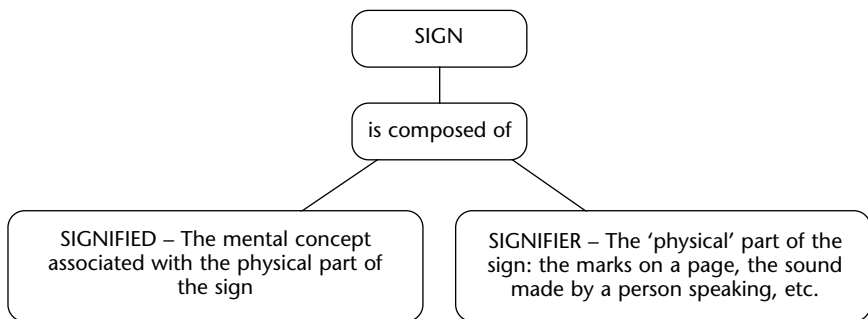


Figure 1.4 Sign: signifier and signified

with the mental concept of trees or what trees are ‘really’ like. This arbitrary nature of signs becomes clearer when we consider that different languages (or, to use our semiotic terminology, different sign systems) use a different signifier to communicate and explain the same thing, for example tree (English), *arbre* (French) and *Baum* (German).

That is not to say that signs have no meaning. Saussure was clear about the fact that signs are obviously meaningful to their users. Indeed, there would be no such thing as language if this were not the case. For Saussure, however, signs are meaningful only in a social context: that is, there is general agreement on the signs in use and on the conventionally accepted ways in which they can be used. There is a *system*.

It is at this stage that we need to introduce two more of Saussure’s terms. The first, the *referent*, refers to the ‘real thing’ which is being represented by the sign: in our case, the real tree. Saussure argued that users of a language, when using that language, constantly have to relate their knowledge of the referent to their knowledge of the sign. This process of relating reality to the sign is, according to Saussure, called *signification*.

We thus need to expand our earlier diagram to include both ‘reality’ and this relationship between it and the signs used to represent it (see Figure 1.5).

- As a result of the fact that signs are organized into systems with rules as to how they can and cannot be used, Saussure argued that signs obtain their meaning *not* from any inherent meaning or from external reality but from their relationship to other signs within the system. For example, the ‘meaning’ of the sign ‘car’ relies on an acknowledgement of what it is (four wheels, enclosed, has an engine, etc.) and also, equally importantly, what it is *not* (two-wheeled, open, a scooter, etc.). In Saussure’s words, ‘in language there are only differences’ (quoted in Lapsley and Westlake 1988: 34).

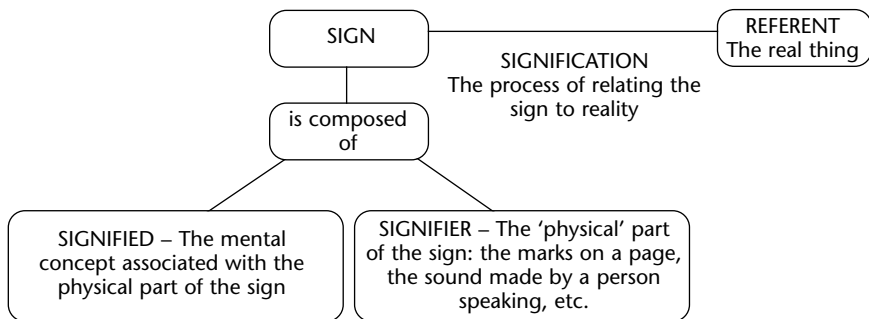


Figure 1.5 Sign and signification

3. Sign systems structure thought. Signs do not reflect a person's external reality but shape and structure that person's perception and understanding of reality. Challenging 'traditional' liberal ideas which saw (and continue to see) the human person as the centre of knowledge and meaning, Saussure argued that people do not use language in individual ways but are born into systems of language: conceptual frameworks which pre-exist them and structure their thought. One example of this which is often (erroneously) given is the idea of snow. In the UK we have a limited number of words to describe freezing weather conditions (snow, slush, ice, hail, sleet), which suggests that this is relatively unimportant in our everyday lives. In Inuit (Eskimo) culture, however, where snow is central to everyday lived experience, there are many different words for snow which reflect the types of snow in terms of the danger it represents and how it affects the ability to hunt for food or to be used for building, etc. English-speaking people's thoughts, therefore, about the same 'reality' of snow will be dramatically different to those of Inuit people.

We have seen how semiotics was used originally in the field of linguistics: that is, the study of languages. Following this, a key move was made in the 1950s by a number of European academics, most notably Roland Barthes and Claude Levi-Strauss. They used Saussure's ideas about linguistic signs but translated the findings to study *cultural* signs such as media texts (film, newspaper articles, etc.), architecture and cultural practices. What this allowed them to do was to analyse culture in as systematic a manner as Saussure had examined language in order to find the 'hidden' meanings associated with cultural artefacts and practices. Their assumption was that, as these things were the result of a process of construction, the task of semiotics was to engage in a process of deconstruction.

In one of his most famous works, *Mythologies* (first published as a series of magazine articles and then as a book in 1957), Barthes used Saussure's ideas to study aspects of contemporary French culture such as Citroën cars, steak and chips, Greta Garbo and Romans in films (to name a few) and argued that:

- signs are not just linguistic but could be anything which communicates a meaning (clothes, media texts, food, etc.)
- the 'meaning' of such signs is not unitary and fixed but is derived from the relationship of the signs within its sign system. So, in the example of the Citroën car mentioned above, it only obtained its meaning (stylish, elegant, graceful, etc.) because the other cars available in France at the time were none of these.
- each sign is capable of three different levels of meaning:

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1. *Denotation* was, for Barthes, the literal or obvious meaning of a sign. For example, in the car advertisements that you analysed previously, the representation of the car is the sign on a denotative level: the obvious meaning is that the representation of the car signifies a car
2. *Connotation* is a level of meaning over and above the level of denotation. It is the additional meaning(s) brought to the text by individual readers on the basis of their cultural background and social experience. So, if we continue with the example of the car in the advertisement, certain connotations will exist on the basis of what type of car it is: cheap and cheerful, tough and rugged, chic and stylish, etc. All of these are connotations.
3. Barthes's third level of meaning is *myth*. For him, myth did not mean something which was false or had never existed (as in 'a mythical beast') but referred to the way in which certain signs, or combination of signs, are used to trigger a range of connotations. For Barthes, 'myth always involves the distortion or forgetting of alternative messages so that myth appears to be exclusively true, rather than one of a number of possible messages' (Bignell 1997: 22). So, according to advertisements for 4X4 (or SUV) vehicles, if you buy such a car you are rugged, free and individual rather than, for example, someone who is hastening global warming.

The relatively detailed discussion of semiotics above is vitally important to our task of understanding how media language is used to create meaning. What should already be apparent from this discussion is the power that you have as a video producer to construct a text. If we use an analogy of a children's construction set, you have a box of parts in front of you, any of which you can choose and attach to other parts as you see fit to construct a model. The ones that you choose and the way in which you attach them is crucial to the shape of the finished model: choose certain parts and attach them in a certain way and you have a crane; choose the same parts and put them together in a different way and you have a boat. Similarly with video production, the visual and aural signs that you choose from all those available for your production and how you put them together are vital to the shape of the finished product and the meanings created by using them.

It is this power to select and include things which 'make meaning' in the final production which is described in the phrase *mise-en-scène*. At its most simple, the term, a literal translation from French meaning 'having been put into the scene', refers to those visual aspects (or signs) which have been *deliberately* chosen to appear within a single shot and, according to some definitions of the term, the manner in which they are recorded. (see Nelmes 1996:



Figure 1.6 *Mise-en-scène*

63–73 for a fuller discussion of the term). For the moment, though, we will take it to mean the former and use the term to refer to the manner in which elements of the shots have been deliberately chosen to aid the production of meaning. This includes the setting, the costumes and the props.

Imagine that the photograph shown in Figure 1.6 is a still from a video.

Each of these different elements within the frame has a semiotic significance. In the above example, key aspects of the *mise-en-scène* include the setting (informal, in a bar), the props (beer glasses, candle, etc.) and the subjects (youngish, relaxed, informal clothing). All of these elements are vital to the overall meaning. Change one and the meaning changes: for example, think of the change in meaning if the shot were in a church or the man making a face were wearing a tuxedo or the glasses on the table were mugs of tea.

The key point about *mise-en-scène* is that it requires deliberate choices and attention on the part of the video-maker. It goes without saying that the correct choice of objects in a shot and their correct placement greatly enhances the shot. More importantly, lack of attention to *mise-en-scène* and the selection of the wrong objects reduces the potential impact and, in the worse cases, the video altogether. This is why professional shoots will always have an art director/set dresser to make sure that they get it right.

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If we think about our earlier discussion about audience, we can see that this is closely related to the overall meanings that the audience might take from the text. What are called *open* texts provide the opportunity to produce a range of different meanings whereas *closed* texts offer very little opportunity to do this. For the moment, though, just remember that the important thing to note about filmic grammar is that both the producers of the video and the audiences will very quickly and easily understand the rules.

So, some key questions that you should ask about media language within any text might be as follows:

- *How* are the main meanings being created through, for example, the use of soundtrack, visuals and titles?
- *What* specific techniques are being used and with what outcome with regard to lighting, composition, camera movement, editing techniques, *mise-en-scène*?
- *How* do the various elements of the text outlined above work, both individually and together, to create meaning?

Tasks to do

Watch the title sequence to *Friends*, a copy of which you will find on DVD in your local library or on the internet. Carry out a detailed semiotic analysis of it.

One of the main problems that many students face when asked to do a semiotic analysis of a media text is actually how to carry it out! If one breaks any analysis down into stages, it becomes much easier. There are three main stages to any systematic semiotic analysis:

Stage 1 – Isolating all the signs in the text at the level of denotation: you will remember from the discussion above that media texts are made up of a number of different signs. The first stage of a semiotic analysis is, therefore, to isolate all of these signs at the level of denotation: that is, the literal or obvious level that anyone with hearing or sight will be able to isolate. This means playing the text over and over again, stopping and starting the text and looking in as much detail as possible at what might appear to be the most insignificant detail. It is a good idea to use a template such as the one that you can find on the website to make the recording of your findings more systematic.

Tip: It is imperative that you try to isolate as many signs as possible. Do not think that some signs are too obvious to list: it is often the most obvious signs which carry the most meaning. Similarly, do not ignore the seemingly insignificant signs. They too will have been included deliberately to contribute to the overall meaning of the title sequence.

Stage 2 – Considering the connotations of each sign: once you have your list of signs at the level of denotation, and only then, can you move on to analysing the signs at the level of connotation. This involves you thinking about the possible meanings that each sign can have. These meanings are dependent upon the sign itself but also upon the manner in which it has been filmed and the shots around it. For example, a car can have a number of different connotations depending upon the type of car it is and how it is filmed: a stretch limousine at night in an LA 'hood' will have totally different connotations to the same limousine filmed on a dreary day on an English country road.

At this stage it is also important to think about the way in which the same signs might have different connotations for different people. For example, the Union Jack will have very different meanings for members of different ethnic groups born and living in Britain, those coming here as immigrants or asylum seekers and those who live abroad.

Stage 3: Evaluating how the signs work together at the level of myth: you are now ready to move on to the final stage of the analysis: that is, evaluating how the signs work together at the level of myth. This is often the most difficult for students but is really the stage where you look at all the signs as they are working *together* to produce meaning (which is, after all, the way in which most people – yourself included – will have read the text in the first place). More importantly, though, you are looking to isolate the way in which these signs work together to produce what Barthes called 'mythical' meanings: that is, certain preferred ways in which the text can be read.

We have included a template on the website that you might want to use to record your thoughts. We would suggest that you obtain a DVD of *Friends* and frame-grab each of the shots from the title sequence and add them into the first column.

Ideology

The term 'ideology' originally came from the work of Karl Marx, a political writer in the nineteenth century, and those who later followed his ideas (Marxists). Broadly speaking, the concept was used to show how certain institutions (such as the Church and the education system) were able physically to control and organize society by controlling the ideas, assumptions and beliefs of that society. It went further, however, in suggesting that such 'ideological' views of the world tended to be only partial and selective and actively perpetuated existing class relations: that is, the idea that it was 'natural' that the ruling class (or *bourgeoisie*) should rule over the working classes (or *proletariat*) encouraged and reinforced the continuation of this class structure. In

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short, ideology serves the interests of dominant groups and actively opposes those of subordinate ones.

Later Marxist writers, such as those within what was termed the Frankfurt School, related the idea to the media to argue that *all* media texts provide a partial and selective (or biased!) view of the world. Anyone making a video, for example, will have certain ideas and views about the subject, whether conscious or unconscious. For Marxists, the fact that most people who own the media and most people working within it are middle-class (or, to use Marx's term, part of the bourgeoisie) means that most of the cultural production in any society will reflect and perpetuate the middle-class view of the world rather than, say, the working-class view.

Feminist writers, too, have used the concept of ideology to argue that as cultural production is generally in the hands of men, most, if not all, media texts contain 'patriarchal ideology': that is, the ideology which states that it is 'natural' for men and women to behave in different ways and for value to be placed on the activities of men. Media texts will reflect this and represent men and women according to patriarchal ideology. These views are, almost inevitably, to the detriment of women.

So, key questions that you should ask about ideology within any text might be as follows:

- What are the major values and assumptions within the text? Why have these been chosen and others ignored?
- Are there any other values and assumptions which are 'hidden' within the text? What are they and why are they there?
- Are there other values which are simply not present?

Tasks to do

1. Watch the evening news on three different television channels and choose one news story that appears on all three news programmes for analysis. If possible, record the three examples of the story so that you can watch them over and over again.
2. After watching the three examples of the story, see if you can notice any differences in terms of:
 - what they included in the reports: locations, interviewees, the words in the script and action;
 - what they left out of the reports that others included;
 - the ways in which the reporters reported the 'facts' and the tone of voice that they used;
 - whether the report was in favour of what was being reported or critical of it;

- whether you thought that overall the stories were either balanced and unbiased or one-sided and biased.
3. Think about your findings and how they relate to the concept of ideology.

Narrative

The term ‘narrative’ broadly relates to the idea of telling a story. More importantly, though, it refers to the idea that the production of any media text will involve (as we have already seen in our discussion of ideology) the *construction* of a narrative through the active *selection* and *ordering* of certain elements into a coherent structure. In order to look at what they are constructed *from*, let us use a definition of narrative provided by David Jay Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (1997: 90). For them, narrative is ‘a chain of events in cause–effect relationship occurring in time and space’. According to this definition, there are three main elements to narrative: causality, time and space. To understand the importance of each, let us use the example provided by Bordwell and Thompson:

1. ‘A man tosses and turns in bed. A mirror breaks. The phone rings.’ It is difficult to understand this as a narrative because we are unable to determine the temporal or causal elements that link the events together.
2. But a different description of the same events can allow this to happen: ‘A man has a fight with his boss; he tosses and turns that night unable to sleep. In the morning, he is still so angry that he breaks the mirror while shaving. Then his telephone rings: his boss has called to apologize.’

For Bordwell and Thompson, the second description is a more ‘complete’ narrative because it allows the audience to:

- connect the events in a cause and effect relationship: the argument causes the sleeplessness; the anger causes the rage that leads to the broken mirror, etc.
- connect the events temporally: the sleeplessness follows the argument but comes before the breaking of the mirror. We are also able to deduce that the actions occur over two days.
- connect the events spatially: he is in the office, then at home in bed, moves to the bathroom and then where the phone is.

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There are a number of different ways of structuring or organizing the narrative of media texts that we will look at in more detail in later chapters. For the moment, though, to explore this idea of selecting and ordering elements to create a coherent structure, we want to concentrate on one of the most ubiquitous of narrative forms: the linear narrative.

A linear narrative is a narrative where the beginning, middle and end appear in that order: that is, the chain of cause-and-effect events and the time are in the correct order. This type of narrative structure was examined in detail by the theorist Tzvetan Todorov (1977). He was concerned with looking at the ways in which Hollywood films created meanings through the organization of their narrative structures. He argued that any linear narrative, of which most Hollywood films whatever their type were an example, moves through five main stages:

1. *Equilibrium*: everything is harmonious.
2. *Disruption*: someone or something comes along to disrupt this state of equilibrium.
3. *Recognition*: all the characters within the narrative recognize that the disruption has taken place.
4. *Attempt*: the characters within the narrative try to rectify the disruption that has occurred.
5. *Enhanced equilibrium*: a state of harmony is re-established, often a better equilibrium than the first state of equilibrium (the traditional Hollywood happy ending).

You only have to think of some recent films that you have seen to note that this structure is still one of the most popular narrative structures in mainstream film. This type of narrative is not limited to Hollywood films, but is widespread in other types of media text. Advertisements provide good examples of the linear narrative. Soap powder advertising, for example, relies heavily on them and the stages for such an advertisement might be as follows:

1. *Equilibrium*: the main character in the advertisement (usually a child) is clean and tidy.
2. *Disruption*: the character spills something on his/her clean clothes or falls into a muddy puddle.
3. *Recognition*: the character walks into the kitchen and shows someone (usually the mother – another example of patriarchal ideology) the now dirty clothes.
4. *Attempt*: the mother rectifies the disruption by washing the clothes.
5. *Enhanced equilibrium*: the clothes are returned to a state of pristine whiteness and we see them being used again.

So, key questions that you should ask about the narrative within any text might be as follows:

- *Is* a linear narrative apparent? If so, what are the different stages? If not, how might you describe the narrative?
- *What* has been included in the narrative and what left out?
- *What* specific techniques have been used to tell the story, for example the use of voice-over, the creation of suspense, the point of view of the text?
- *How* have the characters within the narrative been used?

Tasks to do

1. Watch and record a broad range of advertisements from television.
2. Select five different advertisements, preferably different types of product and different styles of advertising. Using the template that you can download from the website, see if you can isolate and record the different stages of the narrative structure. If you can't, write down what stages are missed out or why it doesn't seem to fit in with Todorov's stages. What points can you make about why it doesn't fit in?

Genre

At its most simple, the term 'genre' simply means 'type'. In relation to the media, it refers to a specific type of film, music, television programme, etc. In terms of video and television, there are many different genres to be found. These could include documentaries, soaps, science fiction, quiz shows and make-overs.

If we think about our discussion of semiotics and *mise-en-scène* above, we saw how certain signs are included within media texts to create certain meanings. The term genre refers to the manner in which these signs are organized within certain texts by *codes* which, when repeated, become *conventions*, or the accepted manner in which they are shown. So, we can talk about the genre of historical dramas, all of which will share certain characteristics: they will be set in the past, they will usually involve elaborate costumes and locations and the spoken language is likely to be different to current language.

However, one of the key theorists of genre, Steve Neale (1980), argues that genres work on two, apparently paradoxical, levels: repetition and difference. At the level of repetition, certain signs will exist in most programmes within the genre and will be organized by the same codes thus marking them out as being within the genre. Crime series, for example, will tend to include cops, fast cars, villains, uniforms, etc. These elements will almost always appear but may be filmed differently. So, if we return to our earlier discussion of semiotics,

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each media producer has the ability to choose from a range of different signs (what is known as the paradigmatic) to create meaning.

At the same time, however, each programme within the genre will exhibit difference to keep it fresh and, on the surface at least, to identify it from the other programmes. That is, it will include different signs from all those on offer (what is known as the paradigmatic) but will put them together in different ways (what is known as the syntagmatic): *Inspector Morse* has a slow pace of editing, beautiful locations and classical music, and the narrative relies on Morse's intelligence and experience to solve crimes, whereas a US series such as *CSI* has a much faster pace of editing, grittier locations and 'urban' music, and the narrative relies upon the latest technology to solve the crimes.

We shall look in much more detail at what makes a genre when we examine an example of a sitcom in the bonus chapter on the website and apply our key concepts to it.

So, key questions that you should ask about genre might be as follows:

- Is the programme similar to other programmes that you have seen or does it appear to be unique?
- If it is similar, what is it about the programme which makes it similar: the look, the content, the types of characters, the type of story? What is different?

Tasks to do

1. Choose two different types (or genres) of television programme, for example crime series and soap operas.
2. Choose two examples of each genre and watch them carefully. While you are watching, try to make a note of the following information:
 - the types of location used;
 - the types of character;
 - the types of narrative;
 - whether there are typical props and costumes;
 - whether there are any other shared characteristics.
3. Once you have done this, see if you can begin to make certain points about each of the different genres: for example crime series tend to have goodies and baddies and it is always the goodies who win.

What you have probably realized by now is that, although we have separated out each of these key concepts, in reality they are all intertwined. It is impossible, for example, to talk about the types of representation in an advertisement without making reference to all the other concepts. To demonstrate

this, in the *Friends* bonus chapter on the website we have applied all of these key concepts to a specific television programme to show how and why they are useful and how they are linked in practice. Over the course of the book, we will be returning to them constantly in order to apply them to specific briefs. What you need to remember is that these are the *fundamental* concepts that you need in your analysis but you should also aim to introduce higher levels of theory that you encounter and enjoy and which are relevant to the exact project that you are undertaking.

Before you do any of this, however, we need to take you through the correct stages of the process of video production.

Applying Theory to Practice

Introduction

In the chapters that you read in the book, we introduced you to a number of key theoretical concepts and we worked through the process of video production, arguing as we did so that excellent video is made by addressing six main elements:

1. *Ideas and the research process*
Coming up with creative, theoretically informed ideas and, through a thorough process of research, being able to assess how achievable they may be and how successful the end product might be.
2. *Planning and management*
Practising rigorous project management, communication and organizational skills.
3. *Process and equipment*
Having an in-depth knowledge of production processes and video-production equipment.
4. *Reflection and quality control*
Constantly reflecting on the creative, theoretical, technical and logistical aspects of the project, resulting in ongoing quality control that is sustained throughout the production process.
5. *Flexibility*
Having the capacity to react to changing circumstances in a flexible, positive and creative way throughout the production process.
6. *Drive, enthusiasm and determination*
Remaining focused on the project and being able to sustain a level of constant motivation and drive for the project as a whole and for the individual tasks that need to be carried out to complete the project.

Your course is likely to demand that you address all of these elements when producing your own practice from now on, so this bonus chapter will show

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you how and why each of the six elements is important by applying them to a real media product. In this way, you will be able to see how the production of an existing product is, at the same time, both different to what you will be expected to produce in terms of scale and quality but that the considerations in producing it are exactly the same.

Friends, a comedy series about a group of six friends living in New York, was produced in the USA from 1994 to 2004. It rapidly became a global television phenomenon, being screened in over sixty countries around the world. It also became a wider cultural phenomenon as evidenced by, for example, the popularity of the 'Rachel' haircut, the incessant celebrity gossip around the lives of the main actors and the widespread (at least where we were!) use of Joey's *How you doin'* catchphrase.

Although we are aware that the example we have chosen is, in quality terms, way above what you will be producing at this stage of your production careers, we chose it deliberately for a number of key reasons:

- It is an example that most people reading this book will be familiar with.
- It is consistently on television, especially cable and satellite, in the UK at least, so is easy to access.
- There is a useful amount of writing and internet resources on the programme that you can access.
- The extras on the *Friends* DVDs offer a great insight into the production process.
- Whether you like the programme or not, it is a really high-quality production.
- (the main reason) the programme usefully allows us to apply the key theoretical concepts to the insights about the production process that we outlined in previous chapters.
- It allows us to critically examine the kinds of issues raised by what is, on the surface, *just* a series of half-hour comedies.

The Theory of Video Production

If you are to begin to understand how theory can be used to both examine why existing media products such as *Friends* are as they are *and* to inform how you produce your own video productions, we need to work through the key concepts systematically. You will recall that we can easily remember the key concepts through the mnemonic I CARLING.

I Institution
 C Contexts of production
 A Audiences
 R Representation
 L Language
 I Ideology
 N Narrative
 G Genre

Space does not permit a definitive or exhaustive account of sitcom in general – for that, we would suggest that you look at Brett Mills’s excellent *Television Sitcom* (2005) – or *Friends*, in particular. Rather, we want to show you how, by simply using the key concepts *as a starting point*, you can make useful, theoretically informed points about *any* media text that should be used to inform your own later productions.

Institution

We saw in Chapter 1 of the book that the term *institution* refers to the business or organization that produced the film or video, and that media organizations tend to be categorized as either major or independent and that this status, along with who owns or controls the organization, affects the kind of products that they produce.

Just a few basic facts about the institutional source of *Friends* allow us to make important points about it. It was produced from 1994 to 2004 by Bright/Kaufmann/Crane Productions, an independent production company set up in 1994, in collaboration with Warner Bros Entertainment (or, more specifically, the television arm of the business, Warner Bros Television), a major media company. Bright/Kaufmann/Crane Productions have had a number of successful programme credits to their name. In the USA, they are known for a number of comedy series: *Dream On*, *Veronica’s Closet* and, after *Friends*, *Jesse*. None of these have, at the time of writing, become as globally successful as *Friends*. Warner Bros Entertainment is a much larger organization than Bright/Kaufmann/Crane. It produces, amongst other things, television programmes; international feature films such as *Harry Potter*, *Scooby Doo* and *The Matrix*; *Looney Tunes* animations; computer games and comic books. AOL Time Warner, one of the largest media organizations in the world, with interests in cinema, music and web-based content, showed an adjusted operating income for 2004 of \$10,662 million. *Friends* was sold to over sixty countries around the world from the UK to China. For all 236 episodes over ten series, it was screened on American prime-time television on the commercial NBC

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network and was always in the top ten programmes in the USA. In the UK, it was screened on Channel 4 and was among the channel's most popular programmes for each of these ten series. The programme had a similar success in each of the countries in which it was aired around the world.

Even these few facts allow us to make some useful observations as to how the institutional basis of *Friends* affects the final product that we see on our television screens.

The first is that, despite being a huge global media player, Warner Bros Entertainment was required to produce 24 episodes in each series. This was at the insistence of the commercial television networks to which the programme was sold, especially in the USA as, for them, a series only really becomes viable once it reaches the magic figure of 100 episodes produced. Each episode was screened at the same time each week: Thursday evening in the USA and Friday evening in the UK. The main reason for this regularity is that it allowed these networks to build a large regular audience watching both the programme itself and, they hoped, subsequent programmes on the channel or network. As a result, the television networks could maximize the money that they made from selling advertising space (remember that commercial broadcasters' primary aim is to make profits). In the USA this was typically around \$500,000 for a 30-second slot during the advertising breaks but reached \$2 million for a 30-second slot during the last episode screened in 2004 (www.friends-tv.org). In the UK, it was global brands such as Maybelline, Toyota, AOL and Wrigley's who advertised during this slot, all of whom would be seeking to attract the same core audience as *Friends*.

The second observation is that the increasing worldwide popularity of *Friends* meant that world sales contributed greatly (and still do!) to the profits of Warner Bros Entertainment and, in turn, AOL Time-Warner. Brett Mills notes that sitcom occupies a more central role in US television schedules than it does in, for example, the UK (2005:5) and as a result of this centrality it was possible for Warner Bros to recoup the production costs domestically by selling the programme to the NBC network. However, as it was the product of a commercial media organization, there was a commercial imperative to sell the programme to as many markets around the world as possible, thus maximizing profits. As we shall see below in our discussion of ideology, this may have important effects on the audiences in these countries.

A third observation is that *Friends* will almost certainly be subject to what David Wild has termed 'eternal syndication' (2004:6): that is, that it is likely to be repeated consistently for many years to come. This is as a result of the industrial nature of its production which meant that, over the course of the ten years that it was being produced, many episodes were produced. This has the important effect of allowing television networks to both claw back the

initial cost of buying the series and to almost certainly guarantee large audiences to advertisers in that it is an easily recognized and well-known series that people will watch time and time again, especially given the large number of episodes produced. In the week of writing, *Friends* was on ten times in the UK. This looks set to continue on the myriad of terrestrial, cable and satellite channels.

Another related observation is the manner in which *Friends*, like other programmes before it, has spawned a spin-off programme: in this case, *Joey*. At the time of writing, it is also rumoured that another spin-off called *It's a Guy Thing*, featuring the male members of the cast, is to be produced. The appeal of this for the media organizations concerned is that they are able to rely upon the association with *Friends* in the hope of both selling the programme to the networks, in the case of Bright/Kaufmann/Crane, and attracting the huge audiences that *Friends* enjoyed in the case of the network or channel that airs it. The hope is that the spin-off both attracts its own audience and keeps the *Friends* brand alive. This is vital in that it means that the broadcasters screening the programme do not have to work as hard at attracting an audience as they would for a brand-new programme. Of course, the problem with this is that if the spin-off is no good, then it may damage the esteem in which the original programme is held.

Finally, popular programmes offer the opportunity for the media organization concerned to make large profits from merchandising. *Friends* is a good example of a programme that allows its fans to purchase items from the network's website that allow it to feel, in official language, 'part of the *Friends* community' – from DVDs and videos of each season, music CDs and clothing to fridge magnets, umbrellas and even Christmas-tree baubles, all of which contribute to the profits of Warner Bros Entertainment and NBC.

Contexts of production

You will remember that no media product is produced in a vacuum and that its production will always be affected by certain external factors. The term *contexts of production* refers to the types of factors that might affect the production.

For *Friends*, the economic context of production was one of the key contexts. We saw above that the need for series such as *Friends* is driven by the need of the broadcaster to attract audiences in order to attract advertising revenue. This affected *Friends* in two main but related ways: first, as short series do not tend to attract a loyal audience, each series needed to be organized so that it could run to at least 24 episodes and, secondly, the programmes themselves had to be produced in an industrial manner, almost like cars off a

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production line. As John Hartley notes, from the inception of the genre onwards such an industrial mode of production suited, and continues to suit, sitcom as a genre well, as:

It could use a studio with one or at most two sets, and few or no film inserts. With stable characters in a given situation it could be written by an in-house team of screenwriters and production staff in industrial quantities at so many pages a day. It was also tolerant of commercial imperatives, allowing for segment-length acts, interrupted by commercial breaks, fitting into the TV hour (fifty-odd minutes) or half hour. It was even productive enough to generate spin-off shows, such as ... *Frasier* from *Cheers*. (quoted in Creeber 2001:65)

We will look at this industrial process of production in more detail in *The practice of video production*, below.

That is not to say, however, that *Friends* was not also affected by other contexts of production. If we look at one – the social context of production – we can see how the types of representations and narratives within the programme were, initially at least, also shaped by the aspirational, consumerist *Zeitgeist* that began in 1980s and early 1990s and continues today: the general feeling of that period of time may be seen as being mirrored within *Friends*. For example, there are ongoing jokes based around Rachel's obsession with shopping and Bloomingdales in the earlier series, and the fact that the friends are always buying coffee rather than making it for themselves.

Audiences

Brett Mills rightly notes that 'very little work has been done on audiences and sitcom' (2005:23). However, if we think about the key questions around audience that we suggested in Chapter 1, it is possible to start making useful points about the likely audience for *Friends* and how they may have viewed the programme.

The producers of *Friends* had very clear ideas about the types of audience that they wanted to attract or, in industry terms, the audience demographic that they wanted the programme to appeal to. As Kevin Bright notes, *Friends* is 'full of stories that *you* can relate to and care about that aren't dictated by a period of time or what was happening in the world. It's about people, how they behave and what happens in their lives' (in Wild 2004:210; emphasis added). The assumption is, in the USA and UK at least, that the audience will largely share the same messages as that intended: that is, they will accept the

preferred reading. So, we would suggest that the assumed audience (the *who*) for the programme is probably the same as the characters themselves: young, professional and urban.

However, although *Friends* was clearly pitched at a young, professional or aspirational audience, as we saw above, it also had to maximize its audience in both the UK and US. If it were only appealing to this narrow audience demographic, it would fail to attract the necessary advertising revenue for the networks or channels screening it. While we are suggesting that the core audience for *Friends* was primarily young, that is clearly not to say that others who do not fit into this core demographic did not, or could not, watch and obtain pleasure from the programme. Brett Mills notes that certain sitcoms tend to have what he terms a 'broad, cross-generational appeal' (2005:6) and, in reality, *Friends* probably had such an appeal. Partly this was related to the generic pleasure offered by all good sitcoms:

The pleasures of sitcom oscillate between those of comic moments and narrative development, with both of those aspects partly reliant on one another for their effects. The pleasures of sitcom can also be non-comic and instead involve either intense character identification or the enjoyment of tragedy or melodrama. (2005:139)

Indeed, if we look at the actual audience figures, we can see that the average audience in the UK was approximately 4 million, rising to 8.9 million for the final episode, while in the USA the average audience was 26 million, rising to an estimated 50 million for the final episode. Clearly not all of these people were in the core demographic.

If we think about the *when*, *where*, *how* and *why* of the audience that would watch *Friends*, it becomes more difficult, given the absence of any academic research, to say with any certainty how different audiences would use the programme. For example, if we think about our own experiences of watching it, we can see some of the problems with trying to make definitive statements. While it was not a programme that either of the authors watched avidly, we did watch it, but in different ways and for totally different reasons. One of us would watch it each week at home with his wife and children as part of an evening's family viewing and, although he often found it trite and relatively unfunny, he would take pleasure from the lifestyle experienced by the characters and reflect upon the time when he lived in a similar social situation. On the other hand, the other one watched it sporadically and, when he did, primarily watched *only* that programme before going out for the evening and gained particular pleasure from the sharp dialogue and the pleasure of the one-liners. So, as Mills notes, the reasons for watching and

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obtaining pleasure from sitcom may be linked to the pleasures of other external factors. *Friends* was often billed as a 'must-watch' programme and, especially for the screening of the last episode, the context of watching was often more social than familial with, for example, groups of students and groups of friends meeting to watch the programme in a weekly ritual. This ritualistic manner of watching also provides its own pleasures. As Phil Wickham notes, sitcom

has a distinctive relationship with its audience, requiring time to develop an understanding of its protagonists, its place and the humour that arises from them. It is thus perfectly suited to television in its demands for time, continuity and intimacy. (www.screenonline.org.uk)

So, in terms of audience pleasure, viewers are 'rewarded' for the time spent developing such an understanding through their continued viewing of the characters and their lives.

This ties in with much audience research that posits the audience as an active audience using media texts in different ways rather than a passive audience that has one simple relationship with the text. That is not to say that there are innumerable ways of reading the text: each of us, and presumably everyone else watching, had a relationship with *Friends* that, although appearing to be personal, is actually the result of certain social factors: age, class, gender and ethnicity, to name but a few.

In addition, *Friends* was one of the first programmes to be a central part of what became known as celebrity culture. For many viewers, the pleasure of the programme was almost certainly inextricably linked to the pleasure of reading about the lives and loves of the actors in the programme.

Representation

At the most obvious level, in its first series, *Friends* represents a group of six young white people, three male and three female, who live with, or close to, each other in a New York apartment block at the start of their adult working lives. Generally, despite their individual character traits and the ups and downs of their relationships over time, it represents them relatively positively as a 'surrogate family'.

However, on a more symbolic level it also represents an idealized time and place between the insecurities of childhood (which are picked up in the narratives of discrete episodes such as Monica's fatness, Ross's geekiness and Rachel's spoilt upbringing) and the solidity, banality and regularity of working and family life (which is picked up in the final series in Monica and

Chandler's wedding, adoption of children and moving out of the city to the suburbs). This space is represented positively through the characters, all of whom are represented as being an ideal: young, good-looking, vital, at the very peak of physical and mental fitness, with a complete lack of *real* responsibilities and lack of recognition of responsibility, unjaded, unfettered and unsullied by what life throws at them. It is a time of confidence, freedom and selfishness on the part of a person that exists only for a few years. This positivity runs throughout the programme in that it represents all aspects of the friends' existence in a positive manner: the stylish apartments, the sexual adventures of the characters, the amount of leisure time available to them, the jobs as existing solely to make money to buy more 'stuff'.

Such representations are, fairly obviously, intrinsically linked to the concept of ideology, as they are not the 'real' world but a partial and selective view of the world. There is, for example, rarely any explicit discussion of money, other than the usual 'I don't have any money' conversations typical of younger people, despite the fact that only two of the characters (Ross and Chandler) have full-time, permanent jobs and the others exist within often precarious temporary or low-paid jobs.

As the characters become older throughout the ten series, it becomes clear that one of the key points about *Friends* is that, in reality, life changes (often for the worst) after this period and real life is just around the corner: marriage, children and responsibility. It is not really surprising that the programme ended before it got to this stage of life, as there was nowhere positive to go other than Chandler with a pot belly, the women losing their looks and Joey becoming a sad and dirty old man.

Brett Mills shows how such representations have the ability to be problematic. In his discussion of the male and female characters in *Friends*, he provides a reading that shows how the female characters are represented in certain stereotypical ways: as sexual objects, as concerned with the domestic, as concerned with lightweight leisure activities such as shopping, as concerned with finding and maintaining a stable relationship, and so on. In this reading, only Phoebe stands outside these patriarchal norms but, tellingly, is represented as being 'abnormal' in that she is kooky in the extreme (2005:113). The males, too, conform to patriarchal assumptions about masculinity: the sexual predatoriness of Joey being opposed by the 'feminine' attributes of Chandler (there was a long-running joke throughout all ten series that Chandler was often perceived by outsiders to be gay). However, we would argue (as, to be fair to Mills, does he) that even such apparently clear-cut cases are open to different readings. We will pick this point up in the discussion of ideology below.

Language

In his hagiography of *Friends*, David Wild notes that it is a product of 'wonderful writing, vivid acting and creative production' (2004:6), and it is true that in the ten years that it was produced it won many prestigious television awards, including six Emmys and a Golden Globe.

However, as students of media and video production, we need to delve a little deeper into the ways in which media language is consciously used if we are to understand fully why *Friends* was, and still is, so successful and how it makes meaning. In order to do this we first need to go back to your findings from the semiotic analysis of the title sequence that you carried out in Chapter 1.

From the shot-by-shot semiotic analysis of the title sequence, you will have begun to appreciate the manner in which it successfully combines the signs into a coherent and potent whole:

- At the level of *denotation* that each sign within the sequence (the sofa, the fountain, the light, etc.) has its own 'obvious meaning': for example, the light is a light, the skyline of New York is New York.
- The way in which the signs are filmed (e.g., through the use of lighting) organizes the signs and solidifies or creates additional meanings, or *connotations*. What, for example, does it mean that the furniture is outside? Similarly, the manner in which the individual shots of the characters in the fountain introduce the characters and their traits works at the level of connotation. Finally, the words to the signature tune – *I'll be there for you, 'cause you're there for me too* – signify friendship and support the visuals.
- The way in which the different signs work together to create an overall mythical meaning (of youth and 'wackiness', the friendship of the characters) for the sequence. It is the combination of all of these signs that creates the meaning (or in media studies terms, the *preferred reading*). This preferred reading for the title sequence clearly signals the situation within the programme itself and the relationships between the main characters. It is actually quite complicated (encompassing wackiness, inclusiveness, familiarity, zaniness and friendship) but, in short, is essentially very positive and upbeat.

If we look at the content of the programmes we can see how skilfully the producers of media texts need to be in using all the tools at their disposal to make meaning.

So, for example, at the most obvious level the design of the sets functions

to create certain meanings about the characters that assist the audience in making meaning about them. All of this is deliberate on the part of the producers. The colour, furnishings and layout of the sets very quickly and easily enable the audience to make assumptions about the characters. Compare, for example, the 'fussiness' of Monica and Rachel's apartment with the sparse masculinity of Joey and Chandler's.

The making of meaning is, however, not limited to set design. If we think about the way in which the programme was shot we can see how the decisions on the part of the producers affect the way we see the programme. It tended to use what has been termed the 'three-headed monster' (Mills 2005:39) style of production: one camera used to take an overview of the scene and the others used to get 'tighter' reaction shots. However, in opposition to much drama production, most of the shots in *Friends* tend to be 'loose'; that is, long shots and mid-shots with occasional medium close-ups (see Chapter 3 in the book). Even reaction shots, which in drama programmes would be close-ups, were in *Friends* shot as medium close-ups (that is, cut at the chest, not the shoulder). There are no point-of-view shots, few close-ups and very little movement, other than relatively unobtrusive pans, tilts and tracks.

Similarly, the inclusion of the studio audience's laughter in the final programme is deliberately used to clearly signal the jokes in the script and, more symbolically, to provide a collective sense of what is humorous within the narrative. The fact that everyone in the studio is laughing at the same moment 'reminds' us to find something funny and, if we do not laugh, that we are outsiders. That is why many similar programmes will include a laughter track as, in Medhurst and Tuck's words, 'the electronic substitute for collective experience' (1982:65).

Ideology

On the surface, *Friends* seems to be *just* a programme about six friends. However, as we saw in the previous chapter, media products such as television programmes and advertisements are never *just* anything: they are *constructed* artefacts that, either wittingly or unwittingly, contain certain ideological assumptions.

One criticism often made of American cultural production is that it perpetuates an ideology of America known as the 'American Dream' and, more damagingly, that this ideology is exported to other countries around the world with different traditions and cultural backgrounds in a process of 'cultural imperialism'. Dominic Strinati (1995) characterizes the idea of the American Dream as follows:

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Its main proposition is that material wealth and success in life can be achieved by anyone who has the necessary initiative, ambition, ingenuity, perseverance and commitment. The dream itself consists of money, power, fame, happiness, contentment, the 'good life' ... The only barriers to its attainment lie within people themselves and their lack of the qualities demanded to achieve the dream. (1995:26)

We saw above the types of representations that exist within *Friends*. Some of these help to perpetuate this idea of the American Dream abroad. If we take one example of the type of representation within *Friends* – the representation of the characters as young urban professionals – we can see how this happens. Brett Mills suggests that sitcom appears to offer 'some sort of comedic global common ground' (2005:9). The success of the programme may point to the fact that, in all of the countries that the programme was syndicated to, this positive representation of the young, urban professional both validates what the rest of the world feels about America and, simultaneously, may lead to a similar view of the world being exported to the country where it is being watched.

One interesting feature of *Friends* is that the work of the characters, while generally not central to the narrative, is not totally absent. So, for example, we see Rachel at Bloomingdales, Monica at 'the restaurant' and Joey at his failed auditions or off-Broadway shows. However, it is the peripheral nature of this work for much of the narrative throughout the ten series that links in with the ideology of the American Dream. For the main characters, the good life appears to just come to them. Phoebe, for example, is rarely seen to work but is able to keep up with those who do in terms of what she wears, what she consumes, and so on. Even the producers of the programme admit that the characters would not be able to afford to live in the style represented within it. It is here that we can see the link between representation and ideology.

The important thing to note about the ideology of the American Dream is that it perpetuates the idea that it is natural and inevitable that some people have material wealth while others do not. More importantly, it perpetuates the erroneous idea that it is the fault of those without this material wealth that they do not possess it rather than, as is really the case, that there are structural reasons why they do not. So, in terms of some of the hidden values and assumptions within *Friends*, the absence of any significant black and Asian characters appears to suggest that this is a lifestyle for white people to aspire to.

However, we would like to finish our discussion of ideology by muddying the waters a little and stating that it is possible for most media texts, including *Friends*, to function on a number of different levels. So, whereas much of

the content *may* be politically conservative, it is interesting to note the ways in which *Friends* actually worked against some of the dominant ideological positions within Western society. For example, if we use the example of patriarchal ideology that we introduced in Chapter 1 of the book, we can note that this is an ideological position that perpetuates the systematic and structural subjugation of women, both physically and symbolically: in effect, it states that women are somehow different and lesser than men. However, in *Friends*, the female characters were as obviously sexual, if not more so, than the male characters, with little or no sanction being applied to them within the narrative. In other words, they are represented as being equally powerful and sexually independent as the male characters which, as David Wild notes, led to some writers 'criticizing the morality' (2004:62) of the programme, and led to NBC very nearly cancelling the show after the pilot in which Monica slept with a guy on the first date.

Narrative

In all, 236 half-hour episodes of *Friends* were produced. Although the narratives of these different episodes changed (for example, during the 'clips from previous episodes' episodes), the narrative structure of each was relatively straightforward.

On the one hand, each episode could be described as fitting fairly easily into the *linear* narrative structure that we discussed in Chapter 1: that is, it contains a beginning, middle and end, in that order. We know that they do this because each episode is perfectly capable of being viewed by itself. More particularly, though, David Marc has characterized the 'storytelling grammar' of sitcoms as follows:

Episode = familiar status quo → ritual error made → ritual lesson learned
→ familiar status quo. (quoted in Hartley 2001: 69)

If you look at a range of episodes, certain aspects of the narratives of individual episodes of *Friends* appear to fit into such a structure. So, each episode normally started with an initial 'teaser' scene before the title sequence that introduced the 'familiar status quo' and contained the seeds of 'ritual error' that would be worked through in that episode. The narrative would then work through Marc's stages until the familiar status quo was reasserted at the end of each episode. However, as with every series with episodes, this does not tell the whole story, for two main reasons.

The first is that each episode of *Friends* was constructed using a more sophisticated narrative structure: the *interwoven* narrative. This is where an

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episode contains two or more separate narrative strands that are cut between and usually only come together at the end. In the case of *Friends*, each episode generally contained three narrative strands: one major strand and two relatively minor ones. The major strand tended, in Kevin Bright's words, to be 'emotionally resonant' (Wild 2004:22) and tended to be worked through, in a linear fashion, during a discrete episode. However, the other two strands often tended to rely much more obviously on comedic elements: snappy, witty dialogue and more physical comedy performance on the part of the actors (e.g. joke faces and gestures, the delivery of the lines and a more slapstick element) than in the 'emotionally resonant' strand. In these comedic strands, the narrative becomes essentially a 'series of short-lived pleasures' (Mills 2005:64) rather than the longer pleasure of the more emotional narrative.

The second is that, as an episodic series, all of the narrative strands within episodes were supplemented by, indeed relied upon, the audience having a knowledge of the characters and their situations that spanned episodes. Because audience members have seen previous episodes, they know important information about the situation that the characters find themselves and also about the characters and their relationships (in script terms, what is known as 'backstory'). This *episodic structure* both allows the producers to leave out information that they rightly assume the audience will know and bring to bear while watching the current episode *and* for the audience to feel a sense of superiority when they are able to bring information in from other episodes to understand the current narrative. A couple of examples highlight this: with regard to the first of these, the producers did not have to keep reminding the audience of the fact that Rachel and Ross had been in a relationship and had split up as a result of a misunderstanding while 'they were on a break', while in regard to the second, regular viewers only had to hear the words 'Oh ... my ... God!' (without seeing the character) to both know it was Janice and immediately fill in the backstory of her relationships with Chandler.

We need to make one final point about the humour within the programme and how the different signs within the narrative lead to meaning. Jeanette Morreall (1987) notes that there are essentially three main explanations for laughter and humour:

1. the *superiority theory* whereby the humour in a situation works by making the viewer feel superior to an individual or group.
2. the *relief theory* whereby the pent-up tensions of the viewer are released by laughing at the humorous situation. Comedy acts as a safety-valve, both individually and socially, allowing potentially dangerous situations to be defused by humour. Transgressive pleasure.

3. the *incongruity theory* whereby humour comes from a situation where what we know and expect is upset by what actually happens. (Morreall in Critchley 2002:2)

One of the possible reasons that *Friends* was so successful is that it worked on all three of these levels. First, even though our lives are by no means as glamorous as the friends' lives and we might aspire to their kind of lifestyle, we can feel superior to them as we can see, as outsiders, where all the characters are 'going wrong', especially in regard to their relationships with each other and others. Similarly, as we saw above, although there is often a situation in each episode that disrupts normal life, everything is always all right in the end; no matter what happens, the friends will always end up back on the sofa of *Central Perk* being nice to each other in a 'familiar status quo'. Finally, series, individual episodes and even individual lines within a scene rely on the incongruity between what the audience expects to happen and what actually happens, especially in the lines of cleverly-crafted dialogue. However, we would also argue that the humour in *Friends* also comes precisely from expecting and receiving certain things on a regular and predictable basis: Ross's silly voices, Joey's womanizing, Phoebe's kookiness. It is this constant interplay between repetition and difference that characterizes genres, as we will see in a moment.

There is one other point that we need to mention here which is related to the fact that, increasingly, *Friends* is likely to be watched by viewers via cable or satellite. Whereas, when it was part of the terrestrial television schedules, the first viewing of each episode was likely to be an 'event', the fact that anyone can revisit programmes means that the pleasure to be obtained from each episode is slightly changed. The fact that people watching on cable, or increasingly via the internet or DVD, can drop in on any episode in any order means that their pleasure from the episode's narrative can be heightened by knowing what has happened in previous episodes but, more unusually, what is going to happen in *future* episodes.

Genre

The term sitcom is made up of two words – situation and comedy – which gives us a clue as to what any programme within the genre is likely to contain: comedy arising from the interaction between characters in a specific situation. On the surface, *Friends* sits very easily within the genre as it shares and repeats some of the main conventions of other programmes within the genre:

- there are recurring characters in each episode
- the situation in each episode is broadly the same

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- the comedy comes from the manner in which characters negotiate the situation
- it is episodic and each episode is finite: that is, as we saw above, that it can stand alone as a narrative
- the show is filmed as if in a theatre, with the live audience acting as the fourth wall
- the lighting is 'flat', as if in a theatre
- the show includes laughter: in this case, from the live audience, but in other programmes within the genre, as canned laughter
- the manner in which it is shot is relatively simple and 'does not provide a complex televisual style' (Mills 2005: 25–6)

However, a little more analysis we both begin to see both some of the limits of the concept of genre and the complexity of *Friends*.

If we look at the situation within *Friends* we can see how such generic conventions do not tell the whole story. John Hartley notes that historically there tends to have been two main types of sitcom: the *family* sitcom and the *workplace* sitcom. The family sitcom is characterized by a family situation that is, either subtly or overtly, not quite that of a traditional family. This 'not-quiteness' of sitcom families allows viewers to learn two things: 'how to watch TV (media literacy); and how to live in with tolerant mutual accommodation, talking not fighting (life skills)' (2001: 66). Examples might include *My Family* or *The Cosby Show*. The workplace sitcom, on the other hand, is 'generically driven to be about sexual chemistry rather than occupational specificity' (2001:67): that is, it is the sexual relationship between characters, whether resolved or not, that drives the narrative. An example of this kind of sitcom might be *Cheers* or *The Office*.

Friends sits in the middle of these two categories in that it combines elements of the two. Like most family sitcoms, it happens primarily in the domestic sphere (in this case, of the two apartments), and shares the 'not-quiteness' of traditional family life in that while the 'real' families of each of the characters appear only sporadically and to varying degrees, the *real* family is each other. So, it has the support network function of a family. However, it also shares the sexual *frisson* that is normally evident in the workplace sitcom. Phoebe is the only character, to our knowledge, not to sleep with any of the other characters. The friends take the place of the families of each of the main characters: they are each other's family.

One criticism often made of genres such as sitcoms is that they tend to be repetitive and formulaic. We alluded to the institutional necessity for this above when we made the point that companies will seek to maximize audiences and/or profits by producing products that are similar to already

successful ones. While they are for the reasons discussed above, it is important to note that the freshness of sitcoms like *Friends* comes from the ways in which they use existing conventions of the genre but in new and different ways. So, at the time of writing the initial pilot episode there were, in the words of the executive producers, no comedy series with twenty-something single characters in the USA.

The Practice of Video Production

We saw in the previous chapters that all videos, whether professional or amateur, should go through the same linear process of production and follow the same procedures. *Friends* is no exception. To recap on the process, see Chapter 2 in the book.

Pre-Production

The production team for *Friends* initially comprised two people – David Crane and Marta Kauffman – who were the executive producers throughout the whole ten years of the programme. They devised the idea and wrote a pilot episode originally screened in the USA in September 1994. As is common in most sitcom production in the USA, they held the power during the production and drove it forward not, as is more common in UK, the scriptwriters.

Prior to the production of the pilot episode, the production team had to go through many of the same processes as you will need to do for your own productions.

Thinking of ideas

In the case of *Friends*, the original idea for the programme came from the Marta Kaufmann and David Crane. They had worked together since their student days and had a number of productions, both in the theatre and in television, behind them. As a result of this long and close working relationship, they were constantly generating ideas for programmes, many of which may not have even made it on to paper. Even if they had and were pitched to networks, many of these ideas made it no further.

However, after the success of an earlier sitcom – *Dream On* – that was broadcast on a cable channel, and the experience of producing pilots and a number of episodes of failed sitcoms such as *Family Album*, which was broadcast on CBS and scrapped after six episodes, Marta Kaufmann noted that what she learned from all of these experiences was that it is important to ‘follow your heart’, as being pushed into producing other people’s ideas, as they were with *Family Album*, were the ones that she regarded as failures.

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Bearing this in mind, they made a decision that they should be able to choose ideas that *they* liked to pitch to the broadcast networks. This involved them thinking of the situation and how that situation would be 'treated' comedically. For Bright/Kaufmann/Crane, this involved first thinking of whether it would be a traditional family or workplace sitcom. But, as Kevin Bright notes: 'the only type of show we did not want to do was your typical "family in a living room" sitcom' (Wild 2004: 206). Instead they chose a situation that came from their own experience and, in Bright's words, was 'something we care about' (*ibid.*): namely, 'when people are in their 20s and they leave home for the first time and start their own lives. It is a time when your friends become your surrogate family' (*ibid.*). They were aware that there were, at the time, no programmes that focused on this group or situation and, as such, felt that this was unique. As we will see in a moment, this decision was problematic for the network broadcasters. Once that fundamental initial decision had been made, they would then have moved forward to discuss further the ingredients for the proposed sitcom. Considerations would necessarily have involved discussing the number and type of characters and their relationships to one another, the circumstances and past of the characters, the location, the type of humour that the programme would use (black humour, slapstick, satire, etc.) and that it would be an ensemble piece where all the actors were given equal screen time rather than as a 'vehicle' for one star and a number of supporting actors.

Nowadays, it is increasingly much more likely that independent production companies such as Bright/Kaufmann/Crane, especially those without an established track record, will be given a relatively rigid brief (normally along the lines of 'Produce a new version of ...') by network or channel commissioning officers.

Assessing the feasibility of those ideas

At this level, feasibility is likely to be based on the first of our limiters: finance. This would involve attracting the necessary funding: namely, finding out if there was a backer who would be prepared to invest in both the pilot episode and, more importantly, in the project overall. The backer would not, for a project of the size of *Friends*, be a private individual but would be a major institution with a track record of financing such ventures. Very often obtaining finance can be reliant on knowing the right people, frequently as a result of having worked with them in the past and establishing a reputation with them as being professional and reliable. Their bottom line for them is: are you a good investment for them and their shareholders? In this instance it is likely that the real risk in the programme lay in the unique nature of the programme idea from Bright/Kaufmann/Crane.

The track history of Bright/Kaufmann/Crane in successfully producing their earlier sitcom, *Dream On*, meant that the other limiters – logistics, health and safety, technical resources, human resources, experience and ability of the crew, time and output – could be relatively easily assessed: they knew they could do it because they already had.

Carrying out research for each of the ideas

This would have almost certainly involved examining the existing market for situation comedy: what types of programmes were out there already and who were their audiences? They knew that the concept was sound as they were ‘going with their heart’ and Bright/Kaufmann/Crane would have, no doubt, drawn upon their existing knowledge and experience in looking at scriptwriters, crew, talent, filming lots, equipment and support. All of these would need to be realistically costed and budgeted for at this stage: if they couldn’t afford it, they couldn’t do it! Before you can make the decision, then, you need to research basic costs. What you don’t want to be doing in your outline and/or treatment is promising to produce something for much less than it really costs. In addition, part of the research for *Friends* at this stage would have involved thinking in a bit more detail about the characters, the actors they wanted to play the parts and if they were interested and were available.

Deciding upon the final idea

At the end of the first stage of pre-production, the production team came up with the very general idea that *Friends* would be a series about ‘six friends in their 20s [who] pursue careers, love and happiness in New York City’ (quoted in Glaister and Younge 2004:3) and a range of possible titles: *Across the Hall*, *Six of One and Friends Like Us*.

Producing an outline

You will recall that an outline is the first formal document to be produced in any video production and has two main functions: to focus the mind of the producer/director and to act as a document that is used to ‘sell’ the idea to those people or organizations that may provide the necessary finance to enable the production to take place.

Once the general idea for *Friends* had been finalized, Bright/Kaufmann/Crane submitted an outline to Warner Bros Television in the hope that they would commission the programme. In turn, WBE pitched the idea to a number of American networks such as Fox and NBC. Fox turned down the idea but NBC finally accepted. However, the initial idea was questioned by NBC for two main reasons: first, that not everyone would understand the idea of *Central Perk* as a place for the action to take place (as this was before the

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widespread proliferation of coffee bars) and secondly, that there were no older characters that would appeal to an older audience (Wild 2004:208). However, NBC finally agreed with the executive producers. As is common in the USA, Bright/Kaufmann/Crane had to produce a pilot episode. The reason for this is primarily institutional: it allows the company to test the water, safe in the knowledge that if the audience don't like a programme, no more will be commissioned and, the company's profits will not be reduced. Once the initial idea had been accepted and a series commissioned, Kaufmann and Crane's role of executive producers meant that they were responsible for developing the production process further.

Researching the production

Once *Friends* had the 'green light' from Warner Bros Television and the network, the research stage could be stepped up significantly. As a studio-based, fictional programme, it would have required less research than other types of television production such as documentaries. However, that does not mean that no research was carried out. All aspects of the production would now be fully researched and developed.

Contextual research

While the experienced producers of *Friends* would not have systematically worked through the I CARLING mnemonic, the quality of the programme shows that they had a clear understanding, however unconsciously, of most or all of the elements of these theoretical elements. Clearly, as people working within the industry and more specifically within sitcom production, the producers would have had a good contextual knowledge of existing sitcoms: for example, what types had already existed, the types of narratives and characters within them and the types of thing that don't work in sitcoms. While they could draw on years of experience, meaning that they would not have needed to explicitly carry out contextual research, we recommend that, as newcomers to the industry, you carry out as much as possible.

Logistical research

Bright/Kaufmann/Crane's research would have concentrated on the areas of logistical research that we introduced in Chapter 3.

For them, obtaining the appropriate kit and people would be paramount. We will see in a moment that the way the series were shot was relatively standard and so the kit required would be the one that, to a large extent, was traditionally used in shooting sitcom. The one main difference between *Friends* and other sitcoms was that it was shot on film, while most sitcoms of that time used the much cheaper video format.

One of the main differences between *Friends* and your own productions is that, apart from the pre-recorded 'wallpaper' shots of New York that were used to split the scenes in an episode, *Friends* was filmed in a studio set in Burbank. As such, it was a specifically designed and easily controlled environment that was used only for television production and needed no recces. The health and safety issues that a full recce would highlight were essential to the filming and, in the case of *Friends*, would have been dealt with by a full risk assessment being carried out by a dedicated health and safety specialist on the Warner Bros staff at the beginning of each series. This would assess the safety of the lot in terms of sets, equipment, props and costumes and the audience area, much like we suggest that you do.

Content research

The final element of the research would have been the research explicitly dedicated to what would be seen within the narrative: that is, content research.

For example, the set designer would research and develop ideas for the main sets – the two apartments and *Central Perk* – through looking at New York apartments and existing coffee shops and the types of decor in them and would then prepare plans, drawings and models for approval by the producers. The art director would be thinking about how to dress the set appropriately and the props mistress would be thinking about how to actually source the props. Just as we have talked about signs, denotation and connotation, they would certainly have been thinking about the meaning of each set, each piece of furniture, each costume. Especially during the first series of *Friends*, until it became successful, they were working under fairly strict budgetary constraints and so part of the research would certainly have involved strict costings.

Producing a script

It is evident from the quality of the final programme that the process of producing a script for *Friends* was thorough and time-consuming.

As is common with many sitcoms, especially those produced within the USA, a team of writers was employed to work on the programme. Typically, one or two people within the production team would write the first two drafts of each script. Only once they were happy with the second draft would it go to the team of writers. In the case of *Friends*, there would typically be 12 per season, some of whom worked on many of the ten seasons. These writers would then meet and go through the script line by line, looking to tighten it up by making the lines funnier and the situations more entertaining. The team would produce, on average, three to five further drafts of the script for

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each episode. To see this process in action, look at the DVD extra, 'The One That Goes Behind the Scenes', on the *Friends* Series 5 DVD.

The pre-production stage for every single one of the 236 episodes of *Friends* began as each of your videos will: with a blank page. However, the team of writers had three main advantages over your production:

1. The fact that there were 12 carefully selected and experienced writers meant that for each script, therefore, there were always 12 opinions, 12 inputs and 12 sets of ideas.
2. They worked together consistently over a ten-year period and got to know and trust each other.
3. They had a clear idea of the characters and their milieu owing to the 'backstory': that is, the history of the characters and their relationships with each other. At the beginning of each series, the basic overall narratives for the whole series would be worked out and these would be fleshed out in the later writing of individual scripts prior to shooting.

The scripts produced would include detailed descriptions of each of the 14–16 scenes within the episode and each shot within the scene. This was in the format of a fictional script, a format we saw in Chapter 3.

Once the final draft of the script was agreed by the executive producers and the writing team, there would be what is called a 'table read'. This is where the actors, in the presence of the producers, directors and other crew members, would read the script aloud for the first time. This was a democratic meeting where anyone present could make suggestions as to how to improve the script. At this stage, relatively major rewrites of the script could occur.

The next stage for the script was that it would move into rehearsals, normally four days before the actual filming of the episode. This was where the actors would act out each scene of the complete script. Even at this stage, the writing team would be present, making sure that the script worked with regard to timing and humour. Relatively major adjustments could still be made at this stage but the overall structure of the episode would generally not change. Frequently, the script team would be working late on rewriting the script the evening before filming. More importantly, the production team of *Friends* was very adept at improving the script again and again right up to, and during, the actual filming of the episodes. Changes were often made to the script during takes in filming as a result of the audience's reaction to individual lines or jokes or because the timing of a scene did not quite work. The way they did this was to quickly identify the issue or problem, skip any debate about why it did not work and immediately arrive at a solution that all agreed

on. It also did not matter who suggested the solution: actor, crew member, executive producer or even a member of the audience.

This is an example of excellent practice amongst experienced professionals, but it is not something that we would necessarily advise you to do at this early stage of your video careers. If you tried to work in this fashion, progress would probably be agonizingly slow.

Given the industrial mode of production for sitcoms that we mentioned above, once the episode was filmed the scriptwriters would then move on to producing the script for the next episode, based on the outlines produced at the beginning of the series.

Producing a storyboard

Unusually in terms of video production but less so for television production, storyboards were not produced for *Friends*. The reasons for this were, as we saw above, that the shooting-style for the programme was relatively standard and formulaic and that, by using four cameras, all elements of the scene could be covered in the necessary depth. In addition, the programme benefited from a trained, stable and committed camera crew who, along with the directors and actors, knew what to do without the need for it to be visualized beforehand.

That is not to say that the director did not have to make certain decisions regarding the type of framing and the camera movements. As we will see in a moment, this tended to be done at the rehearsal stage the day before filming, when the actual scenes from the script would be walked-through and 'camera blocked'. However, as we saw in the section on media language above, the general 'house style' for *Friends* included a relatively standard framing of the shots with regard to their composition (the 'three-headed monster' style of filming), the camera acting as a non-participating bystander and therefore, as is common with mainstream comedy programmes, few, if any, shots from the point of view (POV) of any of the characters and in most scenes, only one of the four cameras moving, and this movement tending to be confined to relatively unobtrusive pans and tilts.

Producing a shooting schedule

As with all productions, including student productions, *Friends* was rigorously scheduled. The shooting schedule would contain the same kind of information as the shooting schedule in Chapter 3. Given the number of people in the crew (over fifty), the fact that in each series there were 24 episodes filmed over a nine-month period (approximately three per month) and that there were different teams working to different timescales, the schedule would have to be incredibly detailed and incredibly accurate. Owing to the industrial

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nature of the production, it is likely that there would be a team of people working only on the schedules for each series and that these would be rigorously adhered to.

Four days before filming, there would be a large production meeting where the executive producers and director would meet with all the department heads – script, lighting, camera, props – to talk through the script scene by scene and line by line to make sure that everything that needed to be done had been done.

Production

Only once *all* the necessary pre-production planning and research was complete would an episode of *Friends* move on to the production stage: that is, where the actual filming of the programme took place. The 24 episodes in each series were produced over a nine-month period.

We won't go into massive detail about how each episode was produced here – for more on the specifics of studio production see Chapter 7 of the book – *The Magazine Programme*. However, we do want to make some important points before that chapter about the following:

- the equipment used
- the layout of the studio
- the crew

The equipment used

Unlike much current television production, each episode was recorded on film rather than video, primarily for aesthetic reasons. Cameras were mounted on large studio pedestals that allowed for all types of possible movement.

During rehearsals, normally the day before the actual shoot, the director would go through the process of 'camera blocking': that is, working out where each of the four cameras should be placed and what they should shoot. Camera positions for each scene would be marked with tape on the studio floor. Each shot would also be briefly discussed with the camera operators so that on the day of the shoot everyone was clear about what they were supposed to do.

During rehearsal, the lighting within each set would also be checked. As mentioned in the media language section above, the lighting for *Friends* was uniform over the sets. In theatrical lighting terms this is referred to as a 'wash', but in video production it is often referred to as notan lighting. There would probably be two main lighting set-ups for the principal locations: one for daylight and one for night-time. This relates to its industrial mode of

production in that it was not possible, owing to the fact that there was a live audience and the large number of episodes that needed to be produced, to stop filming to light individual shots.

The Layout of the Studio

From the third series onwards, all episodes of *Friends* were recorded on Stage 24 of the Warner Bros Studios set at Burbank in California. The three main sets – the two apartments and *Central Perk* – were built and ‘dressed’ (that is, all necessary props placed within them) at the beginning of filming for each season. Any other supplementary sets would be designed and built as and when needed. At the beginning of the season, the lighting within each set would also be set up (‘rigged’) and checked to make sure that it was the same as it was in the previous episode. The set builders, props mistress and electricians were able to ensure visual continuity from series to series through reference to production stills from the last series.

During the shooting of each episode, cameras would be moved to the set in use. Rather than moving from one set to another and back again, as they would have to do if they were filming the script in order, all the scenes from that one set would be filmed in one go. Each scene would, on average, be filmed four or five times. This allowed both for the actors to make mistakes in delivering their lines and, as was often the case, for the writers of the episode to make minor adjustments to the lines to make them funnier. Once all the scenes in a set had been completed, the cameras would move to the next set and the process would start again. As a result, each shoot would last up to six hours.

The fact that it was a studio rather than location meant that it was a rigidly controlled environment. However, *Friends* was, as the saying goes, filmed before a live studio audience. The one thing that could not be readily controlled at the production stage was the noise made by the audience. However, as we shall see in the section on post-production below, this could be altered later in the production process.

To get a better sense of what the studio actually looked like you can take a virtual tour of some of the sets on the official *Friends* website (www.friendsonline.com) or you can watch the documentary of the making of *Friends* – ‘The One That Goes Behind the Scenes’ – available on selected DVDs.

The Crew

In Chapter 4 of the book we saw that the typical student crew might number four people: director, camera operator, sound recordist and production assistant (or PA). As mentioned earlier, the crew for each episode of *Friends* was

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considerably larger: typically fifty or more people per episode. As there were so many different people involved, it is impossible to go through their individual roles and responsibilities here. The fact that there were so many and that each of the episodes needed to be filmed so quickly bears out the point that we made in Chapter 4, that professional media practice does not involve everyone turning their hand to whatever they fancy, when they fancy. Instead, it relies upon different jobs being carried out by individuals with expertise in their field and the rigid adherence to specific production roles, where each person has their own distinct responsibilities.

With this in mind we want to make some general points that you should think about in your own productions.

First, that each individual was responsible for working within a rigorous and strict schedule which clearly denoted exactly what was taking place, when, where, how and who should be present. They were there and ready to carry out their role when they were needed.

Secondly, that everyone within the crew of *Friends* was very clear about their function and what they needed to achieve. One of the key skills that everyone on a professional crew needs is the ability to be quick-thinking, focused and alert to what needs to be done. More importantly still, they need to be proactive and anticipate problems before they arise, and do what needs to be done before the director asks them to do it. For *Friends* there was a high level of professionalism among the crew that, partly at least, came from them working together as a team for a long period of time. This meant that they were very slick and had a clear awareness of their role, other peoples' roles and how they linked together. This level of professionalism and shared understanding inevitably leads to a highly polished finished product. This doesn't just happen: it has to be worked at. This is how the crew functioned and why everyone on the crew had such respect for each other.

A final point is that although the pressure levels were high during the production stage, everyone needed to remain professional and focused. Even though they would all be aware of the studio audience and the clock ticking, the experience and solidity of the crew meant that everybody could deal with the challenges that they faced. Part of professionalism is about not caving in when there is a problem but actually facing it and finding solutions.

Overall, then, there was a general feeling of cooperation and positivity on set. As one observer noted:

The atmosphere around the set is really like a family ... the vibe on the set is just a great time. It's a great group of people coming together to make great entertainment and loving every moment of it. (Wild 2004: 284)

Even though the production process for *Friends* is quite different in terms of organization, experience and scale from your current experience of video making, all these things were made to happen for a reason, and you can learn from them.

Post-Production

Once the production stage was complete, *Friends* moved into the post-production stage.

We mentioned above that each episode of the programme was produced on film. There would typically be 30,000 feet (or over five miles) of film, containing approximately twelve hours of footage per episode. This would all go through a process known as 'telecine', which involves transferring the film image on to video at high quality. This would then be digitized ready for editing on a computer-based non-linear edit suite.

The editor for most episodes was Steve Prime. Clearly, as an established professional editor, he would have been completely comfortable at Ken Dancyger's technical level: that is, he would know exactly how to use the features of the edit suite at his disposal. For him, as for every editor, the process of editing really did require attention to the other two levels: craft and art. So, he would spend three days creating first an assemble edit and then a rough cut.

He would work using a video monitor that allowed him to see the images from all four cameras at the same time. These images would be 'synched': that is, they would all be lined up to show exactly the same moment of filming. He would then go through the process of selecting the best shots and ordering them into a coherent, 22-minute-long narrative. But how did he choose which shots to include and which to leave out?

It is not derogatory to state that the editing techniques used within *Friends* are relatively standard. Indeed, most mainstream television and cinema relies on the audience understanding quickly and easily what is going on in the programme.

Continuity editing is a type of editing that gradually evolved from the beginning of cinema. Early filmmakers quickly realized that they didn't have to show absolutely everything in a narrative but could produce a more dramatic narrative by editing the film: that is, by compressing time and leaving out certain events that were not central to the story being told. Although this almost certainly looked odd to early cinema audiences as it is totally 'unrealistic', the techniques of those early editors have become so widespread within film and television production that they are now almost invisible. As Ken Dancyger notes:

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it is the practical challenge of the director and the editor to work with some number of shots to create a continuity that does not draw unnecessary attention to itself. If it does, the filmmaker and the editor have failed to present the narrative in the most effective possible manner. (1997a: 295)

Generally, then each episode of *Friends* would use the set of standard techniques of editing which we introduced in Chapter 5 and which, together, are known as *continuity editing*: for example, ensuring adequate coverage through the use of an initial establishing shot and then tighter and tighter reaction shots, constructing shot continuity, matching the action, and so on (see Nelmes 1996).

These general rules are apparent in each episode of *Friends*. Specifically, though, there were also certain conventions of most episodes of *Friends*. Although there were exceptions to each, these were:

- cuts were used between shots within scenes
- short dissolves were used between concurrent scenes
- longer inserts ('wallpaper' shots of New York) were used between scenes where there was a change of time or change of location

It is worth noting here that a secondary effect of the use of such rules is that the constructed nature of media texts is hidden and that the audience concentrate on the narrative within the programme rather than having their attention drawn to the process of editing. This effacing of the process of production is inherently ideological and, from the beginning of cinema, certain theorists and practitioners have argued for other types of editing: editing that clearly signals its constructed nature. We will look in more detail at one of these techniques – montage – in Chapter 6 of the book. Clearly, for a programme such as *Friends*, the use of more adventurous editing techniques would disrupt the audience's relationship with the programme and its narrative.

Finally, in one other editing technique to enhance the realism of the programme, albeit through a technique of fakery, he would add canned laughter if the laughter of the studio audience was not appropriate: for example, if it lasted too long after a joke and was likely to drown out the actors' subsequent dialogue.

At the end of the three days of editing, the rough cut would be shown to the executive producers – Kevin Bright, Marta Kauffman and David Crane – who would make comments that would then be acted upon by Prime in the production of the final cut.

Once the final cut for the visuals had been completed, a time-coded copy

of the programme would be passed on to the Foley artists, the music editor and sound mixing engineer to undergo three sound processes before completion:

- First, the Foley artists, Casey and Mike Crabtree, worked in a recording studio to create the all-necessary sound effects for each episode: from the running of shoes over different surfaces to the noise of keys being rattled in doors. This process is necessary because the studio sound was set up primarily to record dialogue. The sounds necessary to enhance the visuals would be recorded at such a low level or would be drowned out by the laughter from the studio audience that they would be unusable, hence the need to re-create them.
- Secondly, the job of the music editor, Merelyn Davis, was to ensure that the music within each episode both enhanced the mood being created by the visuals and physically fitted into the space available for it. She would do this by choosing music from a selection provided by Michael Skloff at the beginning of each season, normally four or five new batches for each season. Again, as is standard in most sitcoms, there would generally be no music in the main body of the scene as this would undermine the sense of realism that the programme sought to maintain. Music was used, however, at the transition of scenes and during the inserts of New York used to separate the scenes.
- Once the music editor had finished her job, the final stage was the final sound mix. The sound-mixing engineers, Charlie McDaniel and Cathy Oldham, were responsible for the final audio mixdown where all of the audio – dialogue, Foley, laughter, sound effects and music – would be mixed and balanced so that they all worked together and any unwanted sound would be removed.

Once these three jobs were completed, the final cut (master) would be mastered out onto high-quality tape for passing on to the television network for broadcast.

Conclusion

Although *Friends* is an already-existing product and we are looking backwards at its production, it is still a useful exercise. Although we have done a lot of the work for you in applying our key theoretical concepts to the actual practice of producing an episode of *Friends*, just reading this chapter is not enough. As with all of the briefs we will work through, *you* must go to the resources that we have isolated: for this chapter, specifically the DVD of 'The One That Goes Behind the Scenes', parts of which are also available to view on *YouTube*. What should become apparent from looking at them is that

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successful moving image production relies upon so many different elements working well together.

In using *Friends* as an example, we hope to have shown you that the process of video production is a difficult one but one that, when done properly, can produce really high-quality work. In this respect, properly means getting the six essential elements of video production (outlined on page 1 of this chapter) sorted out:

- coming up with creative, achievable ideas that are informed by theory
- good group working, project management and organizational skills
- having an in-depth knowledge of production processes and equipment
- constantly reflecting on the creative, theoretical, technical and logistical aspects of the project
- having the capacity to react to changing circumstances in a flexible, positive and creative way
- remaining focused and being able to sustain a level of constant motivation and drive.

Put simply, the programme just would not have been possible to make or be as good as it was without going through a systematic process of production *and* with the level of thought that went into all aspects of it. It is this lesson that we want you to take from this chapter and remember when working through the briefs in the book, all of which will allow you to put all of this into practice and produce your own high-quality videos. Good luck!

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- www.friends-tv.org – the official *Friends* website.

www.imdb.com – the internet movie database, with extensive information about *Friends* and other key sitcoms.

www.nbcuniversalstore.com – the website where you can get information on all the *Friends* merchandise (and even buy your *Friends* Christmas-tree baubles).

www.screenonline.org.uk – the BFI website, with a useful section on sitcoms.

www.sitcom.co.uk – a resource looking at UK sitcoms, past and present.

Friends: The One That Goes Behind the Scenes (1997), Warner Bros. Entertainment.

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