THE IT CROWD

(Series 4 Episode 2, 2010)

Factsheet 1 - Media Language & Representation

eduqas
Part of WJEC

THE IT CROWD

(Series 4 Episode 2, 2010)

Component 2: Understanding Forms and Products

Focus Areas:
Media Language
Representation
Media Industries
Audiences
Media contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- The set product is Episode 2 from Series 4: *The Final Countdown* (2010). This series was broadcast in June and July 2010.
- *The IT Crowd* was produced by Talkback Thames and distributed by Freemantle, a multinational television production and distribution company based in the UK. It was broadcast on Channel 4.
- There were four series of the programme running from February 2006 to 2013.
- The programme is a situation comedy set in the offices of the fictional Reynholm Industries. The focus of the narrative is the dysfunctional relationship between the members of the IT department, Maurice Moss, Roy Trenneman and Jen Barber, whose office is located in the basement.
- Over the lifetime of the series it won several awards including a BAFTA in 2009 for Best Situation Comedy. In 2014 Katherine Parkinson won a BAFTA for Best Female Performance in a Situation Comedy and Richard Ayoade for Best Male Performance in a Situation Comedy.
- The programme has a global reach and is shown in several countries.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media Language
The codes and conventions of media language, how they become established as genres.

Sit coms have a recognisable set of conventions. These have evolved over time and developed to reflect social and cultural change and the needs of audiences. However, they all share similarities which place them in the genre including:

Narrative: Sitcoms usually employ the **circular narrative** model whereby an initial equilibrium is established then disrupted, the episode focuses on this 'problem/situation' which creates the comedy and is then resolved by the end of the programme (Todorov). The reassertion of stability is marked, not by a new equilibrium, but invariably by a return to the original situation. In this sense, sitcoms offer reassurance, audiences can expect that the problem introduced will be solved by the end of the episode.
The narrative is usually thematically uncomplicated and may focus on a different character's situation each episode.
The narrative often relates to class differences, identity and the desire to improve status or to develop socially and professionally.
There may also be narrative strands that continue from one episode to another, typically concerned with relationships between characters.
Some of the narrative comedy may come from repeated motifs including character's catchphrases, reoccurring comic situations and misunderstandings. An essential part of the narrative is visual and verbal humour, for example slapstick comedy, fast-moving dialogue, puns and jokes.

Characters: most sitcoms include a collection of stereotypical characters, for example the 'grumpy old man', the 'truculent teenager', the 'geek'/'nerd', the 'joker' and the 'serious' character. These character 'types' often construct

binary opposites which advances the narrative. They become familiar to audiences and are common to more than one example of the genre.

Settings and locations: in sitcoms the narrative is usually based in the home or the workplace where the key characters interact. These locations are limited and become familiar to audiences, rarely changing from episode to episode. Some, for example the office in the *IT Crowd* and Central Perk in *Friends,* become iconic and part of the programme's brand identity.

Iconography: this often relates to the particular setting, for example the workplace and props can function as part of the comic business. Iconography can also be closely related to character, some characters for example wear the same type of clothing every episode or are associated with a particular object.

Theoretical perspectives on genre, including principles of repetition and variation; the dynamic nature of genre; hybridity and intertextuality. Consider:

Television sitcoms, like other popular genres, have a repertoire of elements that places them within the genre. These are recognisable to audiences, fulfilling their expectations, and are useful in the marketing of the product. However, although sitcoms rely on repetition of common conventions, they also vary and introduce different elements (Neale).
Genres are dynamic, developing over time to reflect social and cultural change, for example the way in which *The IT Crowd* addresses the changing roles of women and cultural diversity (Neale).

Genres also use intertextuality to engage with audiences. *The IT Crowd* includes references to examples from popular culture that would resonate with audiences.

The various forms of media language used to create and communicate meanings.
Semiotic analysis, including denotation and connotation can be used to analyse aspects of media language. Consider:

Visual codes
Codes of expression and gesture: Moss's typical expression of childlike innocence creates much of the comedy, particularly when it is in binary opposition to the setting, for example the 8+ club. There are examples of framing where more than one character's expression is seen, constructing visual comedy, for example when Moss announces to Roy and Jen that he is to appear on *Countdown.*

Codes of clothing: The connotations of characters' clothing and appearance create comedy and construct meanings, for example: Jen's suit and high heels connote an assumed position of power as she is head of the department. However, at times she seems awkward and uncomfortable in her clothing, connoting the fact that she is out of place, knowing nothing about IT. This is further reflected when she finally gets into the meeting in her dressing gown but has her suit underneath and has to exercise in it, so despite succeeding in her goal, is out of her comfort zone, creating visual comedy.

Moss and Roy's clothing establishes them as different constructions of the 'geek'/'nerd' character. Consider the first time Moss is seen in the episode in his zipped-up coat, his shirt and tie and his backpack emphasising his eccentric individuality. The red beret worn by Moss in the 8+ club creates visual humour when worn with his typical work clothes and signifies his success and power within that domain. It also has intertextual links to the film *Jackie Brown*. Prime's clothing establishes him as a binary opposite to Moss and Roy. His long black coat and

his wearing of black sunglasses indoors has connotations of action/science fiction films and establishes an enigma and links to an alternative reality.

Setting: the mise-en-scène of the IT office is central to the programme. It is the base for the characters and they return here at key points during the episode to tell their stories. In its difference from the rest of the building it reinforces the individuality of the IT staff and the potential for comic situations. Other locations are linked to the characters and their narrative arcs. Moss is seen in the *Countdown* studio and green room developing his situation in the episode as a Countdown Champion eligible to be a member of the 8+ club. This surreal setting provides humour in the changing persona of Moss and the confrontation with Negative One.

Iconography: the visual iconography of the IT office communicates messages about the characters and their roles. The props on the desks of Roy and Moss connote aspects of their characters and their relative 'geekiness'. Other iconography creates physical, slapstick comedy, for example Roy riding the bike with the ladder attached. The prop of the card for the 8+ club advances the narrative and develops the Moss storyline in this episode.

Technical and Audio:
The IT Crowd is filmed using a multiple camera production model in front of a studio audience. The scenes shot on location are shown to a live audience and the laughter is recorded.
The editing of the sitcom is very structured, moving between the different narrative strands in supposed real time, making the audience feel involved with what is happening.

The combination of close-ups, medium close-ups and codes of expression create much of the comedy in the episode. For example, the scene where Negative One challenges Moss to a game of 'Street Countdown'. The editing is tight and the shots cut between the three characters building a comedic tension. The scene ends with Moss's iconic statement: '*I came here to drink milk and kick ass. And I've just finished my milk*', an action code.

At times slow motion is used to make cinematic intertextual references, for example when Moss is walking through the club. Framing is also very important in the establishment of characters and relationships, for example the introduction of Prime and Moss in the *Countdown* studio. Here, the combination of framing, gesture (straight back and side parting) and expression (smile and eyes looking right and left) as Moss waits to give his ridiculous but seemingly acceptable answer, '*Good morning, that's a nice tnetennba*', creates comedy.

Dialogue is important in establishing characters – Moss's interaction with the waiter in the club '*get him what he wants*' suggests his character transformation in this new situation and his new identity. Dialogue is also used for humour, for example when the window cleaner's intelligible conversation through the window appears to be his normal way of speaking when he is in the house with Roy.

Narrative:
The episodic narrative of *The IT Crowd* is tightly structured, a common convention of sitcoms with only 30 minutes to develop the stories. The workplace is a common trope of sitcoms creating comedy from the tensions created by people who are forced to work together. In *The IT Crowd* this confinement in one setting and the collision of different values, attitudes and lifestyles serves to create comic situations. In this episode each character has their own narrative strand which involves a problem to be solved:
Moss is accepted as a contestant on *Countdown* and becomes part of an exclusive champions club and is challenged to a 'Street Countdown' contest.

Roy has moved into a new house and wants to 'reinvent himself', but this becomes a problem when a successful old schoolfriend thinks Roy is a window cleaner.

Jen tries to go to the Heads of Departments meeting, but she is not allowed in and spends the episode planning how she will gain entry.

These narrative strands interweave and develop throughout the episode focusing on typical themes of identity and status. Moss becomes revered as a champion; Jen feels undermined and neglected by the hierarchy and wants to establish her status and Roy wants to prove himself to be as successful as his school friend.

The narrative contains a surreal element in the Moss storyline with the hyperreality of the intertextual links to the actual *Countdown* programme and the appearance of the presenters and contributors including Gyles Brandreth and Rachel Riley.

Theoretical perspective on narrative: Applying Propp.

This is a character-driven narrative theory which suggests that characters influence a narrative and communicate meanings through cause and effect, the narrative progresses as a result of their actions. All characters have motives, these are revealed during the story arc and the narrative, according to Propp, is driven by the need to achieve their goals. Propp suggested there were a range of narrative roles, some of which can be applied to characters in *The IT Crowd*:

There are ostensibly three characters with **heroic** properties, Roy, Jen, and Moss. They are the focus of all episodes and the group of the sitcom's title. As highlighted in Propp's theory, they all embark upon a journey and each have a separate narrative strand in this episode.

Roy and Jen also display **anti-hero** qualities as they are flawed and are not successful in their quest.

Several characters could be said to fulfil the role of **helper/donor**. The main one is Prime who gives Moss the card which enables him to enter the exclusive 8+ club and helps him in the 'Street Countdown' contest. However, Roy, Moss and Jen also help each other, as is typical of characters in this genre. For example, Moss suggests to Jen that she wears a dressing gown in order to gain access to the meeting and Roy accompanies Moss to the club.

Negative One displays characteristics of the **villain** as he challenges the hero Moss. However, he is not a stereotypical villain as he is used for comedy purposes. His stereotypical villainous qualities are humorously undermined by his clothing, iconography, and dialogue.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representations
The ways in which the media re-present (rather than simply present) the world, and construct representations of reality. Consider:
All representations are constructed and are not 'windows on the world'. Producers of media products construct representations, in the case of sitcoms to create comedic opportunities, through the use of:

Technical codes. Camera shots, angles, movements and editing combine to construct representations. Consider the first time we are introduced to characters in *The IT Crowd* and how the camera constructs the representation. This is used to position the audience in relation to the characters and may change through the programme. When Moss enters the 8+ club, the way in which he is filmed, for example the use of slow motion, constructs a different representation and positions the audience differently.

Audio codes: diegetic and non-diegetic sound including a soundtrack and dialogue contribute to the construction of representations. For example, the catchphrases used by the characters contribute to their representation, Roy wants to change but reverts to the stereotypical IT

response when confronted with a problem: '*Have you tried turning it off and on again?*'. Jen's dialogue suggests her paranoia about her leadership role: '*I did hate those meetings until they didn't want me at those meetings and now I love those meetings.*'

Iconography: clothing and props in *The IT Crowd* contribute to the construction of representations and will have been a key consideration of the producers in creating the characters and their roles.

The social and cultural significance of particular representations in terms of the themes and issues that they address. Consider:

Representations of masculinity:
Both the male characters in the office demonstrate different elements of the 'geek'/'nerd' stereotype:

Roy exemplifies one type of 'nerd' culture in that he is unkempt, lazy, socially awkward and at times childlike in his approach to problems, creating much of the visual humour. For example, seeing the window cleaner whilst on the toilet and trying to ride the bike with the ladder attached. His clothing is casual and mainly consists of jeans and t-shirts with slogans and logos related to aspects of popular culture. However, he is also an example of masculinity in crisis in his attempts at self-improvement. He reflects contemporary issues as is concerned about his identity, how he is perceived by others (especially Alistair).

Moss is a different 'geek'/'nerd' stereotype. He wears formal clothing and has a side parting in his afro hair and he is very intelligent, but socially awkward. He knows random facts and information and has a childlike quality evidenced in his excitement at attaining a place on *Countdown*. The fact that a young man of his age would want to be a contestant on this show is potentially testament to his 'nerdish' character. He is also eccentric, demonstrated in his admission to the bemused Jen that he and his mum never open the door: '*An unopened door is a happy door, so we never answer ours when*

someone knocks.' He also shows his vulnerability and insecurity in the same conversation, '*This is London Jen, it's not someone with cake, unless that cake is made of dog poo and knives*'. Moss does assume more stereotypically masculine characteristics when he in in the 8+ club, but his eccentricity is further highlighted by his red beret and drinking of milk.

Prime is a more stereotypical representation of masculinity and a binary opposite to Moss and Roy. His exaggerated characteristics including his clothing and voice suggest power and authority, reinforced by intertextual references to Neo in *The Matrix*. His representation also creates humour, '*A fan of tiny biscuits. You are a full of surprises*'.

Representations of femininity:
Jen in one respect is a strong representation of a women reflecting the changing role of women in power seen in the media. She challenges the more stereotypical representations of a head of an IT department. This is reflected through her clothing, she is a power dresser and is usually seen in a suit and heels and in her smart formality she is in binary opposition to the men. However, she is also seen to be insecure and paranoid and at times out of her depth as she has no real understanding of IT.

Representations of ethnicity:
The ethnically diverse characters in *The IT Crowd* reflect changes in society with regard to diversity. Their inclusion reflects the socially and culturally diverse nature of London which is not always evident in other examples of the genre and as such constructs a version of reality and engages with audiences.