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How the Media Communicate

This chapter introduces the idea that each medium communicates differently, using a distinctive set of production codes and conventions. This is important to acknowledge, particularly when our subject of study – the media – is comprised of so many different forms, such as photography, radio, television, film, advertising, newspapers and magazines. Each medium requires analysis that takes the different and unique aspects of each form into account. Roy Armes in his book *On Video* (1988) issues a warning about the pitfalls of simply using the tools of film analysis to explore a related but crucially different medium, video: 'My initial difficulties in coming to terms with the new medium stemmed, largely, I now believe, from attempting to define it in ways more appropriate to film ... aspects of this theoretical work make its direct application to video hazardous' (p. 2). There may be the temptation, for example, to think of television as a miniature film screen, yet film and television are two very different mediums. As specific forms they are distinguishable in a range of ways: their screen ratios are quite different; while films are often shown as discrete texts, television, as Raymond Williams argues, can be thought of as a 'flow' of images which seem to merge almost indistinguishably together in continuum (1974, pp. 91–2); and both television programmes and films are produced with their contrasting contexts of consumption in mind. Film and television, even while they converge in terms of some of the visual strategies they use – invisible editing, for example – also have different conventions.

From the outset, therefore, it is vital that any textual analysis of a media product takes into account the specifics of the medium in which that text appears. In doing so, it is important to consider the formal aspects of media texts alongside any consideration of their content. The way in which a message is communicated within the media therefore becomes as important as the message itself. In other words, the form in which

a message appears contributes a great deal to the way in which we are able to decode and understand any media text.

Media forms and conventions

Debates and discussions about the media often cite a divide between form and content. Form may be defined as the way in which a particular medium packages its message using its particular technologies and codes and conventions. The message itself, the ideas within, are the content. Each works using accepted methods of communication, often termed conventions, which are particular to the medium in question.

The textual strategies used by media forms establish currency by becoming conventional over time. New media texts require the social sanctions guaranteed by convention to ensure audiences will be able to read them. Mediums such as comics and radio exist almost within a predefined tradition of textual norms or conventions which generate audience expectations. Andrew Crisell in his book *Understanding Radio* (1986) discusses the role silence plays on radio. Silence is a signifier, Crisell argues, since its 'absence of sound can also be heard' (p. 55). On a station like Radio Four the use of silence signifies serious and dignified breaks before an important moment; silence falls before the five strokes of the time announcement, for example. As Crisell argues, 'silence can resemble noise (that is sounds, words and music) in acting as a framing mechanism, for it can signify the integrity of a programme or item by making space around it' (p. 56). In this sense, our acceptance of this particular function of silence is conventional, precisely because it has become an orthodoxy through repeated use.

Sometimes, however, texts play with convention, slightly altering the expected formula, while remaining for the most part within sanctioned boundaries. Manipulating what they have come to expect can be a source of pleasure for audiences because the text plays on, and indeed complements, the reader's knowledge of its conventions. The 1980s situation comedy, *The Young Ones*, is an example of a text which set out to break away from, and ultimately challenge, the formal conventions of its genre. Most notably, it refused to abide by the conventions of realism that dominate mainstream television production. Situation comedies conventionally construct the audience as the fourth wall, the unacknowledged observers of a slice of 'real' life. The direct address of the characters in *The Young Ones* destroyed the illusion of realism. Yet more anti-realist were the cartoon-like scenes where the student characters committed seemingly irreparable acts of violence against each other, only to survive completely unscathed. Flouting the fundamental rules of the form added a new dimension of comedy and gratification for audiences of this text; their laughter came from *The Young Ones'* departure from expected conventions.

The most straightforward method of exploring the ways in which these formal differences manifest themselves is to take a closer look at the ways in which a particular idea or content is realized in different mediums.

Different mediums, different conventions: *The X-Files*

The X-Files is a popular 'cult' science-fiction thriller. Because of its perceived cult status the programme has been used as the fictional base on which a plethora of other X-Files commodities, such as comics, T-shirts, mugs and posters, have been produced. *The X-Files*, like a number of other media texts since the mid-1980s, has been successfully diversified into interrelated technologies and areas of entertainment so as to elongate the exposure of the text in all its different aspects. In so doing, the producers have been able to reap the maximum profit by presenting the text across multiple media (see illustration 1.1). Product diversification has meant that *The X-Files* exists in separate media forms: primarily the television serial, but also a comic entitled *The X-Files* and tie-in paperbacks such as *Whirlwind* (1995). All share the same fictional concept, but they present them using different codes and conventions. *The X-Files* is consequently



Illustration 1.1 'Concepts' are now designed to reap maximum profits across multiple media.

Source: The authors.

an interesting case study for analysing how these formal conventions operate.

The familiar *X-Files* viewer will have a number of expectations concerning its manifestations in different mediums. A number of the elements the viewer becomes accustomed to can be categorized as the narrative conventions of the science-fiction thriller. However, several of these conventions appear in ways specific to *The X-Files*, hence its off-beat 'cult' status. In the programme, FBI detective partners Scully and Mulder investigate crimes with a difference; a question-mark always hangs over the perpetrators of the crime at hand – though rationality dictates that a logical explanation can be uncovered, cues in the text invite the viewer to entertain the idea that an alien, paranormal force may be responsible. In the case of the television programme, the opening credit sequence, which is repeated before each episode, feeds the conviction that the alien source is the one to be taken seriously. The credit sequence opens with a series of computer-enhanced images which all suggest the existence of extra-terrestrial life: the opening shot shows the scanning and enlargement of a piece of footage of a moving UFO; another scans the eye of a creature unknown to humankind.

As FBI agents, Scully and Mulder break with the conventional gender mould of the ordinary crime series investigators. The character of Dana Scully is a challenging representation of a female detective. As a highly educated woman, marked by her status as a medical doctor, she always seeks rational scientific evidence. In contrast, it is the male partner, Fox Mulder, who has intuitive beliefs in the existence of extra-terrestrial activity. In this type of programme it is usually female characters who are seen to use so-called 'feminine' powers of intuition. As a result, dramatic tension emanates from the conflicting explanations each character produces for the crimes they are assigned to investigate and solve.

The FBI as an institution is represented as a secretive, suspicious organization. Because the government is repeatedly shown to be obstructive to the detectives gaining access to the information it holds about extra-terrestrial activity, the reader anticipates the intervention of the FBI whenever Scully and Mulder begin to uncover aberrant causes for the crimes they investigate. Constantly implied in the text is the state's desire to guard and ultimately control this information in order to pave the way for experimentation and research into the ways in which the power of the paranormal might be used as a means of extending both the state and the nation's power.

These narrative conventions are realized differently in each medium by the use of distinct formal conventions. With the use of an episode from the second season of the television series, a story from *The X-Files* comic and an advertisement for Vodafone which uses the concept of the X-Files, the specific modes of communication adopted within each medium can be explored in some detail.

The television X-Files

The television episode *Die Hand Die Verletzt* opens in a school in Milford Haven, New Hampshire, governed by a board whose members are involved with the occult. One night, a group of youths meets in a nearby forest to recite a Satanist chant. Seemingly as a result, one of the boys is choked to death. The FBI is called in and Scully and Mulder inspect the crime site and question the school's staff. From an analysis of this episode it is possible to see that there is a range of visual strategies being utilized to infuse meaning into the text. Within television, the selection of close-up or mid-shot is crucial to the director. Close-ups often emphasize particular events with special narrative or thematic significance. In addition, this way of editing or juxtaposing one frame next to another enables the director to make heavy implications about who the viewer should suspect.

At one point Mulder and Scully walk down the school corridor troubled after their interview with the board members. In mid-shot, the camera tracks in front of Mulder as he walks ahead to drink from a water fountain. Mulder exclaims as he lifts his head after drinking; the water, counter to the norms of the northern hemisphere, travels anti-clockwise. 'That's impossible', remarks Scully. A close-up focuses on the small stainless steel sink; the image works to emphasize the strangeness of the water movement, impacting on the viewer as the camera dwells on the water for a few seconds. The grey sink is hard and shiny; the water's movement is cold material fact. The edit works both to reinforce Mulder's claim and to discount the rationality of Scully's reply. The following mid-shot shows Mulder turning from the sink to look at Scully: 'Something is making these things possible.'

A cut to the substitute teacher Phyllis Paddock, in long shot behind her desk, strenuously suggests an answer to the assertion made by Mulder in the previous shot. Moreover, her status as a substitute teacher raises questions about her reliability as a character. Her background is totally unknown, lending her character a transience which is open to foreboding speculation. The shot lingers to show her ending the class then cuts to show the girls present at the murder the previous night walking towards the classroom exit. The overlaying of synthesized music as the girls walk towards the teacher creates anticipation and furthers the viewer's suspicions that the teacher is not to be trusted. A mid-shot from a side angle shows the teacher speaking with the girls, asking them to confide in her if they need support; the choice of a mid-shot creates an intimacy which will be open to re-reading after the following series of shots; as the girls leave expressing thanks, the camera cuts to the teacher's hands and arms. She briskly gathers the assignments, banging them on the desk to neaten them into an ordered pile. The frame composition is sinister: to focus on the teacher's body without her face creates a feeling of dislocation. This, coupled with the briskness of her movement is potentially threatening.

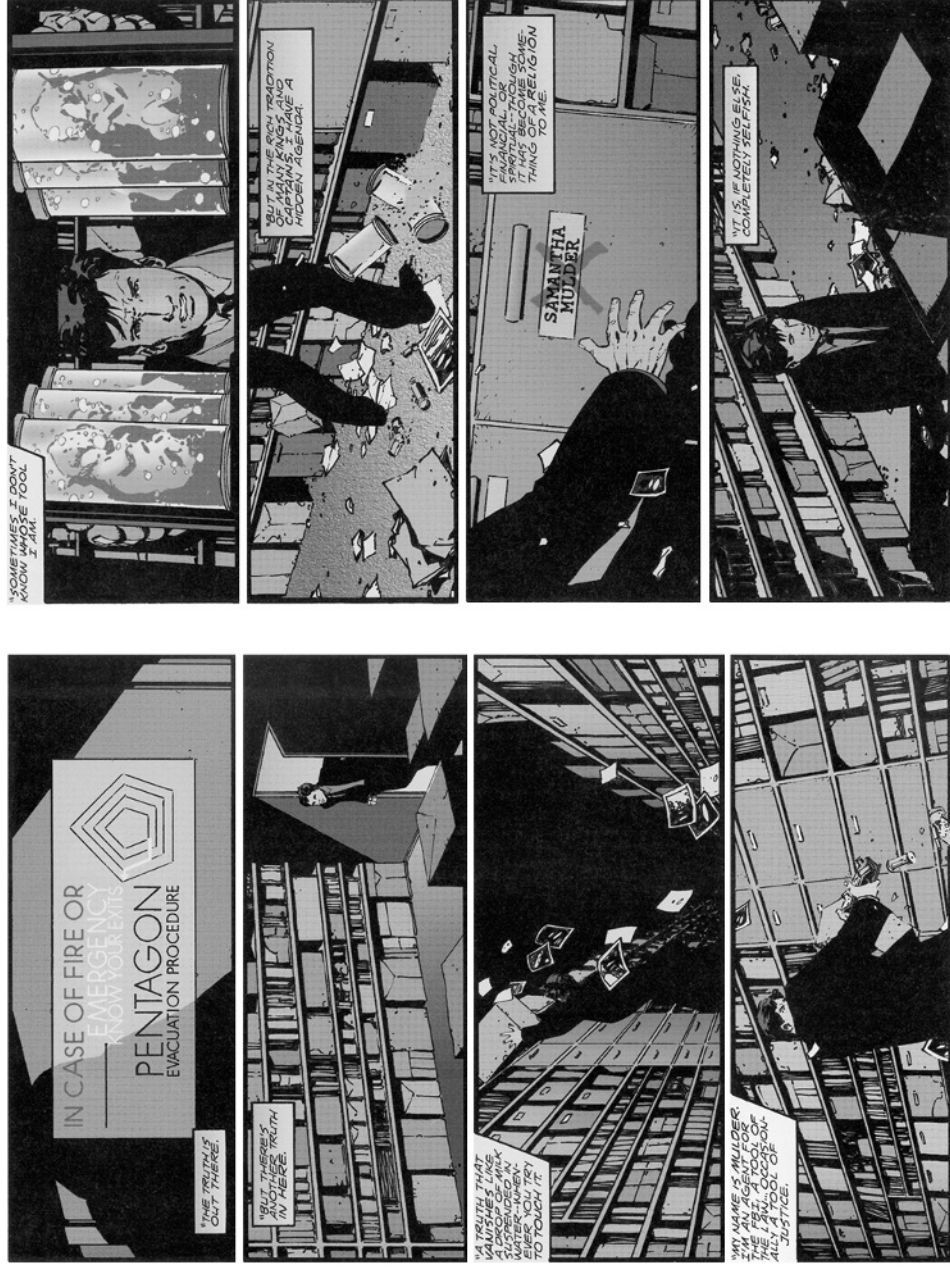


Illustration 1.2 *The X-Files* 'A Little Dream of Me' reveals the codes and conventions of the comic form.
Source: 20th Century Fox and Topps Comics. Reprinted with permission.

The final shot confirms her connection with the occult or an alien force. As she places the assignments in the desk, the camera moves to a close-up on her face. The teacher smiles while staring off-camera towards a presence, leading the viewer to question the 'straightforwardness' of the previous shots.

Phyllis Paddock's offer to counsel the students is no longer reassuring; it is, instead, set up as a terrifying catalyst for furthering the satanic events of the narrative. The method of framing and editing utilized within this episode reflects the ways they are used more generally within television production. The fact that these techniques are being used conventionally allows the audience to comprehend their implications for the future development of this episode of *The X-Files*.

The comicbook X-Files

In 'A Little Dream of Me', the third 'all-new case' for Scully and Mulder in *The X-Files* comic, there is an opening sequence of graphic frames which introduce the narrative. These are comparable to the sequence which introduces the story of each episode before the familiar credit sequence of the television series. In 'A Little Dream of Me' these graphic frames show Mulder breaking into the Pentagon's chamber of files with a view to opening an X-file with personal significance (see illustration 1.2). It deals with the disappearance of his sister Samantha. In much the same way that viewers of film and television must learn to decode moving images, the comic reader becomes competent at building a relationship of meaning between the montage of separate graphic frames which constitute the narrative sequence. Narrative captions 'place' each frame and speech or think bubbles allow the characters to communicate directly with the reader. These are examples of the technical codes and conventions at work in comics. The framing of each image, the colour used in the graphics, the typography used to create the impression of sounds, such as 'POW', 'BZT WHRRR', or speech bubbles, can be designed to produce a variety of connotations by the producers. In this particular opening, each still offers a view which operates rather like the viewfinder of a camera. The first picture shows Mulder's point of view as he stands in front of the door to the Pentagon file chamber. The second picture features an omniscient position, showing Mulder entering the room. The eight stills which make up the initial double spread all show Mulder from different angles penetrating the files until he finds the one marked with a red X entitled 'Samantha Mulder'.

Specific to comics in general, and to this one in particular, is the digression away from a strictly realistic mode of presentation. As a form, comics encourage an imaginative, active reader, who must fill the narrative 'gaps'. At the same time the still graphic images are open to moments of exaggeration which are not usually available or used in television.

In just eight graphic frames Mulder's emotional, even manic, mind-state is conveyed, as files, photographs and even pickled aliens tumble out from the shelves amidst fragmented viewpoints of Mulder's taut body and anguished facial expressions. The larger-than-life images conveyed within the comic would be unsuitable for television because they fall outside the conventions of realism required for mainstream productions. Yet within comic pages they are perfectly acceptable, as they exist within the limitations imposed by the codes and conventions of the form. Once again, we can see the ways in which very similar content is presented to the audience differently, depending upon the medium in which it appears.

Advertising and The X-Files

The enormous popularity of *The X-Files* not only led to very rapid repeats of early episodes on both satellite and terrestrial television channels in the UK, but to a vast expansion in the tie-in market of which the comic book is a very visible and prominent example. The circulation of what might be labelled the X-Files concept in the public imagination has meant that advertisers have confidently capitalized on the meanings generated by that concept. Vodaphone, a large telecommunications company, have utilized the X-Files concept of two agents searching for unexplained phenomena in their attempt to create short promotional films, or what are commonly known as adverts. These are texts that will sell products to consumers, heighten their awareness of the product's brand name and create an easily identifiable image for that product. In the Vodaphone advertisements the unexplained phenomena under investigation have included popular mysteries such as the Loch Ness monster and Big Foot. As chapter 7 in this section explains, these sorts of advertisement call upon the audience's prior knowledge of popular culture, in terms of both *The X-Files* and its conventions, and the mysteries the agents investigate, in a playful and celebratory way. Vodaphone is therefore able to cash in on the popularity of *The X-Files*, whilst establishing itself as an up-to-date telephone communication network.

The Vodaphone advertisements also utilize the services of actor Kyle MacLachlan in their equivalent of the Mulder role. MacLachlan appeared in another popular cult television series *Twin Peaks* and brings with him an off-beat persona that allows the audience instantly to key into his character. The advert's production team has been able to construct the narrative economically because it has been able to rely, to some extent, on audience knowledge. It is important to note that both *The X-Files* series and the Vodaphone advertisement are television texts. This highlights the fact that even within a medium, slightly different codes and conventions can be utilized at different moments depending upon the purpose of the text.

It is essential that advertisers can rely on an audience's knowledge of how textually to 'read' an advertisement. The context in which it appears

therefore becomes of crucial importance to its textual operation and its effectiveness as an advertising text. For example, audiences will bring expectations to television advertisements: they will be short, they will contain a slogan, they will focus on the product and they will offer some form of brief entertainment. The makers of advertisements must therefore be aware of this when designing such texts, and so a particular set of rules will be followed quite closely. The language of advertising as it is used in the Vodaphone X-Files example is very reliant on a knowledgeable audience which will in some way be aware of the texts being referenced. As advertisement makers know that their products will be repeated a number of times, they are able to infuse elements that will probably only be picked up by viewers after a number of transmissions. In the case of the Vodaphone advertisements, these include references to a number of other prominent science-fiction television programmes such as *Doctor Who* and *V*. The ability to know beforehand that repeated viewing of their text will take place is something that the producers of the television series cannot rely upon; they must work under the presumption that their product may only be seen once and therefore must have a certain level of almost instant coherence. What is interesting in the case of *The X-Files* is that it is probably a name that has meaning and associations for those who have never seen the original series, such is the omnipresent nature of its connotations in the late 1990s.

From the examples cited it is possible to see that advertisements and television series share some clear textual similarities. However, the specifics of each medium, its aims and objectives and the production codes and conventions utilized to realize them, must form a central part in the decoding process of media analysis. These must also be borne in mind alongside the use of the theories explored in later chapters in this section.

Suggestions for further work

Select a contemporary television programme that 'plays' with the codes and conventions of the medium in the manner described in relation to *The Young Ones*. Identify as many examples as you can of how it plays with codes and conventions, and consider the purpose of using such techniques.

Identify as many examples as you can of popular television programmes or films whose 'concept' has been utilized by advertisers. What aspects of the concept do you think made them particularly appealing to those wishing to advertise their products?

Further reading

Crisell, Andrew 1986: *Understanding Radio*, London: Routledge.

Cubbit, Sean 1991: *Timeshift: on video culture*. London: Routledge.

Ellis, John 1992: *Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television: Video*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge.