

Peaky Blinders

(Series 1, Episode 1)

AS Component 2: Investigating media forms and products

A Level Component 2: Media forms and products in depth

Focus areas:

- Media language
- Representation
- Media industries
- Audiences

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- *Peaky Blinders* is a **hybrid-genre, long form TV drama** that combines gangster, Western and historical drama elements. The set product is the first episode of season 1, broadcast in September 2013 on BBC Two in the UK.
- *Peaky Blinders* was produced in the UK by Caryn Mandabach Productions and Tiger Aspect for BBC Two. The show ran for six seasons from 2013 to 2022. For seasons 5 and 6, the show moved to a primetime slot on BBC One.
- The ‘**showrunner**’ for all six seasons was Steven Knight, an established screenwriter and TV producer.
- The plot of *Peaky Blinders* focuses on the Shelby family, who run the eponymous criminal gang in 1920s Birmingham. The first seasons examine the effects of WWI on the working classes, while later seasons portray Tommy Shelby’s attempts to move from crime into legitimate businesses, and then onto politics.
- *Peaky Blinders* has won a host of awards, including – for season 1 – Best Director at the BAFTAs, and numerous awards for lighting,

set and costume design. It has also attracted big name actors like Tom Hardy and Adrien Brody.

- In the USA, the show was first distributed by the Weinstein Company and Endemol; it was purchased by Netflix in 2014, who also distributed it worldwide, leading to a global audience.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media language

Consider the codes and conventions of media forms and products, including the processes through which media language develops as a genre:

Genres are ‘types’ of media product that present **codes and conventions** in a way that provides very specific **audience pleasures**. They are favoured by producers and institutions as they often represent a risk-free investment. Audiences’ (and creators’) relationship with genres is complex, involving a balance between familiar tropes and fresh elements that enable genres to evolve.

- *Peaky Blinders* could be classed as a **cross-genre** or **hybrid** long form television drama. It has many characteristics of the gangster subgenre. This differs from other crime genres; in that it often focuses on the personal lives of a criminal family. *Peaky Blinders* could also be classed as **historical drama** – it uses lavish production design to evoke a specific period and location concentrating on Birmingham in 1919. It also explores many of the social and political issues of that time.
- *Peaky Blinder’s* creator and chief writer, Steven Knight, has also said each season is based around another movie genre. In season 1, he said he was particularly inspired by the Western.

- Knight said he wanted to ‘**mythologise**’ British working-class lives in the way ‘Americans took 19th century agricultural workers and called them Cowboys and made them heroes of Westerns’.

Some of the gangster conventions that *Peaky Blinders* uses are:

- The importance of **family loyalty** – it doesn’t matter who the enemy is, the Law or other gangs, the Shelbys are devoted to protecting and securing their family. This focus on family dynamics (an element familiar from **soap opera**) is also reminiscent of the US crime drama *The Sopranos*.
- The **protagonist** is a cool, quiet but ambitious **antihero** who uses intelligence and cunning, as well as brutal violence, to ascend the ranks of a criminal family/organisation – or is strategic in order to maintain their position at the top. Tommy Shelby embodies this stock character in *Peaky Blinders* – a man of few words, as he says to Arthur in the first episode; ‘That’s what I do, I *think*.’ His plan to inflate the value of the racehorse, despite Arthur’s concerns, illustrates his ingenuity.
- The **antagonist** is a lawmaker who is investigating the hero and his family/organisation. This is unusual in crime drama as here the investigator threatens the *status quo*, established by the criminals, rather than seeking to preserve it. Often the detective resorts to unorthodox methods, including those as brutal as the gangsters, to achieve results (see Eliot Ness in *The Untouchables*). In *Peaky Blinders*, Campbell is the antagonist in the first season – in episode 1, his ride through Birmingham, righteous sermon to the police and his torture of Arthur, clearly establish him as a **binary opposition** to Tommy.
- Within the criminal family there is usually an older **patriarch/matriarch** around whose power the other characters orbit. Aunt Polly plays this role in *Peaky Blinders*. Another stock gangster genre character is the less smart, more violent sibling of the hero – in this case, Arthur – playing another binary opposition to the protagonist.

- The **narrative** of *Peaky Blinders* is typical of the gangster genre: the power of the criminal family is threatened – by other gangs, by the law, and from threats within – and the main characters must pull together (or sometimes betray each other) to survive.

- Episode 1 of *Peaky Blinders* establishes a number of plots and subplots around these themes. Tommy’s robbery (hidden from Arthur) has backfired and brought Campbell to Birmingham. Meanwhile Communists, the IRA and rival gangs from different ethnic groups are referred to as threats to manifest later in the season. In addition, Grace, an undercover agent, catches Tommy’s eye, opening a possibility of both romance and betrayal.
- In **long form TV drama**, more subplots and characters can be added to add richness and complexity to a more generic narrative. There is space for Aunt Polly, Ada and Freddie, Billy Kimber, the Lee Family, the IRA and even Danny Whizz-Bang to have fully developed narrative arcs all in one season.

Consider the processes through which meanings are established through intertextuality.

- There are numerous references to the **Western** genre in the first 15 minutes of the opening episode. Some of these are: Tommy’s ride through the city streets, the townspeople who dash to hide when he arrives and then linger to watch the drama, the peaceful living room that hides a bustling gambling den, etc.
- The story of a crime family, the power dynamics within it, and their battles with rivals/the law was immortalised in Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*. The ‘rise of the foot soldier’ narrative arc, from working class to mob boss, references *The Godfather 2*.
- The ‘ruthless enforcer vs mob boss’ set up, as well as the 1920s setting and costume (especially flat caps), recall *The Untouchables*.

Consider how genre conventions are socially and historically relative, dynamic and can be used in a hybrid way.

- Knight has spoken often about what he calls the ‘black hole for TV production in the middle of the country’. He said that in the Midlands there is a ‘**cultural cringe**’ about their location and identities. Whilst Liverpool and Manchester have celebrated their cultural histories, there have been very few TV shows or movies set in the Midlands, particularly in Birmingham.
- He also seeks to reveal the ‘secret history’ of England – the lives and dramas of people who aren’t wealthy or landed gentry. Producer Laurie Borg said the show was conceived as ‘**the anti-Downton Abbey**’, showing a completely different world existing in the same historical period.
- Despite this, the **production design** is spectacular and lush, the costumes particularly having an impact on mainstream fashion. Ornate sets, costumes and décor is usually a convention of the historical drama.

Consider how the combination of elements of media language influence meaning.

Consider how elements of media language including technical and visual codes work together to create meaning in the music video.

Visual codes:

- **Clothing:** the costumes have been one of the most impactful elements of the show, leading Knight to starting his own fashion brand. What impression do the suits, waistcoats and shirts of the Peaky Blinders say about them?
- Consider the costumes of the female characters – Ada, Polly and Grace. Costume indicates different kinds of female character: the rebellious daughter, the matriarch and the ‘sweet girl with a secret’.
- **Iconography and setting:** Knight was often told tales from this era by his relatives. When he created *Peaky Blinders*, he ‘visualised the story through the eyes of a young boy growing up in this environment, so there’s a sense of heightened reality: the horses are bigger, the men taller, the pubs more glamorous.’
- He also wanted the production design to reflect the narrative tone: ‘...set within industrial poverty but full of energy, vigour, and excitement, not despair.’
- Consider the opening sequence as Tommy rides through Small Heath – Western iconography, (tall man on a horse) is used to establish Tommy’s reputation and the environment is full of ‘vigour’.
- **Gesture and expression:** while the rest of the cast have an intense dramatic energy, Cillian Murphy’s performance as Tommy is extremely under-stated, almost static by comparison. His stillness and lack of emotion link to the Western cowboy archetype – strong, silent, but coiled and ready for action. His backstory of PTSD following the First World War adds an emotional backstory to this posture.
- **Visual technical codes:** Tracking shots are used to follow the characters through the streets and other locations.
- Consider how camera shots and editing used to establish tension between Arthur and Tommy, Tommy and Freddie (especially the scene in the pub) and Tommy and Polly (compare the scene in the family meeting with the one in the church).
- Camera movement, editing and *mise-en-scène* creates a ‘sense of energy and excitement, not despair’.

Audio codes:

- **Dialogue:** Tommy is a man of very few words but what he says is well-chosen. How does this fit with his character’s backstory?
- Consider how Campbell is the opposite of this – how do his speeches reveal his character (and a backstory equally as brutal as Tommy’s)?
- **Music:** the use of punk and rock songs, often released sixty years after the events of the show, establishes a modern feel to a period drama. Knight has said he wanted to ‘emphasise the idea of people in the period with modern emotions, aspirations and expressions.’

- The music supervisor Amelia Hartley also added that the angry, but energetic punk songs also indicate the simmering emotion beneath Tommy's calm exterior. A key musical contribution is from Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, who provide the sinister theme song, and contributed 14 songs in total over six seasons.

Consider theoretical approaches

Narratology – Todorov:

- Consider how *Peaky Blinders* fits into **Todorov's** five step narrative structure, and how it also plays with it. Think about the interesting reversal of protagonist and antagonist, and the way the audience are encouraged to empathise with the criminals.
- **The equilibrium:** the opening scenes establish Tommy as a man of great status. They also show the day-to-day running of the Shelby's gambling operation, but the **disruption** (the mistaken theft of the guns) has already occurred and further disruption (Campbell's campaign) is already beginning.
- As befits a long-form drama, almost every character has their own narrative arc, e.g. we see Arthur's equilibrium, more firmly disrupted by his ordeal with the police. Only a few of these are resolved in the first episode, and this encourages viewers to watch the entire series. To examine how each of these arcs manifests in season 1 and 2, look at the actor interviews in the BBC production notes: <https://bbc.in/3L49dUc>
- There are some **recognitions** hinted at in the focus episode, e.g. the Shelbys know Campbell's identity and reputation before he even arrives.
- **Enigma codes** often drive long-form drama by constantly introducing new characters and narrative twists – some of which are answered with others leading to further enigmas.

Genre – Steve Neale:

- Neale says that though genres may be seen as being limited by familiar **tropes**, they are also marked by **difference**, variation, and change.

- Gangster films and historical dramas have a recognisable array of conventions that produce audience pleasures. These include narrative ingredients like anti-heroes, scenes of suspense and violence, but also more aesthetic pleasures like spectacular locations and costumes.
- However, Neale would say they also need to display something original to set them apart from other examples. Evolution is essential to sustain a genre, and *Peaky Blinders* does this by offering greater depth and complexity to the typical 'tough guys'. It does this by rooting their violence in historical and socio-economic context (especially PTSD). When considering the set design and its location, it is not only industrial but also hellish – fire explodes or glimmers in almost every scene in this episode. This offers a distinctly different aesthetic to other period dramas like *Bridgerton*.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

Consider how representations may invoke discourses and ideologies and position audiences (A Level only).

- Knight said that he is deliberately trying to tell stories about the 'secret history of England' that may be darker, more violent and subversive than the more sanitised view of British history portrayed in mainstream costume dramas. There are no glimpses of aristocracy, businessmen or factory owners, at least in season 1, the focus is entirely on working class people and one area.
- Knight's intentional '**mythologising**' of industrial communities, however criminal, has resulted in a fresh sense of civic pride in Birmingham. There are now *Peaky Blinders* tours, theme pubs, and a Rambert dance production in Birmingham.
- The representation of men as brutal and violent is complicated by the Shelby boys' experiences in the war. Knight described them as 'men who have forgotten about physical consequences.' Though apparently fearless, in reality, they are suffering from PTSD.

- Despite the *machismo* inherent in the gangster genre, there are several strong and empowered female characters in the show. In the focus episode we are introduced to Polly, a matriarchal figure; Ada, a rebellious daughter; and Grace, who though initially ‘too pretty’ for the pub, is revealed as a cunning undercover agent. Knight has said this reflects the burst in female independence during WWI, where women ‘took over’ running the country.
- These portrayals could raise interesting discussion about the way working class lives and communities, as well as gender roles, are shown in historical dramas.

The effect of historical context on representations

Representations of class/local identity:

- Knight and his producers have said they were deliberately trying to offer a darker and less upper-class view of British history between the world wars.
- This could be seen as **historical revisionism** – a deliberate attempt to excavate alternative versions of a historical period by looking at the lives the lower classes, women, LGBTQ, or migrant people, instead of royalty and wealthy people.
- *Peaky Blinders* doesn’t downplay the squalor of the industrial city, but it does portray it as a place of community, grudging respect and frequent excitement.
- To contrast these two representations of industrial Birmingham, you could consider Tommy’s ride in the opening sequence to Campbell’s journey from the train station (and ensuing sermon).
- Knight has pointed out that in 1919, Birmingham was seen as ‘the workshop of the world’, a hub for the British Empire, manufacturing all the things needed to maintain that empire. The ambitions and plans of the Shelby clan represent this as a place of dirt and poverty, but also remarkable opportunity.

Representations of gender:

- Tommy, like many other gangster characters in the genre is seen as ‘**tough guy with a heart of gold**’. Though emotionally restrained and capable of bursts of incredible violence, he is kind to children and the elderly and wants to support (and defend) his community.
- Though the violence in the show has been criticised, the *machismo* of the many of the characters is rooted by previous trauma. This adds a layer of vulnerability to traditional ‘tough guy’ gangsters.
- As noted above, the female characters in the show are more complex and narratively significant than the usual ‘gangster’s moll’ and sex workers featured in the genre. Polly particularly has more backstory and nuance to her character than a superficial crime family matriarch, including a problematic relationship with motherhood and her extended family.
- Grace is also an interesting female representation. Initially she is a fish-out-of-water, ‘too pretty’ for the area, who can calm a bar with her siren’s song. Later it is revealed she is a ruthless and dedicated undercover agent who has adopted a ‘pretty’ disguise to get closer to Tommy.

Consider theoretical approaches

Identity theory – David Gauntlett

- Gauntlett asserts that audiences actively borrow from media texts to help construct their identity: ‘**a narrative of the self**’. These are not stable, they are **fluid**, depending on the media text and characters being consumed.
- Long form **multi-protagonist** drama offers audiences a range of different characters for audiences to identify with. Even when they are in conflict (e.g. battles between favourite characters in *Game of Thrones*), we still identify with them. This also suggests a fluid nature to identity.
- By showing a brutal yet highly stylised representation of working-class Midlands life, Gauntlett would say *Peaky Blinders* is promoting a diversity of identities. Instead of

the upper-class version of early 20th century history, we are shown a different (and extremely exciting) world that can offer audience from this area, or from this class, a more authentic text to identify with.

Gender performativity – Judith Butler

- Butler asserts that gender is not a fixed biologically determined characteristic, but rather a fluid **social construct**. She suggests people ‘perform’ a gender role composed of clothes, hair/make-up, posture and other behaviours.
- Costume is crucial in *Peaky Blinders* for constructing not just gender, but also status and power. The Peaky Blinders themselves wear expensive sharp suits (upper class), with flat caps (working class), that also turn into weapons (aggressive masculinity). This costume announces their masculinity as being dominating, territorial and violent.
- Grace is an interesting representation of ‘performed’ femininity. She deliberately dresses more ‘girlish’ and innocent when she first goes for the job at the pub. Her singing is also soft, emotional and melodic. Later, it is revealed this is just a performance and she is actually a vengeful and driven undercover agent.
- Consider the costumes, postures, hair, makeup and dialogue of the male and female characters. How do they ‘perform’ different considering masculine and feminine roles? Who are they performing them to (i.e. trying to convince)? Where do we see ‘cracks’ in these gender performances?

PART 3: STARTING POINTS – Media industries

Consider the processes of production, distribution and circulation by organisations, groups, and individuals in a global context.

- *Peaky Blinders* is a **co-production** between Caryn Mandabach productions, Tiger Aspect (both independent) and Yorkshire Screen Fund. The show was the first to receive a grant from Yorkshire Screen Content Fund, set up to promote production and representation of the county.

- The show was created by Steven Knight, who grew up in the Small Heath area of Birmingham. Knight had previously written several successful film and TV titles, including *Dirty Pretty Things*, *Hummingbird* and *Eastern Promises* – these are also crime dramas with strong characterisation and explorations of social issues including national and class identity. His name on the project was a major draw for production companies and finance.
- *Peaky Blinders* was distributed by the Weinstein Company in the USA but, in the wake of the #MeToo movement’s revelations, the rights were sold to Netflix. This has exposed the show to a far wider global market.
- *Peaky Blinders* would be good example of Netflix’s commitment to ‘**telling local stories on a global platform**’, i.e. commissioning or purchasing content based in a very specific location and culture, that also has international appeal. The Korean show *Squid Game* is another good example of this.
- Consider how a UK audience may respond to the show, and then consider how might a non-UK audience (particularly in non-English speaking territories) respond to the plot and themes? Some ideas: what elements of the narrative are universal (you may want to refer to **Vladimir Propp’s ‘narratemes’** here)? What themes and issues may appeal to audiences from different cultures? What values might be shared (e.g. loyalty to family in the face of adversity)?

Consider the significance of economic factors to media industries and their products.

- As a **public service broadcaster** and non-profit institution, the BBC isn’t constrained by the commercial model of other broadcast TV in the UK. Instead of ‘playing it safe’ by repeating popular concepts or genres, it has a responsibility to develop fresh and unique content and diverse voices.
- The Midlands, much neglected by TV production, has been a key area of investment for the BBC, who has been shifting their studios and other offices from London to Manchester and other northern cities since 2011.

- This means there is investment earmarked for productions like *Peaky Blinders* that are shot and produced, as well as being set, in an under-represented part of the UK. However, it remains a popular mainstream show, with international sales potential.
- As television becomes more of a global industry, **international co-productions** are becoming common. Netflix has ‘rescued’ many BBC productions like *The Last Kingdom*, providing a cash injection for struggling titles. BBC has also collaborated extensively with cable and streaming channel HBO on big budget shows like *His Dark Materials*.
- The BBC has a global reputation as a **quality media brand** which less well-known channels/platforms would be eager to collaborate with. While most UK-produced content is distributed by BBC America, *Peaky Blinders* is the exception.
- Netflix is the number one **streaming** service – as of 2022 they have over 200 million paid subscribers, with 37 million joining in the previous year. They have invested heavily in original content, but also commissioning or buying existing shows from **non-Anglophone** territories. 80% of content commissioned in 2021 was from outside the US and Canada.
- Shows like *Squid Game* (South Korea), *Lupin* (France) and *Money Heist* (Spain) have been huge successes in different territories and crucially offering very different content to the franchise-heavy titles of rival channels like Disney+.

Consider recent technological change and media production, distribution and circulation and the impact of digitally convergent media platforms.

- The popularity of online streaming services means that audience viewing figures for a scheduled broadcast are no longer the main indicator of a TV show’s success.
- Season 6 of *Peaky Blinders* had 5.42 million viewers in the UK when it premiered on BBC 1 in April 2022. When it premiered on Netflix in

June 2022, it had 45.71 million hours of playing time in just one week (making it the second most popular title after *Stranger Things*).

- Fans from around the world – from Korea to Argentina – dress up in *Peaky Blinders* cosplay and share videos on social networking apps like TikTok, indicating the global reach of the show.

Consider theoretical approaches

Cultural industries – Hesmondhalgh:

- One of Hesmondhalgh’s key ideas is that cultural industries are different to other manufacturers. Media texts are purchased usually just once, and then continually re-used rather than wearing out and having to be replaced. This means IP (intellectual property) and the range of products using it must be sold (and re-sold in different forms) to maintain a profit. This leads to heavy investment in familiar products (including stars) and less experimentation.
- The BBC is free from these constraints, as is Netflix (which is **subscription based**). Both institutions need to make entertaining shows that engage with a range of audiences – so they still need to appeal to fans of genres, particular stars and directors. However, unlike TV channels using a commercial model (where shows can be cancelled mid-season if the audience figures aren’t high enough for advertisers), they have more opportunity for experimentation and taking risks.

PART 4: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

How media products target, attract, reach, address and potentially construct audiences.

- *Peaky Blinders* offers several **audience pleasures** that targets a diverse range of viewers.
- Fans of the gangster or even Western genre would enjoy the clear genre conventions being used and innovated upon. Audiences who enjoy historical dramas – both for educational purposes and for visual spectacle – would enjoy the lavish production design and unique fashions.

- More particular and educated – especially politically left-leaning – viewers would enjoy the social and political issues explored, and the alternative view of British history.
- Traditionally masculine viewers would identify with (and admire) the tough, no-nonsense male characters, whilst respecting their strict codes and moral values.
- Female viewers, especially with feminist values, would admire the strong and complex female characters that defy stereotypes.
- *Peaky Blinders* has been credited with fuelling a cultural Renaissance in Birmingham (and the other Midlands filming locations). Knight has spoken about a ‘cultural cringe’ in this locality. He wrote *Peaky Blinders* to address this and ‘mythologise a geographical area, a period of history and class of people who are never normally focused on in this way.’
- These uniqueness (but also the universal appeal) of these portrayals has led to fans from all over the UK flocking to the Midlands – often in full costume – to go to theme pubs, tours, educational events, museums, and art gallery shows. There was a *Peaky Blinders* Festival in Digbeth attended by 20,000 people – including the Mayor of Birmingham – in costume.

Consider theoretical approaches

Reception theory – Stuart Hall:

Hall asserts that individual audience members will interpret media texts in different ways according to their established **values and beliefs**. He believed there were three modes of ‘reception’, where audiences **decode** what they consume.

- **Dominant/intended meaning:** the audience accepts the intended meanings and ideology of the text’s producers. In the case of *Peaky Blinders*, this would be viewers who agree with and enjoy the valorisation of working-class lives and history.
- **Negotiated meaning:** the audience accept some of the intended meaning but reject others. Some viewers may enjoy the depictions of industrial areas as vibrant and exciting but may find the stylised violence upsetting.
- **Oppositional meaning:** the audience reject the intended meaning and instead formulate their own interpretation. They may find style of the show off-putting and superficial and the historical accuracy dubious (factually, the *Blinders* mainly operated in the late 1800s, not the 1920s). They may also reject the use of anachronistic punk and rock music annoying.
- This is what is known as a ‘**cottage industry**’ – unofficial, ‘satellite’ products that provide fans with an extended experience beyond the TV screen.
- There are social media groups around the world dedicated to *Peaky Blinder* cosplay. Look at the #peakyblinders threads on TikTok or another platform.
- There is also a wealth of fanart and fanfiction available. This what Jenkins refers to as ‘**textual poaching**’ – non-professional producers (‘**prosumers**’) sampling bigger cultural products and using them as a basis for their own creativity, then distributing them outside the network (or control) of the institutions that produced the original text.

Fandom – Henry Jenkins:

- Jenkins asserts that fandom is deeply personal and **creative relationship** with media products. He believes that particularly genre films and TV can unite marginalised people and even be **appropriated** for political purposes (e.g. the use of the three finger salute from *The Hunger Games* by Hong Kong democratic protestors).