

# **HOW TO STUDY TELEVISION**

**KEITH SELBY AND  
RON COWDERY**



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*How to Study Television*, edited by John Peck and Martin Coyle, is a companion volume to Macmillan's *How to Study Literature* series.

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Keith Selby and Ron Cowdery





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For Susan and Debbie

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## Editors' preface

If you are a student taking Media or Communication Studies, the chances are that you are looking for a book on television that will not only help you to come to grips with the technical aspects of media production, but also help you to formulate your critical response in a clear, analytical way. The aim of *How To Study Television* is to offer you guidance on both these important tasks by providing not only the sort of technical information you need, but also a critical method that will allow you to explore your insights and ideas about a range of different types of television programme.

The opening chapter introduces you to the five main areas of analysis when dealing with television: Construction, Audience, Narration, Category and Agency. These terms are then explored in Chapter 2 in relation to a single still – an advertisement for airmail letters. Chapter 3 develops the analysis of the advertisement further by discussing the effect of camera angles and visual and cultural codes. These two chapters are intended to offer you points of reference for your own work and also for the chapters that follow. These deal, in turn, with how to analyse an episode from a police series (*The Bill*), from a TV sitcom (*Fawlty Towers*), from a news broadcast (*News at Ten*), and an episode from a TV soap – *Neighbours*. In each case, practical advice is given on what to look for and how to interrelate all the areas that make television the complex social, political and aesthetic medium it is.

Following these chapters on the different kinds of television programme is a chapter on essay-writing and how to organise a written response. The chapter takes for its example television gameshows, but the advice given will help you with writing about all types of television output. Finally, at the end of the book, is an extensive glossary of terms used in the discussion and production of television programmes. Understanding such terms is best done by seeing them put into practice, which is exactly what *How To Study Television* does. At once a guide to current ideas about the media and a

practical textbook that will help you develop your own critical responses, *How To Study Television* is also a rich source of suggestions that should further your enjoyment of studying television.

John Peck  
Martin Coyle



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## Studying television

To many people, television is just flickering wallpaper, moving pictures in the corner of the room. As a medium, television is notoriously easy to watch without, apparently, requiring a great deal of effort from the viewer. While it is easy to watch television, however, it is hard to write analytically about it. If you are studying communications, media studies, social studies, humanities or English, you will probably need either to write about a television programme, or to prepare and present a project about television at some point in the course of your studies. Most students find this very difficult. Precisely because television is so easy to watch it seems to resist our efforts to analyse it critically.

This problem can sometimes be made much worse by the mass of theory which surrounds the study of television. Some critics concentrate on the effects of the media on audiences, in an attempt to identify links between, for example, violence and television. Others concentrate on the importance of the director as the author or creator of the finished product. Others still focus on the way in which social groups or classes are represented by the media, and on how this reinforces stereotyping of people – such as the young and the elderly, homosexuals, women, the working classes, or people of other races and nationalities.

Another problem about which you are probably thinking by now is the complexity of a television programme. It is quite likely that you will feel daunted by the sheer diversity of the elements which go to make up a TV programme – economic, political, legal, technological, artistic, institutional, cultural – and that in attempting to piece all this information together you will feel like a detective at the scene of a crime with far too many clues.

A further difficulty is that the people who made the programme have long since left, so it is unlikely that you will be able to find out what decisions were made, who made them, or why. And yet you know that there is not only the writer's script lurking somewhere at the back of the programme, but there are also camera technicians, directors, producers, designers, make-up artists, actors, sound engineers, the artistic and technical decisions taken at production stage, and so on.

Even if you have managed to find your way through the complexities of the theory surrounding television studies, you can still feel baffled by the intricacies of the production process itself. Added to this, you probably feel that while you have plenty to say about what you liked or did not like about a particular TV programme, you cannot see how to fit it into an analysis of the programme as a media text. Part of the problem, then, is that television can overwhelm the student simply by its bulk and complexity once we start to analyse it. Commonly, the student just does not know where to begin. But this is where you can start to establish a method. Indeed, without a clear method from which to work, you probably will not have anything very coherent to say about a television programme at all.

This is the aim of this book: to show you how, working from just a few basic principles, you can build your own response to any television programme. A central point, which will be stressed all the time, is that the best way to build an analytical response is to start with a few clear ideas about the various areas you need to consider and to use these to direct and shape all your subsequent thinking. Of course, we cannot cover every aspect of every television programme ever made, and so have restricted ourselves to just the general, workaday output of TV as an industry – the type of output about which most students find it so difficult to write. In fact, the following two chapters, in which we map out the details of the method we are recommending to you, are both concerned with the analysis of an advertising still, and not a piece of television at all. But the method we will be recommending can be applied to any media text, no matter what type it is. The reason we are starting with a single still from an advertising campaign is because you first of all need to learn how to 'read' a visual image, in much the same way as, when you first started school, you learned to read words on a page. When you have mastered this area of visual literacy you will be much better equipped to follow the type of analysis we are illustrating in this book as a whole.

What we are going to establish first, then, are the areas of the media text to which you should be directing your attention when you start to build your analysis. These have been the subject of considerable discussion in the academic and practical criticism of media texts and are based on the most recent thinking on the subject. If you can get hold of these principles at the outset, you will soon have a clear idea of the kinds of areas you need to consider in your own analysis.

## THE MEDIA TEXT: PRINCIPLES OF ANALYSIS

WHEN you first see a picture of any type, whether a still or moving picture, you are likely to be so absorbed by details that you might miss any sense of a larger pattern at work. It is often very easy, when you think back about a still or TV programme, for example, to recall some detail of colour, a particular sequence of shots, an actor's voice or a theme tune, and yet be quite at a loss when it comes to trying to fit this into the way you feel about the picture or TV programme as a whole. This is really because you do not know how to start ordering, structuring or shaping a response to the media text. In consequence, certain details will spring to mind as memorable, even though you cannot say how or why they are so effective. However, once you have a sense of a central tension at work in the text, then you will be able to begin thinking about television critically. In this book we will be using an approach which will help you to develop this sense of a central tension by drawing together many different but related approaches so that you can see the larger pattern of the text.

In more traditional forms of writing about the media – such as television criticism or appreciation – responses tend to be largely impressionistic. That is, the writer describes his or her personal response to the work. However, to write a *critical* response to a work you need to understand and to use particular theoretical concepts. This critical vocabulary will help you to make clear statements about the ways in which any media text works. In this book we have built an approach which uses all the major theoretical concepts currently found in communications and media studies and have broken these down into a series of steps which will allow you to analyse a television programme in a complete and coherent manner.

The first thing to grasp about a visual image is that it is a **Construction**. When we talk about a media text as a 'Construction',

however, we are not talking about the celluloid or magnetic tape upon which the programme is stored. What we mean by the use of the term Construction is the idea that all media texts are constructed using a media language. For example, if you were to commission a professional photographer to take your portrait then s/he would make certain choices about whether to use soft or sharp focus, whether to light you from above or below, whether to include the tops of your shoulders or to focus in tightly on just your face, whether to photograph you from an angle or face-on, etc. Such choices are described as codes, and it is these codes which make up media languages. In deciding how to compose your portrait, a photographer will be considering codes of focus, lighting, framing, and many others, and it is the use of these codes which will affect the way we feel about the finished portrait. This is an important point to grasp. A media text is not only constructed using a media language, but the codes which are chosen also convey certain information.

We can demonstrate this by thinking again of the codes that make up the media language of photography. For example, a soft focus may be used to convey things like 'romance' or 'a dream', or, depending on its context, a flashback to the past. But it would be very difficult to make a soft focus photograph mean 'threatening menace'. To create this effect quite different codes would have to be used, such as a low camera angle and harsh, contrastive lighting. So specific codes carry certain meanings with them. This is because we all take a certain cultural knowledge to a visual image and our reading of it will be affected by the type of cultural knowledge we possess.

It is a short step from this to saying that the reality created in a television programme is itself the product of various cultural pressures and constraints, which can take one of two forms. First, media output is to a considerable extent dictated by outside pressures which will significantly affect the selection and representation of society by the media. These constraints may be both financial (the media are part of an industry and are in competition with other businesses to make a profit) and moral, having to do with censorship or public taste. Second, another, less-obvious pressure upon the media in constructing and representing reality directs attention to the question of whether the media's product is actually like reality. That is, the quality of a programme may be judged by how representative it is of reality. But you have to be careful here. There is no point in complaining that, say, M.A.S.H. tells us little about the realities of the Korean War. This may or may not be true. Certainly, however,

the programme does tell us about the kinds of forces that bond relationships in a particular situation, and about the ways in which individuals attempt to cope with the ever-present threat of death. The presence of the Korean War merely heightens that threat, and the characters' awareness of it. To a considerable extent, therefore, the Korean War functions only as a backdrop to the programme's real concerns and interests. This means that characters in a TV programme may sometimes be represented as stereotypes or caricatures which perhaps bear little resemblance to real characters in those real situations: while Hawkeye and BeeJay are represented as fully-fleshed-out characters, Hot Lips Houghlan tends to remain exactly what her name suggests, a pair of hot lips waiting for fulfilment and gratification from the fully realised male characters that surround her. This draws our attention to the fact that in a media representation of reality certain characters may often be represented as some form of stereotypical foil against which other characters can be played, and perceived as such by the audience.

This takes us on to the next idea that you need when thinking about media texts in a critical and analytical way. Media texts are not only constructed out of certain media languages, but are also read by **Audiences**. This reveals something significant about the theoretical framework we will be suggesting in this book: that none of the concepts can be considered in isolation, for as soon as you begin to analyse the way that a TV programme is constructed, you will also need to consider its relation to its Audience.

But the way in which we read a media text can depend upon many things, such as our education and social class, our political and religious views and beliefs, and our race and gender. Of course, we cannot remove all the prejudices that go along with each of these groups, but we can look at the way that each of these various groups will extract different meanings from a media text. This is an important idea: that a media text cannot be reduced to a single, fixed and coherent 'meaning', but will instead be open to various interpretations by its various audiences. Indeed, the media text will be 'used' quite differently by its different audiences, and this is likely to affect quite radically the audience's response to the way in which it presents information as Narrative.

**Narrative** is something so fundamental to television that it is easy to overlook its significance. When we watch a television programme of any type we are presented with a series of events that *seems* quite logical and natural, but which is actually the result of narrative

construction. Because we have no control over the way in which narrative events unfold before us, television tends to give rise to a strong impression that things could not have been other than the way that they are represented. In fact, of course, the way in which the narrative unfolds is far from natural, but is rather the result of manipulating the overall effect of a programme through editing information together. The point here is that narrative involves concealing such things, for example, as the manipulation of time through selective editing by making it seem a natural part of the telling of the tale.

This leads us on to the next area we want to identify: media **Categories**. When we watch a TV programme we bring to it a considerable amount of knowledge and understanding about media texts in general. For example, if you walked into a room where there was a television programme on, you could very quickly categorise it as being, say, a documentary, or a sitcom, or as belonging to the genre of science fiction, and this causes us to respond to the text in particular ways. Think, for example, of the American TV series, *Star Trek*.

If you went into a room and found that *Star Trek* was being shown on the television, you could quite rapidly make several observations about the type of media Category to which it belongs. First, you'd notice that it is a programme which is recognisably within the conventions of science fiction. There are many ways in which we can see this, but one of the most obvious is the fact that the central conflict or tension in the programme is that between the rationality, reason and cold logic of Mr Spock and the warmth, understanding and humanity of Captain James Kirk. This is the central conflict in all science fiction, in which one of the central questions posed focuses upon the problem of what happens to humanity in the face of the rapid development of science and technology. It is the repetition of such conflicts which allows us to identify the genre of science fiction.

Second, you know it is on television, which would lead you to expect a different form of media text from what you would find if you had walked into a darkened cinema to see *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and your response would be tempered by those expectations. Television programmes are made for domestic consumption; because people do not pay the same kind of attention to the TV screen as to the cinema screen the programmes tend to be segmented, broken down into a number of incidents which are almost free-standing. This is an aspect of television production which was pioneered by programmes such as



↳ *Cars* in the 1960s and has characterised much television since. Also, the differences in the means of production of film and television create differences in the final products themselves. Much British television drama of the 1950s, for example, was filmed entirely in studio, and this created a sense of smallness or claustrophobia in comparison with the cinema-film tradition of the same period. A television, studio-based production of a film such as *A Taste of Honey* (1961) would be incapable of generating the sense of documentary realism which characterises the filmic original.

The third and final aspect of categorization has to do with the aesthetic patterning of the text. By this we mean the internal, formal characteristics of the medium. *Star Trek*, for example, opens each episode with a reading from the Captain's log, which seems to suggest elements of documentary truth to locate the programme in time and space. However, since in this matter-of-fact reading from the Captain's log there are references to a 'Stardate 2044', the 'Starship Enterprise' and the planet 'Arkon Four', we know we have to locate this reading from the Captain's log within the context of science fiction. This can help us to draw several conclusions about the aesthetic form of science fiction as a genre. One of the things we can notice, as in the above example, is that the text provides us with enough information to ground the story firmly within the realms of reality, and yet allows us to enjoy the pleasure of seeing a fictional form take shape before us. If a text excites us in this way it is very easy for us to become caught up in the story it has to tell.

However, to write critically about media products we also need to take account of the institutions or **Agencies** in which they were produced. Take, for instance, a single photographic image. This might be seen in a newspaper, a book, on an advertising hoarding or in an art gallery. Images are hardly ever found in isolation. We nearly always come across them within an institutional setting, whether that is television, the press or advertising. Yet more important is the way in which the meaning of the image is influenced by its institutional setting and also by our perceptions of that image in that context. If we see a photograph in an art gallery we may find ourselves interested by its formal qualities of lighting and composition, things we would be unlikely to notice in front of an advertising hoarding, or when scanning an advertisement in the daily paper. Consequently, the concept of Agency is wider than the question of who owns and controls the media. A wide range of financial, technological, cultural and political issues come into play as

well as the professional and industrial practices that are particular to each media Agency.

It is easy, in media and communication studies, to be blind to these forces, all of which have shaped and moulded the programmes we watch. But these pressures are very real ones, and take us from textual study to contextual study, that is, to a consideration of the organisational context of TV scheduling, broadcasting policy, the influence of financial considerations, the question of the State and of public funding, of political bias, etc. So, in media and communications studies we are looking at the connections and the conflicts that exist both within and between Agencies.

For the moment, all the above might seem very abstract and not very applicable to the task you have in mind, so rather than confuse things by tackling a whole television programme now, what we are going to do in the next chapter is to look at a single still to show you how, if you concentrate on just the five areas outlined above, you will be able to build a clear, reasoned and critical response of your own. Then, in Chapter 3, we will develop our analysis of the same still to show you how, using the information from your basic analysis, you can develop your analysis to concentrate on just one aspect of any media text, just as you are expected to do in any project or essay in communications or media studies.

You may be wondering why we are not taking a still from a TV programme – we actually use an advert for airmail letters. First, it would make little sense to analyse a single still, taken out of context from a TV programme, without discussing the rest of the programme, and we want to leave these broader discussions until later in the book, when they will make more sense. Second, television is, above all, a visual medium, and it is vitally important that we introduce you to the techniques of visual analysis at the outset. Building on this technique of close visual analysis we can then show how, using a simple, step-by-step method, you can build an analysis of a complex television programme using each of the five media aspects discussed above. These are the key areas for all our discussions and provide you with a firm foundation of knowledge on which to build both an informed and yet also personal view of a media text.

This, then, is the shape of the book. The next two chapters concentrate on analysing a single still. After these introductory chapters come a sequence of chapters showing how to analyse various types of television programme using a step-by-step method. These will show you how to construct a basic analysis of a programme and

then how to look at a specific aspect of a media text in more detail. After these chapters comes a chapter on how to write an essay on television programmes, with particular reference to game shows. In addition, there is a glossary at the end which gives you definitions of terms used in the book, though these are explained whenever we use them.

What will be new to most students are the five key areas used to discuss media texts. Before we move on to the next chapter it is worthwhile simply summarising those areas so that you begin to get to know them more fully:

1. **Construction:** the idea that all media texts are constructed using a media language and that the codes which are chosen convey certain cultural information also;
2. **Audience:** that a media text cannot be reduced to a single, fixed and coherent 'meaning', but will instead be open to various interpretations by its various audiences;
3. **Narrative:** the way in which the narrative unfolds is far from natural, but is instead the result of manipulating and editing information together;
4. **Categorisation:** that when we watch a TV programme we bring to it a considerable amount of knowledge and understanding about media texts in general and that part of the enjoyment of the text involves the pleasure of seeing a fictional form take shape before us;
5. **Agency:** involving a consideration of the organizational context of TV scheduling, broadcasting policy, the influence of financial considerations, the question of the State and of public funding, of political bias etc. In Media and Communications Studies we are looking at the connections and the conflicts that exist both within and between institutions.

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## **Analysing a media text**

### **I CONSTRUCTING AN OVERALL ANALYSIS**

THE aim of this book is to introduce you to a method of analysing any television programme, and you may think it a little strange that we're starting with an advertising still to do this. As we said in the previous Chapter, our reason for this is simple: we want to make sure that the basic principles upon which this whole book is based are clear from the outset, and it seems sensible to take things one stage at a time, rather than just dropping you straight into a detailed analysis of a complicated full-length TV programme.

This is not, of course, to imply that advertisements are simple, as you will soon find out by looking at various approaches taken to the analysis of advertising. Some writers will tell you that because they celebrate success and consumerism, advertisements are just reflections of an overtly materialistic capitalist society, whilst others will praise the creativity and imagination to be found in advertisements, claiming that they are an art form in their own right. And some people (usually those who have never spent any time analysing a media text) will claim that because advertisements are so much a part of the ephemera of everyday life, they are not worthy of the same close scrutiny that a novel, play or poem might demand. It is only when we start to look at advertisements in a more analytical way that we realise that there really is more to most of them than meets the eye.

Obviously we cannot discuss all the advertisements that have occurred in the British media over even the last thirty days let alone the past thirty years. The steps in an analysis, however, remain essentially the same no matter which media text you are studying. This is the point we want to stress: if you follow the steps in analysis

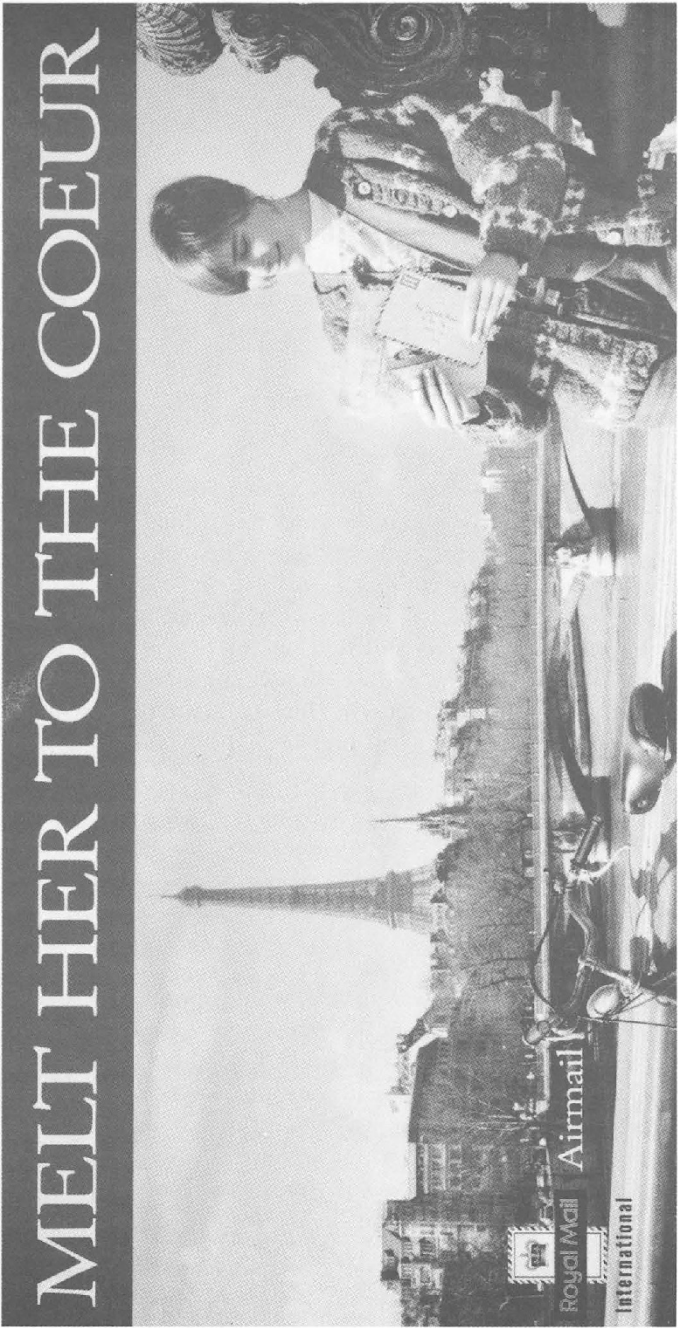
that we use in this book, then you will be able to produce your own, informed and valid reading of any media text. This is very important, because, if you are new to media or communications studies, you will probably feel that what others have written about film and television has much more validity than your own views. And if the only thing you can remember about a particular Carling Black Label or Heineken advertisement is that it made you laugh, then you are bound to feel fairly daunted when you turn to a book that uses a lot of jargon and does not seem to make any mention of your own feelings about the ad. Such books may have many important things to say about the role of the media in contemporary society but they usually presuppose a prior knowledge of the key issues and concepts involved. The aim of this book, however, is slightly different in that we are trying to help you to carry out your own analysis of any television programme. We shall stress that the best way to do this is to start with a few clear and simple ideas about the work as a whole and then to use those key ideas to direct and shape your subsequent thinking.

As you will remember from chapter 1, we have suggested that there are five major areas you need to consider when preparing an analysis of any media text. Even if you still find one or two of these terms confusing, do not be put off, as this chapter aims to clarify each concept in turn as we come to discuss it. Here again are the five major concepts you need to consider when preparing an overall analysis:

- Construction;
- Audience;
- Narrative;
- Categorisation;
- Agency.

Before we start on any of these, however, what we want you to do is to step back a little and think about the image we are going to analyse in this chapter. Turn to Figure 2.1 and take a good long look at the Royal Mail advertisement then consider the following question: What things strike you as in some way significant about this image?

You might notice that there is a pun of some sort going on in the title above the advertisement. Even if you do not happen to know that the French word ‘coeur’ means ‘heart, feelings, emotions’, the pun on ‘coeur’ (core), and the look on the girl’s face seems to suggest that she is opening what we can assume to be a love letter. This is backed up by the setting. In the background we can see the Eiffel



**Figure 2.1** 'Melt her to the Coeur'

Tower and a bridge over the river Seine, both of which have distinctly romantic connotations. Also, the photograph is shot using black and white, which seems to give the image a more documentary or realistic feel, probably because most of the photographs that we now see in black and white are in newspapers. It also seems to distance the image in the recent past, when most photographs were shot in black and white, and, implicitly, to return us to an easier, bygone and more carefree age.

This is supported by the props associated with the girl. The girl's hair style is reminiscent of the 1960s, and of the freedom we associate with that period. Also, next to the girl we see a roadster bicycle, which matches the carefree atmosphere of the setting and the way in which the girl is dressed. And finally, we are told that Royal Mail delivers all this by Airmail, and International Airmail at that. We have a French, carefree atmosphere, suggesting that we can talk to the ones we love simply by writing to them, no matter where they are, and that we can rely upon Royal Mail to make this possible.

These, at least, are some of the ideas that seem to us to be generated by the image. You might like to add to these impressions, but, for the moment, we have made some attempt to locate the advertisement as a media text and to account for the kind of story it is telling. Just doing this – looking at the image and trying to account for what we see – is a valuable first step in trying to build a detailed and personal response, because it helps you to start thinking about the details of the text. And yet it is a step all too often not taken by students, simply because they feel swamped by the mass of details confronting them in any media text.

However, although this first step is a useful one to take, if you want to go beyond an introductory and impressionistic response, you will need to turn your attention more specifically to the five areas we have already mentioned: Construction, Audience, Narrative, Categories and Agency. This is less daunting than it seems once you realise, for example, that virtually everything you are likely to be able to say about the image in terms of a first response will have to do with things like setting and props, which all come under Construction.

## **2.1 Construction**

(The idea that all media texts are constructed using a media language and that the codes which are chosen also convey certain cultural information.)



The two aspects of Construction which we need to consider are (i) *mise-en-scène* (see Glossary) and (ii) the technical codes of construction. *Mise-en-scène* analysis looks at only those aspects which overlap with the theatre – setting, props, behaviour of the actors or figures, costumes and make-up. Technical codes of composition include camera angle, lighting and so on. In controlling these elements the director of the film or advertisement is staging the event for the camera, and you need to be quite clear about how these various techniques are used to create specific effects.

### 2.1.1 *mise-en-scène*: formal codes of construction

- (a) Setting
- (b) Props
- (c) Codes of non-verbal communication
- (d) Codes of dress

We will be looking at each of these areas in more detail in the next chapter. For the moment, all we really want to do is to introduce you to the way we can use the above headings to start to build an analysis. Further complexities and subtleties can come later.

**2.1.1a Setting** In looking at this advertisement, we can say that the setting is clearly Paris (the Eiffel Tower is there just in case we confuse the bridge over the Seine with one of the bridges over the Thames). Paris has been chosen because we associate particular meanings with it: romance and affairs of the heart, sophistication, culture, *joie de vivre*, the city of young lovers, youthfulness, etc. If the young woman were standing next to the Houses of Parliament then none of these connotations would arise.

**2.1.1b Props** Moving to props, we can say that the bicycle shown, a woman's 'roadster', has particular associations for most people. Because it is an older style of bicycle it conjures up images of tradition and stability. Such cycles are solidly constructed and their design has hardly changed over the years. Bicycles of this sort sold today differ little from those of thirty years ago; we tend to think of them as above the changes and whims of fashion. Choppers and mountain bikes may come and go but the roadster is here to stay. Such machines are also favoured by students, and so the bicycle also conjures up the freedoms of student life.