



# WATCHING ME,

**In two linked articles, Emma Calway explores the enduring popularity of *Gogglebox* with its audiences, while Matt Kaufman considers what *Gogglebox* and *Gogglesprogs* can teach us about the slippery concept of postmodernism.**

**G**ogglebox features a concept that could only have been realised in the 21st century, a cross between an Orwellian nightmare and a real version of *The Royle Family* (the late Caroline Aherne, screenwriter and actress from the sitcom, first provided the tongue-in-cheek narration for *Gogglebox*, followed by her co-star Craig Cash). This series gets us watching other viewers on their own sofas in their own living rooms, who watch the same TV that we will have watched that week. Is it, then, mindless reality TV that we can switch on when we want to switch off, or is it a study of something more complex, something symptomatic of our isolated, modern culture?

*Gogglebox*'s hit ratings (it's currently in its seventh series) hint at its unique character: it's not part of the tired reality talent TV formula adhered to by *Strictly*, *X Factor*, or *The Voice*, where contestant is set against contestant, instead somehow managing to create feelings of togetherness in a disconnected, fragmented society. It has similarities with 1960s soap operas

that portrayed kitchen sink drama with nitty-gritty realism, albeit it in a safe environment. We can check our own thoughts, fears and hopes against a safe paradigm, where we can judge others but don't get judged ourselves. In this respect, we hold the power.

This safety net is structured around a familiar recurring cast who we get to know over time; families, couples and friends from all over the UK watch British TV that spans all genres. We can watch them watching it, comfortable in the fact that what we see won't be gruesome or shocking. We are screened from shocking content, aware of the cast's reaction before we see the actual scene in question, providing us with a protective prism but also with a useful way to get the lowdown on the week's TV. We can choose what to watch and what to avoid, based on the reactions of the *Gogglebox* cast.

The show is also traditional in the way it places the living room and the TV set as the focal point for families, looking back to a time when the moving image really was consumed in this way. This is of course, completely at odds with evidence of the younger generation's viewing habits; many prefer to watch/stream box sets on services like Netflix and view on devices such as tablets, laptops and smart phones, or TV catch-up, rather than watching it live on the box with the rest of the family.



Gogglebox/Gogglesprogs Studio Lambert/ Channel 4

# WATCHING YOU

In this way *Gogglebox* is nostalgic and reinforces the theme of togetherness and family values. This can also create much hilarity as we see how different generations view the same event. We watch TV differently, not just in format but also because of who we are watching it with.

Airing on Channel 4 at 9pm, the Bafta-winning show shows warts-and-all reactions: tears, anger, swearing, shock and laughter – it manages to span all aspects of the human spirit, elements that unite us all. Farah Ramzan Golant, the boss of TV distribution company, All3Media, commented in the *Evening Standard* that:

**Everyone loves watching TV and talking about TV. But the show isn't really about TV. The show is about people's lives, their relationships, their living rooms and the way children and parents talk about TV.**

One of the major attractions of *Gogglebox* is that its cast is accessible. During transmission, you can tweet the cast of the show. Newcastle's Scarlett Moffat is a particularly active participant who frequently interacts with us, the viewers.

It's a fascinating study of human behaviour – we like to see the houses of the cast, what's changed in comparison

to the previous week, and every now and then, a new family, couple or trio of friends. There will be features we recognise from the previous week: Steph and Dom invariably quaff an alcoholic beverage while the Moffatts have cups of tea and the Malones usually have an array of sweet treats.

However, can the cast's reactions really be completely authentic? After all, like *Big Brother*, the cast know not only that they are being watched, but that they might be prime-time TV gold. They may be particularly careful about what they say because they are conscious of public perception; alternatively, they may deliberately say shocking, outlandish things to ensure more screen time for themselves. After all, the posh Sandwich duo, Steph and Dom Parker, have gone on to make further programmes with Nigel Farage, while another family was dropped when the father tried to run as a UKIP MP. Inevitably some participants may crave the spotlight, and rather than an authentic study of human behaviour, the experiment thus becomes skewed. Tania Alexander, Executive Producer, stated in the *Radio Times*,

**I knew from the off that I didn't want to put people on television who wanted to be on television.**

While this may have been true at the outset, the cast are now



relatively famous, and several have already exploited their notoriety with appearances on talk shows and reality programmes. Scarlett Moffat, a particularly popular pundit, has now joined the 2016 series of *I'm a Celebrity*.

### Agency and Effects

Stuart Hall's model of communication of the 1980s and 1990s challenged the view that the media have the power to directly cause a certain behaviour in an individual (the so-called hypodermic needle model), while at the same time exploring the role of media as an agenda-setting function. Hall's model put forward three central premises:

1. the same event can be encoded in more than one way;
2. a message contains more than one possible reading; and
3. understanding a message can be a problematic process, regardless of how natural it may seem.

Hall argued that the dominant ideology is typically inscribed as the 'preferred reading' in a media text, but that this is not automatically adopted by readers. 'Dominant' readings are produced by those whose social situation favours the preferred reading.

The differing social situations and experiences of readers/viewers/listeners may lead them to adopt different stances.

*Gogglebox* offers a fascinating insight into how Hall's theory can work in practice. In watching the different reactions from different individuals and families to the same footage, we see that an event can indeed be encoded in more than one way, that it contains

a range of potential meanings and that understanding a message can be problematic. The *Gogglebox* cast consists of a mix of races, sexualities, ages and genders and they react differently on many major themes. To take just one example, an episode in Series 7 focused on coverage of the Tata Steel crisis: the majority of the cast was outraged by what was happening, for a range of different reasons. The Michael family in Brighton, for example, were worried about the hundreds of people who would lose their jobs. Steph and Dom, in contrast, concluded that the steel industry was finished – why are we still supporting this industry when foreigners can do it cheaper, they argued?

*Gogglebox* offers a snapshot (albeit a contrived one) of modern, everyday life. Watching, we see how certain events can bring the majority of people together as one, regardless of religion, gender, background, or race. Often, it seems, the most shocking events do this. They seem to make us recognise our shared values, while others allow us to celebrate our differences. There is nothing, it seems, more interesting than the sociology of human beings and this in part, explains the enduring popularity of *Gogglebox*.

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# WHO WATCHES THE WATCHERS

Matt Kaufman offers a postmodern reading of *Gogglebox* and *Gogglesprogs*.

Postmodernism is an extensive and often challenging concept, which you will need to engage with regardless of which exam specification you're following. This article will discuss a small number of key postmodern features in relation to case studies of *Gogglebox* and its junior incarnation, *Gogglesprogs*, which aired in 2015. It follows the same format as its parent show, except that the participants are children aged between 5-12. At the height of their popularity both shows have pulled audience figures in excess of 4 million.

## What is Postmodernism?

Many comparisons have been made between the era of modernism (arguably from the mid-19th century to the mid-1950s) which reflected a sense of the world through rational approaches that included science and academia, reason and logic, and the newer thinking of the late 20th century, broadly described as postmodernism. A postmodern perspective argues that previous approaches which drew on the rational certainties of modernism are no longer viable in our media-

are no longer any strict rules to be adhered to, and everything is in a state of flux. This is reflected in our art and our architecture, our communications and our media products.

## Recognising Some Postmodern Features: Confusion Over Space and Time

In our modern day world we have numerous examples of how time and space are compressed and can become confusing and incoherent. Clear geographical distances and time scales have become jumbled and undermined. Rapid flows of culture, money and information lead to a feeling of distortion. We no longer hold a firm grasp on the concepts of time and space because we can learn about any number of far removed cultures and lands at the touch of a button, can send emails and texts as well as Skype and Facetime people across the world, speaking to them instantly despite what may be thousands of miles or hours of difference in time zones.

When watching *Gogglesprogs* we note how time and space seem distorted. For starters the segments of programming such as *Britain's Got Talent* or *The Voice* used within

Modernism	Postmodernism
Grand narrative of progress achieved though following science and technology	Scepticism of progress, ambivalence towards technology reactions, neo-Luddism; emerging new age religions
Sense of unified and centred self; 'individualism', a unified, stable identity	Feelings of disconnection and a decentred self; multiple, fluid and sometimes conflicting identities e.g. online personalities
Hierarchy, order, centralised control	Subverted order, loss of centralised control, fragmentation
Easily recognisable and identifiable styles, conventions and genres	Blending of conventions and genres, mixture of styles



the programme may have already been watched by you beforehand, possibly weeks earlier. But now you are watching it again, this time alongside people watching it for the very first time. These people are sat in their front rooms but as we join them we could move between following participants in parts of London or Manchester, over to those sat in homes in Wales or Scotland, and then back again.

### Parody or Pastiche?

Another of the features of a postmodern society is to recognise that we now have an abundance of **style over substance**, meaning that there is far too much importance placed on the surface of things – the way products look and present themselves – as opposed to an exploration of any deeper meaning found within. We value the appearance and simplicity of things over any complex insights or depth. For example take any number of celebrities who are famous not so much for their great talents or abilities, but more for simply being attractive or famous for being famous. Reality television, the genre that *Gogglebox* and *Gogglesprogs* belongs, is well known for producing (C list) celebrities who actually have little talent to back up their found fame-for example Joey Essex.

Fredrick Jameson, a political theorist, takes the idea of style over substance and discusses it in terms of **pastiche**. To understand what a pastiche is, it should be viewed as the opposite of a parody. When something is parodied, a number of things are happening:

something is copied and mimicked, easily recognisable conventions are repeated but there is also a level of analysis taking place, often through humour, which seeks to pick holes in the original. Parody by definition implies a critique which highlights any issues present. This is effectively illustrated in the short news report segments performed by Jonathan Pie, who mimics news items but then breaks with convention to make various satirical comments about biased news coverage and political and social issues.

How pastiche differs is that whilst it may involve the use of conventions from existing products and genres, often with satirical intent, criticism is secondary to entertainment and humour. This is why pastiche has been termed as 'blank parody'. For example, how many music videos of boy bands have you seen set on a beach or in an urban location where the performers all sing into camera? All of these videos generically reference each other, yet there is little political comment. When Busted, Take That or 1-D recycle boy band conventions, they rarely draw attention to these continually repeated formulae.

*Gogglebox* uses many conventions from reality television shows, including cheap settings and locations, unknown participants and 'natural' reactions to events that unfold – but does little to try and criticise or discuss any of the issues found within this type of programme, such as issues of representation or the contemporary acceptance of high levels of media consumption within a family setting.

Looking at *Googlesprogs* we see that whilst child participants may provide an added incentive for some viewers, it means that the level of critical discussion is limited and we now also have further points to consider: media consumption levels amongst the young, passive and susceptible audiences and the missed opportunities by programmes such as these that have not only failed to challenge the culture of television viewing among children, but instead have celebrated and glorified it.

### Where is the Reality?

Described in the *Radio Times*, *Gogglesprogs* is...

**The people-watching-TV-watching-people-watching-TV show (which) returns for a seasonal special where children, not adults are the subjects on the sofa.**

French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard argues that we now live in a heavily media-saturated world, where we find ourselves surrounded by images and representations, which we actually use to help us form meaning and understanding. However because of this, we have lost the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is a **simulation** of reality. Baudrillard makes use of the term **simulacra** to describe how there is a never-ending procession of symbols and representations all around us, which themselves have no origin and are therefore just copies of copies, or



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representations of representations. Being surrounded by simulacra means we live in a **hyper-real**: where the lines that distinguish reality from the simulation of reality have begun to blur. In a postmodern world where the majority of our experiences are filtered through the mass media, how can we tell if what we are thinking and feeling is actually genuine?

Let's take the simulacrum of New York as an example. We have seen countless onscreen representations of its giant skyscrapers, yellow cabs and the instantly recognisable Statue of Liberty. Being there in real time as a tourist, our first-hand experience of the reality may arguably become blurred and distorted due to our expectations and the iconography of New York we have already experienced countless times over through the mass media. It is all very confusing.

Applying this to *Gogglebox* or *Gogglesprogs* we can easily see a blurring between what is real and

what is not: we sit in our front rooms watching other people sat in their front rooms enjoying someone on a talent show or a bake-off programme which in itself is not a real experience because it is being mediated. We watch their responses to these programmes and then we respond to their responses. In all of that process how much of what is happening can actually be described as a 'real' experience? If the emotions we are feeling are based on the emotions of someone else, who themselves are not experiencing a real event, how far removed are we from any real meaning and understanding?

Getting to grips with these (and other) postmodern features should be the aim of all Media students so that you can begin to apply them to your own found examples in the future (that is – if the future really exists?!).

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