

LUTHER

(Series 1 Episode 1, 2010)

Factsheet 1 - Media Language & Representation



Acknowledgements

All quotes from dialogue: *Luther* Series 1, Episode 1 (2010), BBC.

Images	Acknowledgement
All images	BBC

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LUTHER

(Series 1 Episode 1, 2010)

Component 2: Understanding Forms and Products

Focus Areas:

Media Language
Representation
Media Industries
Audiences
Media contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- The set product is the first episode of Series 1, broadcast in May 2010.
- Luther* is a police procedural crime drama and an example of an inverted detective story. It is produced by BBC Drama, distributed by BBC Studios, and broadcast on BBC1. It is also available on iPlayer and Amazon Prime.
- The series was created and is written by Neil Cross who drew his inspiration for the protagonist Luther from Sherlock Holmes and the American detective Columbo.
- It has had 5 series, the most recent being in 2019.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media Language

How the various forms of media language create and communicate meanings.

Semiotics can be used to analyse aspects of media language. Consider:

Settings and location: the urban setting of *Luther* immediately connotes realism with intertextual references to other gritty crime dramas.

Audiences therefore have expectations of the narrative and themes. Settings also relate to characters, for example:

Zoe's office is large and modern but lined with books suggesting her important role and her

intelligence. Luther's workplace is darker and more claustrophobic with a lack of natural light connoting his troubled persona. These binary opposing locations also serve to illustrate the differences between Zoe and Luther and the problems in their relationship.

Alice's initial rural, comfortable setting misleads us to accept her as the victim. Her flat later in the narrative establishes her power within the narrative with its view across London suggesting she is in control and omniscient.

Visual codes

Codes of clothing: The connotations of characters' clothing and appearance create meanings. For example, Alice has long red hair, she wears red lipstick and dresses in suits or tightfitting clothing connoting intertextual links with the femme fatale character, a stock character in early 20th century films – a mysterious, beautiful but villainous woman with dubious morals, who sets out to ensnare a man for her own ends. Luther's clothing suggests his rank within the police, but he is often dishevelled, connoting that he does not always conform to expectations and may be more of a maverick.



Codes of gesture and expression: Luther's gesture and expression often connotes his inability to control his emotions, he can be violent and behave unpredictably. Examples include when he goes to visit Zoe at her home and punches the door and his reaction to the call from Zoe telling him about her encounter with Alice when he proceeds to wreck his office. Here his facial expressions and physical gestures convey aspects of this personality and this contributes to tension within the narrative. Alice's gestures reinforce her need to control and her psychopathic tendencies. Examples include her arm around Zoe's neck, the initial use and recurrence of the hat pin and her hand reaching out to touch Luther's face in her flat.

Technical codes:

Camera shots, movement and angles work together to communicate messages and 'show' the narrative. *Luther* has high production values and a cinematic style which is used to convey information without the use of dialogue. Close-ups advance the relationships between characters and establish tension and a dynamic. The interview with Alice after the crime uses close-ups and shot-reverse-shot to communicate the change in Alice and the realisation in Luther that she is the perpetrator.

The camera also establishes enigmas, for example the repeated shots of the murdered dog which initially seems unimportant, but whose role in the narrative is eventually revealed.

Genre: Crime dramas have a recognisable set of conventions. These will evolve over time and may be specific to a sub-genre, for example a psychological crime drama. However, they all share similarities including:

- A **narrative** based on a crime that needs to be investigated and solved. This may conform to Todorov's theory where the structure is linear from the initial disruption through to a resolution, or non-linear where time and space is manipulated.
- Binary oppositions that function as a narrative element including good vs evil and hero vs villain.

- A set of recognisable **character types** including a hierarchy with a boss, a detective and sidekick and other characters, for example a victim, a range of suspects, the perpetrator of the crime and experts/witnesses who help in the solving of the crime.
- **Settings and locations** to establish realism including the police station, the crime scene and in *Luther*, urban locations. Some contemporary crime dramas feature the home of the detective in order to develop their character. Luther's home serves to reinforce his issues and instability, it is sparse and seems temporary as he thinks he can repair his relationship with Zoe, even though this seems increasingly unlikely. The setting of the pre-title sequence establishes the dark mood of the drama.
- **Iconography** related to the genre or to the character. For example, Luther's overcoat becomes synonymous with his character. Other iconography in this episode includes crime scene tape, a weapon and uniforms denoting rank.
- **Audio codes** including non-diegetic mood music to evoke tension, dialogue incorporating lexis specific to the genre and sound effects to advance the narrative.

Narrative

The set episode of *Luther* has a pre-title sequence which explores events that have occurred earlier. This sequence establishes tension from the start and the exposition sheds light on Luther's character, it also places the audience in a privileged spectator position. The audience then have expectations of how the protagonist may behave subsequently.

The episode then follows the conventional narrative of a police procedural crime drama adopting a linear structure with key moments where the narrative is advanced. For example, when Luther starts to suspect Alice, when he visits Alice to tell her will find the weapon and the confrontation on the bridge between Alice and Luther, leaving a cliff hanger before the next episode.

Action codes are typical to this genre and in *Luther* they set in motion elements of the narrative, for example Alice finding the whereabouts of Zoe and threatening her causes Luther to react and embark on a particular journey.

Theoretical perspective on narrative: Applying Propp.

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

Luther demonstrates attributes of the **hero** figure which is established through the cinematography, framing, the narrative, and his interactions with colleagues. However, he also demonstrates traits of the **anti-hero** in that he is flawed and does not conform to expectations. This is established from the beginning when he lets Henry Madsen fall. Both Alice and Henry Madsen perform as **villains**. Madsen, although he only appears at the beginning of this episode, is a constant reminder to us that Luther is not a typical police detective, as in the opening scene the lines between villain and hero are blurred. Alice, whilst initially appearing to be the damsels in distress is revealed as the villain with an astute mind and an ability to manipulate and control people and situations.



Zoe both conforms to and subverts the role of **princess**. She is married to the hero; she is threatened by the villain and needs the protection of a male character (Mark). However, she also has her own power base, she is a successful lawyer and has made the decision to leave Luther and is determined in the decision to take her life in another direction. DC Ripley assumes the role of the **helper/sidekick**.

How choice of elements of media language influences meaning. Consider:

The way in which the audience is introduced to the main characters through media language including cinematography, framing, and shot composition. The first shot of Zoe is a bird's eye view of her office where she is several floors up and surrounded by windows, a typical motif connoting power and prestige. Luther in the initial chase sequence is in darkness and is indistinguishable from the villain, Henry Madsen. Alice's first shot portrays her as vulnerable and afraid as she cowers, blood-stained in her home.



The paradigmatic choices that have been made regarding the characters and their settings and what this conveys about their role and power within the narrative.

How the choices of technical codes influence meaning in the interactions between characters and how this advances the narrative. For example, when Luther interviews Alice at the police station. The choices of elements of media language including gesture codes, expression and technical codes show the audience the change in Alice from one of a vulnerable victim, to a potential villain who can manipulate the

situation. Consider the importance of close-up shots and the yawn in this scene and how this rapidly advances the narrative and displays Luther's skill as a detective.

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

Television crime dramas, like other popular genres, have a repertoire of elements that places them within the genre. These are recognisable to audiences fulfilling their expectations and are useful in the marketing of the product. However, although crime dramas rely on repetition of common conventions, they also vary and introduce different elements (Neale).

Genres are dynamic, developing over time to reflect social and cultural change, for example the way in which *Luther* addresses the changing roles of women and cultural diversity. It has become less easy to categorise certain programmes as they borrow from other genres and hybridise (Neale).

Genres also use intertextuality to engage with audiences. *Luther* incorporates elements of American police procedural and film noir through cinematography and the character of Alice as the femme fatale.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

The ways in which the media re-present (rather than simply present) the world, and construct representations of reality. Consider:

The fact that all representations are constructed and are not windows on the world. Producers of media products construct representations through the use of:

- **Technical codes.** Camera shots, angles, movements and editing combine to construct representations. Consider the first time we are introduced to characters in *Luther* and how the camera constructs the representation. This is used to position the audience in relation to the characters, this may change through the programme. In the interview scene in *Luther*, the shots and

editing gradually reveal a different aspect to Alice's character and change the audiences' position in relation to her.

- **Audio codes:** diegetic and non-diegetic sound including a soundtrack, mood music and dialogue contribute to the construction of representations. For example, the ways in which other characters refer to or describe Luther and Alice contribute to their representations. In Luther's discussion with his colleagues mid-way through his interview with her after the murders he says of Alice, '*It's the way of her saying to us, look at me*' and '*She's proud of this, why give anyone else the credit*', this dialogue contributes to the representation of Alice as clever and manipulative.
- **Iconography:** clothing in particular contributes to the construction of representations and will have been a key consideration of the producers in creating the characters and their roles.

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

Representations of ethnicity:

Luther as a black detective in a British crime drama challenges stereotypical representations of black men in the genre. The assumptions of the audience are challenged in the opening scene when Luther is chasing Henry Madsen, as stereotypically Luther would be the villain. Both the villains in the series are white.

This challenging of pre-conceived ideas around ethnicity reflects changes in society with regard to diversity and the construction of reality. Zoe is a mixed-race woman who is a human rights lawyer, again reflecting social change.

Representations of masculinity:

Several of the men in the police force are in positions of power, even Teller has to answer to her male boss and justify her decisions regarding Luther.

Luther demonstrates stereotypical masculine traits including his size, power, and aggression. Whilst loving Zoe and wanting to save their marriage, he also scares her. However, he is also emotionally controlled by both Alice and Zoe, demonstrating a more complex representation of masculinity. He also readily shows his emotions challenging the trope of the tough, male detective.

Mark is a binary opposite to Luther as a more metrosexual representation of masculinity which Luther finds hard to accept. Alice alludes to the power struggle within the relationship between Luther and Zoe when she taunts him by saying: '*Why did your wife turn her face from you? Is it because you shine so bright?*'

Representations of women:

Consider feminist perspectives evident in the way in which the female characters in *Luther* are represented:

Alice both supports and challenges typical representations of femininity. At the start she is represented as vulnerable, she is shaking, crying, and presenting as scared. However, she rapidly transforms into a powerful and manipulative antagonist. In her conversation with Luther in her flat she alternates between the femme fatale

seductress and a threat to Luther. In answer to his threat '*I'm coming for you*', she replies '*Not if I come for you first*', setting herself up as intellectually superior to him and capable of controlling the situation.



Zoe's representation is more ambiguous. Whilst she is a successful lawyer with a good job, she is also vulnerable, at risk and in need of protection from men. She is also defined by romance, love and relationships and does not progress the narrative other than what happens to her, not by her.

Teller is in a strong position and reflects changes in women's roles in the police force. She is instrumental in driving the narrative forward. However, many of her traits are more masculine.