The Sweeney
(Series 1 Episode 1, 1975)

Factsheet 1 - Media Language & Representation
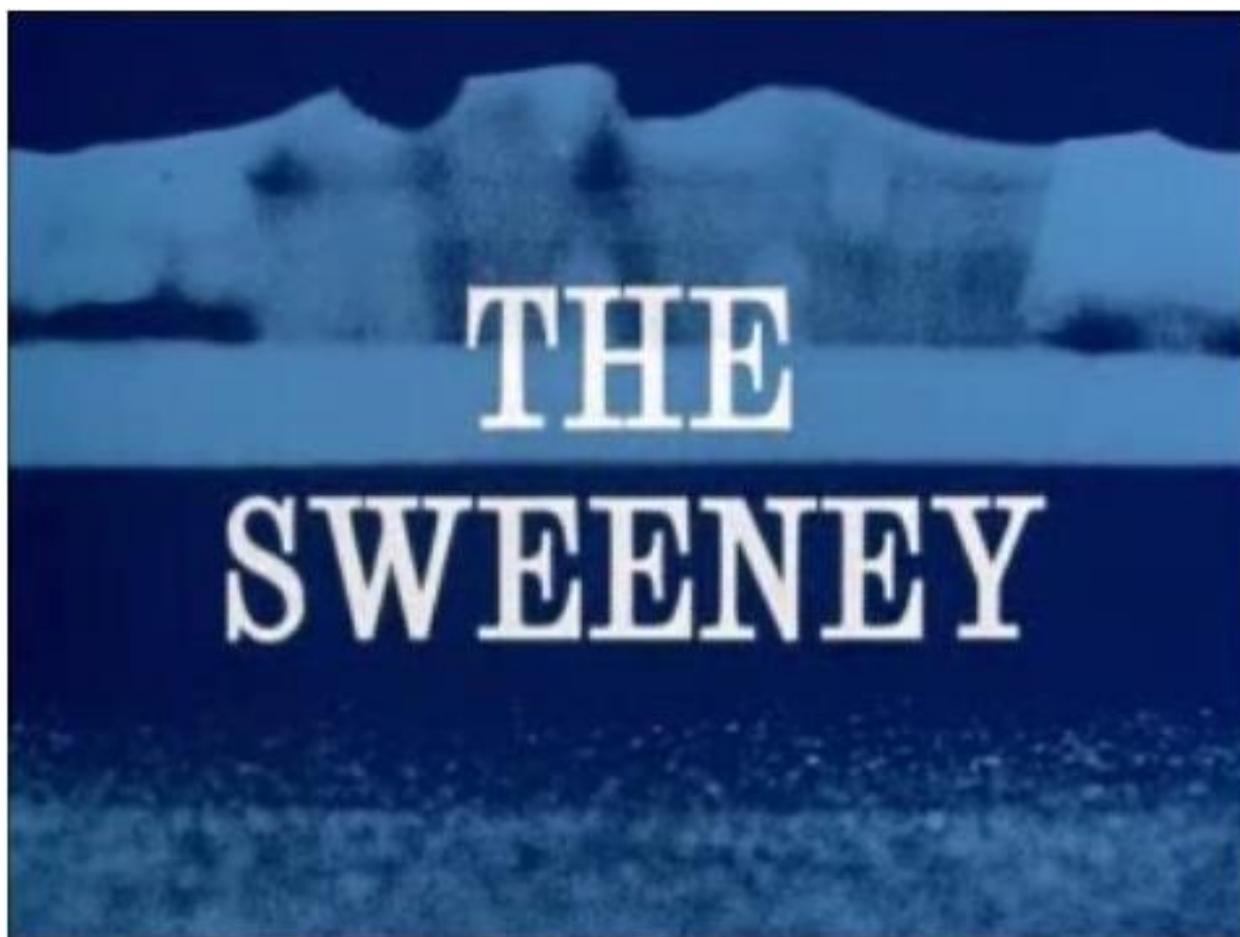
The Sweeney

(Series 1 Episode 1, 1975)

Component 2: Understanding Forms and Products

Focus Areas:
Media Language
Representation
Media Industries
Audiences
Media contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- The set historical product is a ten-minute extract from Series 1, Episode 1 (1975) of *The Sweeney*: 'Ringer'. It was first broadcast on ITV on January 2nd 1975 at 9pm.
- *The Sweeney* is a crime drama that blends action with police procedural.
- It was created by Ian Kennedy Martin and was a spin-off from a 1974 Armchair Theatre television drama called *Regan*. This pulled in over 7 million viewers and the decision was made to develop the idea into a series.
- The programme focuses on two members of The Flying Squad, a branch of the Metropolitan Police. The programme's name is derived from the Cockney rhyming slang for 'Flying Squad' – 'Sweeney Todd'. John Thaw played Jack Regan and Dennis Waterman played George Carter. The programme ran until 1978 and had two feature film spin-offs in 1977 and 2012.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media Language

The various forms of media language used to create and communicate meanings.
Semiotics can be used to analyse aspects of media language. Consider:

Settings and locations: The urban setting of London immediately connotes realism with a focus on the underbelly of urban society and gangland activity. The programme offers an unglamourised view of the capital. The pre-title sequence is filmed on a piece of waste land highlighting the use of real locations in the programme which would have been innovative at the time and part of the programme's appeal.

Visual codes
Codes of clothing: The connotations of characters' clothing and appearance create meanings. In *The Sweeney*, clothing is used to establish a hierarchy: Haskins wears city wear of the time including a formal suit and black overcoat, Regan and Carter as detectives are not in uniform but are less formal. The 'villains' are also clearly demarcated through clothing.

The relationship between technology and media products:
Technical Codes: The shots and editing suggest an attempt to create realism and distance the programme from earlier examples of the genre mainly filmed on sets. The technical codes also suggest the time in which it was made as they are more simplistic; the editing mainly relies on continuity editing and in some scenes there is clearly only one camera, for example in Jenny's

bedroom and sitting room in the opening scene. However, the film stock used and the location filming reinforce the more realistic feel of the programme, these techniques would have been different and refreshing for audiences of the time, involving them in the action.

Audio codes: There is limited use of music with the main audio codes being non-diegetic sound, dialogue and silence. The use of silence was innovative at the time and was used to create realism, for example when Regan is taking surveillance photographs of different members of the gang. Music then cuts in suggesting the narrative is moving forward. The non-diegetic soundtrack of the title sequence became iconic and synonymous with the programme's brand. Accents are used to connote hierarchy; the villains speak with a pronounced Cockney accent whilst DCI Haskins speaks with an RP accent. Dialogue also suggests rank, for example in one of the early scenes Haskins refers to the Beckett play *Waiting for Godot* which is not understood by the other officers, Carter states when asked who Godot is '*he plays full-back for QPR'*.

Genre:

Although crime dramas have evolved over time, they have a recognisable set of conventions. *The Sweeney*, as an earlier example of the genre, clearly establishes a repertoire of elements that continue to be used in contemporary examples of the genre. These include:

- 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. *The Sweeney* has a linear structure and each episode had a different title and deals with a new crime. The narrative arc comes from the relationships between the characters.
- Binary oppositions that function as a narrative element. In *The Sweeney* this includes good vs evil, hero vs villain, police vs criminals and detectives vs police authority.

- A set of recognisable **character types** including a hierarchy with a boss (Haskins), a detective (Regan) and sidekick (Carter) and other characters, for example the criminals and Kemble, the gangland boss. In *The Sweeney* there is also a hierarchy within the criminal group with Frank Kemble as the boss, Dave Brooker as his sidekick with Billy and Stupid Hawes subordinate to both. The choice of name here is indicative of the time in which the programme is made and what constituted as appropriate.
- **Settings and locations** to establish realism including the police station, Jenny's house and a range of outside locations in London.
- **Iconography** related to the genre or to the character. For example, Kemble's house with elements of luxury and his framing in the leather chair behind a desk suggests his power over the others and the class divide between him and the gang members. This is further reinforced by the fact that he smokes a pipe, not cigarettes, and has a more refined accent. The guns reflect the narrative focus of several of the episodes on armed robbery or raids. The cars belonging to the 'Flying Squad' became iconic with connotations of chases and action.

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 *The Sweeney*:
Regan and Carter are **heroes** in that they solve crimes, arrest dangerous criminals and protect the community, but Regan, in particular is also an **anti-hero** as he is flawed - he drinks, smokes, challenges authority and does not always follow the rules. He is seen by his superiors to be a bad influence on Carter, referred to by Haskins as '*undisciplined and irresponsible*'. However, although he and Carter may use tactics to elicit information, it is clear that they are not corrupt and are ultimately 'good guys', one of the villains comments: '*This is The Sweeney, you don't buy them*'.

The **villains** are clearly established from the opening sequence. They are violent, hardened criminals who are used to getting what they want through violence and intimidation as seen in the unpleasant scene where Jenny is threatened with the iron.

There are a range of **sidekicks** in *The Sweeney*. Carter is Regan's partner; Kemble has a sidekick in Brooker and Billy has Stupid Hawes. They all have a clear role and advance the narrative in some way, for example Stupid Hawes reveals to Regan the connection between Billy and Kemble, and Regan realises his surveillance operation has been discovered. Carter covers for Regan and shows loyalty to him rather than Haskins.
Jenny is the **princess/damsel in distress**, she is barely seen in the opening scene and is threatened by the gangsters.

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

- Television crime dramas are historically one of the most popular television genres. They 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). *The Sweeney*, whilst repeating the typical codes of earlier crime dramas, for example *Z Cars* and *Softly, Softly*, also introduced grittier elements including violence and action to appeal to the audience.
- Genres are dynamic, developing over time to reflect social and cultural change, for example the way in which *The Sweeney* addresses the changing perception of the police. *The Sweeney* also borrowed conventions from the popular American crime drama imports and paved the way for programmes like *Starsky and Hutch*.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation
How representations reflect the social, historical and cultural contexts in which they were produced.

Consider how media language is used to construct representations:
The Sweeney clearly reflects the values and beliefs of 1970s society in terms of the representations constructed. The police are white heterosexual men reflecting the police force at the time, as are the criminals. Those in positions of authority wielding power and influence are also white men. Very little screen time is given to women in the programme.

Representations of masculinity:
Regan is the main character, we are introduced to him in the scene after the titles where, interestingly, he is dressed in Jenny's flowered dressing gown, looking at himself in the mirror. His attire suggests that he does not live with Jenny and had not planned to spend the night there, suggesting more relaxed morals. His usual clothing suggests his rank, but also is a little shabby, connoting his lack of care about his appearance, a stereotype of men of the time. He is tough and powerful and unafraid to use

violence when needed. This persona is reinforced by his dialogue: '*We're The Sweeney son and we haven't had any dinner, you've kept us waiting. So unless you want a kicking, you tell us where those photographs are*' which preempts the chase scene. He is not afraid to stand up to authority and frequently bends the rules whilst not being actually corrupt. As Haskins says of him: '*Everything seems to mould itself around Jack Regan's convenience*'.

Carter is Regan's side kick/partner establishing a 'buddy' scenario whereby he covers for Regan. Regan relies on Carter and his local knowledge to solve crimes. He also often lightens the mood with humour and is generally represented as a more stable character. He does however engage in violence and, along with Regan, always solves the crime and catches the criminal.

The members of the gang and their leader Kemble demonstrate stereotypical characteristics of villains recognisable across examples of this genre in film and television. This representation is constructed through visual codes including their clothing, language and iconography, for example

their access to weapons and their involvement in organised crime.

Representations of women:
This reflects the time in which the programme was made when women did not hold high ranks in the police force which was very male dominated. The only time a female police officer is seen is in a caring role when she arrives to protect Jenny after she has been threatened.

Jenny is represented very much as the victim. In the early scene we hear rather than see her as she is under a duvet. She is threatened by members of the gang and needs the protection of Regan although her relationship with him is unclear and does not warrant time in the narrative. In the final scene she is subservient to Regan as she is on the floor and he is on the chair in a protective role.

Edi is the only other women with dialogue in this episode and while she is feistier than Jenny and more street wise, she is still portrayed as long-suffering. She does not know where her husband is or that he has returned to a life of crime. She appears to have a grudging respect for Regan.