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TOP SCHOLAR



Mana Tohu Mātauranga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

Scholarship 2025 Media Studies

Time allowed: Three hours
Total score: 24

ANSWER BOOKLET

Check that the National Student Number (NSN) on your admission slip is the same as the number at the top of this page.

Answer all THREE questions from Question Booklet 93303Q, and write your answers in this booklet.

Begin your answer to Question One on page 3, your answer to Question Two on page 11, and your answer to Question Three on page 19.

If you need more room for any answer, use the extra space provided at the back of this booklet.

Check that this booklet has pages 2–28 in the correct order and that none of these pages is blank.

Do not write in the margins (///). This area will be cut off when the booklet is marked.

YOU MUST HAND THIS BOOKLET TO THE SUPERVISOR AT THE END OF THE EXAMINATION.

Page 1

INSTRUCTIONS

Answer all **THREE** questions. Plan and write your answers below.

For EACH question:

- You should refer to a wide range of specific evidence to support your analysis.
- You may respond by agreeing or disagreeing with your chosen quotation or statement, OR by considering a variety of points of view.

Do NOT use the same material to answer more than one question.

QUESTION ONE: The relationship(s) between media and wider society

With reference to ONE of the quotations or statements below, **analyse the development** of a medium / media industry and / or the factors that shape it.

Quotations / statements (Choose ONE)

- ☐ 1. "Old media is now scared stiff. They finally have figured out that they must adapt – or die." *Ted Gioia*
- ☐ 2. "... in its current state, the country's [New Zealand] film and television sector is 'on its knees'." *Shayne Currie*
- ☐ 3. "AI will reshape industries; it will not end industries." *Nathaniel Whitemore*
- ☒ 4. Social media services are now the shapers of mainstream culture.

PLANNING

ANSWER

Type your answer to **Question One** in the space below.

B I U     

Social media services are now the shapers of mainstream culture.

Social media, one of the fastest growing industries of the 21st century, has become a dominant force in our lives. Not only does it shape our mainstream culture, it fragments, intensifies, and manipulates it on an unprecedented speed and scale. This is phenomenon is made possible by the transformation of social media as a niche industry to a popular one, which possess algorithms that has been refined to accelerate competition, and an artificial generation of culture. Content creators are, in turn, coerced by their model to exploit of human impulses, leading rise to rage-bait and stimulation to represent a large portion of mainstream culture. The evolution of social media are thus alarming and predatory, and contributes heavily to an increasingly alienating mainstream culture.

Ironically, social media first originated as a niche culture. The first social media site, *Bolt*, launched in 1996. Two years later, *Open Diary* launched as the first blogging site. These early forms of social media share the commonality of being intended as a platform to digitally communicate with one's immediate social sphere - that is their friends, family, loved one, etc... The *diffusion of innovation* theory suggests that there are five stages to the adoption of any technological or social innovation, and the late 1990s-early 2000s marked an early adoption phase, in conjunction with the companies themselves experimenting with what works and what does not. In 2000, only 6% of the global population had access to the internet, which the number of them using social media being likely less. These factors led social media to being a 'niche industry' outside mainstream culture. Through the introduction of 4Chan, the first forum-based site in 2003, social media gradually shifted towards a platform where you could "meet strangers online" (which Omegle uses as its catch phrase). However, they were often hot spots for sub-cultures to interact, and was still far from being mainstream. Mainstream integration only truly proliferated in the 2010s, where industry giants such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram gained a monopolistic control over user traffic, which lead to a centralisation of a previously fragmented social media landscape. Yanis Varoufakis coins this occurrence as *Technofeudalism*, where previous competition between industry has been largely eliminated, and redirected to the users instead. Users of mainstream platforms compete to gain traction for ad revenue, whilst all obeying the rules that the platforms set. In 2025, 63% of the global population uses social media, placing us in the fourth category (late adoption phase) of the diffusion of innovations model. Hence, social media has undebatably solidified its position as a driver of mainstream culture in today's society.

Varoufakis' observation of how social media has created a competitive environment for its users affirms a neoliberal mainstream society. Social media's previous role of communication has now shifted largely to consumption, where the majority of social media users today are passive. This coincides with Peter hutchison's characterisation of neoliberalism in his book, *The Invisible Doctrine*, where competition is viewed as an "innate feature" of mankind, thus meaning how success can be decided by purely meritocratic means. The market's role, is therefore, to facilitate an environment for unfettered competition. People are regarded as 'consumers', and their purchase decisions means active participation in the neoliberal agenda in deciding who gets to succeed. If we replace 'markets' with Varoufakis' *technofeudalist* platform monopolies and their algorithms, 'consumers' with the passive users of social media, and 'purchase decisions' with user attention, we see the reflection of an ideal neoliberal society. In other words, the journalist Symeon Brown suggests how social media has become "sentient neoliberalism".

This is largely problematic, because content creators are pressured by the unregulated, completely 'meritocratic' platform to exploit innate human desires to gain a competitive edge. In our current mainstream culture, there are two major trends that are shaped by social media because of the aforementioned agenda. The first is rage-bait content, where content creators deliberately incite anger responses to gain attention and views. Human psychology is shaped in a way that when users are angered, they are more likely to engage (negatively) with the content, and perform actions such as commenting and sharing. For example, TikTok influence Winta Zesu has confessed to deliberately post instances where she performs provocative behaviour in restaurants to generate engagement and ad revenue. The video essayer Hannah Marie comments on how "criticism becomes an asset" in today's social media culture, because whether positive or negative, attention will be rewarded by the algorithm. What was once a content-oriented media ecosystem has become one catered to reaction.

The second trend in mainstream culture is stimulation. This is based upon another human behavioural instinct, in which psychologists call the *novelty effect*. When people experience something new, they are more likely to engage and the experience becomes memorable, inciting them to crave for more, until the novelty of such experience has been depleted. This was partly why the 'niche' era of social media was able to enjoy exponential growth; because of its novelty. But how can novelty be achieved in the mainstream? Content creators today are prone to simulate authenticity, by either self-fashioning and branding their individuality (e.g. the '50-year old Japanese salary man' has been a rising trend in 2025, where men would vlog and share their mid-life crisis experiences) or by creating purposefully bizarre content (e.g. rapper Lil Nas X's creating a TikTok of giving an orange a C section, or the AI generated 'Italian Brainrot'). The attempts at appearing novel creates an ironic effect of a fragmented mainstream culture, that is constantly generating new trends and parodying old ones. Sincerity seems to be largely lost in today's mainstream culture. Additionally, the selective exposure theory has never been so relevant as it is today, since the algorithm creates 'echo-chambers' that feeds users their own manufactured 'niche', which contributes to a fractured and divisive culture.

Following out assessment of how social media has shaped mainstream culture, it is difficult not to view Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, written nearly a century ago, with a prophetic reverence. They coined mainstream culture as the 'culture industry', where due to its mass appeal, it becomes an ideal medium for the dominant class to disseminate pro-consumerist (in today's case, pro-neoliberal) ideology to the economic bassline. However, today's mainstream culture seems to even surpass their model, as users and content creators are actively reinforcing the culture industry themselves. Industry elites only have to provide a suitable space for such actions to propagate. Social media's ability to achieve this is unmatched by traditional media outlets such as film, television, news, etc... as instead of a vertical top-down distribution model, mass culture now becomes a horizontalized web of interactions.

What happens when uncontrolled markets enter every facet of our lives? The current state of our mainstream culture, under the influence of social media, may be a close answer. With cultural observations such as the loneliness epidemic, and a loss of traditional connections/community, it is easy to see social media being at fault of these societal transformations. The hyper-competitive and hyper-stimulative environment that social media generates leads to more and more 'trends' appearing and disappearing from our mainstream culture at an unprecedented speed, leaving behind non for the alienated individuals to firmly grasp upon. Mainstream culture is not only being accelerated, but mutated into something we had never experienced before.

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QUESTION TWO: Media production

With reference to ONE of the quotations below, **demonstrate critical understanding of one medium and its production context**, including reference to your own production experience.

Quotations (Choose ONE)

- ☐ 1. "... knowing and understanding genre conventions informs my decisions ... and whether to conform to or subvert genre expectations." *Raelke Grimmer*
- ☒ 2. "'Make me care' – please, emotionally, intellectually, aesthetically, just make me care." *Andrew Stanton*
- ☐ 3. "With every film that I am doing, I am learning new things either about myself, or about film-making." *Sanya Malhotra*
- ☐ 4. "Part of film-making is always a guessing game, and part of it is always a game of trust." *Greg Kinnear*

PLANNING

ANSWER

Type your answer to **Question Two** in the space below.

B I U

We all want others to care - about us. This year, my media production brief was to produce either a fifteen minute documentary of mockumentary that would be appropriate for a high school age audience. While I have considered distancing myself from the production, and setting the topic to someone or something that would be relatable for a mass audience, I did not want to pass this opportunity to showcase a part of my individuality. Being a musician, and a dedicated pianist, I chose to create a mockumentary based on a washed-up prodigy pianist's reflections on his youth, which would parody much of my own experiences. But as my audience are likely not well versed in the subject of (classical) music, and especially towards the depths I would like to scrutinise the classical music industry and expectations, my major consideration became; *how do I make them care?*

An easy method is to use humour; a foundational convention for mockumentaries. Such is likely to please the audience, and make them engage deeper with the contents and messages that I strive to present. Mockumentary, as a genre, is deeply rooted in postmodernist irony. Following how McLuhan famously claimed that "the medium is the message", mockumentaries itself are a satire of the often serious documentary genre. Nothing in mockumentaries are really supposed to be 'taken seriously'. I could have easily masked myself as a 'bad pianist', disguised under 'the emperor's new clothes' by the classical music industry, and played a 'all-talk no-show' character to make my audiences laugh. Many mockumentary producers followed such routes, such as a New Zealand indie production based upon a Pacifica badminton player, who performs comically poor at a tournament. However, despite including obviously humorous moments (such as an absurdly long name for my character to mock the aristocratic tradition of classical music; Blaise Bird von Augustine don Tralalero Ding-Dong III), I did not want to merely make the audiences care by pleasing them, I wanted them to care emotionally, intellectually, and aesthetically as well.

My question thus become whether or not I would be able to transcend the post-modern roots of mockumentaries. Postmodern humor is often cynical. A well-known example is the Simpsons, which opposed the traditional 'closed' formats of sit-coms, and instead uses humour and parody to engage with real world issues. My mockumentary aimed to tackle issues of elitism and exploitation of young musicians in the classical music industry. The premise itself was based upon how Blaise - no longer young - became no longer marketable for agents and is thus left alone to fend for himself. The content is often hyperbolic (similar to the Simpsons' style of satire); Blaise performed at "prestigious" venues such as Carnegie Hall and Buckingham Palace at the age of 5, and then after showing traces of individuality (or eccentricity) in his playing, he is rejected by the institution. I did not want Blaise's story to be simply a humorous take on the state of classical music, as I am sympathetic to his character, and the pianist whom he was inspired by, Ervin Nyiregyhazi, who is regarded today as a 'lost genius'. In my mockumentary, I wanted to pursue an alternative to the emotionless, and cynical humour of postmodernism.

Metamodernism, an emerging, contemporary cultural movement, seemed to provide the answer. A medium article describes metamodernism as searching for "genuine thought, and style, and more soul". It oscillates between modern sincerity and postmodern irony, with the goal of being simultaneously ironic, and self-reflective, but able to make the audience care *emotionally*. I did not fashion Blaise as a 'bad pianist', but rather, emulated Nyiregyhazi's unconventional but deeply expressive playing style throughout the scenes where I played the piano. I reserved Wagner/Liszt's *Liebestod*'s iconic climax to correspond with the 'climax' of my own film, where I attempted to elicit an emotional climax for my audiences to not just care about what they are seeing, but the music that they are hearing. The scene was juxtaposed visually by Blaise failing to light a cigarette (to mock a 'mature' or 'rebellious' persona of ex-prodigy artists), which was my attempt to balance the sincere and the ironic. Another instance was where I emulated the fragmented, non-nonsensical, or schizophrenic quality of postmodern media by borrowing a Chinese weather station piano track and claiming it as Blaise's 'own composition', during a scene where he recounts his experience at high school. Even though the two thematic objects are completely unrelated, the 'sentimental' quality of the piano track was appropriate in the nostalgic setting I was trying to cultivate.

Regarding the music as a whole, I wanted for the audience to care aesthetically - that is, as much about the music as the filmic contents of my mockumentary. This is inspired by the German concept of Gesamtkunstwerk, popularised by Richard Wagner. He had insisted his operas to be called 'music dramas', because how he views both the dramatic and musical aspect as equally important in reinforcing each other. Gesamtkunstwerk were also experimented with in early cinema. For example, one account of Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927) recalled how everyone at the cinema was prompted to sing along with the French national anthem during a scene. However, in today's mainstream cinema landscape, music has become another property (such as costuming, cinematograph, etc...) that only exists to *support* the narrative elements of the film. Wagner's music dramas can be heard, or seen/read to similar degrees of effectiveness, where the same cannot be said for contemporary film. I wanted to isolate pockets in my mockumentary where the music can be brought to the forefront, with one example being the aforementioned climax scene. I attempted something similar in the opening, where I commenced by film with a recording of myself (Blaise) playing the first movement of Chopin's Piano Sonata No.2. Not only the transitions of each shot, but the narrative and emotive content of the mockumentary's introduction were synchronised with the music.

Having my audiences intellectually care about my subject was also important. Recalling my initial premise, I wanted to use the mockumentary to express few of my own views. Through another attempt at the metamodern, I created a 'hopeful' ending for Blaise (supported visually by an increase in green/natural imagery, the iconographic sun flare, still, and meditative shots) where he finds a Nietzschean conclusion to pursue the 'Dionysian' (similar to Nyiregyhazi) and live a lifestyle unbound by the restrictions that the classical music industry has previously placed on him. Though the ending was partly in parody of 'self-actualisation' content, I also partly treated it with a genuine sincerity. And following Tarantino's sampling of existing culture, a postmodern phenomenon, I alluded to the ending of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, through the three Hindu concepts, Datta, Dayadhvam, and Damyatta. Even my title, *Paradise Lost*, was borrowed from classical literature (which is also ironic, as though he has lost his prodigal fame, one can argue Blaise found a better 'paradise' in his revitalised lifestyle). Finally, I added even more layers of intricacies for interpretation where I play Blaise myself, in which Blaise represents many facets of my current state in life (having graduated from high school and facing a new frontier as a musician). This was modelled after Inarritu's *Birdman*, where actor Michael Keaton, who had played Batman, acts as a 'washed-up actor', which shared resemblance to his own stage in life. This way, I tried to intellectually engage the viewer by breaking the 4th wall by intersecting reality and fiction as most of my audience are people whom I know.

My month-long efforts in producing *Paradise Lost* was met with a generous reception from my peers. Through considerations regarding humorous, emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual methods, I was able to make them care. Before screening, I still had concerns regarding if the topic of classical music would be too unapproachable, but the combination of the four above elements were able to create an effective outcome. Having seen the film, my music director - who understood much of the 4th wall references that I made - remarked how the mockumentary was a simultaneous "self aggrandisement and self flagellation". I was pleased with that response, as it appeared to have affirmed the metamodern properties that I attempted to achieve. And ultimately - it was likely that my mockumentary made him care a little more about me and my music.

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QUESTION THREE: The close reading of media texts

With reference to ONE of the quotations below, **analyse media texts (from any medium)** that you have read closely.

Quotations (Choose ONE)

- ☐ 1. "My films have often looked at the whole dilemma of identity as a straitjacket for people ..."
Todd Haynes
- ☐ 2. "You have to entertain people first before you can educate them." *Danny Boyle*
- ☒ 3. "We have to break the rules if we want to tell stories in new ways." *Lulu Wang*
- ☐ 4. "Film-making [or other media productions] is a way of understanding the world." *Alice Rohrwacher*

PLANNING

ANSWER

Type your answer to **Question Three** in the space below.

B I U     

Women's stories are often told through problematic means in anime. Being a "substantial form of mass media" (Nichole Chan), anime is less of a linear genre but a medium that appeals to both the niche and the mainstream. It is simultaneously conventional and experimental, and is thus prone to entangle itself in layers of irony. What appears to be empowering to females could conceal deeper, systemic shortcomings, and perhaps the only way to tell authentic stories of female characters is by completely breaking free from the rules.

Fan service has been a fundamental aspect of the anime medium. Given that it is largely targeted towards adolescents of a male majority, appealing to John Berger's notion of the 'male gaze' has been deeply embedded in the rules of anime. The 1981 DAICON animations by studio Gainax, provides an exposition of the foundations of anime culture in less than a 5 minute long OVA (original video animation). It features a plethora of eye-candy action scenes, and a female protagonist in a revealing bunny suit navigating the sci-fi setting. A decade later, *Sailor Moon*, a popular 'magic girl' series may be accused for similar appeals to the male gaze, even though it was a 'shoujo' anime designed for a female audience. Whilst in Shonen (catered towards boys) anime, transformation scenes before combat often highlights the male fighter's abilities and power, *Sailor Moon* places emphasis on the girl's bodies. Even their combat suits, sailor uniforms, are of a suggestive nature. Laura Mulvey identifies this dichotomy in her feminist theory between the "active male and passive female". Even though the sailor soldiers are supposedly empowering to women as they take on masculine tasks of fighting malevolent forces, it is still done in a setting where traditional values, or rules, for depicting girls in Japanese media are upheld. Usagi, the protagonist, is shy and excitable, fulfilling the ideal 'kawaii' (cute) expectations of adolescent girls. Additionally, after her final battle, Usagi settles back into female traditional role, enrolling in high school and getting married. Though empowering on the surface, *Sailor Moon* likely had a subtext of encouraging gender norms in 1990s Japanese society.

The 'warrior-girl' trope itself may also have deeper connotations on how it upholds the 'rules' of gender depiction in anime. In *Fate Stay Night* (2006), Saber, who is a gender-bent female version of the British legendary figure King Arthur, presumes a role of a noble, knight figure. While the gender-bending concept was unconventional, it is more or less telling the same story as *Sailor Moon* in terms of reinforcing traditional female tropes. In a research paper, David Sunil explores this trope, and concludes how the 'weapon' (Saber's Excalibur) is a "fetish object" that superimposes masculinity onto characters and belittles their femininity. To avoid Freud's castration anxiety (the male fear of the patriarchy being dismantled), the 'warrior-girl' avoids the emasculation of male viewers by presenting traditional male values onto a female template. Furthermore, authority and autonomy that feminism campaigns for is not granted to Saber, as she mostly acts an objective role, to guide the male protagonist, Shirou, whom is presented as the subject. Saber introduces Shirou to the rules of the Holy Grail War, trains him to fight, and most importantly, protects him (she even quotes that "I have been your sword"). Ultimately, Saber is a highly idealised character, who is highly capable, but in the interests of the male protagonist. She emits a loyalty that affirms the rules in which how female stories are traditionally told in anime.

More recently, while shows such as *Demon Slayer*, *Attack on Titan* etc... has been mostly following the classic 'rules' of anime, there has been more ironic interpretations of them. In Christian Metz's genre theory, he postulates four stages of genre, experimental, classic, parody, and deconstruction. In the 2010s, there has been a number of popular titles that parodies or deconstructs gender norms in anime. On example is the *Monogatari* series. The character Senjougahara is a deconstruction of fictional tropes. While in Hollywood there are female tropes such as the first girl and last girl (Marion and Lila from Hitchcock's *Psycho*) or the Freudian Madonna/whore (Betsy and Iris from Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*), anime has own their unique tropes. In one interaction with the protagonist/love interest, Senjougahara claims that "I'm a Tsundere. You know what that means, right?" The tsundere trope is where a female character intentionally treats her love interest in unpleasant ways, hiding her true feelings. Senjougahara's self awareness is a subtle meta-discourse regarding this trope, and could be seen as potentially trying to break free of the rules by addressing them. Meanwhile, Darkness from *Konosuba* parodies upon the previous 'warrior-girl' trope by being a highly incompetent knight that is deliberately un-noble and masochistic. Could these trends mark a departure from the old rules? It is perhaps more likely that they only accentuate them. In contemporary anime, it is difficult to discern whether the treatment of female characters are ironic or sincere, but ultimately, their stories are still not being old in new ways. Old tropes becomes recycled and transformed into spectres of itself, but the male gaze, patriarchy, and feminine passivity is still largely present.

This leads to the conclusion that authentic stories must be born through detachment, innovation and emancipation. Studio Ghibli and director Hayao Miyazaki has been often praised for their portrayals of female characters. Their films have been produced for a span from the 1980s to 2020s, and have remained steadfast in their own style, largely detached from mainstream anime movements. In fact, Miyazaki himself had claimed that "anime is a mistake". A 2022 study on Ghibli's female characters reveals five most frequently occurring traits in order: showing emotion, athleticism, assertiveness, showing affection, and unemotional. It is immediately evident that while some traits are following the rules of traditional female portrayals (showing emotion, showing affection), others opposes it. It is also worthwhile to note the juxtapositional nature of these traits, such as showing emotion and being unemotional. Instead of objectification, Miyazaki humanises his female characters, which means an acknowledgement of the nuances of human character. Additionally, while in *Fate*, Saber acted to support Shirou's narrative arc, Miyazaki often feature 'dual-protagonists' between a male and a female in his films. Examples includes Pazu and Sheeta in *Castle in the Sky* And Ashitaka and San in *Princess Mononoke*. Miyazaki gives equal opportunities to both male and female characters to develop their own narratives, and oscillates between protagonist/supportive roles for each.

This essay suggests that it is not enough to be ironic, or to deconstruct, if we want to tell the women's story in anime through new ways. Attempts which female characters have been seemingly empowered are explained to be mostly superficial, and attempts to parody the old rules only bring them into more prominence. Through studio Ghibli's approach, perhaps we can inspire towards a new way of story telling, one that is more organic and devoid of stereotypes and conventions that are harmful to female characters. The future of anime must no longer be a process of rumination or looking backwards.