# Formation music video, Beyoncé (2016)



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## Formation music video, Beyoncé

(2016)

AS Component 1: Investigating the Media A Level Component 1: Media Products, Industries and Audiences

Focus area: Media language Representation Media contexts

#### PRODUCT CONTEXT

- Formation, lead single for the album Lemonade, was released the day before Beyoncé performed at the Super Bowl final in February 2016. The Formation music video, directed by Melina Matsoukas, was released with the song.
- This music video has won numerous awards including a Clio Award for Innovation and Creative Excellence in a Music Video at the 2016 awards, and has been nominated in the music video category at the 59th Grammy Awards.
- The video is set against the backdrop of the flooding in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and the associated racial tension in America, and also draws historical parallels with references to racism and slavery.

#### PART 1: STARTING POINTS - Media language

#### **Historical context**

Explore the flooding in New Orleans following **Hurricane Katrina** to place the video into this context. The **racial tensions** following the floods (easily accessible through Kanye West's comments about President George Bush at the time) offer the chance to consider the way in which Beyoncé is inviting audiences to interpret **historical circumstances**.

### Consider how the combination of elements of media language influences meaning and intertextuality:

- The music video offers a wealth of (sometimes conflicting/contradictory) **messages** and possible meanings. Many of the references in the video require an awareness of **issues** and **events** (such as the flooding in New Orleans and racial tension in America).
- The video also requires a high level of media literacy to recognise and understand **intertextual references**, such as footage taken from a documentary about bounce called *That B.E.A.T.* and references to news footage of police brutality, such as the lone dancing boy.
- Consider the ways in which factors in the music video **contrast and conflict**, and whether this creates a confused meaning in audiences or offers a coherent **message**.
  - » The use of costume is interesting. Antebellum dresses which seem to reference slavery contrast heavily with stereotypical "pop" signifiers such as tight fitting/revealing costume in some of the dance sections.
  - » Similarly Beyoncé's performance shifts from moments of aggression such as obscene gestures with her fingers to more culturally recognisable dance routines that seem less loaded with political or social messages.
- This contrasting use of signs leads to possible readings/meaning of the video:
  - » Is it exploring issues of the Black experience in America? Is it a personal exploration of Beyoncé's life? Is it attempting to discuss issues of gender and equality? Is it possible for the video to be all of these things?

#### Consider the dynamic and historically relative nature of genre:

Beyoncé as a performer has worked within

a number of **different genres** (pop, R&B, dance, hip-hop, etc.). These genres are mutable and **subject to change** and arguably all **combine** in the genre that is being explored in this music video: bounce.

- Explore what "**bounce**" is and how it relates to Beyoncé specifically as a performer and the issues she is exploring in this video/song.
- Consider the historical significance of MOBO (Music of Black Origin) across these different genres.

#### **Consider theoretical perspectives Semiotics - Roland Barthes**

- The concept of the **signifier/signified**, using specific signification in the music video and considering how this might be interpreted according to social convention:
  - » For example, the use of antebellum era dresses. Beyoncé and a group of other Black women pose in white dresses that appear to reference the antebellum era of American history. Consider the significance of slavery in relation to this sequence and what is being signified.

#### A level only:

#### Postmodernism - Jean Baudrillard

- The video might offer an interesting challenge to Baudrillard's ideas that in the modern age of **simulacra** we are immersed in a world of images which no longer refer to anything 'real'.
- Explore whether this video is in fact a collection of images that refer very specifically to reality and encourage audiences to consider and discuss these issues.
- To balance this discussion, consider the video as a **sales and promotion** tool for Beyoncé's career (it was after all released the day before her Super Bowl performance). Is she making valid social comments or instead reducing important issues down to a means to promote her own career and sell records?

#### **PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Representation**

#### **Economic and political contexts:**

In discussions about the various issues of representation in this video, we should not lose

sight of the purpose of the music video in relation to **finance and profit**. The video was released the day before her Super Bowl performance. The combination of this release date and a performance to over 100 million people impacted the **global circulation** of the video and the financial gain for Beyoncé and her collaborators. Candidates might discuss the extent to which the video was designed to promote a **political/cultural** agenda or to simply generate **publicity** and make **money**.

#### Consider the way individuals are represented through a process of selection and construction:

- As explored in the Media language section above, the video offers a range of different representations relating to race and ethnicity. However, consider also the specific presentation of Beyoncé herself.
- Consider Beyoncé the performer as a **construct** and the ways in which her image is cultivated on screen. Which images/sequences have been selected to construct her on-screen **persona**? For example, her representation as a person of strength and power:
  - » Beyoncé frequently makes direct address to the audience by gazing directly at us, she stands in strong, powerful stances at the front of groups (of both men and women), and perhaps most iconic is the image of her on top of the police car.
  - » Consider the extent to which this construction of her persona is cultivated to sell records and gain fans, rather than offer any meaningful insight into her personality/beliefs.

#### Consider how media representations convey values, attitudes and beliefs about the world:

- Whilst Beyoncé is offering subversive (or at least politically motivated) comments about race, candidates might be asked to consider ways in which she is reinforcing some attitudes and values in relation to gender:
  - » Does the representation of Beyoncé in the video reinforce and possibly condone the **objectification** of women?
  - » For example, the dance sections where she wears short/tight or revealing outfits as well as some of the sexualised lyrics. This might be balanced by looking again at her construction as a strong, powerful figure.

#### **Consider theoretical perspectives:**

#### A level only:

#### Feminist theory - bell hooks

 hooks could be used as a stimulus to explore whether the video offers a strong message

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- about **gender** or instead feeds into the **oppression** of women in a patriarchal society.
- hooks' position that feminism is a struggle to end sexist/patriarchal oppression can be used to ask whether the video is part of that struggle or part of the oppression. Is Beyoncé adopting **feminism** as a lifestyle choice to sell music or has she made a political commitment to feminism? Again, this debate should take in the contrasting and possibly contradictory representations within the video.

#### Theories of ethnicity and postcolonial theory - Paul Gilroy

- Explore the music video in terms of racial hierarchies and binary opposition based on otherness.
- Consider ways in which the music video challenges racial hierarchy by subverting expectations and placing a black woman in a position of power and dominion, but may perpetuate a sense of binary opposition between races by perpetuating Gilroy's sense of 'otherness' and a clear divide based on racial lines.