

Bad Blood – Taylor Swift Music Video

(2015)

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Unit 1: Investigating the Media Section A: Selling Images – Advertising, Marketing and Music Video

Focus areas: Media language Representation Audiences Media contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- The music video accompanied the Taylor Swift single which was released on 17th May 2015. It was the fourth single to be released from the album *1989*. The single was remixed and featured the artist Kendrick Lamar. It was released on the label Republic Records.
- The video was directed by Korean American, Joseph Kahn who has created music videos for artists such as Britney Spears, Eminem and Katy Perry.
- The video won a Grammy Award for best music video and features a range of icons from popular culture such as Jessica Alba, Cara Delevingne and Cindy Crawford.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media language

Industry context:

Taylor Swift is a pop phenomenon worth upwards of \$250 million. Forbes included her in their list of the 100 Most Influential Women. A recipient of 10 Grammys and an Emmy, Swift has sold over 40 million albums and is one of the most followed celebrities on social media (83.5 million followers on Twitter).

Swift has had a huge impact on the music industry. In 2015 Apple changed their music

policy after she refused to allow them to stream her album without payment. She also withdrew her album from the streaming site Spotify, despite being one of their most popular artists, as a protest against payment practices.

Consider the use of moving image media language, and codes and conventions:

- The video fits the **‘Pop’ music genre** and upholds some of the typical conventions. These include focus on the **performance** of the artist, **direct mode of address** and the clear representation of Swift’s **star image**.
- Heavy use of a **close up** of Swift’s **direct gaze** alongside **voyeuristic pans and tilts** of the female body creates a **male gaze**. This is stereotypical of modern pop videos. This is further reinforced through the sexualised **costume** choices of the characters.
- The video challenges the staple **high key** choreographed dance moves and love story narrative. Instead the narrative has **tropes** of the Action/Sci-fi genre.
- The video fits **Goodwin’s** ‘illustrative’ format where the visuals illustrate the lyrics of the song.

Consider how the different elements of media language, and the combination of elements, influence meaning and communicate multiple meanings:

- The codes and conventions are heavily influenced by those of the Superhero and Sci-fi genres. The opening **establishing shot** of a city scape pays homage to these genres and sets audience expectations. The **mise-en-scène** of the mundane office in the opening sequence juxtaposes the action as Swift and Selena Gomez fight anonymous henchmen for a silver **‘McGuffin’** brief case. This **intertextually references** many action film narratives.
- The characters are introduced through **direct address** and graphics that communicate their

names using **puns** and **coined words**.

- **Iconography** of the action genre includes the **object codes** of various weaponry, the boxing ring and the CGI explosions.

Consider critical perspectives:

Semiotics – Roland Barthes

- An **enigma code** is introduced early on in the video where the audience question why Gomez betrays Swift. The tension is built up with a **POV shot** of Gomez viewing Swift in a compact. The camera cuts to a **medium shot** of Swift dispatching the last henchman and then arc shots reveal Gomez. She blows powder in Swift's face and violently kicks her through the high-rise window.
- The video employs heavy use of **Proairetic Codes** due to the Action film nature of the narrative. Key examples are the focus on various elements of weaponry, the training sequences and the **cross cutting** between the two enemies.
- There are many **cultural codes** in the music video. The use of **intertextual** references to popular culture targets a wide demographic. Examples include: Sci-Fi costumes from *Tron* (2.49) and *The Fifth Element* (1.01), references to the training centre from *The Hunger Games* and the Hexagon corridors from the *Alien* franchise (2.44).

Narrative – Tzvetan Todorov

- Todorov can be applied easily to the mini narrative. The disruption to the equilibrium occurs when Gomez kicks Swift from the window. The narrative then builds to a restoration but the audience is prevented from viewing the resolution.

Genre Theory – Steve Neale

- The video relies on the audience's knowledge of film genre conventions to follow the narrative. The narrative uses recognisable **tropes** of the Superhero, Action and Sci-Fi genres.
- Conventions of pop music videos are challenged by the narrative, setting and iconography.

Advanced Theory:

Structuralism – Claude Lévi-Strauss

- The narrative is based around the **binary opposition** between Swift and Gomez. The conflict is created when the **POV, slow motion, low angle shot** shows Gomez watching Swift fall from the window. The **climax** to the conflict occurs with a Mexican stand-off between the

two characters and their respective 'teams'. The audience does not see the outcome as the video ends as they strike one another.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

Social context:

The music industry has long been criticised for its narrow representations of gender. The phrase 'sex sells' appears to resonate with record company bosses. Female artists are continually **hypersexualised** in their videos, to the point where it has become normalised. There are countless examples of passive, scantily clad females in the music industry. **Laura Mulvey's** concept of the '**Male Gaze**' dominates videos featuring both female and male artists.

The debate exists that **self-objectification** is linked to female empowerment. Artists like Beyoncé and Rhianna are heralded as strong independent women who are not devalued by their sexuality.

Consider how representations are constructed through processes of selection and combination:

- Swift's representation changes during the video. Her **dress code** in the opening sequence could be considered to fit the 'sexy secretary' **stereotype**, whilst Gomez wears tight leather. Both represent femme fatale, male fantasy figures. Their **body language** and **gesture codes** show power as they dispatch the anonymous male henchmen. The power is reinforced through the **diegetic audio codes** of **amplified** kicks and punches.
- **Intertextuality** is used in Swift's next **dress code** (1.01). Her costume is inspired by Milla Jovovich's character in *The Fifth Element*. The camera **pans** Swift's body which could be considered to represent a **male gaze**.
- The **dress codes** of the cameos are certainly inspired by sadomasochism which points to objectification. However, the **facial expression and body language codes** show determination and empowerment. This is reinforced by the **slow motion** and **low angle shots**.
- Lena Durham's character, Lucky Fiori (0.54) displays typical masculine traits. Her hair is short and she wears a manly black top. The **object code** of the cigar plays to the stereotype of a crime boss. This connotes female power.

Consider critical perspectives:

- **Stuart Hall's theory of representation** –

the **intertextual** references anchor meaning to the images. The video relies on a 'shared conceptual map' of popular culture to create a relationship with the audience.

- **David Gauntlett's theory of identity** – the video could be considered to be an expression of '**Girl power**'. Gauntlett recognised that female pop stars promote financial and emotional independence. Swift has created a video that presents males as inconsequential. The **ideology** of the video could be considered 'popular feminism'.

Advanced theory:

- **Liesbet Van Zoonen's feminist theory** – the video offers juxtaposing representations of women. The **dress codes** allow the female characters to be viewed as products of the **male gaze**. However, the narrative represents them as powerful and aggressive while the males are **passive** in the narrative.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

Social / cultural context:

The video has been viewed over a billion times on YouTube. The primary target audience is 16 -24 year old females. The **mode of address** is created through the **direct gaze** and the **intertextual references** to popular culture. The audience would be media savvy as the marketing for the video was largely conducted online from Swift's various social media accounts using the hashtag #BadBloodMusicVideo. She released teaser posters featuring the cameo stars of the video.

The inclusion of Cindy Crawford and the nods to '*Kill Bill*' and '*Aliens*' suggests that a secondary older audience was also targeted. The video could also be said to target a male audience through the use of familiar Action film genre conventions.

Consider how media producers target audiences, and how audiences interpret and use the media:

- The audience was targeted by the online marketing campaign. The 18 'A list' celebrities, models and artists were revealed by Swift over seven days before the video's premier at the Billboard Music Awards. The age **demographic** of the celebrities varied from 18 to 51 to appeal to a wide demographic.
- Rumours also circulated that the song was written about Swift's relationship with fellow pop artist Katy Perry. This was unconfirmed but did prompt Perry to comment on her

Twitter account. This added to the video's appeal for audiences who enjoyed the voyeuristic nature of the controversy.

- The **intertextual** references create pleasure for the audience. Additionally, the video uses many **tropes** from the Superhero/ Sci-Fi genres which would appeal to fans of those genres. The repetition of familiar conventions engages the audience.
- The video has **high production values** which influences audience expectations through use of CGI and visual effects.
- According to the **Uses and Gratifications theory** the video could offer escapism, entertainment and possibly personal identification with the situation.

Consider critical perspectives:

Reception Theory - Stuart Hall

- The **preferred** reading of the video would be for the audience to accept the representation of Swift's **star persona**. That she is a strong independent female and an influential popular culture icon. A more **oppositional** viewpoint might be that the representations of females are overly sexualised.
- The **ideology** that Swift wants to present is one of girl power, shown through the dominance of the female characters and their physicality. However, the video has been criticised for its superficial understanding of feminism. It still supports the **body image ideology** that beautiful must equal slim, white and full chested. It distorts the image of emancipated femininity and creates something that is unachievable.

Cultivation Theory - George Gerbner

- The target audience would be cultivated to accept the sequences of violence, including when Swift is kicked through the window. This has become a typical convention of the Superhero genre.
- The portrayal of body image reinforces unrealistic **stereotypes**, with the majority of the characters being hyper-sexualised.