

Michael Jackson, Black or White (1991)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2AitTPI5U0>



Subject content focus area

Media language

Representation

Contexts

Background context

- Michael Jackson was an American singer, dancer, song writer, record producer, actor and philanthropist.
- Michael debuted in 1964 as one of the Jackson Five then began his solo career in 1971. By the early 80s he was a dominant figure in the music industry and his album 'Thriller' earned him the title of the 'King of Pop', as it is the best-selling album of all time.
- Michael Jackson's music videos were so unusual that they helped to transform the medium into both an art form and a promotional tool.
- The MTV cable channel was seen as a platform for Michael Jackson to showcase his video talents and by airing his videos regularly, MTV was also able to reach greater heights.
- The music video for 'Black or White' premiered on 14th November, 1991, in 27 countries simultaneously. It reached an audience of 500 million – the highest ever for a music video.



Michael Jackson, Black or White - Factsheet

- The song reached number one in 20 countries around the world, and meant that Michael Jackson was the first artist to have number one hits in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

Part 1: Starting points - Media language

- The video is more a mini film with a 1 min 45 second intro to the song. In this intro, the audience is zoomed along a suburban street into the window of a family home, where an establishing shot shows a young boy of around 11 years old (Macaulay Culkin of 'Home Alone' fame) playing rock music in his bedroom loudly. The scene cuts to an establishing shot of his parents downstairs and we soon see, through a close up, how cross his father is at the noise.
- A high angle shots shows his angry father coming upstairs to confront the boy and typical narrative storylines suggest that the audience will see the boy get his comeuppance.
- An angry exchange takes place using point of view shots of high and low angles, putting the audience in the position of each character. The scene ends when his dad calling his music "garbage" and slamming the bedroom door shut which causes the boy's beloved framed picture of Michael Jackson to fall off the door and smash.
- A close up shows how this single event changes the boy's mentality from apologetic son to rebellious *tweenager*. A series of extreme close ups see him get out his electric guitar, push huge speakers into his parents' living room, turn up those speakers to the humorously titled 'Are you nuts!?!' level, don a pair of wrap-around shades and leather gloves and let rip on his guitar whilst telling his dad to "eat this".
- Close up shots show the windows shattering, a high angle shot shows the boy now in control and a wide shot shows his dad being rocketed up to space in his armchair, landing on the other side of the world. The assumption is that Culkin was trying to attack his father for having bigoted views about music and so transported him across the world to experience other cultures first hand, and hopefully open his mind a little. This is where the song really begins.
- A panning shot establishes that we are somewhere in Africa, due to the iconography of lions, wide open plains and a group of tribes men/hunters. The dad and his armchair land in the background whilst the hunters appear to pursue the lions. The camera then cuts to Michael Jackson amongst the hunters dancing, whilst the dad looks on bemused.
- At this point we see how the boundaries between performance and conceptual music videos can become blurred as Michael Jackson is seen performing (singing and dancing) amongst characters who are there to represent an idea, a concept or a narrative.
- The next few minutes see Jackson dancing amongst five very different groups of people in a series of wide shots, mid shots and close ups. The background varies from the African plains to a studio to NYC and Russia. Towards the end of the video, iconic landmarks such as the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower and the Pyramids of Giza can be spotted suggesting that globally we





Michael Jackson, Black or White - Factsheet

are all the same; it is only geography that separates us.

- The footage of Jackson in a Russian snowstorm cleverly becomes the inside of a snow globe picked up by a white baby who happily plays alongside a black baby, whilst sitting on top of the Earth, reminding the audience that prejudice is learned behaviour, not innate.
- The camera cuts to Jackson bursting defiantly out of an inferno whilst singing, "I ain't scared of no sheets", a cultural reference to the KKK and their infamous torch ceremonies. The video ends with a continual close up shot of numerous people of various ethnicities and nationalities, some famous and others not, morphing from one to another. These visual techniques give a seamless transition from person to person and shows the audience that we are more similar than we realise.

Media contexts - Cultural

- With the launch of MTV, a 24-hour music channel, Michael Jackson's promotion was easy - each song came with a popular promotional video. The popularity of these videos helped make MTV famous and Jackson used it as a platform to demonstrate his talents.
- Jackson broke barriers of racial discrimination with 'Black or White' and brought a difficult subject into the public arena. This song came about around the same time as The Civil Rights Act of 1991.

Part 2: Starting points - Representation

- Jackson's clothing in the video could be said to mimic the song's title and his actions - him copying the various dance moves, then them copying his - represent the ideology that ultimately we are all just the same.
- Each group of people are represented positively in the video, displaying happy faces, a sense of unity and friendship and the lyrics of the song sound like a plea for racial harmony.
- This all seems like a very positive message to promote, that race does not and should not matter to anyone.
- However, interestingly, Michael Jackson suffered a skin condition called vitiligo, which caused his skin to grow paler as he aged. This condition sparked all sorts of media debate about whether he purposefully bleached his skin and it was clear he also wore makeup to cover up this condition, make up which made him paler. Therefore, the statement in 'Black or White' could be considered a little ironic in light of this.

