

### Media Language Analysis: Dead Boys by Sam Fender

#### **Industry and Audience Contexts:**

Sam Fender is an indie artist signed to Polydor Records, which is a subsidiary of Universal Music, which is part of the NBC Universal conglomerate. He is a niche artist who appeals to a younger audience who listen to indie or alternative music. They may consider themselves to be music aficionados as they reject popular music in favour of lesser known artists.

#### **Analysis of visual and technical codes:**

The video opens with a slow dolly zoom out from a mid-shot on a visual of a group of men sleeping on the floor, all seemingly piled on top of one another. This creates a sense of enigma as theorised by Barthes as we do not immediately understand why the boys are lying there. However, through repeat viewings of the video the audience may come to understand that it connotes the number of boys who have died due to suicide, and the idea of bodies piling up – too many to count. This also links to Barthes' semantic code which can be heavily applied to this video as each frame contains a deeper level of meaning beyond the literal.

There is a long-shot of a typical street with ropes hanging in front of the camera. A shallow focus is used to ensure our attention on the ropes as a car drives past in the background. This connotes the idea that many boys are dying but it is going unnoticed. Perhaps people are moving on with their lives, which is another example of semantic code.

Intellectual montage is used to cut from the image of the dangling ropes to a slow dolly long shot movement around a dorm room which shows empty beds. This juxtaposition of images symbolises that the bed is empty because of suicide and creates a sad and reflective mood.

Another example of intellectual montage is the edit from the close-up of a hand gripping the arm of a sofa, to an extreme long shot of a man standing in a field looking up at a train passing along the tracks. This montage of edits positions the audience to consider why the man is looking at the train, and we think he is contemplating his death. In this shot the camera is also positioned from inside the house, as if we are watching him, but we cannot do anything, perhaps connoting the way people do not help young boys.

There is a montage of images of close up shots of boys alone within the frame. First we see a boy hiding beneath a cushion, then a boy clinging over the bath. Both boys' facial expressions are sombre and sorrowful. This edit suggests the loneliness these boys feel, which links to the message about the large number of young boys who die from mental health issues.

In the performances the boys stand up from the floor and stand next to Sam Fender facing forwards. Within this mid-shot we can see that all of these boys are young, and there is a range of ethnicities. Some of the boys wear a white t-shirt and others are not wearing a top. The position of the boys in the frame connotes a sense of unity, however the fact that some are topless suggests vulnerability.

The boys then turn around and face the wall, meaning that we can no longer see their faces. This again reinforces the message about the number of boys who have died, and who are not talked

about, making them invisible. Perhaps then also this connotes the sense of isolation these boys feel. Another interpretation could be that they feel ashamed on the way they are feeling, which makes a comment about toxic masculinity, and the idea that men should not be vulnerable.

The performance takes place in what appears to be a communal shower room, typically seen in a locker room. The colour palette is cold through and the camera moves slowly throughout, often with cut-in edits to close-ups on the boys' hands. This all emphasises the sense of isolation and claustrophobia; a sense that they are trapped. The shower room might also suggest typical masculinity e.g. sports, the gym, which links to the video challenging these stereotypes. We might consider these boys as being the Proppian 'princesses' as they are in need of rescue, which feeds into the overall challenge of toxic stereotypes.



Intellectual montage is used again cutting from a mid-shot of a backpack and pair of trainers on top of a building, to a slow panning movement around the dorm room, however this time we see more empty beds. As the camera continues to pan we see one boy in the centre of the room with a plastic bag over his head, while the other boys silently watch without moving. Some boys are resting their head in their hands, as if this is a casual occurrence. Intellectual montage has been used throughout the video to create a sense of mystery (Barthes' Hermeneutic code). Juxtaposing these two frames again helps the audience to draw the conclusion that a suicide has happened because of the abandoned bag and shoes, with the empty beds showing the growing numbers that have died. The boys not communicating can be interpreted as them not being able to communicate, perhaps about their feelings. All of the boys look isolated, even though they are together in the frame. They also do not try to stop the boy which communicates ideas around boys feeling isolated and not being able to get help. The body language of the boys suggests that suicide is no longer shocking to them, but something they might see every day, as they sit as if watching a TV show.

### **Codes and Conventions Review:**

Overall the video does conform to expectations of a mainstream video to some extent, however there is heavy use of intellectual montage to construct a narrative which is more challenging to watch and so more typical in niche music videos. The video also does not have the high production values of music videos financed by mainstream artists on big record labels, such as Justin Bieber. Instead the video uses on location filming and natural lighting to create a sense of verisimilitude, which is very typical for smaller indie artists.

The visuals amplify the meaning of the lyrics with images of isolation and distraught boys. There are also examples of the visual illustrating the lyrics, for example, "the anniversaries are short lived, they come around at break neck speed", is shown with a close up shot on a destroyed football birthday cake, then cutting to ropes hanging in front of the camera. When the lyric is "close our eyes, earn our pain", there is a montage of boys lying down closing their eyes, isolated in the frame. Another example of illustration is "some are silent" and we see a close up of a hand around a neck. A final example is when Sam Fender sings 'Ohhhh', the visual illustrate this with a montage of boys screaming, emphasising the sorrowful mood of the lyric too. From these examples it is clear that this video follows the convention as outlined by Goodwin, that the visuals will have a relationship with the lyrics.

## A Level Media Studies

### NEA Research

#### Music Video Analysis

The video ends with a wide angle shot of a group of boys sat down in a gallery in front of imposing portraits of soldiers throughout history. One of the boys stands on top of a chair and is central in the frame. The intertextual reference here to the celebration of war heroes in museums and galleries helps the audience to juxtapose expectations of masculinity with the impact it has on young men today. Intertextuality is a key convention of music videos as it enables the audience to understand the narrative on a symbolic level very quickly. Throughout the examples the audience uses their cultural knowledge to make sense, meaning an intertextual reference is being made to actual issues in society today. Barthes' referential code is important in music videos to create meaning quickly.

The video seeks to position the audience to view Sam Fender as the hero, promoting him the voice of a generation. This is done through by positioning him in the centre of the frame with the other boys moving around him. His emotional and angry performance reflects the intensity of his message. This is a typical convention of music videos where the singer is the one telling the story. This links to Propp's theory as the audience must be positioned to view the artist positively and to see them as a hero. Fender performs the song without a band or instrument which might be viewed as quite unconventional for indie music videos, however he is separate from the narrative which might be more typical. Low-key natural lighting is used through the montage of narrative shots. This creates a sense of verisimilitude or realism which empowers the sad and shocking message of the video. This is also a key convention of indie music videos as they seek to establish the artist as politically and socially aware.

Voyeurism is a typical convention of music video, however it is developed in this video because instead of watching for pleasure, we are watching from afar and unable to help, creating an uneasy feeling.

Goodwin also states the different genres possess different conventions, and as previously stated the video challenges this concept because Fender does not perform with instruments or a band. Instead he sings into the camera without expression, which challenges conventions.

The narrative does not follow a 5-act structure as theorised by Todorov, and this is usually only typically seen in a high-budget mainstream artist music video. Instead this video uses intellectual montage to create much of the meaning, which can be challenging to watch for the audience, but also encourages multiple viewings of the audience. Barthes' narrative theory can be applied more easily to this video with use of semantic code to encourage the audience to decode the symbolism shown. Montage editing is also typical in music videos meaning that their narratives do not follow the Todorovian model. Instead in this video intellectual montage is used to create symbolism and polysemic meanings. Barthes suggests that media texts are like a ball of string with many different possible readings.