A-Level Media Studies
NEA Research & Planning
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Music Video Analysis: Thinking about Narrative

Task: Analyse 3 mainstream music videos aimed at a 30-49 audience.

1. To what extent does the video follow a typical Todorovian narrative model? Provide examples from the text, for example if there is an equilibrium how is it communicated through media language?

2. Can you identify any of Propp's characters in the video? How are these characters constructed through media language?

3. Can you identify any binary oppositions in the video and how are these constructed?

4. Are there any enigma codes for the audience to decipher? How are these constructed?

5. Are there any intertextual references? How are these used to create meaning?

Katy Perry: The one that got away

The Katy Perry video for The One That Got Away rejects Todorov's traditional narrative structure to some extent. Throughout the video we cross-cut between the story of Katy as an older woman who is recalling a tragic relationship, to the story of Katy as the younger woman in love. The story of Katy's youth is told in linear and it is here that we are able to apply Todorov's linear structure. We clearly see an equilibrium here as the first scene depicts a man and woman in a bedroom painting pictures of one another. The camerawork is steady and we cross-cut between the characters, establishing their connection as they smile at one another across the 180-degree line. Two-shots are also used to continue to establish the happiness of their relationship. A sepia colour palette is used to support the nostalgia of the scene, with soft light coming from the window. Props including an old-fashioned Polaroid camera and retro costumes including Beatnik 60s style and prom dress also support the sweet nostalgia of these scenes. The disruption occurs when the couple argue and destroy one another's paintings and is highlighted through cross-cutting between this scene and young Katy in a cupboard crying. The contrast in colour emphasises the disruption as we go from sepia to cold blue tones and low key lighting. Having said that, this cross-cut may take place following the death of the boyfriend, rather than following the argument. The recognition takes place when the boyfriend drives away and then discovers the veil, before crashing off of the road and dying. The re-equilibrium is the older woman at the end who is trying to gain closure by visiting the crash site.

While the story can be told in linear, the video uses cross-cutting across timelines, and flashbacks to structure the narrative. In addition, split screens are used to intersect the emotions of young and old Katy.

The video really only centres on two characters, with Katy being the hero and perhaps the boyfriend being the 'princess'. The use of close-up two-shots helps to establish the intimacy of the two characters, and close-ups of Katy singing emotionally into the camera telling us that this is her story or her journey. Unlike traditional Proppian narratives, there are no other archetypal characters in the video as it is a limited narrative told in just 4 minutes. However, as with most music videos, the star is the hero of the story and leads the narrative.

Binary oppositions are far more easy to identify in music videos because they help to drive the story without the need for a fully fleshed out narrative; they are fragmentary in nature. Examples of binary oppositions in this video include love and loss. This is clearly shown through the cross-cutting between past and present, use of split screens, and with the use of colour and lighting as aforementioned. The lighting in the 'present' is blue symbolising a cold atmosphere as well as having a 'future' quality, compared to the nostalgic warm tones of the past. The long shots and slow pans of the house in the 'present' shots symbolise the loneliness and isolation of older Katy, contrasted with the tightly framed and small set design of the cosy apartment in the past.

We can also apply Barthes narrative theory to this video quite easily. There are a number of enigma codes for the audience to decode. One example is scene where the boyfriend is driving and we are given the sense that there will be a tragic outcome. Firstly, the 'present' performance shots of Katy singing and crying emotionally foreshadow the death of the boyfriend, and so we wonder at what point in the video the tragedy will happen, and how. This tension is built up in the driving scene through the use of close up shots on the boyfriends face when he finds the veil, showing that he is not looking at the road. Cross-cuts to Katy in the cupboard crying and singing with emotion heighten the tension here, signalling that the end is coming. Match action shots show the rocks on the road and we cut to the boyfriend's reaction, with diegetic sounds of the car tyres screeching as he drives off of the road.

Referential codes, or intertextuality, are also important in music video to help to communicate meaning to the audience. This video is clearly aimed at an older audience due to the references made. The flashback scenes are set in the 1960s with many examples of iconography of the time including props (the camera), costumes, and set design. The video uses the typical romantic drama plotlines which the audience are familiar with, meaning that the use of non-linear narrative structure is not confusing or disorientating. There is a reference at the end to Johnny Cash through the playing of the song 'You are my sunshine' and this links to an earlier lyric in the song which references the love of Johnny Cash and

June Carter. This is a reference that will be understood by a mainstream older audience, symbolising a great love.