

Taylor Swift, 'Bad Blood' (2015)

<https://youtu.be/Qcly9NiNbmo>

Subject content focus area

Media language

Representation

Media industries

Audiences

Contexts

Background context

- 'Bad Blood' was released in May 2015. It was the fourth single to be released from the album *1989* (2014).
- The single is a remixed version of the album track, with added guest vocals from Kendrick Lamar. It was premiered at the Billboard Music Awards.
- The video broke video-streaming service Vevo's 24-hour viewing record (accumulating 20.1 million views in its first day of release).
- It won Video of the Year and Best Collaboration at the MTV Music Awards. It also won Best Music Video Grammy Award.
- The video includes many references to popular action films of the past twenty years, contains captions and titles like a movie, and was marketed using 'teaser' posters featuring famous women from the ensemble cast, bearing the name of their character. This is a marketing technique often used in the film industry (e.g. *Pulp Fiction*) to introduce characters.
- Swift also posted stills and behind-the-scenes shots on her Instagram account to build expectations.
- Encouraged by comments by Swift on Twitter and Instagram, speculation was rife amongst fans about who the song is about. Many believed the target was Katy Perry, although the identity of the person has never been revealed.

Part 1: Starting points - Media language

- The setting for the video is modern-day London, and Swift's secret training facility beneath the streets.
- The colour palette for the video is mostly shiny and reflective black and white. As the narrative builds, more reds begin to appear, perhaps foreshadowing the change in Swift's hair colour.

The final confrontation is lit by massive explosions and fire, in contrast to the cold, metallic monochrome of the earlier shots.

- The video would be a good example of a music video that blends the conventions of performance. Though there are no conventional dance routines, but Swift does sing the song and addresses us directly, although as if we are the person with whom she has 'bad blood'.
- Though not strictly dance performances, the video does feature lots of acrobatic fight sequences that have the rhythm and grace of a dance routine. Each fight scene is also a reference to a different movie, which builds a relationship with a wide audience who would recognise these intertextual elements.
- The direct address builds intimacy, though her tone and facial expressions are angry and threatening (in contrast with Swift's 'sweet girl' image).
- Other female pop stars like Lady Gaga, Katy Perry and Rihanna change their images from video to video, playing a range of 'characters' from vampire queens to aliens. Previously, Swift had maintained a consistent visual image through her videos, but in 'Bad Blood' she does the opposite, changing costume and hair colour in every shot and creating a sexy 'kick ass' action hero character at odds with 'sweet', girl-next-door image.
- The video is a good example of *intertextuality* (when an artist 'samples' and makes reference to other media products). The title font is similar to that of *Sin City* (2005); the robot lab to *Robocop* (both 80s and more recent remake); the fight scenes at the start and in the snow reference *Kill Bill* (2003); the female agents training and preparing for battle look like similar scenes/ locations/ characters from the *Hunger Games* (2012) and *Divergent* (2014) films; and the motorbike chase refers to *Tron* (1982). By referring to such a wide range of films, the video is targeting a wider audience than might usually listen to Swift, building a relationship with them.
- Action movie editing techniques are used throughout: balletic fights scene, moving from normal speed to slow motion within one shot; the combination of long shots (to see strength, skill etc.) and close-ups (to show emotion); match-on-action to emphasise the fluid skill of the fighters; and cross-cutting between the two sides as they approach for the final confrontation.

Media contexts - Cultural

- 'Bad Blood' follows a trend amongst contemporary music videos to create something more like a feature film. The large budget, emphasis on action spectacle, and use of titles and captions construct the video as no mere piece of marketing, but as a media 'event' in itself. The teasers on social media and movie-style posters, as well as the 'premiere' during a major awards ceremony, added to the sense that this was a media 'event'.
- 'Diss tracks' are a popular form of song-writing: artists who have fallen out in 'real life' write songs attacking each other. Speculation about such songs builds audience engagement: fans take sides, and spats on social media make them feel they're involved and part of the artist's social circle.

- On recent tours, Swift has built on this connection with her fans with her #girlsquad. In her 'off-screen' life she has been photographed with leading actresses, models, musicians and writers, promoting a female solidarity. The video takes this idea and re-imagines her 'squad' as an army. This links to Dyer's 'Star Theory', where an artist's public image is consistent with her personal life, and represents values (here female power, confidence, solidarity) that the audience might share.

Part 2: Starting points - Representation

- Gender is represented in a complex manner. The video opens with two female agents easily dispatching an army of male combatants, and throughout women are portrayed as strong, aggressive, highly-skilled and able to use advanced weaponry. These are traits we might typically associate with masculinity.
- However, Swift's character and many of the other women are feminised and sexualised throughout. Many of their weapons are hidden within traditionally feminine objects (a compact mirror, a handbag). The characters' costumes are tight-fitting, with almost all the women wearing stiletto heels and thigh-length boots. While these women are presented as empowered, they are also dressed in a manner that might reflect male fantasies.
- Nearly all the women also fulfil mainstream ideas of feminine beauty: slim, athletic, long-legged, big eyes and pouting lips, long glossy hair etc. Their make-up and costumes emphasise this. Feminist approaches might argue that the females are objectified (although they are certainly not passive).
- By contrast, the main male character, played by Kendrick Lamar, is fully dressed in 'cool' urban clothes (sunglasses, baseball cap) and isn't sexualised in any way. He also seems to be in charge of the technology (a male stereotype) and is often shown in split screen with Swift, as if he is her equal.

Starting Points: Audiences

- 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 use of **direct address** and the **intertextual references** to popular culture.
- The inclusion of Cindy Crawford and the nods to *'Kill Bill'* and other films 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.
- 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.

- The rumours that the song was written about Swift's relationship with Katy Perry potentially added to the video's appeal for audiences who might enjoy the speculation and controversy.
- The **intertextual** references create pleasure for the audience. Additionally, the video uses many **conventions** from the Superhero/Sci-Fi genres which would appeal to fans of those genres. The repetition of familiar conventions engages the audience.
- According to the **Uses and Gratifications theory** the video could offer escapism, entertainment and possibly personal identification with the situation.
- Audience responses: according to the **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.

STARTING POINTS - Media industries

- At the time of the release of 'Bad Blood', Swift was signed to the independent label, Big Machine Records, and her music was distributed by Universal Music Group, one of the 'major' record companies.
- Swift had achieved mainstream success with her previous releases and was an established artist at the time of this release.
- The high budget video features many high profile performers and demonstrates **high production values** which influences audience expectations through use of CGI and visual effects.
- 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 artist's fans are called 'Swifties' - and Swift herself has trademarked this name for her various merchandise, from clothing to stationery to smartphone apps. The latter means her fans can access Swift's music (and videos, exclusive footage etc.) without using services such as Spotify and Apple. (Swift withdrew her music from Spotify for three years as the royalties that artists receive from this platform are very small and she is reported to have said 'It is my opinion that music should not be free'. (<http://bit.ly/2KuANM4>). She also planned to withhold her album '1989' from Apple Music until the company changed its policy with regard to paying royalties during subscriber trial periods.)