

Country House – Blur

(1995)



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

Focus area: Media language Representation Audiences Media contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- The single *Country House* by Blur reached number one in August 1995. It was released from *The Great Escape*; the band's fourth album.
- The music video was directed by the artist Damien Hirst and starred the actor Keith Allen, comedian Matt Lucas and model Jo Guest. The narrative follows the idea of a rich businessman who makes enough money to escape the pressures of city living by buying a country retreat.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media language

Cultural context:

The band Blur were part of the cultural phenomenon of Britpop. The genre had its origins in traditional British rock music typified by tuneful melodies over guitar riffs. The sound had been popularised by bands like the Beatles in the 1960s. The genre that celebrated and commented on British youth culture began in the early 1990s with album releases from bands like Suede. It was heavily influenced by the 'Madchester' scene, a music scene that had grown out of Manchester's nightlife. The Happy Mondays and The Stone Roses had become synonymous with the Madchester sound. Blur formed in the late 1980s. They met at London's Goldsmith College and were signed to Food Records in 1990. Within three years they dominated the Britpop scene.

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

- The video can be seen as upholding some of the classic conventions of the Britpop era. It strongly references British culture such as the **iconic** bowler hat motif and the **stereotypical** country manor house.
- **Imagery** in the video can be linked to the working classes. The **establishing shot** introduced a stereotypical London Tower block, while the *mise-en-scène* of the inside connotes a cramped council flat, with a worn leather couch, board games and dirty dishes. The audience is reminded of classic British sitcoms like *'Only Fools and Horses'*.
- Conventions of the pop music video are evident. There is **performance** to camera by the band and a **direct mode of address**. It is illustrative, according to **Goodwin's theory**, and the lyrics match the narrative.

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

- There are three distinctive **settings**: the working class flat shown through edited **medium and long shots**, the studio setting with the giant mousetrap style board game and the upper class country manor house.
- The blackened studio is often shown with a Dutch tilt to emphasise the surreal nature of the *mise-en-scène*. From 1.58 fast motion is used to **intertextualise** the style of the British comedy TV show *'Benny Hill'* which relied heavily on slapstick humour.

Consider critical perspectives: Semiotics – Roland Barthes

- The **symbolic code** of the rat is used throughout the video. A rat is shown in a close up at 0.22. This is to represent the exhausting and repetitive lifestyle that the businessman lives. Other repeated **motifs** include the dice and the skeleton signifying fate and death.
- **Cultural codes** engage the audience. There

is a monopoly style game shown from a high angle, while the characters run around on a life-size mouse trap game. Reference to the French novelist Balzac and to the drug Prozac communicates the unhappy pressurised lifestyle that the man leads.

Genre Theory – Steve Neale

- Conventions of the pop music videos are challenged by the use of the **Dutch tilt** and the surreal landscaping. Bright colours are used to further reinforce the sense of surrealism.
- The codes and conventions of Britpop are upheld through the stereotypical British representations and the social commentary.

Advanced Theory:

Structuralism – Claude Lévi-Strauss

- **Binary opposition** exists in the sense of conflict that exists in the rich and poor, and working class against the upper classes. The imagery of the **mise-en-scène** communicates the vast differences between the two classes. The working class flat is dingy with a beige colour palette while the Country House is lit with high key lighting and blue sky.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

Social context:

The 1980s had seen a change in culture with regards to how men were represented in the media. Traditional tough masculine stereotypes were still evident but there came the emergence of the ‘New Man’. This man wanted to break from the patriarchal breadwinner role and show a sensitive side. These men did chores and changed nappies.

This evolved into the ‘metrosexual’ figure of the 1990s, a man who was confident in his masculinity and wasn’t afraid to show interest in fashion and male grooming. A reaction to the metrosexual man emerged in the form of ‘lad culture’. This representation was reinforced in the media by publications such as ‘Loaded’, ‘FHM’ and ‘Maxim’. The ideology of the ‘lad’ was centred on male bonding though a shared passion for sport, pub culture and the objectification of women.

Representations in Britpop combined ideas of masculinity, but it was largely dominated by lad culture. An over confident, beer swilling swagger was a common representation in the genre.

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

- The **dress codes** of the band reflect the casual style of the 1990s. The fashion was heavily influenced by the ‘Mod’ style of the 1970s, with Parka and Harrington jackets being popular. The **body language and gesture codes** of the band signify a cheeky, roguish but charming **star image**.
- The female characters wear the **dress codes** of male fantasy figures. One wears a nurse costume, another a milk maid costume. They wear provocative costumes and red lipstick which further objectifies them.
- The exaggerated, hysterical body language of the females paints them as **passive** figures. They appear to amuse the band members by taking bubble baths with them and pouring water over them from teapots. The camera shots of the females reinforce the **male gaze** with lingering high angle shots of their cleavage (1.45).

Consider critical perspectives:

- **Stuart Hall’s theory of representation** – The codes in the video serve to reinforce a shared **ideology** of 1990s youth culture. The **dress codes**, popular culture references and social commentary create identification for the target audience.
- **David Gauntlett’s theory of identity** – Gauntlett discusses how the changing role of men is not a crisis of masculinity but becomes a problem when they pointlessly commit to the old traditional role of the strong provider.

Advanced theory:

- **Liesbet Van Zoonen’s feminist theory** – The video offers a superficial representation of women. It does not encourage more equality; it supports **patriarchal** ideas that men dominate women. The light-hearted style does go some way to soften the stereotypes.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

Social / cultural context:

Country House contributed to an ideology that existed in the 1990s. This ideology was a celebration of youth culture and patriotic values. Britpop was a genre that bridged art, music and literature. The audiences it spoke

to become part of a cultural movement.

The video has 7,142,046 views on YouTube and was nominated for the Best Music Video award at the 1996 Brit Awards. The target audience was young males, aged 15 to 30, categorized as BCD, **mainstreamer, aspirers and strugglers** in the 4C categories.

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

- One of the key **marketing strategies** for the single and the video was the highly publicised, ‘Battle of Britpop.’ This saw Blur’s record company move the release date of *Country House* to coincide with the release date of *Roll with It* by the other Britpop giant, Oasis.
- The press latched on to ‘battle’ and gleefully published the spats between the two bands. Radio 1 was re-launching its image to appeal to a younger audience and enthusiastically embraced the battle of the bands.
- The Britpop battle was won by Blur who reached the number one spot at the top of the charts.
- Damon Albarn could be said to be an **opinion leader** to the target audience as he uses the lyrics to make social observations.
- The **intellectual references** would offer pleasure

to the target audiences. While the **intertextual** references to popular culture: Benny Hill and the music video to Queen’s *Bohemian Rhapsody* appeal to a wider demographic.

Consider critical perspectives:

Reception Theory - Stuart Hall

- The **preferred reading** would be for audiences to accept the **counter hegemonic** ideas about rejecting the capitalistic system. The video promotes the idea that society is a ‘rat race’ and that ultimately kills those who embrace its ideals.
- **Oppositional views** of the video found that Blur, who came from middle class backgrounds, patronised their working class target audience.

Cultivation Theory - George Gerbner

- The media **saturation** by Britpop culture exposed the audience to a particular **ideology**. This made them susceptible to accepting the values and beliefs of the movement.
- The representation of women supported overtly sexualised stereotypes.