



## Music videos:

# Radiohead *Burn The Witch*

(dir. Chris Hopewell, 2016)

### Overview

- Radiohead are an English rock band who have been active since the mid-1980s. *Burn The Witch* was the lead single released from the 2016 album *A Moon Shaped Pool*.
- Radiohead are known for experimenting with a range of different styles. The lead singer and lyricist (Thom Yorke) is known for writing in a pithy, stream of consciousness-style. Yorke has stated that many of his lyrics are motivated by anger, expressing his political and environmental concerns and written as “a constant response to doublethink”.
- The video for *Burn The Witch* was directed by Chris Hopewell, who had worked with the band in the past. Radiohead have a history of producing videos with a unique narrative hook or style (for example, the promos for *Just*, *No Surprises* and *Paranoid Android*). It was animated by the Bristol-based Jacknife Prints and took two weeks to make. *Burn The Witch* was released on YouTube in May 2016.
- The video includes very specific references to 1960-70s UK media:
  - The stop-motion animation used, as well as the character and setting design, are direct references to a series of children’s programmes made by the BBC in the 1960s and known as the *Trumptonshire Trilogy*. These were series of short episodic stories set in the fictional English county of Trumptonshire. The series tended to depict an idealised version of rural England. Some of the characters in the video appear to directly reference characters in the series (for example, the mayor) although the character design is different. Episodes of the series can be found on YouTube.

- o The more ritualistic aspects of the video reference *The Wicker Man* (1973), a folk horror film in which a naïve policeman investigates the disappearance of a young girl on a remote island. Several incidents from the film (for example, the celebration, the folk dance and particularly the final moments) are directly represented in the video.
- At the time of writing, the video has over 40 million views on YouTube.
- Yorke has stated that the lyrics, which were written over a decade before the song was recorded, reference a campaign by the (now defunct) *News of the World* newspaper to publish the names and addresses of sex offenders in 2000.
- The video has been interpreted in several different ways:
  - o As a criticism of authority and a warning against groupthink.
  - o As a warning about mass surveillance or the threat to open discussion posed by the self-policing users of social media.
- o As an attack on the rhetoric of “traditional” values used by right-wing politicians such as Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, and members of the UK Independence Party.
  - After Trump was elected US president on 8 November 2016, Yorke tweeted lyrics from the song and linked to its music video, interpreted as a criticism of Trump’s policies.
- o Animator Virpi Kettu, who worked on the video, interpreted the song as a comment on the European migrant crisis and scapegoating of Muslims. The visual style was deliberately lighter in tone than the song, as Radiohead “wanted the video to contrast with what they’re playing and to wake people up a bit”.
- The video depicts the visit of an inspector to a rural village during what appears to be a May Day celebration. He is shown a series of more and more disturbing events until he is finally asked to climb into a giant wicker man, in which he is locked and appears to be burned alive. However, the end of the video reveals that he has escaped.

This factsheet introduces *Burn The Witch* as a case study to explore media language and media representations, including a consideration of the social and cultural contexts that influence how media language is used to construct representations. You are reminded that two music videos should be studied as part of the OCR A-Level course. *Burn The Witch* should be partnered with one of the three videos on **List A**.

## Section B: Media Language and Representation (Media Messages, Paper 1 Question 5)

Sample exam question:

*‘Explain how representations in music videos are chosen to promote the artist(s). Refer to one of the music videos you have studied to support your answer.’<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Taken from H409/01 Sample Assessment Material







## Media language

Here are some key points to consider.

### Communicating meanings

Here you could consider how the various interpretations of the video, particularly Yorke's comments about the lyrics and his explicit link to the election of Donald Trump, align with the visual codes seen in the video. Music videos can communicate multiple meanings using elliptical, fragmentary editing as well as symbolism and connotation.

This video follows a linear narrative structure, although there are several layers of meaning. The video opens and closes on a bird singing. The narrative cuts between the official being driven in a car and the action in the village, including a number of shots which foreshadow later events (the gallows being dressed with flowers, a carpenter working on the wicker man). The mayor greets the official and shows him a series of gradually more and more disturbing sights culminating in the reveal of the giant wicker man. The end of the video suggests that the official has been killed, although watching until after the song has finished shows that he survived.

It might be discussed how the director uses the modes of language associated with music video (elements of performance, ellipses, visuals referring directly to lyrical content) to create meaning, particularly given the band themselves do not appear and all elements are fully controlled by the animation team. The video might be considered in relation to the very dark humour of the visuals and the building menace of the lyrics and music. Is there evidence to support the various interpretations outlined above? Why might Yorke have explicitly used the video to comment on the victory of Trump, whose

success was seen by many as a negative thing? Are Virpi Kettu's ideas about the video's meaning born out by what is presented?

The structure of the video and how it combines media language elements could also be considered. The video follows a linear narrative format with a very clear beginning, middle and end. An elliptical structure is used with fades through black connoting the passage of time (this technique was also used in the *Trumptonshire* cartoons), which creates a sense of a longer period than the four minutes of the track. The world is deliberately garish, with saturated colours, and a simplistic design which reflects the world of children's television being pastiche, creating a contrast with the grotesque and horrific events depicted. Reasons for these choices might be discussed, as might some of the other media language elements in the video (significant moments such as the red cross being painted on the doorway; the model village with the little versions of the mayor and the official; the sword dance; the display of food with the bleeding pie; the reveals of the gallows; the wicker man).

Given that the video appears to have been created using an analogue animation technique which is at least fifty years old, it could be argued that the promo offers a counterpoint to more technically advanced videos. The video has been shot at a 4:3 aspect ratio, which is atypical of most videos shot since the 1990s. However, it does work to replicate the *Trumptonshire* shows, as this was the aspect ratio of all television at that time. The footage appears to have had film grain and imperfections added to make it seem authentic. The reasons for these choices might be discussed.

Audience interpretation of the video might be considered. There are over 21,000 comments on the official YouTube posting of the video, so it has clearly had an impact. A selection of these might be explored in relation to the media language of the video (although many of the comments focus on the music rather than the visuals). Based on Yorke's comments, the song has a very particular meaning in relation to modern witch hunts, with the original inspiration being updated over time, depending upon the social and political situation. It might also be worth considering the implications of a video made in the mid-2010s which references a television show which has not been broadcast since the mid-1980s and which was made in the 1960s; how might different audiences respond to this?

As noted above, the lyrics have a clear ideological point from Yorke's perspective, to do with modern witch hunts. The video is a little less clear in its imagery, although it does suggest possible ideological positions and viewpoints.

- The juxtaposition of the official in his car with the villagers doing their jobs suggests a possible distrust of external authority (although the mayor, an archetypal authority figure, is clearly in charge).
- The distribution of jobs in the village seems to conform very much to essentialist gender roles.
- The traditional band, the festivities, and the shot of the (apparent) maypole connote values of rural Britishness and pageantry.
- The name of the inn ("The Speared Boar") is possibly a reference to the 1954 book *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, which postulates the belief that everyone is capable of great evil given the right circumstances; the video plays with this idea.
- The mayor's pride in the various gruesome events contrasting with the official's shock; given that the song appears to be from the point of view of those enforcing the rules, there may be some discussion about how audience sympathies are being directed.
- The shot of the gallows dressed with flowers creates an interesting ideological juxtaposition.
- The implications of the final sequence and the ironic pull-back from the waving villagers juxtaposed with the burning wicker man and (we are led to believe) the death of the official creates a question of perspective; just what is the message here?







## Codes and conventions

Here you could consider how *Burn The Witch* fits into the broader category of music video as a form, as well as narrative video as a genre. The visuals do not directly relate to the lyrics, although some elements are reflected (for example, the line “Red crosses on wooden doors”, although this occurs some time after the shot featuring the cross being painted on the door; the line “If you float you burn” which again occurs after the shot of the ducking stool; the link between the ending and the title). It appears that the narrative in the video is more thematically linked to the track. There is a clear narrative through-line which could be considered in the context of other narrative videos (as well as Radiohead’s earlier videos, particularly those for *Just* and *Paranoid Android*). The lyrics (which are themselves quite ambiguous) act more as a counterpoint to rather than a commentary on the narrative.

Genre interpretation will be driven by whether audiences have awareness of the video’s influences, primarily stop-motion animation, *The Wicker Man* and the intertextual references to the *Trumptonshire* series. The video will have different connotations for audiences who have this cultural knowledge considering the huge narrative contrasts between the video’s content/ideology and that of its inspiration. Similarly, some iconography will only fully make sense to audiences who have a broader knowledge of the folk horror genre (especially, as noted, *The Wicker Man*, so audiences “in the know” will interpret the video in a very different manner to those who have not seen the original film).

The fact that the band is absent, although unconventional for music video, which is usually artist-centric, is not particularly unusual for Radiohead, whose videos often depart from the norm. Taken

as an example of music video, the promo adheres to conventions of music videos by including a self-contained narrative (the official’s visit to the village) and so in this regard there is evidence of generic convention, albeit one which is subverted by some of the imagery included within the narrative.

Taken as an example of a folk horror pastiche, there is a clear (if subversive) link between the lyrics (e.g. “red crosses on wooden doors”), the music and the increasingly dark nature of the imagery seen which is typical of the genre, although it might take audiences a few viewings to fully decode these given how much detail the video contains, making it more of a challenge for audiences to interpret compared to more conventional examples of the form.

The video could therefore be seen as somewhat subversive or countertypical. Given that Radiohead are primarily seen as an alternative band (despite their longevity), it could be argued that this is actually a fairly stereotypical example of their output.

The video plays with a range of genre conventions, which are hybridised within the video. These include:

- children’s television
- folk horror
- animation
- surrealism.

The reasons for these choices, their effects and significance could be discussed. It is notable that permission was not asked from the creators of the original series, who have been quoted as saying that the video “tarnished the brand” and even breached copyright.

## Intertextuality

There are evident intertextual references throughout the video. Some of these are obvious; some are linked more to archetypes. A few possible intertextual elements which might be discussed are:

- As noted, the multiple references to the *Trumptonshire* cartoons: *Camberwick Green*, *Trumpton* and *Chigley*. Specific characters from these shows such as Windy Miller, the mayor and Mrs Cobbit the flower seller are implicitly referenced.
- Certain moments from *The Wicker Man* are re-enacted. Versions of the masks worn by the characters in the sword dance appear in the film; the costume worn by the girl who starts the fire reflects the costume worn by one of the women who captures the victim in the film; the notion of a damsel in distress being used to hook the victim appears in both. The focus on the boxes of tomatoes is a reference to the main reason for the plot of *The Wicker Man* (the crops on the island have failed leading to the need for a human sacrifice); the abundant crops in the promo suggests that things are going well for the villagers.

- “The Speared Boar” may be a reference to the book *Lord of the Flies*, given that a significant moment in the book involves some of the main characters spearing and killing a boar.
- The model village may be a reference to the film *Hot Fuzz* (2007) which pastiched folk horror (among many other genres), the climax of which featured a model village. It might also be noted that *Hot Fuzz* focuses on a character from the city who comes to live in a rural village with a dark secret.
- The reference to red crosses on doorways links to traditional ideas about how plague victims were identified in medieval times.
- There is possibly a link between the lyric about “sing a song of sixpence” which refers to a nursery rhyme in which some quite brutal events take place involving birds and pies, given the appearance of those elements in the video.

As with any discussion of intertextuality, it is always possible that audiences will identify intertextual elements which were not intended by the producers, while some elements may have references which are not immediately clear (for example, the small waving figures in the model village; the reference to Jobes on the boxes of tomatoes).





## Media representations

### Processes of representation

Given that Radiohead do not appear in the video and that the entire project was created by animators, there is very little self-representation in the video. The band are obviously linked by association, and Yorke's lyrics and vocals as well as the slightly dissonant music act as a soundtrack to the video, but the visual representations are clearly disconnected from the band. Discussions of selection and combination in the creation of representation might include:

- The representation of the official at the start in contrast with the representation of the village.
- The gradual shift in attitude of the official from pompous to condescending to shocked to terrified – how does this represent authority?
- The representations of the characters he meets and particularly their reaction to him – most treat him with respect and deference whereas he tends to respond with shock and negativity. The character of the mayor comes across as likeable and patient (in so much as a silent animated figure can) – how does this represent ideas of tolerance and acceptance?
- Although (as the video reveals) the villagers are planning to sacrifice the official, much of what is represented appears to be harmless and community-oriented activity (albeit with some very dark undertones) – what is the effect of this contradictory representation?
- The lack of representation of any people of colour, LGBTQI+ or other minority group characters – is this a deliberate oversight, an attempt to replicate the actual lack of representation within the source material or a comment on the comparatively parochial nature of rural England?

As noted, the animator Virpi Kettu suggested that Radiohead “wanted the video to ... wake people up a bit”. Yorke's comments about the inspiration for, and subsequent use of the video to comment on then contemporary politics, imply a connection to the real world. Discussions of realism and versions of reality could explore how successful (or otherwise) he has been. For example:



- Can a comparatively primitive form of animation ever be regarded as realistic?
- Do the more surreal or darkly ironic elements (the woman trapped in her house; the couple playing with the ducking stool; the two little versions of the main characters in the model village) enhance or detract from the realism?
- What effect does the use of very unrealistic animated flames have on what would be, in reality, quite a horrific moment (not to mention the pull-back of the camera on the waving villagers,

- something of a trope for children's animation)?
- Does the bookending of the video with the birdsong add or detract from the "realism"?
- Could folk horror as a genre be said to be realistic?

It might be discussed how successful the video is in depicting, as Kettu claims it does, the European migrant crisis and scapegoating of Muslims, since neither of these elements are overt. The combination of surrealistic elements as well as the rich visuals and motifs are worth exploring.



## The effect of contexts on representations/ media contexts

The social and cultural contexts influencing the video should be discussed.

Social contexts might include:

- urban vs rural
- tradition vs progress
- (figurative) witch hunts
- fear of "the other"
- mistrust of authority
- abuses of power.

Cultural contexts might include:

- Radiohead as an ongoing cultural force and their other videos
- the intertextual references mentioned above and their significance (or otherwise)
- the implications of using children's programmes in the way the video does.

Discussion might be had of the way contemporary contexts influence the representation of society in the video, since there is obviously an attempt to make the piece look as if it was shot in the 1960s. The

representation of society as monocultural rather than multicultural; the traditional hierarchical roles (both leads are male; the victim characters apart from at the end are female); the very traditional and old-fashioned depiction of the world: all of these would appear to be contradictory to the world in which the song was made (and indeed to Radiohead's seemingly liberal/anti-authority beliefs).

There is also some scope to discuss the history of animation in music video as well as in the broader media. Animated music videos have been made since the 1980s (for example, Dire Straits' *Money For Nothing* uses a very primitive CGI while Peter Gabriel's *Sledgehammer* uses stop-motion); how animation can represent an artist, given the amount of control it provides, might be worth exploring.

## Representational issues

In some respects, the video makes use of several features which may be stereotypical or archetypal. Given the ambiguity of both the lyrics and the video, there is clearly a lot which might be discussed in relation to what is seen and whether they are deliberately stereotypical or being used for ironic effect:



- the outfits worn by the various characters, particularly the official, the mayor and the “yokel” with the alcohol bottle and straw in his mouth
- the depiction of the village as a rural stereotype
- the depiction of a patriarchal society
- the notion of rural people behaving in an unconventional and savage way (demonstrated by the official’s reactions)
- the official escaping at the end
- the implication that the woman in the house is a witch
- the implication that the woman in the sword dance is going to be sacrificed.

Similarly, the representation (or lack of representation) of social groups could be considered; as noted elsewhere, the video is very narrow in its social representations.

There are a couple of moments which might be discussed in relation to misrepresentation.

- The official is represented as being quite an unsympathetic character and yet is the victim at the end – how sorry do the audience feel for him (the equivalent character in *The Wicker Man* is a lot more sympathetic).
- The villagers are (generally) represented in a positive light – particularly the mayor – and yet are about to burn a man alive – how are the audience supposed to respond?
- The filmmakers did not get permission to use the iconography of *Trumptonshire*, to the frustration of the family of the man who made it – should their opinion that it “taints the brand” be considered; has their intellectual property been misrepresented?

There are a wide range of ideological values which might be ascribed to the video, depending upon the point of view of the audience.

## Audience positioning and responses

Some discussion should be undertaken relating to how audiences might respond to and interpret the representations. As noted above, an interesting activity might be to consider the various comments on the YouTube video, as these offer first-hand reflections on the impact the video has had. For example, one commentator stated that “It’s interesting how you only see the mouth of the lady in the house whose door is being marked with an X (symbolises witch) and then also the town inspector’s mouth when he is being burned alive. The bird at the beginning and end is oblivious to the goings on in the town so the mouth is shown. To me I guess this means that all the other townsfolk, as if possessed by something unseen, won’t speak out against whatever strangeness is occurring in the town, labelling any outsider or whoever tries to speak up (lady in house) as a witch, hence burn the witch.”

Discussions might also be had about potential audience responses to the video. How might the various social groups represented in the video consider their representations? What criticisms are being aimed at authority and those who accept it? Is it a fair depiction of rural England?

## Academic ideas and arguments

While there is NO REQUIREMENT to study the set academic ideas and arguments in relation to music videos, this might be an interesting opportunity to discuss some elements of theory. You could consider introducing applying the following theoretical perspectives at A Level.

### Semiology – Barthes

The video includes symbolism (the bowler hat and black suit, the mayor’s chain, the gallows/maypole). There is certainly opportunity to consider denotation, connotation and myth, particularly since the video



does seem to be trying to challenge some conventional connotations (for example, the maypole as gallows; the celebration of life become a celebration of death; the use of iconic children's television to tell a horror story; the connotations of the lyrics).

## Narratology – Todorov

The video appears to follow Todorov's ideas of narrative structure, although there are a lot of unanswered questions: why has the official come? Why is the woman locked in the house? What is the significance of the sword dance? How does the official escape? It might be considered that the video challenges expectation in terms of narrative enigma since many questions remain unanswered (and can never be – something of a motif of Radiohead, given the end of their video for *Just*).

## Structuralism – Levi-Strauss

The video includes several elements which link to Levi-Strauss's binary opposition (the city vs the country; sophistication vs primitivism; modernism vs tradition). Some of the imagery in the video also relies on binary opposites for its effects (the woman in the house who may or may not be a witch; the maypole which is a gallows; the bleeding pie; the reveal of the wicker man).

## Theories of Gender Performativity – Butler

The video clearly depicts an essentialist world which, although it may reflect gender roles in the 1960s, is clearly out of date in the 2010s. What is the effect of this? Will an audience not versed in the social politics of the 1960s interpret the video as sexist? Is there a deliberate commentary on gender roles? Did the filmmakers decide to sacrifice representational equality for cultural verisimilitude? Does this influence how the video might be interpreted?

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## Sources

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[Radiohead video breaching copyright, say Trumpton creator's family \(theguardian.com\)](#)

[Decoding the Politics in Radiohead's "Burn the Witch" Video \(pitchfork.com\)](#)

[Thom Yorke uses Radiohead's "Burn the Witch" to comment on the ill-fated 2016 election \(consequence.net\)](#)

[Radiohead Artist Stanley Donwood Shares "Burn the Witch" Behind-the-Scenes Shots \(pitchfork.com\)](#)

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[Trumptonshire \(wikipedia.org\)](#)



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