



## Music videos:

# Emeli Sandé *Heaven*

(dir. Jake Nava, 2011)

### Overview

- Emeli Sandé is a singer-songwriter from Scotland. *Heaven* was her debut solo single, released in 2011.
- Sandé was born in Sunderland in the North East of England. Her father is Zambian while her mother is English. The family moved to Scotland when she was four.
- The video for *Heaven* was directed by Jake Nava. It was filmed in Bethnal Green (East London) which was where Sandé lived at the time. The singer has said, "We wanted to capture a real British vibe and keep it really simple to emphasise the lyrics."
- Sandé has described the song as being about how youth is over too quickly and how young people are easily influenced by friends, family, and the media. The song debates whether these influences are good or bad. She stated, "Heaven came from a conversation I was having with my producer, it's harder for our generation because things move so fast, and how there's so many influences and avenues, and he said, you just have to keep your heart clean. It was the imagery of a clean or dirty heart that inspired me, and we wrote it in about half an hour. I knew I wanted it to be my first song from the off."
- At the time of writing, the video has nearly 25 million views on YouTube.
- The video includes several motifs which recur throughout. Most notably these include religious iconography (a cathedral building, an image of a statue of Mary, references to God) as well a social iconography reflecting class, age, and race. The video is tied together with Sandé's performance.

## Overview (continued)

- The video also includes many shots of the sky, which is symbolic in several different ways as well as reflecting the title of the song, given traditional ideas about heaven.
- The video has been treated to give it the effect of an analogue film. There are several points where the image is over-exposed or where artefacts and grain can be seen on the footage. The beginning and end of the video suggest an old film reel

pre-roll, while the ending suggest a film reaching the end of its spool.

- The video includes a range of shots, camera angles and camera movement. A great deal of the video is open to interpretation since there is no clear narrative through-line – the video combines elements of performance with a conceptual reflection of place characterised through its people and buildings.
- The song includes elements of gospel, trip hop and breakbeat.

This factsheet introduces *Heaven* 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. *Heaven* should be partnered with one of the three videos on **List B**.

## 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 you might consider.

### Communicating meanings

Here you could explore how Sandé's descriptions of the video/song relate to 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 does not have a clear narrative structure (broadly, it could suggest a day in the life of a city, but this is not clearly signposted). The video opens with a montage of clips introducing a range of "characters", some of whom will recur throughout the video. Occasionally the camera cuts back to Sandé, or to shots of the environment.

Although Sandé is shot in medium close-up, which connotes her significance, other characters are similarly shot. Sandé is seen inside a room, next to but not looking out of a window. This intercuts with Sandé shot in low angle with a religious building behind her and an emphasis on the sky. Over the course of the video, Sandé appear in a range of different locations, sometimes in the same shot as other characters but often isolated. The video includes a wide range of shots which suggest, but do not explain, possible situations involving the various people featured. The end of the video shows Sandé leaving the shot after her final line, "then I'm gone". It might be discussed how Sandé uses the modes of language associated with music video (elements of performance, ellipses, visuals referring directly to lyrical content) to create meaning and why these images have been chosen, since they clearly have significance.

The structure of the video and how it combines media language elements could also be considered. The opening moments ground the video in a gritty urban world, emphasised using the film grading effect. The urban environment is clearly highlighted early in the video by being seen through the window behind Sandé and behind the man in the headscarf. The woman in the red dress is walking into what is possibly a subway tunnel, a typical urban feature. As the video goes on, a broad range of urban settings are explored: pathways under bridges; rainy night-time streets; residential squares; buses. Reasons for these choices of setting might be discussed, as might some of the other media language elements in the video (the various close-ups of the characters and their expressions, the manner in





which Bethnal Green has been shot, the way that Sandé occasionally interacts with the other characters, the fast-paced cutting to create juxtapositions, the points where Sandé mimes particular lines – why have these been chosen?)

The use of CGI might be considered in relation to how developing technologies affect media language. It is unlikely that the video was shot using an analogue film camera so therefore the footage will have been treated to look like it was. There are several points during the video where “imperfections” can be seen, and there are some points where the image seems over-exposed or washed out. Why might the producers have chosen to do this? Is there a link with the lyrics (for example, the repeated line “lasts too long”?) Does it suggest that the video itself is a historical artefact, or that Sandé is recording a snapshot of history?

Audience interpretation of the video might be considered. There are over 4500 comments on the official YouTube posting of the video. However, virtually none of these refer to the video; mostly, they focus on the song and the singer. Does this suggest that the video has not had much of an effect on the audience? There are several analyses of the video online which might be explored, although it is noted that most of these are speculative.

The iconography within the video suggests (but does not absolutely state) an ideological position for Sandé.

This element could be discussed, possibly in relation to the point about audience above. Some possible areas for consideration might include:

- The effect of the Christian symbolism within the video, emphasised by shots of the cathedral, the statue of Mary, the angel statue, the rosary and crucifix, the repeated motif of wings, etc.
- The shot of the phrase, ‘Fear is your only God’ written on the dirty window.
- The repeated shots of the sky in conjunction with Sandé singing, “Heaven”.
- The use of lens flare and sunlight – what might these connote?
- The shots of Sandé framed against the blue sky with the church silhouetted in the background.
- The over-the-shoulder shots showing Sandé looking at the light at the end of a tunnel with a silhouetted figure in the distance – what might this signify?
- The juxtaposition of the woman in the red dress and the man in the blue top – is this a comment on wealth and poverty?
- Many of the characters look dissatisfied (for example, the girl stood against the wall with the wings drawn on it) or pensive (the man in the bed; Sandé herself); although there is the occasional shot including joy (the children on the swing) most of the characters seem to be somewhat unhappy – what viewpoint is being suggested here?

## Codes and conventions

Here you could consider how *Heaven* fits into the broader category of music video as a form, as well as performance/concept video as a genre. The video clearly shows the standard relationship between music and images (for example, the final shot of Sandé leaving the frame as she sings, "Then I'm gone"; the repeated juxtaposition of Sandé singing, "Oh heaven" with the shots of the sky). There is a vague conceptual through-line which could be considered in the context of other conceptual videos, although it is unclear how this might be interpreted (beyond being a snapshot of Bethnal Green in the early 2010s) – the montage of shots appears more symbolic of the tone of the track and the lyrics than any specific meaning. The video has an expressionistic quality (emphasised by the number of out-of-focus texture shots and disjointed juxtapositions) which invites an audience to come up with its own interpretation.

The video could be seen as being conventional for both the genre and as a music video (a performance which intercuts lip sync with imagery connected by theme) and so meeting audience expectation.

The urban landscape setting of the music video is conventional for a track of this genre; the shots of the artist in a range of urban locations juxtaposed with a skyscape surrounded by nature could be identified by the audience as an attempt to create a conventional "star image". The choice of shots focusing on the artist – close-ups/ECUs/low angle – are conventional for music videos and would not challenge expectation. The editing juxtaposes the performance with disconnected images of urban life; again, these are all typical for

music video and adhere to generic expectation. Editing to the beat is also conventional.

The depiction of characters reinforces stereotypical views about society – a white female is shot as though she is emotionally hurt; images of children playing/people walking/dancing/praying – all create a conventional sense of conceptual structure which would not challenge audience expectation and which link to the idea of music video as an interpretation of the track (albeit one which is not fixed).

The use of religious iconography perhaps signifies something spiritual (for example, the church window or the tattoo on the man's back of angel's wings and images of the crucifix); this might be seen to be symbolic and linked to the title/lyrics (as are the various shots of the sun breaking through clouds and Sandé's emotive performance, both of which connote "heaven") another convention of music video. Reasons for these choices and the effects they have could be discussed in relation to the broader landscape of how genres evolve and change.

The video plays with a range of genre conventions, which (although they are not explicit) are suggested by the imagery within the video. These include:

- social realism
- religious redemption
- documentary.

The reasons for these choices, their effects and significance could be discussed. Due to the lack of a clear narrative, it must be emphasised that any discussion is likely to focus on speculation and interpretation.

## Intertextuality

There are few obvious direct intertextual references within the video, although some imagery has an archetypal/stereotypical quality. A few possible intertextual elements which might be discussed are:

- Sandé's St Christopher necklace and the bright lights around her, while she is dressed in black could suggest an angelic representation, or that she is a 'fallen angel'.
- The woman in the red dress is an archetype of beauty/sensuality (see also the video for *Stop Where You Are*, where the singer wears a similar dress, or *The Matrix*).
- The urban environment could be intertextual with any number of film or TV programmes, although given the ubiquity of London as a location, this is almost inevitable.
- "Fear is your only God" is a lyric from the track *Vietnow* by rock band Rage Against The Machine.

## Media representations

### Processes of representation

There are a huge number of representations within the video which might be explored, and which might be considered significant. A few which might be discussed are:

- The representation of Bethnal Green and the choice of shots – is it represented as being attractive, dangerous, poor, undesirable?
- The representations of the female characters – the woman in the red dress (a similar shot is repeated twice), the woman on the bus, the young woman with the angel wings, Sandé herself.
- The representations of the male characters – the man with the headscarf, the elderly man in extreme close-up, the man in the bed, the man with the wings tattooed on his back.
- The representation of religion – is this positive, negative, or ambiguous?
- The focus on isolation in public spaces (many of the characters appear alone even in the crowded urban environment).

Sandé's self-representation might be considered. For example:

- The significance of Sandé's black dress, which has connotations of darkness but also religious vestments.
- Sandé's jewellery, which suggests religious belief (or stereotypical femininity).
- Sandé's positioning of herself as sometimes a part of/sometimes isolated from the world inhabited by the other characters.
- Sandé's juxtaposition of herself with "heaven" in the low-angle shots where we are invited to look up to her.





- Sandé's being shot in close-up/extreme close-up at certain points in the video.
- Sandé's emotive performance.

Sandé stated that she wanted the video to "capture a real British vibe". Discussions of what "a real British vibe" means could explore how successful (or otherwise) she has been. For example:

- Is it clear that the video is set in Britain? There are occasional iconographic elements – a red post box, glancing shot of a Transport for London logo, the signage on the street – but in general the setting is quite anonymous.
- The video clearly shows a multi-ethnic environment – what might this suggest about Sandé's perception of Britain?
- The grading of the video and some of the costumes (for example, the woman on the bus in the opening montage, the woman in the red dress) have a retro quality which suggests the 1970s or 1980s – might this be a deliberate representation of Britain as somehow being caught in the past, or might it be a subtle reference to the track's riff on James Brown's 1970 track *Funky Drummer* (the rhythm of which has been used by many other tracks). Sandé has said, "A lot of people when they first hear it immediately think early '90s, that kind of era, strings with the 'Funky Drummer' underneath them, quite epic sounding I guess."
- Given that in 2011 around 70% of the UK population were believers in some form of religion (according to that year's census), what might Sandé be suggesting about the relationship between Britain and religious belief (around 65% identified as Christian at the time)?

- Does the video create a realistic representation of Britain? Does the video suggest that this representation of urban London is the "real British vibe"?
- Is Sandé suggesting that she is a curator of, or simply a product of, the "real British vibe"?

It might be discussed how successful the video is in depicting the experience of minority groups in 21st century Britain. Considering the huge number of different social groups which appear in the video from a range of ethnicities, ages and social classes, a significant amount of time could be spent considering how and why these groups were chosen, and how the video represents them through juxtaposition and comparison. A few possible areas for consideration include:

- The woman in the red dress juxtaposed with the man in the doorway.
- Sandé juxtaposed with the old, weathered man in extreme close-up.
- The juxtaposition of the man in the hood who looks directly at the camera and the man in the bed who stares at the ceiling.
- The juxtaposition of the smiling children on the swing and child in the pushchair in the rain (and later the child on the stairs who looks directly into the camera).
- The shot of the street with a character in the distance carrying a large cross juxtaposed with a shot of a girl/woman in a white dress intercut by the shot of an angel statue.
- The shot of a (homeless?) person under a blanket juxtaposed with a shot of the Mary statue.

## The effect of contexts on representations/ media contexts

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

Social contexts might include:

- poverty
- social isolation
- religion and faith
- social deprivation
- teenage experience
- family.

Cultural contexts might include:

- the invention of Sandé as an artist (this was her first video).
- London as a location.

Discussion might be had of the way contemporary contexts influence the representation of society in the video, since there seems to be a conscious effort on the part of the producers to explore typical social urban tropes. The video appears to suggest a slightly negative representation of this environment – characters' expressions suggest resignation, unhappiness, or despair. However, there are also images of hope (the light through the clouds, the light through the window, the positive connotations of religion). The urban environment is dishevelled (scaffolding, graffiti) and overwhelmed by tall buildings; the churchyards are overgrown. The sky, however, is bright and clean.

There is also some scope to discuss the history of religious representation in music video as well as in the broader media. Videos such as Madonna's *Papa Don't Preach*, Beyoncé's *Heaven* or Lady Gaga's *Judas* might be explored. It does appear that, at certain points in this video, quite a traditional representation of heaven is being offered. There are several low-angle shots depicting Sandé in front of religious locations. The shots are graded (and possibly saturated) to emphasise bright colours and sunny skies. This could be read as a stereotypical positive representation of heaven/God.

## Representational issues

The video makes use of several features which may be stereotypical or archetypal. Interpretations appears to be ambiguous. Elements which might be explored include:

- Sandé's representation of herself considering the somewhat vague nature of the lyrics – how are the audience meant to feel about her?
- How Sandé's performance represents her: when singing, she has a very serious expression; during the chorus where she sings "Oh, Heaven", she gestures skyward; for much of the song she does not address the camera (is there any significance in the moments where she does?).
- The various settings: the urban setting, with its emphasis on street life; the focus on people in deprived areas; locations such as streets, parks, and housing estates; the various shots of Sandé in different places – the juxtaposition of the field with flowers, the street, the rooftop, and the room.
- The representations of the various people depicted: there is a documentary quality which suggests that they are real people experiencing a range of emotions. How is the audience meant to interpret this? With empathy/pity/frustration/something else?
- The representation of diversity and city life, with its associations with issues of poverty, class, and race/ethnicity. This can be seen by the repeated shots of the homeless, children in decrepit environments, dilapidated streets, teenagers smoking and the general sense of resignation, frustration, or misery on the faces of those featured. As noted elsewhere, there are occasional shots which suggest a positive representation: children laughing as they play.
- Whether there is a sense that Sandé is represented as going on some sort of "journey" – is she engaging with this world, commenting on it or just visiting it? Is it significant that she lived in Bethnal Green at the time?
- The representation of religion, particularly the stereotypical iconography – is this being used in a respectful, ironic, or symbolic way?

Similarly, the representation of social groups could be considered. These include:

- the representation of (single) women
- the representation of women/men of colour
- the representation of children
- the representation of parents
- the representation of different age groups.



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

- Some commentators have suggested that the woman in the red dress could be interpreted in a negative way – is this a fair representation?
- The shot of the character under the bridge connotes an air of menace – are they a threat?
- The shot of the children staring into the camera towards the end of the video – is this a positive or a negative representation of their world?

## 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. However, most of these address the song and not the video.

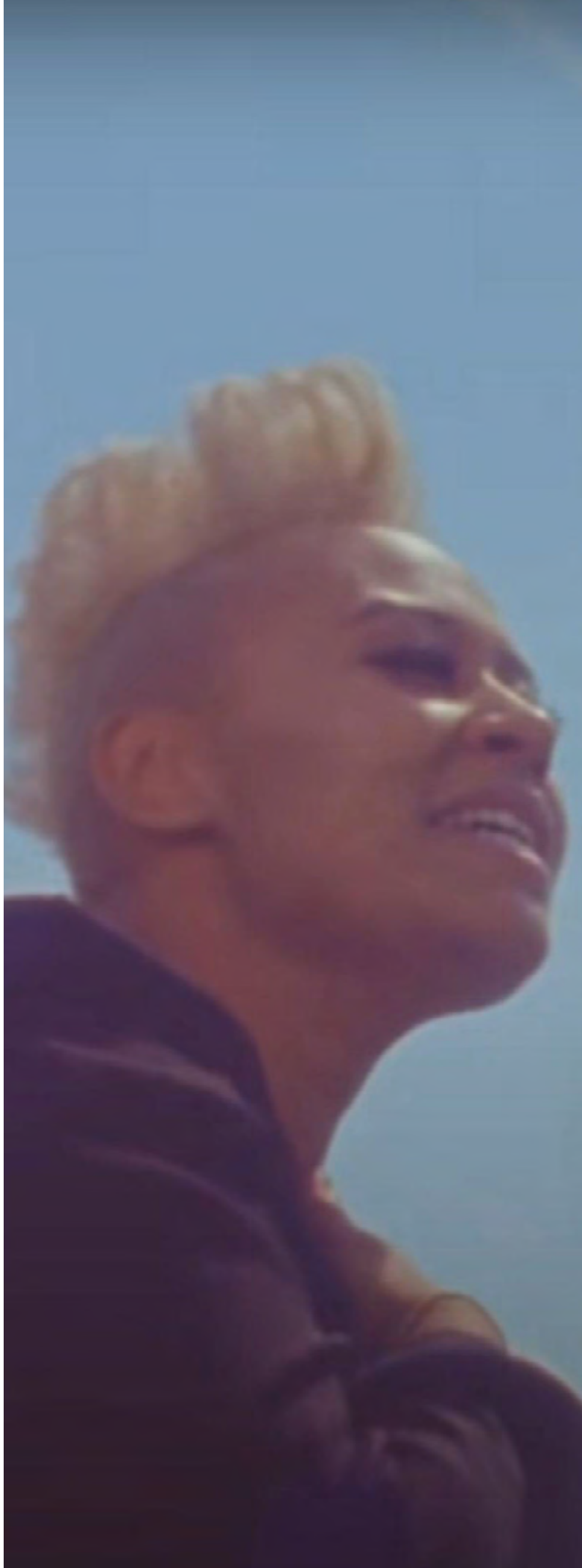
Discussions might also be had about potential audience responses to the video. How might the various social groups represented in the video consider their representations? How might people who do not live in urban London interpret the imagery? How are the audience being positioned to respond? What about those who do not accept or agree with the religious iconography – does the video exclude them? How might those who actually lived in Bethnal Green at the time feel about it?

## 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 St Christopher medallion, the cross, the light breaking through the clouds). There is certainly potential to consider denotation, connotation and myth, particularly as the video does seem to be reinforcing conventional connotations (particularly relating to religious imagery but also the representation of the inner city).



## Structuralism – Levi Strauss

The video includes a range of binary opposites – light/dark; sun/rain; wealth/poverty. There might be opportunities to discuss how audiences could interpret these elements and whether this offers an insight into any ideological stance or deeper meaning to the video. Is religion represented in a binary way and if not, why not?

## Gender Performativity – Butler

The video contains a range of representations of women and men. Some of the women are represented as performing their traditional roles (mother/object of the male gaze) while others seem to subvert it. Similarly, some of the male characters appear to be conforming to their essentialist roles although more seem to be presented in a counter-typical way. How might this influence interpretation of the video?

## Ethnicity, and Post-Colonial Theory – Gilroy

Given that Sandé is a woman of colour, and the video features a wide range of ethnicities, some discussion might be made of whether the video challenges, supports or ignores 'post-colonial melancholia'. Is there significance in shots of Sandé juxtaposed with buildings created during the Empire? Are the shots of the downtrodden residents of Bethnal Green a criticism of the Black experience in 21st Century Britain, or just a realistic representation of the "British vibe"?

## Sources

[Emeli Sandé - Heaven](#) (YouTube)

[Emeli Sandé's heavenly success story started 10 years ago with her version of events](#) (pressandjournal.co.uk)

[Emeli Sandé interview: 'I want to give my best songs away'](#) (digitalspy.com)

[Q&A: Emeli Sandé](#) (completemusicupdate.com)

[Heaven \(Emeli Sandé song\)](#) (wikipedia.org)

[Heaven by Emeli Sandé](#) (songfacts.com)



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