



Music videos:

Lil Nas X *SUN GOES DOWN*

(dir. Lil Nas X/Psycho Films, 2021)

Overview

- Lil Nas X (real name Montero Lamar Hill) is an American rapper/artist (and former internet personality). *SUN GOES DOWN* (stylised with all caps) was a single release from his first album (*Montero*, 2021).
- The artist came out as gay in June 2019, shortly after the release of his EP *Panini*. Although the majority of his fanbase responded positively, there were negative and homophobic reactions.
- The video for *SUN GOES DOWN* was directed by Lil Nas X in collaboration with LA-based production and management company Psycho Films. The single preceded the release of the album and followed the release of the single *Montero (Call Me By Your Name)*, the video for which caused some controversy due to its explicitly queer themes and religious iconography. *SUN GOES DOWN* was made available on YouTube in May 2021.
- The video includes some of the visual motifs typical of Lil Nas X videos (for example, the creation of CGI worlds; the artist as a fantasy version of himself) but these are low key when compared to some of his earlier work since the artist wanted this video to feel “very real”. Discussing the video during an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, he was quoted as saying: “My visual aesthetic is always changing. But a reoccurring theme in my work would always be Surrealism, or Futurism. I really love to mix reality with imagination—I guess that’s my ‘thing’ ... [in the music video for] ‘SUN GOES DOWN,’ I kept that kind of feeling to a minimum, because I wanted it to feel very real. But you still have me in a meditative state, where I go to this purple world where it’s like my future and past all existing in one place. I fly through that and go to my past me, and I’m trying to uplift him.”

- At the time of writing, the video has over 40 million views on YouTube.
- Lil Nas X posted a message for his younger self on Twitter in the February before the song was released: "Dear 14 year old Montero, I wrote a song with our name in it. It's about a guy I met last summer. I know we promised to never come out publicly, I know we promised never to be 'that' type of gay person, I know we promised to die with the secret, but this will open doors for many other queer people to simply exist. You see this is very scary for me, people will be angry, they will say I'm pushing an agenda. But the truth is, I am. The agenda to make people stay the f*** out of other people's lives and stop dictating who they should be. Sending you love from the future." Although referring to the single released before *SUN GOES DOWN*, the themes of both song and video develop the ideas in the tweet (and indeed those of the preceding videos).
- Shortly before the video was released, Lil Nas X posted: "in the "sun goes down" video i go back in time to visit a younger version self who's struggling inside, hating himself, & doesn't want to live anymore. i try my best to uplift him. can't wait to share this song and video with you guys on friday. this one is really special to me."
- The video juxtaposes a stylised, futuristic version of the Lil Nas X of 2021 (who has embraced his sexuality) with his younger (2017, according to the prom poster) self, who is struggling with his identity. Both the song and the video deal with themes such as bullying, self-hatred, and contemplating suicide before ending with hopeful imagery depicting Lil Nas X transforming into his current identity.

This factsheet introduces *SUN GOES DOWN* 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. *SUN GOES DOWN* 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.'*¹

¹Taken from H409/01 Sample Assessment Material





Media language

Here are some key points to consider.

Communicating meanings

Here you could consider how Lil Nas X's various comments about the meaning of the video 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 follows a linear narrative structure, with elements of magical realism, to communicate a very clear meaning relating to Lil Nas X's acceptance of himself and his desire to encourage his past self (and others) to do so as well.

The video opens on an extreme close-up of Lil Nas X's eye before pulling out to a long shot showing the artist sitting in a lotus position, positioning the audience with him and suggesting peace and meditation. The artist selects a moment from his life (working in a Taco Bell) from a great number of possible moments, including intertextual references to his previous promos. He observes himself singing the opening lyrics before joining himself in the past to sing words of encouragement. The end of the video mirrors the beginning, with an extreme close-up of Lil Nas X's eye changing to match how it looks at the start of the video. It might be discussed how Lil Nas X 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 use elements of fantasy/science fiction which are a motif of Lil Nas X's videos (the CGI

landscape, a character with superhuman powers) before moving back in time into Lil Nas X's past with the bulk of the video depicting a more realistic world. The two worlds are linked by the colour palette (rich purples, Lil Nas X's white suit, the aurora effect in the sky) and by the recurring motif of Lil Nas X encouraging his past self. Reasons for these choices might be discussed, as might some of the other media language elements in the video such as:

- the shots of the attendees at the prom
- the way the school has been lit and dressed
- the way that Lil Nas X's isolation is emphasised and then subverted
- the use of slow-motion at the end to reinforce the optimistic outcome
- the points where the different versions of Lil Nas X mime particular lines.

The use of CGI might be considered in relation to how developing technologies affect media language. Lil Nas X often uses CGI in his videos to create virtual worlds. CGI has clearly been used in *SUN GOES DOWN*, most obviously at the beginning but also at the very end to create the effect of the younger Lil Nas X's eye going white. This might be compared to the practical effects which have been used during the video (particularly the use of lighting in the prom sequence and the set designs which ground the video in the "real world" – the Taco Bell, the bedroom, and the school). Some significance might be found in the repeated motif of the purple lighting/aurora effect and where these do/do not appear in the video. The significance of, interpretation of and possible reasons for the CGI rendition of Lil Nas X's eyes might also be discussed.



Audience interpretation of the video might be considered. There are close to 75,000 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. Based on Lil Nas X's comments, the video intends to present a personal response to a personal experience that the artist wishes to share with his fanbase. This is achieved through the combination of elements such as the CGI-heavy opening (directly referring to some of the artist's previous videos) contrasting with the more realistic action referencing locations and experiences which Lil Nas X's target audience might find familiar (the prom in particular is the archetypical American teenage "coming of age" experience). The significance of these choices might be discussed.

It is very clear that the video and the song directly reflect Lil Nas X's ideological viewpoint as of 2021, as much of the imagery relates to his reflections on his personal past. There is scope to consider the choices made at certain moments in the video related to the combination of lyrics and action, for example:

- The juxtaposition of images when he sings, "I don't want a life/Send me a gun and I'll see the sun" during the opening moments of the video.
- The shots of Lil Nas X in the car with his (actual) father and the implications of their relationship.
- The shot in the bedroom where the two versions of Lil Nas X both sing different parts of the song as the younger version prays.
- The lines relating to Nicki Minaj juxtaposed with the shots of the phone followed by the line "Strangers make you feel so loved, you know?".
- The juxtaposition of the positive tone of the lines, "And I'm happy by the way/That I made that jump, that leap of faith..." with the ambiguous shots of the younger Lil Nas X in the school corridor.
- The shots of Lil Nas X in the toilet cubicle juxtaposed with the repeated opening lines.
- The implications of close-up where the older version of the artist puts his hand on the shoulder of his younger self leading to the positive resolution.

Codes and conventions

Here you could consider how *SUN GOES DOWN* fits into the broader category of music video as a form, as well as performance/narrative video as a genre. The video clearly shows the standard relationship between music and images (for example, the shot of Lil Nas X looking at his lips in the mirror as he sings the line, "Always thinkin', Why my lips so big?") There is a clear narrative through-line which could be considered in the context of other narrative videos (as well as Lil Nas X's earlier output). However, some of the lyrics (particularly the lines which seem to relate to suicide) are presented in a more expressionistic or ambiguous manner; reasons for this might be explored.

The video could be seen as somewhat subversive or countertypical for the genre. Lil Nas X presents himself in a conventionally strong way in his 2021 incarnation whereas the younger version is (for most of the video) weak and lacking self-assurance. The mirroring of the white suit and the hair style of the younger version are noteworthy. 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 are hybridised within the video. These include:

- science fiction/fantasy
- (queer) coming of age drama
- teen/school drama
- magical realism.

The reasons for these choices, their effects and significance could be discussed. Lil Nas X's subversion of his own previous videos could also be explored, since there are clear challenges to the imagery of both *Panini* (which is referenced at the start) and *Montero (Call Me By Your Name)*.

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:

- Lil Nas X scrolls through a number of his past videos and settles briefly on *Panini*. This was the track he released just before he came out in 2019; the video includes his character seemingly wooing/stalking a female character (as well as including a far more confident/arrogant version of the artist than is seen in this video).
- The use of "prophet eyes" may link to several characters, although it is a typical trope to connote mystical or magical characters.
- The mention of Nicki Minaj, which refers to Lil Nas X's pre-fame life when he ran a Nicki Minaj fan account on Twitter as well as a brief interaction the two had in 2020, when Minaj reacted to Lil Nas X explaining why he had denied being a fan of hers – "People will assume if you had an entire fan page dedicated to nicki u are gay. and the rap/music industry ain't exactly built or accepting of gay men yet".
- The scenes set in the school and the prom are archetypal for many American teen/school/coming of age dramas, while the final "feelgood" dance section fits the climax of such films.
- The notion of an angelic figure saving a desperate man from suicide is the basic plot of *It's a Wonderful Life*.



Media representations

Processes of representation

Given that Lil Nas X was involved in directing the video and that the song is evidently autobiographical, the level of self-representation in this video is clearly very high. The artist is almost never out of shot throughout the video, so almost all the representations seen relate to his self-representation and his sense of social identity. Discussions of selection and combination in the creation of representation might include:

- The representation of the “water world” Lil Nas X inhabits at the start of the video in comparison to the representations of the “real world”.
- The different representations of Lil Nas X himself: the tailored white suit contrasting with the futuristic costume worn in the *Panini* video, the clothes he wears while working in Taco Bell, the slightly geeky outfit he wears in school and particularly the flamboyant white suit he puts on for the prom.
- The representations of the characters he meets and particularly their reaction (or lack of reaction) to him – noteworthy moments include when he is with his father in the car, when he is in school and when he enters the prom.
- The representation of the moment where he returns to the prom after breaking down in the toilet cubicle and the different reactions this engenders from the other characters.

- The focus on isolation in public spaces (in most of the shots Lil Nas X is either alone or is being ignored; the 2017 version of the character ignores or does not see the 2021 version).

Lil Nas X has stated that he wanted the video to feel “very real”. Discussions of realism and versions of reality could explore how successful (or otherwise) he has been. For example:

- Does the CGI-heavy opening achieve a realistic representation of a meditative world and how effective is this?
- What is the effect of the set design and lighting for the Taco Bell and bedroom scenes; does the lighting and slightly stylised set design enhance or detract from the realism?
- What effect does the shot of the aurora in the sky have in the otherwise realistic car scene?
- Do the realistic representations of the school create an effective counterpoint to the more surreal elements of the video?
- How “real” is the ending of the video in comparison with the rest of the action?

It might be discussed how successful the video is in depicting the experience of a closeted gay man in 21st century America. The combination of realistic and 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:

- homophobia, particularly within the rap community
- social isolation
- religion and faith
- fandom
- teenage experience
- racism.

Cultural contexts might include:

- Lil Nas X himself as an established star
- the intertextual references mentioned above and their significance (or otherwise).

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 avoid typical tropes. Lil Nas X's 2017 character is not consciously attacked or derided by any of the other characters; in fact, his isolation seems at least partially self-induced. Some thought might be given to the reactions he generates at the end of the video (particularly the shots as he enters the prom, the recognition he gets from the DJs and from the attendees surrounding him as he dances).

There is also some scope to discuss the history of queer representation in music video as well as in the broader media.

Representational issues

In some respects, the video makes use of several features which may be stereotypical or archetypal. However, these are rarely presented in a negative way but are used to explore the broader narrative Lil Nas X is aiming to communicate; there is a degree of ambiguity which is open to audience interpretation. Elements

which might be explored include:

- Lil Nas X's representation of the 2021 version of himself and the look/feel of his meditative world
- the depiction of the Taco Bell
- the attic room
- the mise-en-scene of the school
- the representation on Lil Nas X in 2017 (particularly the bleached hair and the flamboyant white suit)
- the before/after representations of Lil Nas X at the prom, including the various cutaways to other characters and their lack of response/reaction to him
- the sequence in the bathroom.

Similarly, the representation of social groups (considering that Lil Nas X, as co-director, is responsible for these) could be considered. These include:

- The representation of a gay man who has embraced his sexuality compared to one who is struggling with it.
- The representation of a father and his son.
- The representation of the attendees at the prom (almost all of whom are seemingly straight given the shots of the couple having their photo taken and the couple dancing).
- The representation of the groups of teenagers who initially ignore Lil Nas X and then surround him as he dances.
- The representation of Lil Nas X in the final shot of the video as the camera dollies in on his eye.

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

- The look Lil Nas X's father gives him in the car after picking him up from Taco Bell – is this sympathy or judgement (it is worth noting that the character is played by Lil Nas X's actual father)?
- The response of the DJs to Lil Nas X's dance – is this supportive, surprised or mocking?
- The shots of the revellers surrounding Lil Nas X prior to the final shot – are they happy for him or amused by him?



It is fairly clear that Lil Nas X is seeking to present a reasonably balanced representation despite (or maybe because of) the very personal nature of the lyrics and the video. Certainly the video does attempt to articulate the experience of being a closeted gay man, but there may be some scope in discussing whether the visuals are tame compared to the lyrics and whether the end of the video offers a realistic representation or whether it is an idealistic interpretation.

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, given the huge number of responses since these offer first-hand reflections on the impact the video has had. For example, one commentator stated that they liked "how this didn't end with him finding someone to dance with. He decided he was enough. And that's when God mode was activated" which itself gathered over 200 responses.

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? Is there an implicit criticism of the father or the social groups at the prom?

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 white suit, the prom, Lil Nas X's pose at the opening). There is certainly potential to consider denotation, connotation and myth, particularly as the video does seem to be trying to challenge some conventional connotations (for example, Lil Nas X's own personal myth; the use of iconic American institutions such as the prom or Taco Bell; the connotations of the setting at the opening).

Narratology – Todorov

The video appears to follow Todorov's ideas of narrative structure, albeit in a cyclical rather than linear manner, since the equilibrium of the start is pretty much the equilibrium achieved at the end (symbolised by Lil Nas X's suit and eyes). Some discussion of where the disruption and other elements of Todorov's structure occur might be helpful.

Postmodernism – Baudrillard

The video includes several elements which link to Baudrillard's ideas, particularly ideas of simulation and hyperreality. It could be argued that the entire video is about the construction of the identity of Lil Nas X – a sort of simulation of the self. Similarly, the settings of the video are mostly hyperreal (signified by the lighting and some of the set design) – it is interesting

to contrast the Taco Bell and prom settings with the schoolroom and school corridor. The bedroom has a transitional quality, while the opening fantasy world is clearly a construction.

Theories of Identity – Gauntlett/Theories of Gender Performativity – Butler

The video is very rich in imagery which links both to Gauntlett's ideas and those of Butler, particularly as they relate to queer theory. Considering Lil Nas X's involvement in the direction of the video and the autobiographical nature of the lyrics, Gauntlett's ideas relating to how identity is built, particularly online (given the platform) might be worth exploring. Given how the artist is deconstructing his own identity in relation to (seemingly) mostly heterosexual couples, Butler's theories could be discussed.

Sources

[Lil Nas X - SUN GOES DOWN](#) (YouTube)

[Lil Nas X visits his younger self in video for new single 'Sun Goes Down'](#) (nme.com)

[Psycho Films](#) (psychofilms.com)

[@LilNasX](#) (twitter.com)

[Lil Nas X's Releases the Video for His New Track "SUN GOES DOWN"](#) (complex.com)

[Lil Nas X Helps Struggling Younger Version of Self in 'Sun Goes Down' Video](#) (rollingstone.com)

[Lil Nas X goes back to high school in 'Sun Goes Down' video](#) (ew.com)

[Lil Nas X: The artist faces the final boss of hell in the video for new track "SUN GOES DOWN" – and it's high school](#) (wonderlandmagazine.com)

We really value your feedback

Click to send us an autogenerated email about this resource. Add comments if you want to. Let us know how we can improve this resource or what else you need. Your email address will not be used or shared for any marketing purposes.



OCR is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

For staff training purposes and as part of our quality assurance programme your call may be recorded or monitored. © OCR 2023 Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England. Registered office The Triangle Building, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge, CB2 8EA. Registered company number 3484466. OCR is an exempt charity.

OCR operates academic and vocational qualifications regulated by Ofqual, Qualifications Wales and CCEA as listed in their qualifications registers including A Levels, GCSEs, Cambridge Technicals and Cambridge Nationals.

OCR provides resources to help you deliver our qualifications. These resources do not represent any particular teaching method we expect you to use. We update our resources regularly and aim to make sure content is accurate but please check the OCR website so that you have the most up to date version. OCR cannot be held responsible for any errors or omissions in these resources.

Though we make every effort to check our resources, there may be contradictions between published support and the specification, so it is important that you always use information in the latest specification. We indicate any specification changes within the document itself, change the version number and provide a summary of the changes. If you do notice a discrepancy between the specification and a resource, please [contact us](#).

You can copy and distribute this resource freely if you keep the OCR logo and this small print intact and you acknowledge OCR as the originator of the resource.

OCR acknowledges the use of the following content: All images taken from SUN GOES DOWN (official video) © SME (on behalf of Columbia); SOLAR Music Rights Management, UMPI, AMRA, Sony Music Publishing, CMRRA, BMI - Broadcast Music Inc., LatinAutorPerf, Abramus Digital, UMPG Publishing, AMRA BR, Kobalt Music Publishing, LatinAutor - Warner Chappell, LatinAutor, LatinAutor - SonyATV, MINT_BMG, SOCAN RR, LatinAutor - UMPG, UNIAO BRASILEIRA DE EDITORAS DE MUSICA - UBEM

Whether you already offer OCR qualifications, are new to OCR or are thinking about switching, you can request more information using our [Expression of Interest form](#).