



Music videos:

Sufjan Stevens *Sugar*

(dir. Ezra Hurwitz, 2020)

Overview

- Sufjan Stevens is an American singer-songwriter who has released several albums. *Sugar* was the third single released from his 2020 album *The Ascension*. Stevens is a multi-instrumentalist who is known for his eclectic style, primarily folk, pop, indie-rock and electronica.
- Stevens originally lived in rural America (Michigan) but relocated to New York. He has stated, “creating a life in New York when I was older [was] actually quite hard... I had to learn to be an urban dweller. It was unnatural to me.” When recording *The Ascension*, he had relocated to the more rural upstate New York. Discussing this move, he stated, “I think deep down I’m more of a naturalist. My soul belongs in the wilderness.”
- Stevens has stated that the stripped-down nature of the album (and *Sugar*) was due more to circumstance than to design. Due to “landlord reasons” he described the album as “simple: I could only use [a drum machine and] things I could plug into a computer. My mind was not really in the folk idiom any more. I’d packed my guitars in the storage and I think mentally I’d packed away that aesthetic, too.”
- Although Stevens identifies as Christian, he claims that this does not influence his music. His work does, however, explore themes of love, religion, and grief. He has stated: “I don’t think music media is the real forum for theological discussions... I just feel like it’s not my work or my place to be making claims and statements because I often think it’s misunderstood.” He also stated: “I don’t like talking about that stuff in the public forum because, I think, certain themes and convictions are meant for personal conversation.”

- The video for *Sugar* was directed by Ezra Hurwitz. The choreography was by Kyle Abraham. The video has been described as depicting “a family living a vintage and seemingly peaceful life before their domestic bliss starts to crumble around them.” Abraham stated, “The way I approach choreography tends to blend elements of the everyday with moments of abstraction... I was compelled by the tempo and the tone of the song... especially when choreographing the duet material and solo material for [dancers] Samantha Figgans and Raymond Pinto. This song and its undertones created a lot of really fun scenarios to play with choreographically.”
- Stevens has stated that *Sugar* is “ultimately about the desire for goodness and purity (and true sustenance) ... On the surface the song is just a string of clichés, but the message is imperative: now is the time to gather what is good and pure and valuable and make it your own, and share it with others. Feed your soul and speak new life into those around you. Give each other love, respect and sacrifice. Relinquish all the old habits, all the old ways of thinking and doing, all former practices - ‘business as usual’ - and bring new life to the world. This is our calling.”
- At the time of writing, the video has over 550,000 views on YouTube. Several of the comments discuss how the video adds layers of meaning to the song, and many reference the choreography.
- Stevens has been quoted as saying, “We’re expected to look good, feel good, do good all the time but insecurity, instability and disorder are built in, too.” Furthermore, he has said, “Experience makes fools of us all. In experiencing so much and growing older, I’ve realised there was definitely a naivety to my former self. There was a hopefulness, joyfulness and playfulness to a lot of [my] early records that’s been slowly receding over the years. It’s hard for me to speak for it because it’s happened so gradually, like watching a tree grow. But you start to lose faith in the structures of society as you get older, and I think that’s coming to the surface now.”
- The video has a fractured, non-linear narrative and includes many surreal elements. There are repeated motifs (the foodstuffs associated with sugar as well as the sugar itself; the sporadic dance moves; the gradual destruction of the house; the isolation of the main characters). The video is very much open to interpretation as it appears to be as much a response to the thematic concerns of the lyrics as it is a literal translation (apart from, of course, the reference to sugar).

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

¹ Taken from H409/01 Sample Assessment Material

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



Media language

Here are some key points to consider.

Communicating meanings

Here you could consider how Stevens' comments about the song fit 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 non-linear narrative structure, with elements of surrealism, to communicate an ambiguous outcome which is open to interpretation. Does the video suggest a theme of "bring[ing] new life to the world"?

The video opens with a montage introducing the four characters and the main locations featured in the video. Stevens himself is never seen; his vocals act as a commentary/narration/counterpoint which may or may not intersect with the action in the video. The pensive expressions on the characters' faces match the low-key tone of the introduction. The shots of the broken glass and the spilled Coca Cola foreshadow the destruction which occurs as the video progresses while the shot of the father/mother figures on the floor suggests the non-linear nature of the narrative, given their different costumes, location, and expressions. It might be discussed how the director uses 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 create a sense of realism (the representation of what appears to be a typical small American house, a family, the trappings of domestic life

such as cooking) before introducing elements of threat (the sense of despair and resignation in the characters' body language and facial expressions, the broken glass) and then moving into the surreal (the shot of Figgins dancing juxtaposed with her taking the jar from the fridge; Pinto laughing hysterically while staring at the static on the television as the Coca Cola pours down the cupboard; the young boy taking various desserts out of a chest).

The contradictory representations of the family's world are linked by the recurring motifs of sugar (both literally pouring out of bags and in the various sugary foods seen through the video) and using dance as a mode of expression. Reasons for these choices might be discussed, particularly in relation to an interpretation of the lyrics and music. Some of the other media language elements in the video which could be considered include:

- The way the video has been lit to create a slightly sepia tone.
- The use of a 4:3 aspect ratio.
- The way the house has been dressed to imply a sense of the past.
- The way that the four characters are presented as isolated and alone but also as a stereotypical nuclear family.
- The use of special effects towards the end to build up to the apocalyptic climax.
- The points where the characters dance.

The use of CGI might be considered in relation to how developing technologies affect media language. Although the video does use a lot of practical effects (for example, the chocolate dripping down the walls,



the chandelier crashing down, the final reveal), there is selective use of CGI (the smoke which comes from the oven; possibly the flames; the cracks in the mirror and in the walls). Some discussion might be had as to how effective these are and how they contribute to the possible themes of the video. Would they have been more effective as practical effects?

Audience interpretation of the video might be considered. There are only 550 comments on the official YouTube posting of the video and very little has been written about it since it was released. However, several of the comments do discuss the effectiveness of the video and how it has enhanced the song. The choreography is also highlighted. Based on Abraham's comments about the choreography, he has tried to "blend elements of the everyday with moments of abstraction". How might an audience interpret these moments? His ideas that "the song and its undertones created a lot of really fun scenarios" might also be explored. Some of the imagery seems to comment on Americana – the iconic Coca Cola bottle, the cherry pie, the family meal – all of which are subverted; how might different audiences interpret these? Does the lack of audience response suggest anything?

It is not clear how the video reflects Stevens' ideological viewpoint as of 2020, as at least some of the imagery does not relate either to the lyrics or his comments about the track. This element is clearly open to interpretation. There is scope to consider the ideological implications of choices made at certain moments in the video related to the combination of lyrics, music, symbolism, and action, for example:

- The moment where Figgans' character stares at the (healthy) apple juxtaposed with Pinto's character drinking the (unhealthy) Coca Cola as Stevens sings, "Is someone going to cut me some slack?"
- The juxtaposition of the line "Wipe that writing off the wall" with Figgans wiping cherry juice onto her face.
- The line "Let's take up this lifeline" juxtaposed with the first shot showing the family in a positive/ stereotypical nuclear domestic situation (also consider the expressions on their faces, their body language and the depiction of the pie).
- The line "Surrender with that colourful flag" sung as Pinto drops a bottle of Coca Cola and slumps down against the wall followed by Figgans doing the same thing.

- The line “Yeah, they’ve been selling us this fiction as fact” as the video focuses on Figgans dancing while the family eat.
- The line “Don’t drink the poison or they’ll defeat us” sung as the first crack appears in the wall of the house.
- The way in which various moments of destruction (the Coke bottle being flung at the wall; the vase of flowers being smashed on the floor) are emphasised by the music.
- The implications of the final moments of the video which suggest that nothing that the video showed actually happened, or possibly that the family have left their previous life behind. Does this fit in with Stevens’ idea that the song is about “Relinquish[ing] all the old habits, all the old ways of thinking and doing, all former practices...”?

Codes and conventions

Here you could consider how *Sugar* fits into the broader category of music video as a form, as well as concept/narrative video as a genre. The video clearly shows a relationship between music and images (for example, much of the choreography and the editing) and there is a conceptual link between the off-key music and the developing apocalyptic imagery. There is a suggestion of narrative through-line which could be considered in the context of other narrative videos, although the fragmentary non-linear nature of what is shown as well as the inclusion of surrealist elements such as the dance and the various vignettes are open to interpretation. Much of the video is expressionistic and ambiguous; reasons for this might be explored.

The video could be seen as somewhat subversive or countertypical. The artist does not appear at all (although this may be something of a motif for Stevens at the time as he does not appear in the other videos for tracks from *The Ascension*). *Video Game*, the preceding track, is also a choreographed dance video while *America*, the lead track from the album, did not have a music video (the official YouTube version simply shows an American flag). Videos focusing on expressive dance are unusual in the mainstream, particularly where the dance/movement elements are seemingly incorporated into an apparent narrative in a sporadic way. Reasons for these choices and the effects they have could be discussed in relation to the broader landscape of how genres evolve and change. Although the genre of *Sugar* is hard to identify other electronica acts such as the Chemical Brothers and Fatboy Slim are known for choreographed dance videos which incorporate the surreal, for example, *Go* and *Let Forever Be* by The Chemical Brothers, *Around The World* by Daft Punk or *Weapon of Choice* and *Praise You* by Fatboy Slim.

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

- domestic drama
- horror
- disaster movie
- musical.

The reasons for these choices, their effects and significance could be discussed. The idea that Stevens himself is hard to pin down to a particular genre might also be considered in relation to the various contrasting ideas portrayed in the video.



Intertextuality

There are no obvious direct intertextual references in the video. However, some of the elements could be seen to be archetypal or stereotypical, with possible links to existing works.

- The flickering television could potentially be a reference to Tobe Hooper's film *Poltergeist* (1982).
- The moment where Figgans picks up the apple could be a reference to the traditional interpretation of the Fall of Man as depicted in the Bible.
- The camera movement from Pinto's character to his "son" could be a reference to Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), which uses some similar shots when

developing the relationship between the father and son characters.

- The moment where the chocolate starts to ooze down the walls could be a reference to many horror movies (for example, *The Amityville Horror* (1979/2005)).
- There are potentially many other moments which might link to other products since many of the images (the cracked mirror, the music box, the train set, the setting, the chandelier crashing down, the reveal at the end as the wall crashes down) can be found in a range of sources.



Media representations

Processes of representation

Given that Stevens does not appear to have been directly involved in the video beyond providing the track and that the meaning of the song is somewhat unclear, the level of self-representation in this video is quite low. Similarly, the focus on the four characters and the claustrophobic, isolated world depicted suggest that quite a narrow range of representations are being explored. Discussions of selection and combination in the creation of representation might include:

- The representation of the house before, during and after the cataclysm.
- The different representations of the family, particularly Pinto's character (considering his character's costume and behaviour) and Figgans' character (considering her demeanour and actions) during the apparent timeline of the story.
- The representations of family life: the ordered domesticity of the tidy house and happy family which are occasionally shown in comparison to the far more evident images of disorder, distress, and breakdown.



- The implicit negative representation of America as suggested by the lyrics in conjunction with the apocalyptic visuals (could “sugar” be a metaphor?).
- The focus on isolation in domestic spaces (there are very few moments where the characters are in the same room).

The choreographer Abraham has stated that he wanted the video to “blend elements of the everyday with moments of abstraction” while Stevens has described how the song is about “love, respect and sacrifice”. Discussions of realism and versions of reality could explore how successful (or otherwise) Hurwitz and Abraham have been in interpreting Stevens’ intentions. For example:

- Does the set represent a realistic version of an American house? How is this affected by the gradual deterioration of the house as the video continues?
- What is the effect of the fragmentary editing (since we see the tidy house juxtaposed with its emptier/destroyed version) – does this affect ideas of realism?
- What effect does the shot of the smoke and later fire coming from the oven have, given that Figgans’ character does not seem to react to it?
- Do the realistic representations of the external landscape at the end of the video create a counterpoint to the more surreal representation of the house?
- What effect do the moments where the characters break into dance have on the realism of the video’s world?

It might be discussed whether the video is attempting to comment on the experience of Black families 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:

- social isolation/fragmentation
- family
- mental/physical health
- Black experience
- loss of agency.

Cultural contexts might include:

- Stevens' previous track (*Video Game*) which also included a dance routine, this time in a completely CG environment
- the possible intertextual references mentioned above and their significance (or otherwise)
- dance as a cultural interpretive form.

Discussion might be had of the way contemporary contexts influence the representation of society in the video, since there seems to be a both stereotypical and countertypical elements. The family are Black and seem to live in comparative poverty (for the US, considering the size of the house and the state it is in for most of the video); this would seem to fit with the stereotypical Black experience (at least, as represented in the media). Similarly, the negative domestic representation (seemingly unemployed father spending his days drinking and watching TV; friction between the parents; children left to their own devices; the house descending into squalor) would appear to suggest a stereotypical view of class. However, the inclusion of the surreal dance sequences and elements of set such as the chandelier as well as the moments of normalcy and the ending offer a more countertypical representation.

There is also some scope to discuss the impact of a white artist using Black performers to represent him. This might be seen as a deliberate commentary on race relations in America, or it might simply have been that they were seen to be the best performers for what Abraham intended (Abraham is also Black while Hurwitz, who is white, trained as a dancer).

Representational issues

In some respects, the video makes use of several features which may be stereotypical or archetypal. Some of these are negative, some are positive and some are open to interpretation. Elements which might be explored include:

- The positive connotations of the family as they sit round the table talking in a positive, animated manner juxtaposed with the negative connotations of the moments where they argue.
- The symbolism of the pie, which we see being made, see in its perfect baked form and then see smashed at the end of the video.
- The juxtaposition of Pinto in his shirt and trousers compared to when he is topless.
- The juxtaposition of Figgans in her domestic role compared to when she smears the cherry on her face and smashes the vase.
- The stereotypically comfortable house contrasting with the gradually deteriorating environment as the video continues; the way that the video cross-cuts between these.
- The before/after representations of the family's life.
- The symbolism of the gradually decaying food/room/flowers and the family's complicity in this destruction.
- The gender stereotypes (mother in the kitchen/son playing with a trainset/daughter with a pink music box).

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

- The representation of a happy family compared to one which has broken down.
- The representation of a nuclear family compared to one in which communication has collapsed.
- The representation of well-adjusted, constructive individuals compared to destructive, chaotic individuals.
- The representation of claustrophobic living compared to the open air.
- The connotations of parents as they (seemingly) abandon their children.



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

- It is possible to interpret Pinto's character as a negative representation of Black masculinity given what he does during the video – we rarely see him in a positive way apart from during the family meal scenes. Could this be interpreted as a criticism of Black men?
- Figgans' character mostly appears in the kitchen or the bedroom, or she is serving the family – could this be seen as an essentialist female stereotype?
- The vignettes involving the children seem to cast them very much in stereotypical gender roles – is this deliberate?
- The implication is that the family are quite poor – does this reinforce stereotypes of Black America?

It is unlikely that, given his apparently liberal viewpoints, Stevens would intend any of this. There may be some scope in discussing whether the visuals do offer a valid interpretation of the lyrics, or whether the video and the song are working at cross-purposes to each other.

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. Although there are not many of these, some do relate to the video and the way (in the opinion

of the posters) it has influenced their interpretation of the song.

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 an American audience respond in comparison to a non-American audience? How might a Black audience respond in comparison to a non-Black audience? How might an audience who enjoys dance as an artistic form respond in comparison to one which does not enjoy 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.

Narratology – Todorov

The video appears to subvert Todorov's ideas of narrative structure – all the elements of his theory appear to be present, but since the narrative is non-linear, it is impossible to identify some key moments (what causes the disruption? Do the characters recognise this? What is the significance of the new equilibrium?). The effect of this on the audience, particularly relating to expectation, might be explored.

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 a simulated world – a sort of microcosm, considering that until the end of the video we never see the “real” world. Similarly, the events of the video contrast the real and the surreal/hyperreal (signified by dance and some of the imagery) – it is interesting to contrast the realism of the set with the surrealism of the action. The gradual shift of the environment from real to hyperreal to real again is also notable.

Theories of Gender Performativity – Butler/Feminist Theory – Van Zoonen/bell hooks

The use of male and female characters invites some consideration of Butler, considering that (on the surface) the video presents an essentialist view of gender. Is this deliberate? Is there some attempt to subvert these roles? How are the audience being positioned in relation to the characters? Given the focus on Figgans' character, there is scope to explore Van Zoonen's ideas relating to 'what we do' rather than 'what we are' and the contextual ideas she discussed. Given the racial dimension, an application of some of bell hooks' ideas might also be fruitful – does the video reinforce the 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy', or does it allow for an 'oppositional gaze'?

Sources

[Sufjan Stevens - Sugar](#) (YouTube)

[Sugar Lyrics](#) (genius.com)

[Sufjan Stevens Choreographs a Domestic Dance in 'Sugar' Video](#) (rollingstone.com)

[Sufjan Stevens Shares Video for New Song "Sugar": Watch](#) (pitchfork.com)

[Get lost in Sufjan Stevens' entrancing new track 'Sugar'](#) (faroutmagazine.co.uk)

[Sufjan Stevens Shares Stunning New Video For "Sugar"](#) (dustyorgan.com)

[New Release and Video: Sufjan Stevens – Sugar](#) (thankfolkforthat.com)

[Sufjan Stevens shares haunting video for new song 'Sugar'](#) (tonedeaf.thebrag.com)

['I have a sense of urgency': Sufjan Stevens wakes from the American dream](#) (theguardian.com)

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