

Turntables

(By Janelle Monáe)



Image screenshot from Janelle Monáe – Turntables [Emotion Picture] / [Youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K11LW0wTj08)

AS Component 1: Investigating the media

A level Component 1: media products, industries and audiences

Subject content:

Media language

representation

media contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- Janelle Monáe (who goes by both they/them and she/her pronouns) is an American singer, songwriter, author and actor. They have won several awards during their career; in 2015, *Billboard* gave them the Women in Music Rising Star Award and they have received 8 Grammy

Awards. They also starred in the films *Hidden Figures*, a box office success about black women mathematicians who worked for NASA, and *Moonlight*, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture. The song *Turntables* was nominated for an Oscar for Best Original Song in 2021.

- Janelle Monáe is signed to Atlantic Records but also has their own independent label Wondaland Arts Society. They are one of the few black women to run their own independent record label. In 2021, they and their company signed to Sony Music Publishing.
- Turntables* was written by Monáe, Nathaniel Irvin III, and George A. Peters, with production by Nate “Rocket” Wonder and Roman Gian Arthur. It marked Monáe’s first new original music since their Grammy Award-nominated third solo album, 2018’s *Dirty Computer*.

- *Turntables* is a protest song that was initially written to appear in the 2020 Amazon documentary *All In: The Fight for Democracy*, which focuses on the issue of voter suppression and the fight for democracy. The film's subject is the 2018 elections for the Governor of Georgia. It drew attention to the tactics used to suppress voting rights to ensure the election of the Republican candidate Brian Kemp at the expense of Stacey Abrams, the black Democrat candidate. In the documentary, the tactics used to suppress the voting right of minorities were exposed. During the run up to the election, 1.4 million under-represented minorities disappeared from the electoral roll and 300,000 Georgians were incorrectly deemed ineligible to vote.
- The music video was inspired by this erosion of democracy and goes further, highlighting Monáe's concerns about other social inequalities in America and globally, thus demonstrating the power of the music video form to raise awareness of social issues:

My responsibility as an artist is to reflect the times. And I wish these were not the times we lived in. I wish that I didn't have to write a song fighting against voter suppression and drawing attention to the injustices of marginalized people. I wish I didn't have to do that. And I wish that the other artists didn't have to do that, but we felt a responsibility to it.

- Read the rest of this interview with Janelle Monáe in *Variety* magazine: <https://bit.ly/3ADUGcO>
- The title of the track *Turntables* refers to Monáe's assertion that action needs to be taken to turn things around and tackle injustice across society. They refer to the music video as an emotion picture and a chronicler of social issues; it is important in drawing attention to the truth so that change could happen.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – media language

Consider the codes and conventions of media forms and products

Consider how *Turntables* conforms to the codes and conventions of the **narrative/performance video**. The aim of the performer is to interpret the lyrics through a narrative, of which they are an integral part. The artist in performance sings directly to camera, involving the audience in the story and leading them through the narrative. The involvement of the artist in this style of music video allows them to establish their star persona. In the case of Janelle Monáe, the use of the music video form raises awareness of societal inequalities and issues that are of concern to them and black Americans. This is a protest song and as such employs the codes and conventions of this sub-genre, including a strong beat that Monáe describes as similar to a march and a powerful, uplifting chorus, typical of a power ballad. The aim of the song and its inclusion in the documentary film is to offer an audio contribution to the movement. This is then reinforced by the choice of images used in the music video to reflect the issues and events.

Consider how the combination of elements of media language influence meaning

Consider how elements of media language, including technical and visual codes, work together to communicate meaning in the music video.

Visual codes:

- **Clothing:** different cultural codes are established through clothing styles and colours, suggesting the inclusivity and diversity of the community. For example, the young girl and the black womens' hairstyles carry **cultural connotations**. Monáe themselves wears a 1940's army uniform relating to national identity.
- **Settings and iconography:** the music video locations move between archive footage locations, surreal settings and iconography and the ordinary home of a family having breakfast. The setting of the family living room shows a young girl with an iconic, cultural hairstyle watching the archive news footage through a VR headset. This *mise-en-scène* communicates

a positive message that the scenes she is witnessing on the screen are consigned to history and she will not have to live through them as things will change. The lyrics state:

*Got a new agenda
With a new dream
I'm kicking out the old regime*

Some of the iconography in the music video has very literal connections with the lyrics, such as the turntable at the start, whereas other examples of iconography are more surreal. For example, Monáe dragging the statue of the warrior queen out of the sea and then standing beside it, reinforcing the idea of minorities standing up to injustice. Similarly, the juxtaposition of the American flag with the lyrics:

*America, you a lie
But the whole world 'bout to testify*

suggesting that America has let down its people. Simpler but important messages are communicated through iconography, for example the young girl having a choice over the dolls suggests that inequalities extend to the toy industry.

- **Expressions and gestures:** the main audio in the music video is the song lyrics and Monáe's rapping. Other elements of the narrative are constructed through expressions and gestures. For example, the gestures of protest in the archive footage, including the iconic and globally recognised Black Power raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics; these are replicated in the more contemporary images of protest. Similarly, the upbeat atmosphere of the music video during the chorus sections is reinforced by waving, smiling and dancing, which are recognisable **signifiers** of positivity.

Technical codes:

Consider how the technical codes, including camera shots, movement and editing, work together to create meaning.

- The establishing shots of the beach at the beginning and end of the music video constructs the idea of freedom. The final shot of Monáe with the warrior queen statue, combined with the audio of the sea, leaves the audience calm and

feeling confident that change will happen.

- The use of **close-up shots** of Janelle Monáe in the music video and their determined expressions create an upbeat feeling and an engagement with the audience.
- The **long shot** of Monáe with their back turned and gesticulating to the American flag connotes the idea of the flag as a symbol of oppression for some areas of American society. On the other hand, the long shot of the smiling face of the young girl when she picks up the doll, which represents her culture, is positive and uplifting in its simplicity.
- The **canted angles** combined with fast editing towards the end of the video as the music builds creates a sense of disorientation reflecting the need to disrupt the status quo.
- The **bird's eye view** shots of the Black Lives Matter protests and the colourful Pride march signify the strength of feeling about inequality across America.
- The **editing** cuts between the black and white archive footage, the contemporary news clips and the performance of the artist in various settings, establishing a cohesive message reinforcing the ideology of the music video through **visual signifiers**.

Audio:

As well as the song itself, the music video starts with the voice of black American writer James Baldwin from 1968 and featured in the 2016 documentary film based on his work, *I Am Not Your Negro*: 'I can't be a pessimist because I'm alive... I am forced to believe that we can survive whatever we must survive...' It is used here to remind audiences how long the suppression of minority groups has been happening.

(Watch the full clip of James Baldwin speaking here: <https://bit.ly/2VbPkjd>)

Narrative:

- The **narrative** is **non-linear**. Monáe combines elements of the past, present and the future; they use the archive footage to highlight the injustices of the past and those still perpetrated in the present but, through the inclusion of happy

children, looks to more positive future. The different **narrative strands** featuring as a series of clips are held together by the artist performing the song and engaging in direct mode of address with the audience, thus forcing them to engage with the issues. The artist acts as the storyteller, a typical convention of music videos. The repetitive lyrics of the chorus reinforce the narrative:

*No stoppin' 'til
Turn, turn, turn (turn)
We can't wait for it
Turn, turn, turn
Yeah, the tables 'bout to turn*

- There is a **structure** to the narrative as the music video starts and ends in the same location. The narrative focuses on the central premise that there is a need for change and for the tables to turn:

*We are in the middle of a revolution right?
What's a revolution without a song and a song
without a revolution. Tables are turning. The
people will always be the saviors of the people.*

*Music speaks to everyone and of course, has a
huge influence in the way we think, things we do,
and how we move. Lyrics to our favorite songs
replay in our heads and I hope my words stick in
the ears that listen to it.*

(<https://bit.ly/3CG506P>)

- The narrative moves between reminders of the injustices dispensed out over time to minority and subordinate groups, to more positive statements about how change can happen.
- A further narrative focus is related to the documentary for which the track was written and on voter suppression in Georgia. Visual signifiers of this event include images of black people casting their votes and Stacey Abrams speaking.
- The images are at times highly **illustrative**, often featuring a literal interpretation of the lyrics. This adds to the sense that a vivid story is being told with a clear message and the fictional elements are supported by the factual visual information.

Consider how media language conveys viewpoints and ideologies

Consider how the elements of media language mentioned here communicate the artist's viewpoint reinforcing the ideology, gained from their own and past experiences, that contemporary society must learn from past mistakes:

I'm simply watching, examining, and wanting to highlight all of the people who are on the front-lines fighting for our democracy, fighting against racial inequalities, fighting against white supremacy, fighting against systemic racism, and systemic oppression.

(<https://bit.ly/3RqRW9t>)

Consider theoretical approaches

Semiotics - Barthes:

- The selected images do not only illustrate the lyrics but connote deeper meanings in relation to the more abstract notion of challenging injustice and inequality.
- Certain visual signifiers, for example the American flag and the raised fist, connote more complex meanings according to the context in which they appear and can achieve the status of myth through a process of naturalisation.
- Consider the signification of clothing, iconography, gesture and expression in the music video *Turntables*.

Structuralism - Levi-Strauss (A Level):

- Music videos create meanings through a structure that is recognisable to audiences. The form has a repertoire of familiar elements regardless of the music genre. This music video employs the codes and conventions of the narrative/performance form, cutting between the chosen archive clips, the constructed narrative and the performance of the artist. Music videos have a set time, the length of the song, to construct meaning and therefore use recognisable conventions, including clothing and iconography, to convey messages rapidly.

- The resolution of opposites can have ideological significance, particularly in music videos that encode social messages. Consider how this music video brings together individuals, groups and events to create a cohesive ideological message related to the need for social and political change.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

PRODUCT CONTEXT

Janelle Monáe is an influential artist who has played powerful roles on screen and in their music videos. As a musician, they tend to blend and bend genres in their music, including rap and jazz; these music sub-genres typically cover themes related to the experiences of Afro-Americans. Monáe uses the conventions of the music and its historical roots to explore social inequalities and the suppression of minority groups. As a black, female and non-binary artist in this genre, they are also concerned to project a positive representation of gender and, in particular, black women through their music:

A lot of us live this experience. This is not something we get to turn off and turn off. This is life for us. This is a life for our family. This is a life for our friends. This has been the life for our ancestors. (<https://variety.com>)

Consider processes which lead media producers to make choices about how to represent events, issues and social groups

Representations of gender and ethnicity:

- Turntables* constructs a **version of reality** using real locations and believable characters combined with actual protestors, sports personalities, leaders and politicians who have spoken out and taken action against oppression. One example is Muhammad Ali, who throughout his life challenged white supremacy, segregation and all forms of racism. This is combined with a more surreal aesthetic using the music video form to engage the audience with the issues. The **paradigmatic choices** of visual and technical codes work together to convey a point of view about society.
- Janelle Monáe refuses to accept that certain areas of society, including ethnicity, gender and social class, should continue to be **misrepresented and under-represented**. Whilst some of the images used highlight negative representations of ethnicity, there is also positivity and hope with the inclusion of **cultural iconography**, such as the uplifting shots of groups dancing and singing together and interesting, iconic shots of young black women. Positive **messages and values** are embedded in these representations and, through the music video form, the audience is informed about the injustices of the past and present and encouraged to be active in seeking change.
- Consider how this is achieved through the processes of selection and combination.

How representations invoke discourses and ideologies and position audiences (A Level only)

- Different music videos will construct representations of gender, issues, social groups and ethnicity in diverse ways, according to the conventions of the music genre. Consider how the representations in this music video are constructed by the artist to convey a viewpoint and instigate discourse around a social issue. Janelle Monáe is politically active and understands how dominant groups in society control what is produced, how representations are constructed and stereotypes reinforced. As part of her activism, they are a co-chair of When We All Vote, a non-profit organisation whose aim is to increase voting participation for all Americans.
- Consider how they use the music video form to invoke discussion around social inequality, ethnicity and identity and is not afraid to point the finger of blame and suggest change is coming:

*I'm kicking out the old regime
Liberation, elevation, education
America, you a lie
But the whole world 'bout to testify.*

The change in the lyrics from 'I' to 'we' reinforces the collective responsibility for what is happening in society.

- The music video serves both to amplify the lyrics and to engage the audience to empathise with the situations and issues, both real and imagined by the artist in *Turntables*.

Consider theoretical approaches

Theories of representation – Hall:

- This music video deliberately avoids constructing stereotypical representations and presenting subordinate groups as ‘other’, instead representing them as powerful and active as a result constructing a more positive representation.
- Consider how this is achieved in *Turntables* through recognisable signs and codes that are decoded by audiences and interpreted to produce a positive, hopeful reading of the music video.

Feminist theories – Van Zoonen (A Level):

- Consider how in *Turntables*, Janelle Monáe has created a political music video positioning the audience to engage with a discourse around the representation of issues related to ethnicity and identity. Their agenda is clearly centred around their own concerns and experiences stemming from their background and the experiences of black people in the past and present. Their aim is to raise awareness of these issues.

bell hooks

Consider how you can apply hooks’ assertion that race and class, as well as sex, determine the extent to which individuals are exploited and discriminated against. How far does this music video challenge stereotypical representations of ethnicity and gender?

Consider how Monáe, as an activist, demonstrates feminism as a political commitment rather than a lifestyle choice in attempting to challenge the under-representation and misrepresentation of social groups in this music video.

Theories of ethnicity and postcolonial theory – Gilroy (A level):

- The narrative embeds positive messages and values, constructing representations of a successful black, female and non-binary music artist to subvert negative stereotypes of ethnicity.

- Consider the way in which representations of race and ethnicity are constructed in the music video in order to challenge the under-representation and misrepresentation of particular ethnic groups that may originally stem from colonial attitudes.
- Consider how Monáe uses this music video to reinforce similarities rather than cultural differences in the creation of a common purpose to be successful and defy the odds against them. The representation of ethnic groups as victims and the notion of ‘otherness’ is avoided and replaced by more positive representations of power through protest.

CONTEXTS

Social, cultural and political

Consider how *Turntables* reflects the time in which it was made:

The representations in this music video have been affected by social and cultural contexts, for example the issues of voter suppression, the Black Lives Matter movement and the growing awareness of global social inequality. The narrative constructed by the music video offers social commentary and challenges audience perceptions of particular social groups, positioning them to view them differently.

Consider how the responses of different audiences may reflect social and cultural circumstances. Audiences who may feel under-represented may be empowered by the messages encoded in this music video. The music video explores issues related to the experience of living in contemporary America as a member of an under-represented social group.

Other political issues and events are alluded to in the music video, for example the protests after the killing of George Floyd and the Families Belong Together campaign, whose aim was to reunite immigrant families separated at the US-Mexican border by a policy initiated during the Trump administration.

Watch Janelle Monáe discuss the political and social background to the creation of *Turntables* here:

<https://bit.ly/3pXqxjZ>

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