

### Activity 5.15

Analyse the still image from *Rio*, top-right of this page.

- Describe the setting in detail. What does this say about the world of the video?
- Can you identify any elements of an 'excessive' celebrity lifestyle?
- What is happening in the narrative? Can you identify any of Propp's character types?
- Does the female appear to be a passive object or active subject in the scene? Is she sexually objectified?
- What are your thoughts about this image? Do you think an audience in the 1980s would have responded differently?

Watch the video again and pause at different key moments to make notes.

The video intertextually references James Bond films and represents males as successful and fun-loving with a keen interest in women. The main female is beautiful, exotic and rarely fully clothed. She is clearly an object of desire, but she is not completely passive within the narrative and the males are not completely in control.

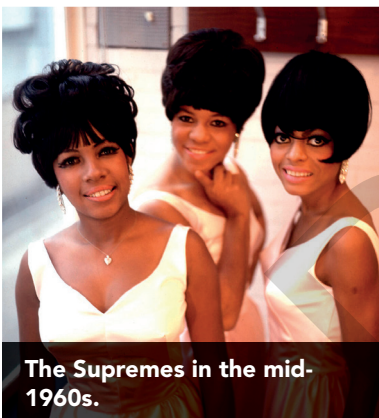


### Context: 1990s

The 1990s saw the development of digital technologies that had a significant impact on culture and society. Women were gaining more power and many female music artists were achieving success.

In the USA, the 1990s was a relatively peaceful and settled time politically, as the Cold War (a period of hostility between the USA and USSR following the Second World War) had ended. There were, however, racial tensions within US society. While some progress had been made towards equality, people from minority ethnic groups tended to have low levels of income and a poorer quality of life, showing that society was not yet fully integrated. Racial tensions were highlighted by, for example, protests in Los Angeles in the early part of the 1990s.

Other significant issues of the time include gang and drug-related crime, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, both of which are explored in 'Waterfalls'.



The Supremes in the mid-1960s.

### The set product: 'Waterfalls' by TLC

TLC was an American female group that formed in the early 1990s. Many all-female bands have achieved success in the music industry over several decades. The Supremes, for example, who released many records in the 1960s and 1970s, were named by *Billboard* as the number-one girl group of all time. TLC appeared second on this list in 2017, based on performance in the official US charts, and it has been argued that they have had a significant influence on subsequent artists and bands. Beyoncé stated in *Entertainment Weekly* in 2002 that TLC had influenced most girl groups around that time and had certainly inspired Destiny's Child.

The band members at the time of the release of 'Waterfalls' were Tionne 'T-Boz' Watkins, Rozonda 'Chilli' Thomas and Lisa 'Left Eye' Lopes. They achieved critical and commercial success in the 1990s, winning several Grammy and MTV Music Video awards, and their album *CrazySexyCool* gained an RIAA Diamond Award, selling over 10 million copies. Their music hybridises elements of **contemporary R&B** with **hip-hop**, genres that were becoming popular during the 1990s and both of which have their origins in African American music. Some rap and hip-hop music has been criticised for objectifying women, but female artists such as TLC create music that communicates a feminist message.

TLC can also be seen as groundbreaking artists who attracted a large audience, as Sose Fuamoli commented on [www.abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au): 'Pioneering a real representation of womanhood, in particular Black womanhood, TLC's longevity stems from the unabashed honesty in their lyrics and an effortless,

### Key Terms

#### Contemporary R&B

A music genre with elements of traditional rhythm and blues, usually characterised by a 'smooth' production quality, and also influenced by soul music.

#### Hip-hop

Developed in the 1980s and 1990s, stylised rhythmic music that often accompanies rap.

engaging delivery.' The *Guardian* reflected on TLC's wide audience appeal in an article in 2017, suggesting that their 'sultry' music balanced a broadly mainstream R&B sound with edgier elements that might attract more specialised audiences, keeping them interesting and successful.

Following Lopes' death in a car accident in 2002, Watkins and Thomas continued performing as a duo, although they recorded very little new music until their latest album was released in 2017. Many of TLC's songs include messages of female empowerment and address social issues relevant to the time in which they were produced.

### Analysing 'What About Your Friends', 1992

The set music video that you need to study is 'Waterfalls', but the following example will help you understand more about TLC and how the band's videos developed over time.

The single 'What About Your Friends' was taken from TLC's first album, *Oooooohhh on the TLC Tip*. The video was directed by Lionel C. Martin, who directed many R&B music videos in the 1990s. It was released early in TLC's career and helped to establish their identity as a band. The genres are R&B and hip-hop, and Lisa Lopes raps a section in the middle of the video (similar to 'Waterfalls'). There is a clear development between this video and 'Waterfalls' in the use of technology, the representations and the messages communicated.

#### Media language

The visual codes include a very bright colour palette, locations such as an outdoor yard with fire escapes and a juice bar, and the repeated motif of graffiti. These elements combine to connote meanings about fun-loving youth in an urban environment, reflecting the genre and the personality of the band. Familiar music video conventions are included, such as:

- lip-synched performance, framed from a variety of camera angles
- highly choreographed and stylised dance routines involving TLC and backing dancers, which seem to intertextually reference other products, such as the film *West Side Story*
- some elements of narrative, featuring the band members at a fashion show, with binary opposites as the two 'sides' in the dance-off
- the use of technology, such as the on-screen graphics of the band's nicknames, which reflects the time in which the video was produced and fits the style of the video, and also communicates meanings clearly.

There is a message in the lyrics about what can happen to friendships when a person becomes wealthy, which might be relevant to the band in this period of early success.

#### Representations

The personas of the band are established in the video through technical codes such as camerawork and visual codes such as costume, props and gesture codes:

- A clear contrast is established between the band members and the catwalk models, who might reference the 1990s 'supermodel'. TLC are constructed as 'authentic' in comparison with the fashion models. They appear youthful and carefree, unaffected by success and wealth.



The video for 'What About Your Friends' uses a bright colour palette to establish the identity of the band.



TLC backstage for a UK performance in 1992



- The loose, baggy clothing is typical of the genre and of the time. The band members wear T-shirts and oversized trousers, and there is no evidence of objectification.
- In some sections of the video, the performers' exaggerated movements are deliberately masculine and seem to satirise the macho personas of some male rappers.

This video constructs a representation of a confident group of young Black women who have a clear message to communicate.

TLC's star personas and musical style developed through the 1990s, and the band covered a range of social issues in their work. Another single, 'Unpretty', from 1998, for example, explores complex contemporary issues relating to identity and body image. The video includes a combination of performance and two intertwined narratives that communicate clear messages, so also has similarities with 'Waterfalls'.

## Key Term

### Chorus

A convention from ancient Greek theatre where a group of actors would appear in tragedies to provide a break in the action and comment on events in the play. They were both part of the play and observers of the action.

## Activity 5.16

Analyse the still image from 'Waterfalls', below right.

- Describe the setting in detail. What does it say about the 'world' of this narrative?
- What is happening in the scene? Can you identify any binary oppositions?
- Why does the shot include a superimposed image of the boy's mother?
- Identify the camera shot used in this image – where is the viewer placed and why?
- What point do you think this image makes about the social issue of drugs and drug dealing?
- What are your thoughts about this image? Do you think an audience in the 1990s would have responded differently?

Watch the video again and pause at different key moments to make notes.

## 'Waterfalls'

The video for 'Waterfalls' was directed by F. Gary Gray who directed music videos for a range of acts during the 1990s, including rap and hip-hop artists Queen Latifah and Ice Cube. He later directed feature films including *Straight Outta Compton* and *Fast and Furious 8*. 'Waterfalls' was named Music Video of the Year at the 1995 MTV Music Video Awards – TLC were the first Black artists to win this award. The song appeared on the very successful *CrazySexyCool* album and became a platinum-selling single. It was also nominated for a Grammy award.

The video combines familiar music video conventions of performance and narrative. TLC's performance consists of lip-synched singing and choreographed movements, and Lisa Lopes performs a rap sequence during the middle of the song, typical of the hip-hop genre. Two narratives interpret the key idea in the song: that it is dangerous to take risks and engage in potentially life-threatening behaviour. The video addresses issues that were highly relevant at the time: gang violence related to drug dealing, and HIV/AIDS. This communicates a powerful message in a popular song that became hugely successful and reached a very large audience.

The three band members act as narrators, situated outside the main narrative worlds of the video. This technique resembles the **chorus** in ancient Greek theatre: they describe and comment on the narrative, communicating a particular point of view about the dangers of the characters' behaviour.

The video uses many special effects, most notably the 'liquid' effect when the band perform in the waterfall, which demonstrated innovative use of technology at the time. Other effects include fast motion sequences to link the different sections of the video, and lighting effects to connote the man's illness.



Analyse this image in Activity 5.16.

## Representation: ethnicity

Popular music is created by artists from different ethnic backgrounds and many Black artists, for example, achieved great success in the industry throughout the 20th century. In the early 1980s, however, MTV attracted criticism for playing very few videos by Black artists. This reflected the under-representation of people from Black and minority ethnic groups in many media industries at the time. It has been argued that Michael Jackson brought about a change when videos such as 'Billie Jean' and 'Thriller' were regularly played on MTV. Later in the 1980s, videos by Black rap and hip-hop artists became a popular feature of the channel and a wider range of representations has been in evidence since.

### Ethnicity in the music videos

The video for 'Waterfalls' constructs representations of different ethnic groups. Young Black males take part in drug-dealing and gang violence in a typically urban environment, reinforcing negative ethnic stereotypes. However, the boy selling drugs is very young and becomes a victim, and his mother desperately tries to stop him, positioning the audience to have sympathy for these characters.

The white heterosexual couple appear to have an affluent lifestyle, connoted by the luxurious bedroom setting, constructing a representation of white privilege and power that also reinforces stereotypes of ethnicity. However, the characters' decision to have unprotected sex results in the male character becoming ill and dying. It is also worth noting that the female is shown to be promiscuous, which subverts traditional gender stereotypes.

The band explained in an interview with the *Huffington Post* that the narratives are intended to have universal relevance to people from any social group: 'The stories we were telling in the video have no colour. Every mother worries about her child – Black, white or whatever colour. She worries about her kid hanging with the wrong crowd or getting into trouble; the same with people trying not to be promiscuous or to be safe and everybody can be too trusting in that way. So everybody could relate to Waterfalls.'

Contemporary music videos encompass a diverse range of ethnicities and there are some interesting representations to explore in the set products. White ethnicity, for example, is constructed in 'Roar' through the patriarchal male who fails to survive in the jungle and the resourceful female who succeeds in taming the wild animals, but there is an absence of people from other ethnic groups. 'Bad Blood' juxtaposes the representation of Swift as a blonde-haired white female star with Kendrick Lamar as the Black rapper, dressed in black with dark glasses and baseball cap. There are perhaps some stereotypical representations of ethnic minorities, for example in Arsyn, played by Selina Gomez, as the antagonist.

In 'Uptown Funk', the male performers, who are from different ethnic backgrounds, demonstrate a clear sexual interest in females, which upholds a masculine stereotype, particularly of Latin and African American men. Bruno Mars is an American artist whose father is Puerto Rican. *Latina* magazine in February 2017 commented that Mars is 'embracing the Latin Lover archetype.' The video is set in an urban location and many of the characters are from ethnic minorities, although the shoe-shine men are older white males in a very low-status role, which subverts expectations and stereotypes.



### Quickfire 5.55

Identify three elements of the mise-en-scène in 'Waterfalls' that show a typical US urban environment.



### Quickfire 5.56

How might the representations of Taylor Swift and Kendrick Lamar in 'Bad Blood' appeal to different audiences?



### Quickfire 5.57

How do the costumes and props in this image construct different personas for Bruno Mars and Mark Ronson?



The video for 'Intentions' emphasises traditional values such as hard work, friendship and education.

The video for 'Intentions' constructs positive representations of women of different ethnicities. Bahri, for example, was born in Saudi Arabia and moved to the USA with her mother in the hope of a better life. She travels for several hours every day to attend college and gain an education, which seems to reinforce the ideals of the 'American Dream' (that there are opportunities for everyone to achieve success in US society). The video shows the women working to achieve their 'intentions', communicating a message of hope and empowerment. It does not focus on the problems they have encountered in the past and can be seen to challenge outdated stereotypes, as the women are not shown as 'victims'. Nonetheless, they are assisted by Justin Bieber. The video communicates an inspirational message about celebrating diversity and uniting as an inclusive community.



## Analysing the Contemporary Set Music Videos

You will need to analyse the media language and representations in the set music videos that you are studying and consider how these may appeal to audiences. You can use the list of codes and conventions on pages 166–167 to structure your analysis. When analysing contemporary videos, compare them with the older example that you study, identifying similarities and differences in:

- the codes and conventions of music videos, for example:
  - use of the camera and editing
  - performance and/or narrative
  - intertextuality
- the use of technology
- representations of gender, ethnicity or issues
- the way in which the video reflects its contexts.

### Quickfire 5.58

Which theory of narrative do you need to study in relation to the set products?



You will also need to study industry and audience in relation to the contemporary music videos by, for example, considering how the videos target an audience and how audiences respond to them.

### Contemporary contexts

Consider the ways in which the products by the contemporary artists you study reflect the context in which they were made.

### Social contexts

Western society is now more equal than it was in the past. There are laws in Britain, for example, to prevent discrimination against people in relation to their age, ethnicity, sexuality or gender. However, there are areas where progress still needs to be made.

Gender inequality is still an issue in many areas of society and across many countries. In some industries, for example, women do not earn the same level of pay as men. In recent years, two social movements linked to the Hollywood film industry have raised awareness of these issues. *Time's Up* focuses on equality for women and people of colour in the workplace. The #MeToo movement focused on sexual assaults against women in the film industry. These movements have drawn attention to the inequalities that still exist and, in some cases, the abuse of power by dominant groups in society.

### Stretch and Challenge 5.32

Can you identify any influences from older music videos on the contemporary products?





There are also issues relating to racial equality in society. For example:

- A report published in 2016 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission showed that, while progress had been made, there was still racial inequality in Britain and that people from ethnic minorities were more likely to live in poverty and less likely to achieve a position of power within the workplace.
- Anti-racism demonstrations took place in the USA, the UK and other parts of the world following the death of George Floyd in May 2020. Floyd, a Black man, was killed in the United States by a white police officer who was later convicted of murder.
- In Britain, the statue of slave trader Edward Colston was pulled down by protestors at a Black Lives Matter rally in Bristol. There has been increased discussion in the British media about racial discrimination and there is a hope that society will become more equal as a result.

Social inequality is a global issue, as many people worldwide live in poverty. In Britain, issues such as zero-hours contracts and changes to the welfare system in recent years have impacted on people's quality of life. The use of 'sweat shops' in countries such as China and India, where factory workers work very long hours for extremely low pay, concerns many people. These countries supply low-priced products such as clothing and electronic goods to overseas markets, so this is a global economic issue.

### Cultural contexts

There is increased hybridity in many areas of popular culture, such as film and music, and many older, 'retro' styles have influenced contemporary artists in recent years. This is also evident in fashion, as versions of clothing trends from the 1970s and 1980s have become popular again.

Popular culture also reflects social change. Mainstream films, for example, are now more likely to feature a female action hero than in the past.

Technology contributes to the cultural framework of media products such as music. For example:

- Digital distribution of music has rapidly increased in recent years, and audiences can stream and/or download music legally, as well as accessing songs and videos on artists' YouTube channels. However, there is still a potential threat to the music industry through illegal and extremely low-cost downloading, which many artists are working to prevent.
- Modern media makes stars seem much more accessible than used to be the case. 'Gossip' magazines have always featured stories about artists' lives, but this is added to by aspects of modern living, such as stars including personal posts and videos on social media. These make audiences feel closer to these artists, as though they 'know' them.

### 'Roar' by Katy Perry

The video for 'Roar' makes use of CGI technology and intertextually references films such as *Tarzan* and *The Jungle Book*. The linear narrative conveys a clear message about female empowerment as Perry's character leaves behind a domineering male and takes control of her destiny. Lyrics such as 'I am a champion' are illustrated with images of Perry taming wild

An anti-racism rally in London in 2016.



#### Top Tip

Make notes on the way in which the contemporary products you study reflect their social context. Not all of the social issues listed relate to every product, but think about which ones apply.



#### Top Tip

Make detailed notes on the ways in which each music video targets and appeals to the artist's audience.



#### Top Tip

Make notes on how the contemporary music videos you study use hybridity and/or 'retro' influences.

